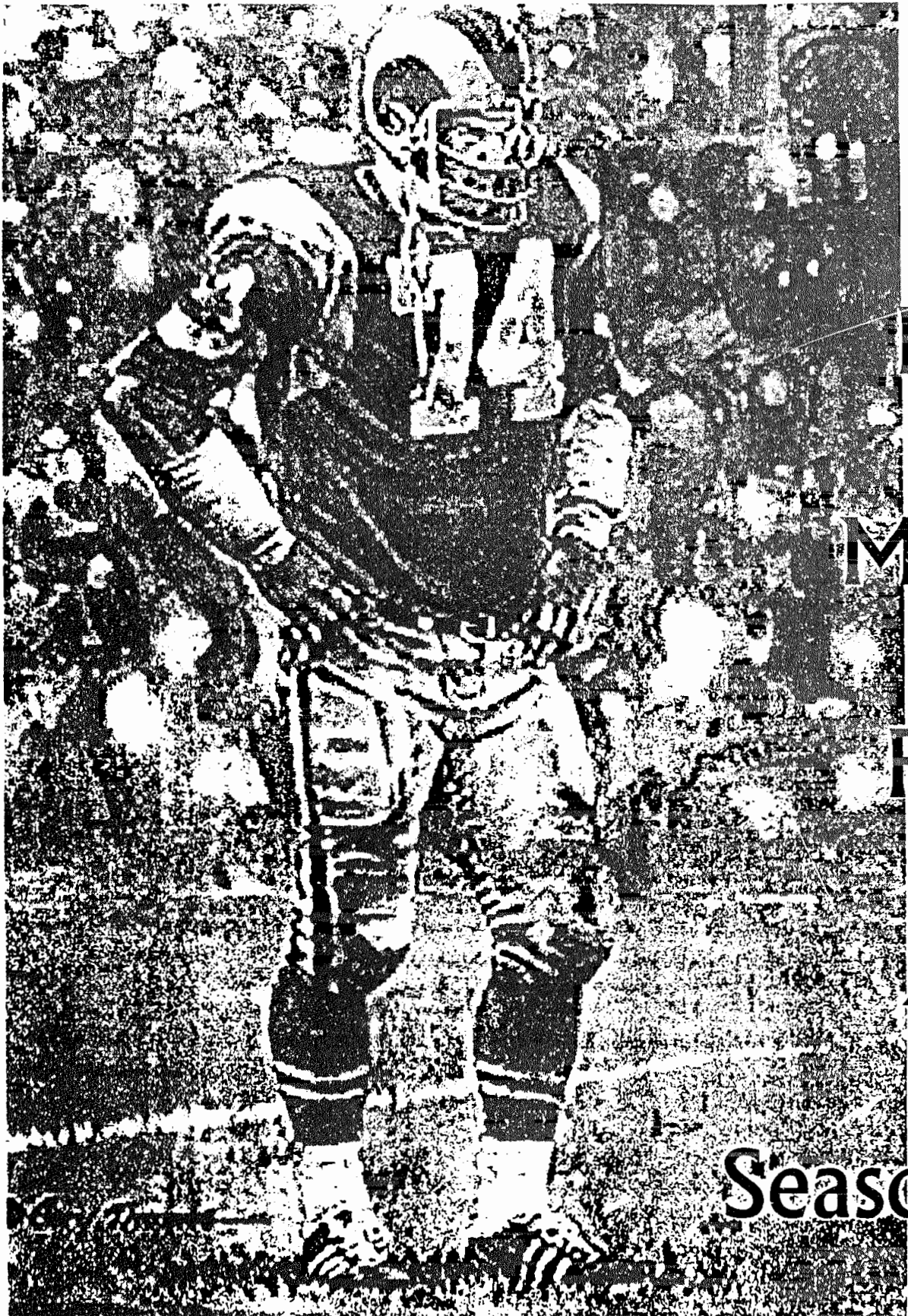


*Merlin Olsen*



**A  
Big  
Man  
For  
All  
Seasons**

*"It's nice to have different identities."*

# Merlin OLSEN

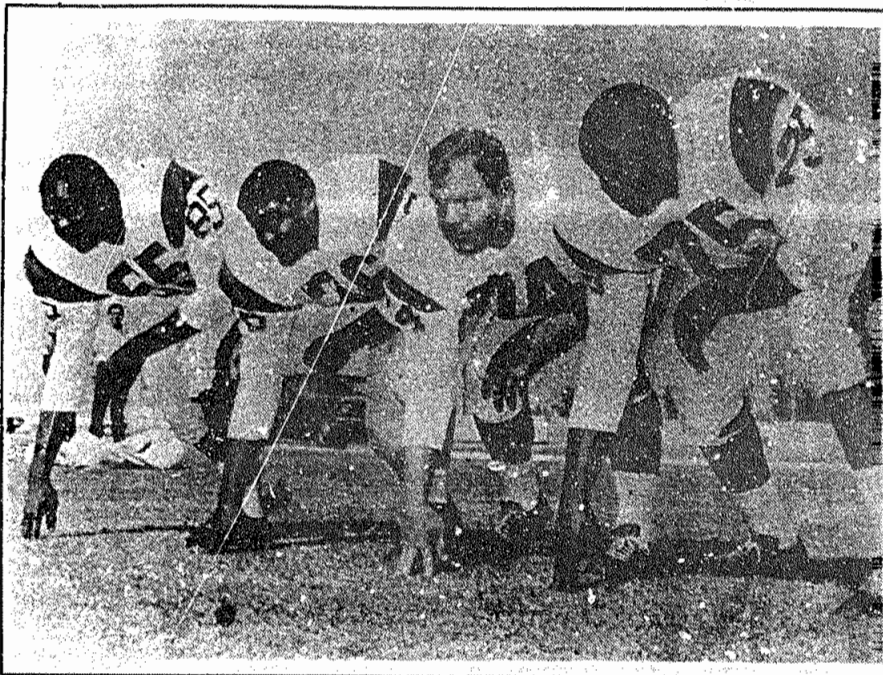
"Merlin Olsen. He's the 'Flower Man.'

"Yes, and I used to watch Merlin Olsen on Little House  
on the Prairie."

These were the responses I got when I told my wife Betty and her daughter, Sheree Fowler, that I would be talking by telephone with Merlin Olsen, also a Hall of Fame defensive lineman with the Los Angeles Rams! ■ When I first spoke about Merlin Olsen with a former teammate, it was Notre Dame All-American and five-time Pro Bowl tackle Frank Varrichione. Frank explained Olsen's strengths as a player, and concluded, "Merlin Olsen is a fantastic person." ■ Actually, Olsen, now 55, who worked for over a decade as a color commentator on televised National Football League games, and who has filmed TV commercials (notably for F.T.D.) and a variety of public service announcements, has already achieved much more than most of us will accomplish in a lifetime. ■ Later, when I told Olsen about the different responses, he smiled, and said, "It's nice to have different identities."

Story by **JIM SARGENT**





