

LEE ROY SELMON

by Don Smith

As the Tampa Bay Buccaneers prepared for their National Football League debut in 1976, Head Coach John McKay decided to place an emphasis on defense when he began selecting players for his new team. Thus, the first player drafted in Buccaneer history was 6-3, 250-pound Lee Roy Selmon, an all-America defensive end from the University of Oklahoma.

It could not have been a better choice for, in the next nine seasons, Selmon became the backbone of the entire Buccaneers franchise, the team's first genuine super-star and a player who was soon recognized as one of the finest defensive ends ever to play in the NFL. In 1995 Selmon became the first Tampa Bay Buccaneer to be elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

The only thing that could possibly have surprised pro football observers would have been for the Buccaneers, who had the first choice in the entire 1976 NFL draft, not to select Selmon. His credentials were incredible. Besides winning consensus all-America honors in 1975 and leading Oklahoma with 132 tackles, Selmon won both the Lombardi Trophy and the Outland Trophy, two coveted awards that went to the most outstanding college lineman each year. Also enticing was the fact that Selmon came from a winning program -- the Sooners lost only two games of 45 in his four seasons in college.

Big Brother

There was still another plus for McKay to ponder. Lee Roy and his brother Dewey, who was 11 months and one day older, had played together at Eufala, Oklahoma, high school and at the University of Oklahoma and both hoped that they might be drafted by the same team when it came time for pro football. As soon as Lee Roy was drafted, he rushed from a picture session with Commissioner Pete Rozelle in New York to Tampa where he played a family waiting game to see what Dewey's fate would be.

"A couple of months before the draft, some Tampa Bay officials talked to me about Dewey," Lee Roy remembered. "They asked me how I felt about Dewey and me being separated. Would I play better if we were on the same team? They said they might pick him, too, if he were still available when the Bucs made their next pick. But I knew the chances were very slim.

But Dewey was still available when Tampa Bay's turn came in the second round. Dewey was the 60th player chosen. Although picking the two Selmons was a good publicity ploy for the Buccaneers, the decision was even more sound from the personnel standpoint. Dewey also had been an all-America at Oklahoma. With the Bucs, he played at defensive tackle as a rookie but was shifted to middle linebacker in his second season.

While both Selmons immediately made fine progress as players, they had to make a huge adjustment from the winning-and-losing standpoint. Unlike the perpetual success they enjoyed at the University of Oklahoma, their experience with Tampa proved to be a nightmare. The new team lost all 14 games in 1976 and its first 12 in 1977 before finally breaking into the victory column in Game No. 27. Both the city and its team became the laughing stock of the sports world.

"For the first time in my life, I was embarrassed to be recognized as a football player," Lee Roy remembers. "I didn't even want to go to the grocery store. Everybody had a solution. Even the clerk would tell us what defense we should be using. Everyone had an answer ... everyone but us."

But on the field, the Selmons did not have to make any apologies. Lee Roy, in particular, was rapidly gaining recognition as one of the really outstanding young defensive players of the NFL. Even though he missed six games because of injuries, he was named the Bucs' Rookie of the Year and the team's Most Valuable Player in 1976.

The Bucs Improve

Lee Roy really began to shine in 1977 and, by late season, the Buccaneers as a team were slowly but surely becoming competitive, particularly on defense. Offensively, the Bucs were shut out six times and held to 10 points or less in 11 of their first 12 games. On the other hand, the opposition scored more than 20 points in only three games all season.

Finally, after 26 straight losses and in Game No. 13 in 1977, the Bucs went on the road to defeat the New Orleans Saints 33-14. With 12 tackles and three sacks, Selmon was a major contributor in the defense-dominated victory which also saw Tampa Bay return three interceptions for touchdowns. More than 10,000 excited fans showed up at the Tampa airport when the team arrived home from New Orleans. The next week, the Buccaneers won at home for the first time with a 17-7 victory over the St. Louis Cardinals.

Lee Roy Selmon was universally recognized as the major contributor to the Bucs' improved performance. He made 110 tackles, forced a team-high five fumbles and led Tampa Bay with 19 sacks.

