

RON YARY

By Joe Horrigan

Courtesy of the Pro Football Hall of Fame

Ron Yary was a frequent recipient of individual honors and recognition during his collegiate and professional football careers. He was considered the best offensive tackle in the nation in his junior and senior seasons at the University of Southern California and was named All-America both years. He was also the first player in the school's history to win the Outland Trophy, given to the outstanding interior lineman in college football, and the first player selected overall in the 1968 National Football League Draft.

A veteran of 15 NFL seasons, Ron was named All-Pro six times, All-NFC eight times, and played in seven Pro Bowls. It seemed the only mark of distinction missing from the 6-5, 255-pound lineman's impressive collected works was the one reserved for the deserving few – election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Then, on January 27, 2001, Yary's football portfolio was made complete, when it was announced that the star lineman was elected to the Hall of Fame as a member of the Class of 2001.

Born on July 16, 1946 in Chicago, Illinois, Ron grew up in Bellflower, California. He was an All-San Gabriel Valley tackle as a junior and played fullback as a senior at Bellflower High School. Although he loved playing football he said he was actually indifferent about where he went to college.

"I just wanted to play football; I didn't care where," he said. Initially he enrolled at Cerritos Junior College, where he returned to the line and made All-Metropolitan Conference as a tackle. After just one semester, however, he transferred to USC.

"They said I was just a 'B' player but they wanted to take a look at me," he recalled. Within three weeks of spring ball, the "B player" was starting both ways, playing defensive end and offensive tackle. When the season began, Yary was placed solely at the offensive tackle spot.

"Ron is as good as I've ever seen," commented USC's head football coach John McKay following Yary's first season. "If he continues to develop, he'll be fantastic...he is fast and hard to move out, he's so strong."

Yary more than lived up to McKay's expectations and consistently demonstrated his dedication and

versatility. He made his versatility obvious following his senior season when he played offensive tackle in the Rose Bowl and defensive tackle in the Hula Bowl.

The Minnesota Vikings, impressed by his adaptability, selected Yary with the first overall pick of the 1968 draft, a pick they acquired from New York as a part of the deal that sent Fran Tarkenton to the Giants. Yary was the first interior lineman to be selected first overall in the draft since 1949 when the Philadelphia Eagles drafted center Chuck Bednarik.

Vikings coach Bud Grant told the media following the draft that Yary was the No. 1-rated player in the country offensively and in the top 10 defensively. "If he arrived tomorrow, he'd be an offensive tackle," he told reporters. "But," he continued, "he could play any one of four positions – defensive tackle, and any position in the offensive line, center, guard, or tackle."

USC assistant coach Dan Levy agreed with Grant's assessment. "Lots of kids in college football are big, but not athletic," Levy said. "A lot of young men can't handle their growth. Yary is an athlete, a great one. I don't think he has a weakness."

However, when challenged to find a weakness in Yary, the coach quipped, "his feet aren't as fast as O. J. Simpson's."

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Ron spent much of his rookie season learning the intricacies of line play at the professional level. He had the good fortune of having to practice daily against one of the most formidable defensive lines in pro football, a line that included All-Pro defensive end Carl Eller.

"I have more problems in practice than against any defensive end I've faced in a game," Yary remarked in reference to Eller in a 1971 interview.

For his part, Eller was equally complimentary about his teammate. "Ron has the strength so that you can't run over him," Eller said. "It's suicide to charge straight at him. Maybe his strongest point is his blocking on the run, straight ahead. That's when he uses his strength to his best advantage."

Ron won the starting right tackle job on the Vikings offensive line in his second season and remained a fixture at that spot throughout his Minnesota tenure (1968-1981). He was either All-NFC, All-Pro, or selected to play in the Pro Bowl every season from 1970 through 1977.

"To appreciate Yary," a teammate remarked, "you have to watch the films." He's amazing. He destroys people. I've seen plays where he cleans out the defensive end and takes the linebackers with him."

Another player said, "Yary is fantastic. How many times has anybody gotten in on the quarterback? He's the best tackle I've ever seen."

Yary, however, wasn't one to look for glory or media attention. "All of your applause comes from your peers inside your team and not from the audience or media or anything else like that," he said. "Your glory comes in other ways; it comes from knowing that you got a good block even though it's not noticed – it's noticed the following day during films. A lot of times if a back makes a good run, the offensive lineman was the main cause of that. That's when your glory comes."

Being an offensive lineman is often a thankless job. Seldom is a lineman singled out from the group. Offensive line play is the hardest to judge by the untrained eye. "It's easy to describe," Yary offered, "but hard to do."

An opponent's assessment of a player is often the most telling. Los Angeles Rams defensive end Jack Youngblood, also a member of the Hall of Fame's Class of 2001, frequently named Yary as one of the toughest opponents he faced during his career. The match-up between the two often drew extra media attention as both players were recognized as among the best in the game and often the game had playoff implications. One writer suggested that whenever the two faced each other on the field "the concussion waves bounced off the walls."