*The first edition of the Rams' Fearsome Foursome - (L-R) Lamar Lundy, Rosey Grier, Merlin Olsen and Deacon Jones. (Photo courtesy St. Louis Rams)*

Olsen's honors from football alone include:

- Three-time academic All-American at Utah State University in 1959, 1960 and 1961.
- Played in the East-West Shrine, Hula Bowl, All-American Game and College All-Star game.
- First-round draft pick of Los Angeles Rams and the AFL Denver Broncos, 1962.
- NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year, 1962.
- NFL All Pro, 1965-1969.
- An NFL record 14 Pro Bowl selections.
- NFL Team of the Decade for 1960s and 1970s.
- Rams' team captain, 1970-1976, and MVP, 1972, 1974.
- Maxwell Club NFL Player of the Year, 1974.
- Elected to High School (1987), College (1980) and Pro Football Halls of Fame (1982).
- Walter Camp College Football Team of the Century, 1992.
- *Sports Illustrated* All-Time NFL team, 1993.
- NFL 75th Anniversary Team, 1994.

Nobody could have guessed he would have achieved so much in his early years. Born Sept. 15, 1940, Olsen was the eldest son of Lynn and Merle Olsen. The youth grew up in Logan, Utah, as one of nine children in a close-knit family which enjoyed an interest in sports.

