

# Smu Running Backs History



**SMU running backs history** is a fascinating journey that reflects the evolution of college football and the significant contributions that Southern Methodist University (SMU) players have made to the sport. SMU, located in Dallas, Texas, has a rich football tradition, and its running backs have played pivotal roles in both the team's successes and the broader landscape of college football. This article will delve into the history of SMU running backs, highlighting key players, memorable seasons, and their impact on the game.

## The Early Years of SMU Football

SMU football began in 1915, but it wasn't until the 1930s that the program started to gain prominence. During this time, the running game became an essential part of the team's strategy. Early running backs were often multi-talented players who not only carried the ball but also played other positions, showcasing their athleticism.

## Pioneering Players

In the early years, players like Dixie Howell and Bill Meek were among the first to make their mark as running backs. Howell, who played in the late 1930s, was known for his speed and agility, setting the stage for future generations of SMU running backs. These early players laid the groundwork for what would come in the decades ahead.

## The Glory Years: 1980s and 1990s

The 1980s and 1990s were transformative years for SMU football, particularly for the running back position. Under the guidance of legendary coach Ron Meyer, the Mustangs became a national powerhouse.

## Key Running Backs of the Era

Several running backs stood out during this period, helping to elevate the program's status:

1. Eric Dickerson (1979-1982)

- Arguably the most famous running back in SMU history, Dickerson was a two-time consensus All-American and finished his college career with over 4,450 rushing yards. He was known for his upright running style and incredible speed, which translated into a successful NFL career.

2. Craig James (1978-1981)

- A dynamic back who complemented Dickerson, James was known for his tough running and versatility. He rushed for over 1,000 yards in multiple seasons and became an integral part of the Mustangs' offense.

3. Garrison Hearst (1990-1992)

- Hearst brought a different style to the SMU backfield, showcasing his ability to catch passes out of the backfield in addition to his rushing prowess. He was a key player during his time at SMU and went on to have a successful NFL career.

## The Death Penalty and its Aftermath

In 1987, SMU football faced significant challenges when the NCAA imposed the "death penalty" due to repeated violations. This had a profound impact on the program, including the running back position.

## Resilience and Rebuilding

Despite the setbacks, SMU began to rebuild its program in the late 1990s and early 2000s. New coaching staff and recruiting efforts brought fresh talent to the team, including a new generation of running backs.

1. J.J. McCleskey (1996-1999)

- A versatile player, McCleskey was known for his ability to contribute both as a runner and a receiver. His leadership and performance helped to stabilize the program during its rebuilding phase.

2. Darius Johnson (2005-2008)

- Johnson emerged as a consistent performer, showcasing his ability to carry the workload in the backfield. His contributions were critical to the team's resurgence in the mid-2000s.

## Modern Era: A New Chapter for SMU Running Backs

The 2010s marked a new era for SMU football, with a renewed focus on recruiting and player development. The running back position continued to evolve, with players adapting to the modern game.

## Notable Running Backs of the Recent Years

### 1. Zeke Elliott (2013-2014)

- Although Elliott is best known for his time at Ohio State, he began his career at SMU, showcasing raw talent that would later flourish at the national level. His early days at SMU demonstrated his potential as a dynamic playmaker.

### 2. Ke'Mon Freeman (2016-2019)

- Freeman emerged as a significant contributor in the backfield, providing a balanced attack alongside the passing game. His ability to break tackles and gain yards after contact made him a fan favorite.

### 3. TJ McDaniel (2019-present)

- McDaniel has been a vital part of the Mustangs' offense, known for his speed and elusiveness. His performances have helped SMU remain competitive in the American Athletic Conference.

## Impact on NFL and Beyond

Many SMU running backs have transitioned successfully to the NFL, leaving a lasting legacy on professional football. The skills and techniques honed at SMU have equipped these players for success at the highest level.

## SMU Running Backs in the NFL

- Eric Dickerson: A Hall of Famer, Dickerson is remembered as one of the greatest running backs in NFL history.

- Craig James: After a successful college career, James became a notable NFL player and later a television analyst.

- Garrison Hearst: Hearst's NFL career included a Pro Bowl appearance and significant contributions to multiple franchises.

## The Legacy of SMU Running Backs

The history of SMU running backs is not just a story of individual accomplishments but also a reflection of the university's broader football legacy. From the early pioneers to modern-day stars, these players have shaped the direction of SMU football and contributed to the rich tapestry of college football history.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the **SMU running backs history** is a testament to the talent, resilience, and impact of the players who have donned the Mustang uniform. As the program continues to develop and adapt, the legacy of its running backs will undoubtedly inspire future generations, ensuring that SMU

remains a key player in the landscape of college football. Whether through their contributions on the field or their journeys to professional football, SMU running backs have left an indelible mark on the game.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **Who is the all-time leading rusher among SMU running backs?**

The all-time leading rusher for SMU is Eric Dickerson, who amassed over 4,000 rushing yards during his college career from 1979 to 1982.

### **What notable achievements did SMU running backs accomplish in the 1980s?**

In the 1980s, SMU running backs, particularly Eric Dickerson and Craig James, were pivotal in leading the Mustangs to a national championship in 1982 and helped define the 'Pony Express' era.

### **How has the legacy of SMU running backs influenced the program's recruiting?**

The legacy of talented SMU running backs like Eric Dickerson and others has made the program attractive to recruits, as they seek to emulate their success and contribute to a storied running game.

### **Which SMU running back won the Doak Walker Award?**

SMU running back, who won the Doak Walker Award, is likely to be the standout player, with the most recent winner being Xavier Jones in 2019, recognized for his exceptional performance.

### **What role did the 'Pony Express' play in shaping SMU's running back history?**

The 'Pony Express' was a legendary backfield combination of Eric Dickerson and Craig James that revolutionized the running game at SMU, leading to significant national attention and success during the early 1980s.

### **Who are some notable SMU running backs from the 2000s and 2010s?**

Notable SMU running backs from the 2000s and 2010s include Zach Line, who became the program's all-time leading rusher after Dickerson, and Ke'Mon Freeman, who made significant contributions in more recent seasons.

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