

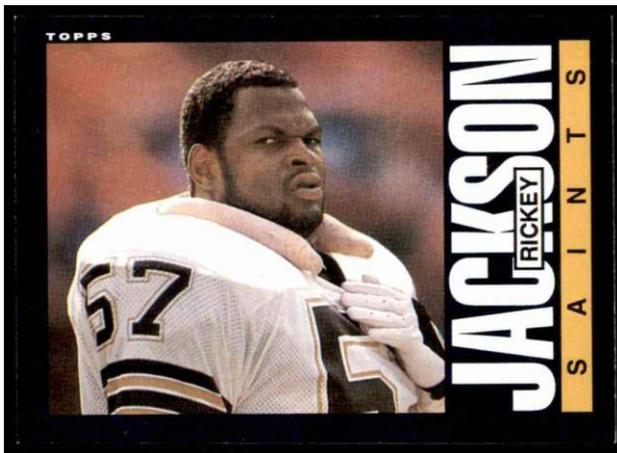


## Rickey Jackson

This article was written by Matt Keddie

No matter where he played, Rickey Anderson Jackson (b. March 20, 1958) was an anchor that held the defense together. In college at the University of Pittsburgh, Jackson was often referred to as the “left side.” In the NFL as a member of the New Orleans Saints, he was the centerpiece of the famed “Dome Patrol” linebacker corps in the mid-to-late 1980s.<sup>1</sup>

Jackson was raised in Pahokee, Florida by Leila Pearl Jones Lawson and Van Jackson. Lawson worked as a school bus driver for nearly 30 years as a single mother who raised Rickey and his four siblings. Rickey's father, Van, served as a police officer and truck driver, while maintaining close ties with his son.<sup>2</sup> Rickey found a niche in athletics, becoming a versatile athlete on the basketball and football teams at Pahokee Senior High School. He strove to be the absolute best at anything and everything he undertook.



Growing up with four siblings, Rickey was extremely competitive.<sup>3</sup> The days of playing tackle football on the green patches of the neighborhood remain strong in his mind. Dubbed the “City Champ,” by the locals who played with him whether they were his friends or acquaintances, all admired his skills and athletic abilities. It garnered Jackson the motivation he used to become a professional football player as he ascended through the ranks during his high school and college years.<sup>4</sup>

One of his sisters, Carolyn, described Jackson's drive as a youngster, “Football has been his goal, his life, forever, from the time he was 6 years old.”<sup>5</sup> Carolyn elaborated, “He talked to mother every day of his life. Every day. We didn't question what mother said.



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And Rickey always wanted to be above the minimum of doing just enough to get by. That wasn't acceptable. He always wanted to do more ... very much a high achiever."<sup>6</sup>

Jackson's attitude translated to the gridiron, he was an incredible two-way player at linebacker and tight end. He was named to Florida's All-Century Team in 2007, as one of the top 33 players in the state's football history. Ironically, Jackson was recruited as a sophomore in high school by Michigan's Bo Schembechler. He turned down the offer because Schembechler would not allow Rickey to start as a freshman.<sup>7</sup> Jackson went on to play at the University of Pittsburgh, where he was part of the greatest recruiting class in program history, during a time when Pitt was a national power.

Jackson played alongside future NFL players Hugh Green, Dan Marino, Russ Grimm, Jimbo Covert, Mark May, Randy McMillian, among others at the university. Green is one of the all-time college greats, who started at right defensive end. Despite playing in Green's shadow, Jackson started opposite him, anchoring the left side of the defense.<sup>8</sup> Teams would often run away from Green, generating the opportunity for Jackson to exploit the play. As a result, he routinely stuffed the opposing ball carriers. As a junior in 1979, Jackson was a second-team All-East selection, and honorable mention as an All-American. He earned second-team All-American honors in 1980 on the number one ranked defense in the nation during his senior campaign. He finished his college days totaling nearly 300 tackles and three interceptions.<sup>9,10</sup>

Jackson credits his decision to attend Pitt a result of the 1976 national championship team that boasted Heisman trophy winning running back Tony Dorsett.<sup>11</sup> The New Orleans Saints drafted Jackson 53<sup>rd</sup> overall in the second round of the 1981 NFL draft. He made an immediate impact, starting at outside linebacker as a rookie. His 6'2" frame at 243 pounds contributed to his success at linebacker. He totaled a Saints rookie record eight sacks, leading the team with 125 total tackles, starting in all 16 games.<sup>12</sup> His play earned him a spot on the NFL's All-Rookie team that season, and he was an All-NFC choice as well.<sup>13</sup> It did not take long, but by 1983, Jackson was one of the game's elite pass rushing linebackers, when he recorded 12 sacks, earning the first of six (1983-1986, 1992, 1993) Pro Bowl selections as a member of the Saints.<sup>14</sup> New Orleans did not enjoy much success in Jackson's first six seasons, never posting higher than an 8-8 record.<sup>15</sup>