"I had always wanted to be an athlete," Olsen told me in a telephone conversation in December 1995. "I always admired people who were athletes, and I had been frustrated by not being able to achieve any success in grade school and junior high school.

"In fact, I was usually the first one cut off every team. I just didn't have any coordination. My feet and hands were just too big for the rest of me, and it was hard for me to keep up with things.

"But I was really determined that I wanted to get a shot at being successful in sports, so I didn't give up.

"In fact, I tell people the story of my ninth grade coach pulling me aside to tell me he was going to cut me off the basketball team. He suggested that I go out for the school paper, or get involved in drama, or something else.

"The coach said, 'Our job here at the junior high school is to develop athletes for the high school, and you're never going to be an athlete.'

"I've often wondered how different my life might have been if I had listened to that coach and had given up on my dreams.

"I finally made the football team as a sophomore in high school."

From there a determined and talented Olsen, who had grown to 6-foot-5 and about 270 pounds by the time he reached the NFL, experienced great success on, and off, the gridiron. He became a starter at offensive and defensive tackle, winning All-American recognition as a senior at Logan High.

Asked about football at Utah State University, he replied, matter of factly, "I was recruited by about 150 schools. I had basically very good grades and lots of activities, and I qualified on the basis of need. So I had scholarship offers from Pac-10, Big

10 and Ivy League, and most every part of the country."

But he decided to go to college in California: "I planned to go to the University of California at Berkeley. I think what happened, more than anything else, was that I worked away from home all summer long, up in Yellowstone, working by myself and away from people.

"I was so lonesome by the end of summer that the idea of going somewhere that I didn't know anybody didn't appeal to me.

"But I still had a commitment to go to Cal, so I was going to honor that. Somehow, someone in the registrar's department had made a mistake and processed my scholarship as an *academic* scholarship, rather than as an *athletic* scholarship.

"They had sent a letter that summer saying that we will be able to give you a full scholarship, but it won't be available until winter quarter. There was some mess-up there at Cal, but it was still my out.

"I went up and registered at Utah State. When the Cal athletic director called to say, 'We're all ready for you down here,' I explained to him what I had found in the letter, and he went *ballistic*."

We laughed about that comment, but I'm sure nobody was laughing about Merlin's decision in 1962!

Olsen continued, "Cal's football coach at the time, Pete Elliott, who is now the head of the Hall of Fame, never heard that story until years afterward.

"When I told Pete that story, the color drained out of his face, and he said, 'You mean you were going to come and play for me at Cal?'

"And I said, 'Yes, it was all done, and if that letter hadn't arrived, I would have played for Cal.'

"There are little twists and turns in our lives. Utah State did not have a good football program at that time. But in the spring of my freshman year, a new coach came up there from the University of

## Strong, agile and aggressive. Olsen became the regular left tackle on the Rams' defensive "Front Four" early in the exhibition season.

California by the name of John Ralston. He brought with him a number of athletes he had started to recruit to go to Cal.

"We ended up with a team that played excellent football, that got a couple of bowl invitations, and got ranked in the top 10 in my senior year. That's not too bad for a little school out of Utah."

In addition to winning the Outland Trophy as the nation's outstanding college lineman in 1961, Olsen, a member of Phi Kappa Phi, graduated Summa Cum Laude with a degree in finance in 1962. Interested in business, he earned an M.A. in economics in 1970.

Asked about the 1962 NFL draft, he recollected, "The Rams had the second and third picks of the first round, and they picked Romar Gabriel and myself with those two picks. The first pick that year was Ernie Davis.

"But in those days it was unusual for a lineman to go in the first round, so it was quite an honor. The first round was basically quarterbacks, and wide receivers, and running backs."

Los Angeles was a weak team in the early 1960s. Former Ram quarterback Bob Waterfield was the head coach in Olsen's rookie season. But Waterfield, tired of losing, resigned after eight games, and assistant Harland Svare finished the year.

It made little difference. L.A.'s 1-12-1 record left the club last in the NFL's seven-team Western Conference. Still, the strong play of Olsen, named Defensive Rookie of the Year, and Roman Gabriel, became the Rams' highlights.