Although the rivalry between Yary and his on-the-field adversary was strong, there was a mutual respect between Yary and Youngblood. "I'd say Jack Youngblood has always been the toughest," Yary related late in his career. "He's so quick. He's not afraid to take an inside move when he still has outside responsibility, because he's quick enough to adjust."

Pittsburgh Steelers defensive end L.C. Greenwood was another opponent who spoke respectfully of Yary's play. "What Yary does better than anyone is hooking," Greenwood offered. "Especially when Tarkenton is rolling out. He can get inside you and keep you hemmed in. Other linemen don't learn it, or just can't do it. Yary is one of the best at it."

Yary admitted that hooking the end in most cases wouldn't be among an offensive tackle's list of favorite plays. "The block is used on a weakside play and my responsibility is to hook the end, get to the outside, and keep him pinned on the line or move him back," he explained.

"If I can move him back far enough there's a good chance of him cutting off the middle linebacker. Some tackles have a hard time doing that because the ends are usually lined up outside of you. They're usually on your outside ear to a foot-and-a-half outside your shoulder. Regardless," he summarized, "I still enjoy it...the play is set up so that I just can't miss, and it gives me a chance to get even with some of the great ends who have made me miserable."

Enjoying the game was something that Ron always managed to do. "When I got involved in football it was because I loved the game," he told a reporter. "For me it was like playing tag out in front of your

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house, or kick the can when you were a kid. When I saw a football that's exactly the way I approached it and I just enjoyed playing the game."

During Ron's days with the Vikings, the team won two NFL Central Division titles and nine NFC Central championships. During that same period, Yary's Vikings won the 1969 NFL championship and NFC titles in 1973, 1974, and 1976. In all, Yary played in five NFL/NFC championships and Super Bowls IV, VIII, IX, and XI.

Yary offered that much of his personal recognition was, at least in part, a result of playing on a winning team.

"I honestly believe there are five, maybe eight tackles who are as good as one another," he said. "It's just a matter of location, the amount of press the player gets that determines a lot of his postseason honors. And how well your team does, that's a big factor. If your team has a very successful year like we did in 1973 and you're playing good football...it's easier to get recognition."

Others, including Bud Grant, disagreed with Yary's humility. Sure a winning team focused more attention on certain players, but it also provided more opportunity for criticism. Grant recognized and appreciated Yary's individual greatness. In 1974, after Ron was named All-Pro for the third consecutive year, the usually reserved coach sang his praises.

"He should be All-Pro the next ten years," the coach proclaimed. "When you get a great player, the few mistakes he makes become magnified because you get conditioned to his excellence. But when you add up the big plays he makes, you realize his worth. We think he's the best tackle in football."

Not too surprisingly, Yary downplayed the tag of being "the best."

"It's hard to consider yourself the best at any position," he offered. "You've got so many excellent football players in the league, not only at tackle, but at all other positions that to pick out one particular player and say he's the best, I don't think it can be done."

Candidly, Yary would even talk of some of his more memorable miscues. "I can vividly remember one play, it was a sweep to the right. Well, when the ball was snapped I pulled out and went to the left as hard and as fast as I could, and I think I knocked down everyone on my team, ran head-on right into them. I took some kidding from that for a long time."

Yary was a natural leader who led by example. The offensive team captain, he was as dependable as he was good. Always in shape, he missed only two games as a Viking because of injury – both coming in 1980 due to a broken ankle. Later that same season the gutsy lineman continued to play in spite of a broken bone in his foot.

"I know myself better than anyone else," he explained when asked how he could continue to play. "I will know when I can't do it anymore. I will know when I am truly on my way out and that is when I will hang it up."

Although Ron went on to play two more seasons – 1981 with the Vikings and 1982 as member of the Los Angeles Rams – he found it increasingly difficult to play up to the high level he set for himself. Following the 1982 season the unassuming 36-year-old warrior quietly decided it was time "to hang it up."

For those who observed Ron Yary throughout his 15 stellar seasons it came as no surprise when his name was called at that January 27, 2001 press conference naming him a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame. The only thing that surprised some of his legion of supporters was that it hadn't come sooner. But with typical humility he dismissed the notion that he was "overlooked" and proclaimed "it was absolutely worth the wait."

RON YARY

Offensive Tackle

Yary, Anthony Ronald

6-5, 255

Colleges: Cerritos JC CA; USC

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High School: Bellflower [CA]
Born: July 16, 1946, Chicago, IL
Drafted: 1968 Round 1 Minnesota

<u>Year</u>	<u>Team</u>	<u>GM</u>						
1968	Min	14	1973	Min	14	1978	Min	16
1969	Min	11	1974	Min	14	1979	Min	16
1970	Min	14	1975	Min	14	1980	Min	14
1971	Min	14	1976	Min	14	1981	Min	16
1972	Min	14	1977	Min	14	1982	LARm	8