Tampa Bay improved to 5-11 in 1978 and Selmon continued to gain in stature with one great game after another. He became the first Buccaneer to win all-star honors when the Sporting News picked him on its all-NFC team. In the Bucs' 16-10 upset of the Minnesota Vikings in the season's third game, he sacked quarterback Fran Tarkenton three times and pressured him on 13 other plays.

"He's as good as any defensive lineman I have ever seen," Tarkenton marvelled after the game. "The only reason he hasn't received more national attention is because of his team's 2-26 start. But Selmon rates right up there with the best."

When the teams faced off in a rematch two weeks later, the Vikings always assigned two men on Lee Roy, sometimes three, and Tarkenton continually rolled to his right to keep away from Selmon.

Buccaneer fans still remember the most spectacular sack of his career when, playing against Buffalo late in the 1978 season, he literally threw two Bills blockers into quarterback Joe Ferguson. He missed the last three games of the season after he injured his right knee against Green Bay two weeks later. Nevertheless, he was an all-NFC pick by UPI and a poll of NFL personnel directors by Pro Football Weekly tabbed him the best defensive end in the NFL.

Division Champs

In 1979, it all came together for both Lee Roy and the Buccaneers. In an incredible turnaround, the Bucs started the season with five straight wins and won the NFC Central Division championship in only their fourth season. Tampa Bay finished with 10-6 regular season record and led the entire NFL in scoring defense, allowing only 237 points or 14.8 points per game. They also won their first-ever playoff game with a 24-17 upset of the Philadelphia Eagles. But the magnificent season finally ended in a 9-0 loss to the Los Angeles Rams in the NFC championship game.

Selmon was accorded virtually every honor a defensive lineman can win -- consensus all-pro, NFL Defensive Player of the Year by Associated Press, NFC Defensive Player of the Year by UPI, similar awards from The Sporting News, the NFL Players Association, Pro Football Weekly and the Newspaper Enterprise Association. He became the first Buc ever to be selected as a Pro Bowl starter but he had to decline the invitation because of a tendon injury suffered in the NFC championship game. It was the first of six straight Pro Bowl invitations for Lee Roy and he did play in the next five.

His 1979 defensive statistics were awesome -- 117 tackles, 11 sacks, three fumbles forced and two recovered, one for a 29-yard touchdown, two passes broken up and 60 quarterback pressures! He also blocked two extra points and one field goal.

The Buccaneers had only two more winning seasons in Selmon's career -- in 1981 when the Bucs won the NFC Central title for the second time in three years and in the strike-shortened 1982 season. He won all-pro honors again in 1980 and 1982 and all-NFC recognition in 1980, 1982 and 1984.

While Lee Roy Selmon developed steadily into a super-star, brother Dewey was playing very well for the Buccaneers. He was named the Bucs' Most Valuable Player in 1978. But he missed the entire 1981 season with a thigh injury suffered in training camp. In 1982, he was traded to the San Diego Chargers for a future draft choice but retired after the season.

Family Ties

To tell the total Lee Roy Selmon story, it is necessary to talk about the entire Selmon family, the six sons and three daughters of Lucious Sr. and Jessie, farmers who lived in eastern Oklahoma. The family lived in a four-room house on a 40-acre farm near Eufala, a town of about 2,500. Sometimes, Jessie and the children went to the fields with Lucious Sr. to collect corn or hay and to weed the cotton. The home had an outdoor bathroom but there was always something to eat and a place for everyone to sleep.

Lee Roy remembers a happy childhood. "My mother is a sweet little lady who really cared for all of us," Lee Roy says. "She has certain beliefs she wanted us to know about. Treating people fairly ... working hard and earning what you want ... she stressed those things, then left the rest up to us. It is hard to describe her in words." "You couldn't run to either my dad or mom for a second opinion," he recalls. "That never worked. They always stuck together. Our family playbook was the Bible."

The last three of the Selmon children -- Lucious II, Dewey and Lee Roy -- were born within three-and-one-half years of each other between March 15, 1951, and October 20, 1954. The three started playing football together when they were junior-high age. Their "football" was a shiny tin can Lucious had found.