But the 1960s were glory years for the great Green Bay teams. In 1962, the Packers finished on top of the Western Conference at 13-1, with the Detroit Lions a close second at 11-3. Green Bay then beat the Eastern Conference champion New York Giants, 16-7, to claim the NFL crown.

Strong, agile and aggressive, Olsen became the regular left tackle on the Rams' defensive "Front Four" early in the exhibition season. From that time on he anchored what soon became known as the "Fearsome Foursome."

Flanking Olsen were ends "Deacon" Jones, who stood 6-foot-5 and weighed 260 pounds, and Lamar Lundy, at 6-foot-7 and 255 pounds. Eig John LoVetere, 6-foot-4 and 280 pounds, played the other tackle.

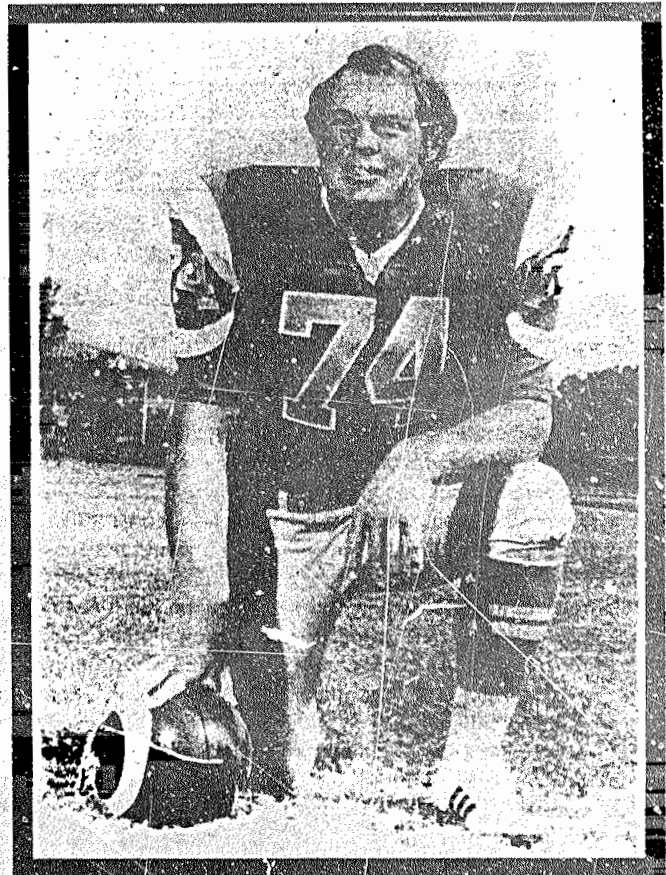
In 1963, L.A. acquired 29-year-old defensive tackle "Rosey" Grier, a 6-foot-5, 290-pounder from the Giants. That deal established the "Foursome," which terrorized offenses for the next four years.

How about the Pro Bowl?

"I made the Pro Bowl every year but one," Olsen recalled. "The only time I didn't make it was my last year. I tore a hamstring, and I was afraid my season was over, but I ended up coming back and playing the very next week.

"I think if I hadn't gotten myself hurt, I would have been able to make it in 1976, too, because I ended up being an alternate to the Pro Bowl, even though I played hurt for a good part of the year."

Although the Rams finished last in Olsen's first year, the club steadily improved. Under Coach George Allen in 1966, the Rams took third place with a record of 8-6, their first winning season since 1958. For the next 10 years, from 1967 through Olsen's final season, 1976, L.A. consistently played tough defense and lost more than four regular-season games only twice, in 1971 and 1972.



*Merlin Olsen during his heyday with the Los Angeles Rams. (Photo courtesy Merlin Olsen)*

## The Rams and Merlin Olsen

Year	RAMS	Place & Conference	OLSEN's Honors
1962	1-12-1	7th in West	Pro Bowl, Def. ROY
1963	5-9	6th in West	Pro Bowl
1964	5-7-2	5th in West	Pro Bowl
1965	4-10	7th in West	Pro Bowl, All-Pro
1966	8-6	3rd in West	Pro Bowl, All-Pro
1967	11-1-2	1st in Coastal Div	Pro Bowl, All-Pro
1968	10-3-1	2nd in Coastal Div	Pro Bowl, All-Pro
1969	11-3	1st in Coastal Div	Pro Bowl, All-Pro
1970	9-4-1	2nd in NFC West	Pro Bowl
1971	8-5-1	2nd in NFC West	Pro Bowl
1972	6-7-1	3rd in NFC West	Pro Bowl, Ram MVP
1973	12-2 Playoffs	1st in NFC West Cowboys 27, LA 16	Pro Bowl
1974	10-4 Playoffs NFC Title	1st in NFC West LA 19, Redskins 10 Vikings 14, LA 10	Pro Bowl, Ram MVP Maxwell Award
1975	12-2 Playoffs NFC Title	1st in NFC West LA 35, Cardinals 23 Cowboys 37, Rams 7	Pro Bowl
1976	10-3-1 Playoffs NFC Title	1st in NFC West LA 14, Cowboys 12 Vikings 24, LA 13	Pro Bowl, alternate Lombardi Trophy

"George Allen arrived in 1966," Olsen observed. "He brought with him some players and made some changes, and he brought with him a new attitude. Things started to turn around."

Asked to elaborate, Olsen explained, "With the Rams under Bob Waterfield and Harland Svare, there was a sense of, I don't know, maybe 'hopelessness' is too tough a word. There were a lot of players who were just going through the motions. George Allen was pretty tough on those kinds of people, and he would replace them just as quick as he could.

"George was also a very good salesman, and he was able to convince people that we were going to be a winning football team.

"I think *attitude* is a critical part of the winning equation. If you don't have the right kind of attitude, you're probably not going to win a lot of football games."

Allen also brought in veteran players and was able to fit them into the team.

"George liked veteran players. Another reason he liked to bring those guys with him is that his defensive scheme was so complicated that you couldn't learn it out of the book. You really almost had to have someone there who had played it in order to teach it."

While Allen's complex defense helped turn around L.A., the nucleus of defenders was already present.

"We had the 'Fearsome Foursome' before Allen," Olsen recalled.

"In fact, I think Rosey Grier only played into 1966, when he blew his Achilles tendon. Rosey arrived in 1963.

"We played good defense. We always had a good defensive line. We made it tough on people to run the football, and we made it tough on people to have the time to throw the football."

But following a 9-4-1 season in 1970, owner Dan Reeves fired coach Allen. Asked about the players' reaction to Allen's firing, Olsen recollected, "George had actually been fired once before that (in 1968), but they brought him back. One of the reasons he came back was because the players really stood up for him.

"But George's relationship with Dan Reeves, the owner, was bad. Much of that was George's fault, because he acted like he owned the team. In fact, he once threw the owner out of the locker room because he had a couple of drinks, and that didn't sit well with Reeves. So Reeves lived long enough to fire George, and Reeves died shortly thereafter."

Tommy Prothro, the longtime UCLA coach, replaced Allen, but his regime lasted only two seasons.

Was there a big difference in the coaching change?

"There was a very definite coaching difference. Prothro tried to bring some of his college ideas into the pro ranks, and some of it didn't fly well at all.

"The other big difference was that Prothro was very uninterested



in having the players involved in the thinking side of the game. His attitude was, 'You just do what I tell you.' That just didn't sit too well with players who were involved with all levels of the game. So he was not there very long. I think his tenure was two years, and he was fired.

"The Rams brought in Chuck Knox, and I played out the rest of my career for him. I really liked him. He was probably my favorite Ram coach."

Citing the book, *The Pro Football Hall of Fame* (1991), I asked Olsen about Denis Harrington's comment that he (Olsen) was one of the more "cerebral" players in the NFL.

"I believed that was the kind of thing you had to do if you were going to play well. You had to bring your complete concentration to each play. You basically played one play at a time you didn't go out and play a game."

My reply, "I think that's an interesting concept, but I think few are able to really apply it."

"It's not too difficult when you get tired," Olsen quipped, and we laughed. Modest, personable and witty, Olsen is reluctant to give himself much credit, despite his outstanding record.

But the point remains that Olsen combined brains and brawn more than any other defensive lineman. He learned the intricacies of line play, he concentrated intensely on each play as a mini-game, and he consistently out-thought his opponents.

Therefore, Olsen was a major contributor as Coach Knox led the Rams to five straight division titles, from 1973 through 1977. Although over 30, Olsen played perhaps his greatest football in the 1970s. Still, L.A. could not quite make it to the Super Bowl, which was inaugurated in the 1967 season.

For example, playing at Minnesota for the NFC title in 1974 and trailing 7-3 in the third period, the Rams drove 99 yards toward paydirt. The big gain came from a James Harris pass to fleet Harold Jackson, a play which covered 73 yards to the Viking two-yard line. John Cappelletti then carried to the six-inch line. But on the next play, guard Tom Mack was called for illegal motion.

Two plays later, Harris' pass to tight end Pat Curran was intercepted by linebacker Wally Hilgenburg. The Vikings got a one-yard touchdown from Dave Osborn in the last quarter to go up, 14-3. L.A. rallied on a Harris-to-Jackson scoring pass late in the period, but the Rams never came close to taking the lead.

"In the 1974 championship game, when the Vikings stopped us on the one-yard line," Olsen remembered, "there was a critical penalty called. The official had thrown the flag and had informed the other official that Alan Page was offside. And Page started screaming that Tom Mack had moved. One of the officials was intimidated enough to say, 'Well, we think somebody moved.'

"So they called the penalty on us, instead of on them. If you look at the film, there was nobody on our side of the line.

"The penalty really hurt us. Maybe we wouldn't have scored anyway, but it was much more difficult from the six-yard line than it was from the one-yard line."

In 1975, when Ron Jaworski took over at quarterback after Harris was injured, the Rams won the conference crown and beat St. Louis in the first round. But again L.A. fell short in the NFC championship, losing to the Cowboys, 37-7. Roger Staubach completed four TD passes, and the Ram defense did not touch him all day. Also, the Cowboys held the NFC's leading rusher, Lawrence McCutcheon, to 10 yards in 11 carries, and All-Pro Harold Jackson was blanked on receptions.

Asked about that game, Olsen replied, "We really got killed in



*Deacon Jones (75) and Merlin Olsen (74) joined the Rams during Bob Waterfield's tenure as head coach.*



*The left side of the Rams' "Fearsome Foursome" (Olsen (74) and Jones (75) against the Oakland Raiders.*

that 1975 championship game. But I think that was the best I ever saw Roger Staubach play. That was a very frustrating day, because we had his receivers covered, and he would just throw it anyway, throw it perfectly, and complete it.

"That was a really difficult day for us, because we didn't play that bad of football, but the Cowboys played brilliantly."

In 1976, after a fourth straight division title, even though Olsen played hurt most of the season, the Rams defeated the Cowboys in the playoffs. But for the NFC title, L.A. again lost at Minnesota, 24-13.

One big play occurred in the first quarter, when the Rams moved the ball to within inches of the Viking goal on third down. Coach Knox elected to go for a Tom Dempsey field goal. But Minnesota's Nate Allen deflected the ball, and Bobby Bryant picked up the pigskin and ran it 90 yards for a score. In the end, special teams helped

put the Vikings into the Super Bowl.

"In the 1976 championship," Olsen observed, "we ended up kicking a field goal, which was blocked, and the Vikings carried it back for a touchdown. That was the difference in the ballgame.

"The films showed that we actually scored, and that was pretty frustrating to us. We thought we had punched it into the end zone. That was one of those days where we disagreed pretty violently with the officials."

Still, Olsen gives the Vikings credit for playing a great game, even though the season-ending losses in 1974, 1975 and 1976 were tough to accept.

Asked if he has any regrets about his football career, Olsen said, "I think it would have been nice to play in a Super Bowl, and to wear a Super Bowl ring. But I certainly didn't have to have that to feel very good about what I've been able to do as a professional football player.

"That basically was the only thing I didn't get to do, and that includes all the other things you dream about doing."

By 1976, Olsen was involved in business and in acting. Also, he became an NFL color commentator in 1977, a position he enjoyed for 15 years. But he had begun acting on TV in 1966-1967. His first screen credit came in the 1969 John Wayne epic, "The Undefeated."

"John Wayne certainly was an interesting character," Olsen reminisced. "He had been a football player, and he certainly was tuned in to that. Roman Gabriel also worked on that film. We had a great time with 'The Duke.'"

Regarding "Little House," Olsen explained, "I had signed a contract with NBC to do some acting and some broadcasting. They had kind of thrown the acting in, because they knew I wanted to do some of that. I don't think they had any plans to put me in anything.

"They did send a letter to all of their producers who were doing shows for NBC, indicating I had signed a contract with them and that I had an interest in doing some acting.

"Michael Landon had just lost Victor French, who had gone off to do his own show, and Landon had about eight scripts which had been written for Victor French. Michael needed someone, and he had seen me doing something.

"Anyway, Landon called me and invited me to come down and read for him, and he offered me a chance to go to work."

Olsen performed in "Little House" through 1981. Later, he played starring roles in programs such as "Father Murphy," "Fathers and Sons" and "Aaron's Way." Also, he has been the national spokesman, the "Flower Man," for FTD florists since 1983.

Olsen often appears as a motivational speaker, particularly for charitable concerns. His favorite fund-raising project is the Children's Miracle Network. He has been a co-host of the CMN telethon since it started in 1983. To date, CMN has raised over \$900 million for children's hospitals across the United States and Canada.

A true family man, Olsen married the former Susan Wakley, and they have two grown daughters and a son, Kelly, Jill and Nathan.

Asked about his impressive list of achievements in sports, acting, business and public service, Olsen modestly replied, "A lot of people out there have done a heck of a lot more than I have. But I've been very fortunate, because I've had success in a lot of different areas."

He is not retired. "I still do a lot of work. We're in the process of getting ready to do another film in the spring, which will also be a pilot for another



*Merlin Olsen as he appears today. (Photo courtesy Merlin Olsen)*

series.

"But I'm taking more time to do the things which I want to do. It's nice to be able to decide when you want to work, and when you don't want to work."

When I told Olsen that it is unusual for a Hall of Famer, who is also a famous TV celebrity, to take time to talk about his career for a magazine like *Ragtime Sports*, he seemed surprised.

"Unfortunately," he remarked, "there are a lot of people who are not very concerned about others. That's something that I've tried always to keep in the back of my mind."

"Merlin was one great football player," concluded Frank Varrichione, his teammate in Los Angeles for four years and a longtime friend ever since, "and he's one great human being."

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# SPORT SPECIAL

The Fearsome Foursome has dwindled to one, but Merlin Olsen, all by himself, remains awesome; after ten seasons, Merlin knows all the tricks

## THE MAGIC OF MERLIN OLSEN

BY EDWIN KIESTER JR.

Merlin Olsen, the epitome of a defensive tackle, is man enough for a Mack truck. Instead, he is tucked in his purple Porsche, gripping the wheel with his huge hands, negotiating the Friday afternoon rush-hour traffic on the San Diego Freeway. His massive knees, squeezed behind the wheel, almost scrape the top of the dash. A 35-cent paper cup of Dr. Pepper is firmly wedged between his thighs.

Olsen's neighbor, All-Pro guard Tom Mack, sits in the passenger's seat. His 250-pound frame, too, is folded almost double. The freeway is jammed with maniacs hurrying to take advantage of the weekend sunshine at the beach, the mountains or the backyard pool. Clusters of cars roar down the eight lanes at 65 miles an hour, only a few feet separating one trunk from another hood. Individualists zigzag in and out, shaving fenders by inches, overtaking laggards with a sudden blast of power. At intervals, brakes squeal, stoplights blaze, horns blare. It is a time and setting fit for the brute strength of a defensive tackle.

But Olsen guides his Porsche through chaos smoothly and unhurriedly. He eyes the clusters coolly and glides among them without fender-shaving, sudden

bursts of acceleration or wrenches of the wheel. Between nips of the Dr. Pepper, he sizes up each developing situation, plans his reaction and acts firmly and decisively. When a woman in a Mustang edges into his lane, his booted foot eases up on the accelerator without a lurch. When a truck applies brakes abruptly in front of him, he slides the Porsche into the adjoining lane without losing a bit of speed, without disturbing his conversation.

The Los Angeles Rams are scheduled to meet the Cincinnati Bengals in two days. The two clubs have never before faced each other, but Mack, who attended Ohio State, warns that Paul Brown teams are always tough. Olsen comments that the films show the Bengals' second-year man, Ken Anderson, is a quarterback who refuses to be sacked. Mack wonders if his aching knees will be able to last through the game.

A passing "McGovern" bumper sticker turns the conversation to the Presidential election. Olsen mentions that his wife Susan is supporting McGovern, but that he is playing an active role in the local Nixon campaign.

"Did you hear about my letter to Shriver?" Merlin



asks, rhetorically. He pauses to avoid a Charger which has suddenly ripped across his path. "Shriver made a speech in which he said the President's domestic advisers were fending off all the questions about his economic policies. He compared the advisers to a bunch of 'big, slow, dull-witted linemen protecting their quarterback.' I sat down and wrote him a letter. I told him I didn't think the President needed any protection when it came to economic matters, but I certainly questioned anyone who could support the McGovern economic policies. I told him I'd be glad to debate the subject with him any time he chose—that is, if he didn't mind sitting down with one of those big, slow, dull-witted lineman."

Olsen offers a few of his thoughts about Phase One and Phase Two and about McGovern's proposed \$1000-a-family income grant. "I even had a special campaign button made," he says. "It says, 'Big, Slow, Dull-Witted Linemen For The President.'"

By now, Olsen has left the freeway and is heading more slowly through residential streets. The All-Pro tackle of the Rams confesses, almost casually, that he holds a master's degree in economics.

"Actually I didn't finish my thesis until two years ago," he says. "I completed all my course work my first two off-seasons, 1963 and '64. I didn't really need the thesis, but it bugs me not to finish something I set out to do. So, finally, after '69, I sat down and wrote it."

"It's about the effects of the Cuban revolution on the world sugar market," he says. "It's called 'An Economic Evaluation of the Product Sugar With Special Emphasis On The Abnormal Sugar Market of 1963-64.'"

The big, slow, dull-witted lineman eases his Porsche to a stop.

It is a mark of Merlin Olsen, and a tribute to the elusiveness of line play, that you can learn as much about this man watching him on a freeway as on a football field. Obviously, he is brainy; no one undertakes a master's thesis on the world sugar market with only sawdust inside his headgear. Obviously, he is cool; after the freeway, offensive guards become playthings. But most of all what becomes clear about this six-foot-five, 270-pound, blond behemoth, who enters a room as though he is carrying the door-frame on his shoulders, is that he is a totally self-reliant, confident individualist. No pro football player would dare challenge a candidate for Vice-President of the United States to a debate unless he is supremely certain of his own abilities.

The magic of Merlin Olsen is being put to a singular test in the season of 1972. For the first time in his professional career, he stands alone. For a decade, he was not only an individual star, but a key member of a

highly-regarded and highly-publicized defensive line euphoniouly known as the Fearsome Foursome, a quartet that made the destruction of quarterbacks a respected trade.

In the 1960s, when you thought of Olsen, you thought also of Deacon Jones, the left end who led the league almost every year in quarterback sacks; Roscy Grier and later Roger Brown, the man-mountain tackles who defied any blocker to clear them out of the way; Lamar Lundy, the six-foot-seven right end who looked like a charging wall to any normal-sized passer. In the late Sixties, these giants terrorized the league. For five years running, they kept the Rams in first place in their division or close to it.

The Foursome was at its best in 1967. That year, the George Allen-coached Rams lost only once in the regular season and at one point won six straight games in which the defense permitted only 54 points and twice shut off opponents with a single field goal. They were in second place only because Baltimore was undefeated.

**I**n their next-to-last game, the Rams collided with the champion Green Bay Packers, who had already clinched their division, but were not about to let down, not with Vince Lombardi telling them their manhood was at stake. Two finely-matched offenses and powerful defenses fought on virtually even terms until the fourth quarter. Then Green Bay slipped ahead, 24-20. After the kickoff, the Rams' offense could not get going and the Packers got the ball back with under two minutes remaining.

Then the Fearsome Foursome took over. On the first play, Jones broke into the backfield and smashed the Green Bay sweep. