



Rod Smith

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

Roderick Smith (b. May 15, 1970) was all business on and off the football field. The success he attained in his 14-year NFL career as a wide receiver with the Denver Broncos was attributed to his intense focus and strong mental toughness. During Denver's run to Super Bowl XXXIII, he distinctly recalls, "We didn't really celebrate a lot throughout the playoffs or anything like that," he said. "We expected to win, and we came with the mentality of dominating the game."¹

Denver went on to dominate the Atlanta Falcons in Super Bowl XXXIII, 34-19, behind Smith's game high five receptions for 152 yards and one touchdown.² Ironically, the game's turning point occurred in the second quarter when John Elway connected with Smith on an 80-yard scoring strike that gave the Broncos a 17-3 advantage.³ Smith routinely took game preparation very seriously, stated the team's success started that week before the game. "I remember we had already had our whole game plan pretty much in. When we got there, we were just fine-tuning."⁴ He was a two-time Super Bowl champion, as Denver had won Super Bowl XXXII the previous year, upsetting a heavily favored Green Bay Packers team.



Smith's NFL career began with a chip on his shoulder. Undrafted out of Division II Missouri Southern, he felt he had to prove himself when the Broncos signed him as a free



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agent in 1994. Standing at roughly 6'0" and 200 pounds, Smith initially was a member of the practice squad and only started in two games in both 1995 and 1996.⁵

His first season as a full-time starter in 1997 culminated with a 70 catch, 1,180 yard campaign that resulted in a career high 12 touchdown receptions.⁶ "Players like Rod don't come through your door very often, but he came through ours every day with a purpose and hunger to be great," said Broncos owner Pat Bowlen.⁷ "Rod's production and numbers, as outstanding as they were, paled in comparison to his commitment to winning and the respect he commanded from each and every one of his teammates throughout his career.

Emerging from being an undrafted player to one of the best to ever play his position, Rod has truly earned his place among the greatest Broncos of all time. Every game was personal business to Smith, that was his method of preparation. He would never skip a team workout. Smith recalled, "I went to over 600 straight voluntary workouts. That's why my career lasted as long as it did and I consistently played at a high level."⁹

Smith's consistent high level of performance landed him as the franchise's all-time leading receiver. As of 2021, Smith still held numerous career marks for the Broncos, including receptions (849), receiving yards (11,389), and receiving touchdowns (68).¹⁰ In 2012, Bowlen inducted Smith to the team's Ring of Fame, and he was named to the team's 50th Anniversary Team in 2009. Many argue that Smith's game is worthy of a Pro Football Hall of Fame nod. *Sports Illustrated* lists Smith as one of the three greatest hall of fame snubs in franchise history.¹¹

Smith's role as Denver's premier receiver rivaled receiving greats of his era, such as Antonio Freeman, Torry Holt, and Hall of Famer, Michael Irvin.¹² Beginning in 1997, Smith posted six consecutive 1,000-yard receiving seasons (8 total for career), leading the NFL in receptions (113) in 2001. Smith earned three Pro Bowl selections (2000, 2001, 2005), was a two-time All-AFC performer (2000, 2001), and a two-time second team All-Pro (2000, 2001) by the Associated Press.¹³

In 2006 and 2007 he suffered injuries that required multiple hip replacements, effectively ending his football career. He played his final game on December 31, 2006. He formally retired from football in 2008. Smith retired in the eyes of fans as graceful, professional, and one of the most loved Broncos players of all-time. Said Elway of Smith, "Rod brought his lunch pail to work each day, took nothing for granted and made himself into an elite player. He's a true pro. In addition to being one of the greatest undrafted players of all time, he's one of the greatest wide receivers to ever play the position."¹⁴



Smith totaled over 11,000 career receiving yards, 13.4 yards per reception, and 71 career total touchdowns.¹⁵ It seemed as the level of competition increased, so did Smith's game. He was also outstanding during his college days at Missouri Southern.

At Missouri Southern, Smith was a two-time first-team All-American, one of the greatest players in school history. He led the nation in 1991 in receiving, amassing 1,439 yards on 60 receptions.¹⁶ The performance earned him MIAA Offensive MVP, and first-team All-MIAA, an award he won twice. He was the first receiver in school history to post a 1,000-yard receiving season. Smith was a finalist for the Harlon Hill Award, given to the most outstanding player in Division II in his senior season.¹⁷

Off the field, Smith outstandingly graduated with three degrees: economics & finance, business, and marketing & management. This success earned him the school's distinction as the Outstanding Graduate in 1994. Less than a decade later, Smith was inducted into Missouri Southern's Athletics Hall of Fame.¹⁸ While in Missouri, Smith also earned induction to the Joplin Area Sports and the Missouri Sports Hall of Fames.¹⁹

Now and then, Smith returns to the area as a participant in local golf tournaments and school events. Smith says about returning to Joplin, "Coming back here brings up those memories, and it's tough. But this is still home, one of my homes anyway."²⁰ Smith was a 2009 inductee to the College Football Hall of Fame, and chosen for induction to the Division II Hall of Fame in 2008.

End Notes:

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