Ken Houston Hit It Big In The NFL

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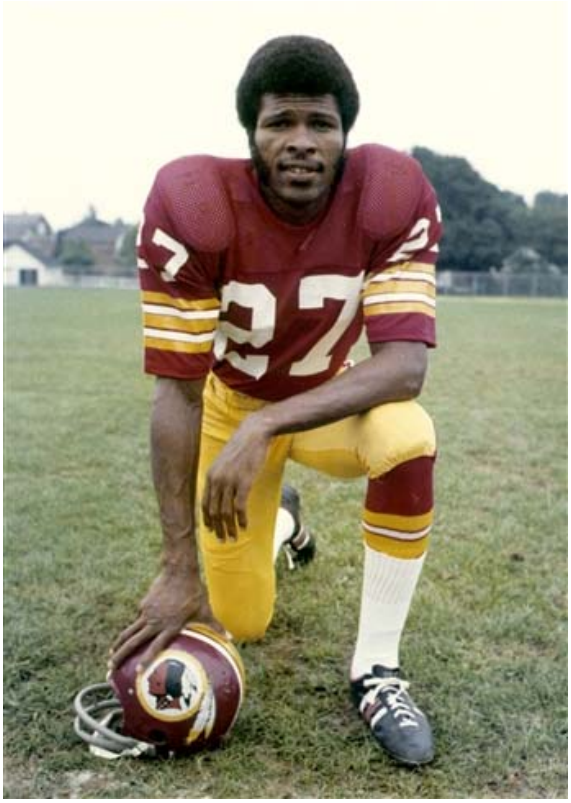

Ken Houston rose from college to the pros in 1967 and quickly made his ball-hawking mark at safety. AP View Enlarged Image

Early in his pro football career, Ken Houston learned valuable techniques from his defensive backfield coach, Bernie Miller.

They included proper positioning and grasping how to be in the right place at the right time.

Houston applied Miller's teachings. Case in point: In a 1973 game, his Washington Redskins held a 14-7 lead over a Dallas squad that faced fourth and goal at the 4-yard line with 24 seconds left.

Cowboys quarterback Craig Morton completed a pass at the 1 to Walt Garrison. Houston read the play from his strong safety position, moved up and grabbed the airborne fullback as the ball arrived.

Houston pulled the powerful off-season rodeo cowboy away from the end zone to end the threat.

Bull Ride

"I thought it was going to be an interception," Houston, 66, told IBD. "So I was going up to try to get in between Garrison and the ball, and I realized I couldn't. Then he caught it, and I was in perfect position, with my momentum catching him in the air. He couldn't get his feet on the ground."

That was the defining play in the 14-year career of one of the premier safeties in National Football League history.

Houston's Keys

Played for the Oilers and Redskins, becoming a member of the NFL 1970s All-Decade team and the league's 75th anniversary team.
"I always wanted to stay in shape. I trained. I always tried to stay flexible, did a lot of rope jumping. And I played hurt a lot. There were games that I could have missed because of injury. But I chose not to, and I just played on."

The ball hawk intercepted 49 passes and returned an NFL-record nine for touchdowns.

He's tied for first with most interceptions returned for touchdowns in one season (four) and in one game (two). He played in two All-Star games in the old American Football League and 10 Pro Bowls in the NFL.

Houston is mostly remembered for his vicious hitting style that rattled opponents. Despite being on the small side for a strong safety at 6 feet 3 inches and 197 pounds, he slammed into ball carriers with a flying forearm after chasing them down with his long-fluid strides.

Intimidation was a key part of his game, and he never backed down.

"I just thought that was a more stunning blow," Houston said. "They called me dirty and everything else, but you definitely got the ball carrier's attention."

His teammates also took notice of his jarring hits. "Kenny had tremendous instincts and was a great hitter," said Mark Murphy, who played with Houston in the 1970s. "He was kind of unorthodox because he tackled with his forearm. But he didn't miss many."

Armed

Houston relied on his forearms in high school in Lufkin, Texas. An offensive lineman, he used them to block and eliminate opponents from the play. Maintaining excellent leverage with his body low and elbows up, he applied all the power he could and hit with force. He avoided using his hands, knowing that would draw a penalty flag.

Houston was recruited as an offensive lineman at Prairie View A&M in Texas, but he encountered adversity early on.

On a running play in practice, Houston, playing center, had to block a 300-pound tackle. Not deterred, he did what he was taught in high school, lowering his shoulders to drive him back. The running back ran through a huge hole for a 10-yard gain.

Over The Line

One coach disliked his blocking style. He wanted the lanky center to stand up and confront the defender head-on. Houston did it and took a beating. "I was bleeding all over the place," he said. "(The coach) was trying to make me quit. He said, 'Look, you go take your pads off because you won't play football here again.'"

Houston, a mental wreck, began walking off the field. But another assistant coach, Hoover Wright, turned him around with this idea: How about playing linebacker?

Houston said sure, and Wright quickly put him in a three-on-three scrimmage where two guards and a center worked against the middle linebacker and two tackles.

Houston wanted to show up the coach who had belittled him. And he did so with a controlled anger.

"For the next 15 minutes, it was almost like people on offense were getting destroyed," Houston said. "I always knew I was a ballplayer, but I was so angry. I always tell people that the day I was being cut from the team is the day I made the team. So it was a blessing."

Houston's determination to be the best paid off. He excelled at linebacker the rest of his college career, earning All-American and all-conference honors and helping Prairie View vie for the national championship. The AFL's Houston Oilers drafted him in 1967 and converted him to safety.

As a rookie, Houston played with the same ferocity he displayed as an offensive lineman and linebacker. He intercepted four passes and returned two for touchdowns.

Even so, he walked away from football three times in 1967 for personal reasons, most notably because he was raised with a strong Christian background and went to church every Sunday. He thought football would interfere with his religious devotion.

His roommate, running back Johnny Brunson, convinced him to return to the game. He told him God gave him the ability to play football and that he should dedicate his gridiron feats to the Lord.

Houston embraced Brunson's wisdom and became an elite safety. He intercepted 25 passes in his first five seasons and returned nine for touchdowns, including two in one game in 1971, when by now the Oilers were in the merged NFL.

After the 1972 season, the Oilers traded Houston to the Redskins for five players. The trade surprised Houston. But he welcomed it knowing that he'd play for Redskins coach George Allen, a defensive genius who like Houston would enter the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Allen was a great strategist and had a knack for putting players in the right defense. Houston committed himself to learning from him and became a smarter player.

He perfected Allen's innovative zone-man defense, where two defensive backs line up to double-cover a receiver, but then one of the backs moves to another receiver based on what the wideout does. The alignment was aimed at confusing offenses.

Many fans and pundits called Houston the best player on a Redskins defense that paved the way for three playoff appearances while he was there. He also called signals at times.

Teammates and opponents admired his savvy. "Kenny and I knew each other so well and could count on each other being in a certain spot," said Brig Owens, a safety alongside Houston in Washington for five seasons. "We didn't have to communicate verbally. During your career, you have the pleasure of playing with great players. Kenny was one of those players."

Helping Out

Houston was respected away from the game, too. Influenced by his parents, who were community-minded, he became immersed in civic and charity endeavors during his football career. He traveled with other players to overseas hospitals caring for U.S. troops wounded in the Vietnam War.

"To me, it was just a way of life," he said. "It was a part of my nature, a part of my background to think of others first. You've been given a gift, and it's like giving something back. People enjoy you being there, and they get to know another side of a person, another side of a football player."

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