

Oilers Running Back History



Oilers running back history is a rich tapestry woven through the threads of the National Football League (NFL) and the American Football League (AFL). The Houston Oilers, one of the original teams in the AFL, had a long and storied history that featured some of the most talented running backs in professional football. This article will delve into the evolution of the Oilers' running back position, highlight key players, and examine how their contributions shaped the franchise's legacy.

Origin and Early Years

The Houston Oilers were established in 1960 as one of the original eight teams in the American Football League. In those early years, the running back position was often crucial to the team's offensive strategy.

1960s: The Formation of a Ground Game

- The Oilers' first head coach, Lou Rymkus, implemented a run-heavy offense that relied heavily on the capabilities of its running backs.
- The team's first notable running back was Billy Cannon, a Heisman Trophy winner who played for the Oilers from 1960 to 1963. Cannon was known for his speed and elusiveness, characteristics that made him a key player in the Oilers' early success.

Key Players of the 1960s

1. Billy Cannon (1960–1963)

- A dynamic playmaker who contributed both as a runner and a receiver.
- Helped the Oilers win the AFL Championship in 1961.

2. Darryl Lamonica (1963–1967)

- Though primarily a quarterback, he occasionally played as a running back, showcasing the versatility of the position.

3. Jim Nance (1965–1967)

- A powerful running back who brought a different style to the game, Nance was known for his hard-nosed running.

1970s: The Rise of the Ground Game

As the Oilers transitioned into the 1970s, the team began to emphasize a more balanced offensive approach, which included a strong running game. This period saw the emergence of several legendary running backs.

The Arrival of the "Run and Shoot" Offense

- Coached by O.A. "Bum" Phillips, the Oilers began to implement innovative offensive schemes that highlighted the running back's role.
- The combination of ground and aerial attacks made the Oilers a formidable opponent.

Notable Running Backs of the 1970s

1. Earl Campbell (1978–1985)

- The most iconic running back in Oilers history, Campbell was a three-time NFL rushing champion and won the MVP award in 1979.
- Known for his punishing running style, Campbell was a fan favorite and played a significant role in the Oilers' success during the late 70s and early 80s.

2. Robert Newhouse (1972–1983)

- Though Newhouse gained more fame with the Dallas Cowboys, he began his career with the Oilers and contributed to their rushing attack.

3. Mike Barber (1973–1982)

- While primarily a tight end, Barber also contributed as a versatile player who occasionally carried the ball, showcasing the importance of adaptability in the backfield.

1980s: The Campbell Era and Beyond

The 1980s were dominated by the legacy of Earl Campbell, whose impact was felt both on and off the field. His running style and ability to break tackles changed how defenses approached the Oilers.

Legacy of Earl Campbell

- Campbell's unique blend of power and speed made him a timeless figure in NFL history.
- His contributions helped the Oilers reach the playoffs multiple times, and he laid the groundwork for future running backs.

Supporting Cast in the 1980s

1. Ruben Carter (1980–1982)

- Known for his short-yardage abilities, Carter complemented Campbell's running style.

2. Alfredo Roberts (1984–1989)

- Initially a fullback, Roberts provided solid blocking for Campbell while also contributing in the passing game.

3. Mike Rozier (1986–1990)

- The 1989 AFL MVP, Rozier was another standout running back who helped keep the Oilers competitive after Campbell's departure.

1990s: The Decline and Transition

As the Oilers moved into the 1990s, the franchise faced significant challenges. The team's identity began to shift, and the running back position evolved along with it.

Key Changes in the 1990s

- The Oilers relocated to Tennessee in 1996, becoming the Tennessee Titans, which marked the end of an era for the franchise.
- The running back position began to emphasize speed and agility over power.

Noteworthy Running Backs of the 1990s

1. Eddie George (1996–2003)

- A Heisman Trophy winner, George became a cornerstone of the Titans' offense, winning NFL Offensive Player of the Year in 2000.
- He combined power running with surprising speed, becoming one of the most durable backs in NFL history.

2. Derrick Mason (1997–2004)

- Known as a versatile player, Mason contributed significantly in both the running and passing games.

3. Greg Hill (1994–1999)

- A solid backup, Hill played a supporting role in the backfield, showcasing the depth of the Oilers' running game during the transition period.

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of Oilers Running Backs

The Oilers running back history is marked by a succession of talented players who left an indelible

mark on the franchise and the NFL as a whole. From the early days with Billy Cannon to the iconic Earl Campbell and the smooth transition to Eddie George, the running back position has always been a focal point in the Oilers' offensive strategy.

The evolution of the running back role, shaped by these remarkable athletes, reflects broader trends in professional football, including changes in offensive schemes and player skill sets. Though the Oilers may no longer exist as a franchise, their legacy lives on through the stories of their running backs, who not only defined a team but also contributed to the rich history of the NFL.

As football continues to evolve, the influence of these players remains relevant, reminding us of the thrilling and often brutal nature of the game that has captivated fans for generations. The history of Oilers running backs is not just a recounting of statistics and accolades; it is a celebration of the spirit and resilience that has characterized the franchise throughout its journey.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who was the first notable running back for the Houston Oilers?

The first notable running back for the Houston Oilers was Billy Cannon, who played for the team in the early 1960s.

Which Oilers running back set the franchise record for rushing yards in a single season?

Earl Campbell set the franchise record for rushing yards in a single season with 1,934 yards in 1978.

What impact did Earl Campbell have on the Oilers' success in the late 1970s?

Earl Campbell was instrumental in the Oilers' success in the late 1970s, leading the team to multiple playoff appearances and earning the NFL MVP award in 1979.

Who were some of the key running backs for the Oilers during the run-and-shoot era?

Key running backs during the Oilers' run-and-shoot era included Allen Pinkett and Lorenzo White, who contributed to the team's offensive strategy.

Which Oilers running back was known for his dual-threat ability as both a runner and a receiver?

Derrick Henry was known for his dual-threat ability as both a runner and a receiver during his time with the Oilers, showcasing his versatility.

How did the Oilers' running game evolve in the 1990s?

In the 1990s, the Oilers' running game evolved to incorporate more passing plays, but they still relied on strong running backs like Eddie George to balance the offense.

What was the significance of the Oilers' running back committee approach in the 1980s?

The significance of the Oilers' running back committee approach in the 1980s was that it allowed for fresh legs and diverse running styles, contributing to a balanced offensive attack.

Which Oilers running back is often considered one of the best in franchise history?

Earl Campbell is often considered one of the best running backs in franchise history, not only for his statistics but also for his impact on the team's identity.

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