



Redskins Legacy: Byner Stars After Browns Stint

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When considering players who began their careers with the Cleveland Browns and later made an impact with the Redskins, Bobby Mitchell is often the first name to come to mind.

After playing running back for four seasons in Cleveland (1958-61) – where he served as the sidekick to the great Jim Brown – Mitchell was traded to the Redskins and converted to flanker. He set team receiving records and helped fuel the Redskins' explosive offense in the 1960s. He's now in the Hall of Fame.

But there's another running back who once played along Lake Erie, was traded to the Redskins and turned in a star-studded career in the nation's capital.

His name is Earnest Byner.

A Cleveland Brown for his first five seasons, Byner came to the Redskins in April 1989 in a swap for running back Mike Oliphant. The deal proved to be one of the gems pulled off then-Redskins general manager Bobby Beathard.



While Oliphant was out of the league in a few years, Byner was a workhorse in his five seasons in D.C. He rushed for 3,950 yards on 990 carries (4.0 average) with 25 touchdowns and caught 185 passes for 1,577 yards with four scores.

He twice rushed for 1,000-plus yards, a career-high 1,219 in 1990 and 1,048 in 1991. He made the Pro Bowl both years. His 1991 performance helped key the Redskins' march to Super Bowl XXVI, where they crushed the Bills, 37-24.

"We knew as soon as we traded for him it was the best thing that could happen to him and to us," said Jim Lachey, an All-Pro offensive tackle who teamed with Byner for his five seasons in D.C. "Just a hard worker, there was no deficiency in his game. Could pass protect with the best of them, run with the best of them, and he was mentally sharp."

Byner's most memorable moment as a Redskin happened in Super Bowl XXVI. The Redskins, leading 3-0 in the second quarter, drove to the Bills' 10. From there, Byner caught a pass from quarterback Mark Rypien in the flat and dove into the corner of the end zone.

When that play happened, one couldn't help but think back to Byner's infamous moment four years earlier. With a little more than a minute left in the AFC Championship game in January 1988 and Cleveland trailing Denver, 38-31, Byner was running for what looked like a sure touchdown.



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Redskins-Browns Through The Years

But he fumbled the ball away, costing the Browns a trip to Super Bowl XXII.

It was Cleveland's second straight heartbreaking loss to Denver in the AFC title game, with "The Fumble coming a year after "The Drive."

In light of “The Fumble,” did Byner feel vindicated when he scored the touchdown in Super Bowl XXVI?

“It was a crowning moment for me more so because we won the Super Bowl,” he said. “Redemption for anything is not possible. You only learn from the experiences that you go through. That was a very tough learning experience for me, but I learned my lesson, graduated from it, kept growing and eventually got to be a champion.”

Byner tacked on a 998-yard rushing performance in 1992 and, after his numbers plummeted in 1993 – j his fifth and final year in Washington – he returned to Cleveland for two seasons and spent his last two in Baltimore.

In 14 NFL years, Byner amassed 8,251 rushing yards and 4,605 through the air and posted six seasons of more than 1,000 yards rushing and receiving combined. He scored 71 touchdowns – 56 on the ground.

After retiring, he spent six years as the Ravens’ director of player development (the Ravens won Super Bowl XXXV during his stint) and became the Redskins’ running backs coach when Joe Gibbs returned in 2004.

“I was looking for the opportunity to coach,” Byner said of his return to D.C. “I had one other opportunity that was presented to me and another one I was pursuing. But when coach Gibbs got the job I said, ‘Shoot, let me see if I can get in touch with him.’ I knew the expectancy was going to be high, and I wanted to be a part of trying to get this thing back to where it used to be.”

Byner spent four seasons on the Redskins’ staff and has since coached for the Titans, Jaguars and Bucs. Today, he’s a member of the Redskins 80 Greatest team.

*Mike Richman is the author of The Redskins Encyclopedia and the Washington Redskins Football Vault. He hosts a podcast called “Burgundy & Gold Flashback.” His web site is redskinshistorian.com. Check out his Facebook **Friend** and **Fan** pages and follow him on **Twitter**.*

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