The first Selmon ever to play in a helmet was Lucious at Eufala High School. Lucious was a sophomore and already one of the best players in the state when Dewey and Lee Roy joined the team. In his senior year at Eufala, Lee Roy, playing tailback, averaged 14 yards per carry. He also kicked off and played linebacker.

Throughout it all, Dewey and Lee Roy remained close, so close that they actually went to the high school prom as each other's date. "There were only about 14 girls and 18 guys in our class," Dewey explained. "We were shy about asking a girl and, by prom day, all the girls had been taken. So Lee Roy said he would take me. We had a good time."

Larry Lacewell, a Sooners assistant coach, recruited all three Selmons to attend the University of Oklahoma. Knowing them was something he cherished. "If you meet them," he said, "it's a humbling experience. What amazed me about those boys was they never talked about what their folks didn't give them. They always bragged about what they did give them."

By 1973, Lucious as a senior was a preseason all-America at Oklahoma. Lee Roy and Dewey were sophomores destined for all-America acclaim. In the five years the Selmons played there, Oklahoma won two national championships and also finished second and third in two other years. Lucious was a 16th-round draft pick of the New England Patriots in 1974 but wound up playing briefly with Memphis of the World Football League. By the time Lee Roy and Dewey were drafted by Tampa Bay, Lucious was settling into a new career as defensive line coach at Oklahoma.

While you might have a hard time finding a Selmon-battered quarterback who would agree, Lee Roy once observed that it required a minimum of four years for a player to feel entirely comfortable in pro football.

He charted his own course this way: "My first year was a total learning year. I learned from being injured. In my second year, I developed a pass rush technique. In my third year, I began to execute what I had learned the first two. In my fourth year, my personal goal was to get that knee so repaired that I would learn to play instinctively, to adjust when an adjustment was needed without a second thought."

Lee Roy, who was graduated as an honor student from the University of Oklahoma with a degree in special education, was preparing for the future even in the early years of his NFL career. He became active in both worthwhile charitable activities and in the business community.

In 1980, he was named the NFL Man of the Year, a program that honors those NFL players who make significant contributions to their communities as well as starring on the football field. Selmon had assisted such worthwhile programs as the Ronald McDonald House at All Children's Hospital in St. Petersburg, the March of Dimes and the United Way. A Lee Roy Selmon roast that year raised nearly \$10,000 for the Tampa Big Sisters.

In 1978, he completed a management training program at First National Bank of Florida and he worked there throughout the remainder of his career and until 1993, when he signed to become an associate

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athletic director at the University of South Florida. Today, he lives in Tampa with his wife Claybra and their three children.

Career-end for Selmon came at the Pro Bowl on January 27, 1985, when he appeared as an NFC starter for the fifth straight year. He suffered a herniated disk in his back during that game and never played again. He sat out the 1985 campaign hoping the injury would heal without surgery. But when he found out that even surgery would not guarantee that he could play again, he retired in April 1986. "I'm just thankful I was able to play 10 years," he said at a retirement news conference.

For those NFL opponents who lined up against Lee Roy Selmon for almost a decade, there was deep admiration for the Tampa Bay stalwart but also a sense of relief when they learned they wouldn't have to face him again. As Chicago Bears offensive tackle Ted Albrecht once told his coach: "I never wanted to be buried at sea. I never wanted to get hit in the mouth with a hockey puck. And I don't want to go out and play the second half against Lee Roy."

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SELMON, LEE ROY

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6-03 250 Oklahoma

Eufaula HS [OK]

Born: 10/20/54, Eufaula, OK

First player selected in 1976 NFL draft

1976-1984 Tampa Bay Buccaneers, 9 seasons, 121 games

78-1/2 career sacks, 380 quarterback pressures

Forced 28-1/2 fumbles, recovered 10

Consensus All-America, 1975

Lombardi and Outland Trophies as best college lineman, 1975

Named to six straight Pro Bowls following 1979 through 1984 seasons, but did not play in first game because of injury

CO-MVP of 1982 Pro Bowl with four sacks

All-Pro choice in 1979, 1980, 1982; All-NFC five times

Four-time NFLP choice as NFC Defensive Player of Year, 1979

National Football Foundation Hall of Fame 1988

Pro Football Hall of Fame 1995