The fortunes for the franchise turned in 1986 when Jim Mora was hired away from the USFL as head coach. New Orleans drafted linebacker Pat Swilling to shore up the defense, and also nabbed linebackers Vaughan Johnson and Sam Mills from the recently folded USFL, to round out what would become a rock solid linebacking corp.<sup>16</sup> The quartet of Jackson, Swilling, Johnson, and Mills formed the Dome Patrol, arguably one of the greatest linebacking units in football history. The Saints posted a 12-3 record in 1987, their first winning season and postseason appearance in franchise history anchored by the



Dome Patrol.<sup>17</sup> Jackson led the defense with 9.5 sacks, 74 tackles, and forced three fumbles. His hard-hitting style routinely caused the ball carrier to lose control of the ball upon impact, which led to forcing frequent fumbles. His 40 career forced fumbles ranks tenth all-time.<sup>18</sup>

New Orleans enjoyed more success from 1990 thru 1992, qualifying for the playoffs each season, including capturing of their first division title in 1991.<sup>19</sup> After a win over the Rams, Swilling said, “The Dome Patrol really rolled today. Sam Mills, Rickey Jackson, Vaughan Johnson, and me. We got it on, didn't we?”<sup>20</sup> In 1992, the entire Dome Patrol was selected to the Pro Bowl, in what was a career season for Jackson. He recorded a career high 13.5 sacks, forced six fumbles, behind 66 total tackles.<sup>21</sup> The Dome Patrol was the league's top ranked defense in points allowed and second in yards allowed.<sup>22</sup>

Jackson spent 13 seasons with the Saints prior to signing with the San Francisco 49ers as an unrestricted free agent in 1994.<sup>23</sup> He only missed two games in his 13 seasons in New Orleans, holding a number of records at the time of his departure. Jackson ranked first in team history in games played, seasons with the team (tied), most career sacks with 123, and most sacks in a game (four), to name a few.<sup>24</sup>

While in San Francisco, Jackson rotated to the defensive end role from linebacker. He was on the winning Super Bowl XXIX team that pummeled the San Diego Chargers, 49-26.<sup>25</sup> He started in 29 of 32 games with the 49ers before retiring following the 1995 season.<sup>26</sup>

#### End Notes:

- 1 “Rickey Jackson,” Saints Hall-of-Fame, accessed November 7, 2021, <https://www.saintshalloffame.com/inductees/rickey-jackson/>.
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- 3 Smith, Jimmy. “New Orleans Saints great Rickey Jackson always wanted to be the best,” *The Times-Picayune*, accessed November 7, 2021, [https://www.nola.com/sports/saints/article\\_28153552-785a-5c37-8b93-1622094968e6.html](https://www.nola.com/sports/saints/article_28153552-785a-5c37-8b93-1622094968e6.html).
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- 7 Smith, Jimmy. "New Orleans Saints great Rickey Jackson always wanted to be the best," *The Times-Picayune*, accessed November 7, 2021, [https://www.nola.com/sports/saints/article\\_28153552-785a-5c37-8b93-1622094968e6.html](https://www.nola.com/sports/saints/article_28153552-785a-5c37-8b93-1622094968e6.html).
  - 8 Whaley, Anson. "Rickey Jackson's Late Switch Was The Beginning Of A Hall of Fame Career," SB Nation Pittsburgh, accessed November 14, 2021, <https://pittsburgh.sbnation.com/2010/8/6/1608650/rickey-jackson-pitt-football-hall-of-fame>.
  - 9 "Rickey Jackson," SportsReference.com, accessed November 14, 2021, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/players/rickey-jackson-1.html>.
  - 10 Whaley, Anson. "Rickey Jackson's Late Switch Was The Beginning Of A Hall of Fame Career," SB Nation Pittsburgh, accessed November 14, 2021, <https://pittsburgh.sbnation.com/2010/8/6/1608650/rickey-jackson-pitt-football-hall-of-fame>.
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  - 12 "Rickey Jackson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed November 7, 2021, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/J/JackRi01.htm>.
  - 13 "Rickey Jackson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed November 7, 2021, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/J/JackRi01.htm>.
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  - 16 Gelhar, Alex. "After decades of despair, a historically dominant linebacker corps changed everything for the New Orleans Saints," NFL.com, October 26, 2016, <https://www.nfl.com/news/sidelines/the-dome-patrol>.
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  - 20 "Saints' Heyward rams L.A.," *The Blade: Toledo, Ohio*, September 16, 1991, 21.
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  - 23 ProSportsTransactions.com, accessed November 14, 2021, <https://www.prosportstransactions.com/football/Search/SearchResults.php?Player=rickey+jackson&Team=&BeginDate=&EndDate=&PlayerMovementChkBx=yes&submit=Search>.
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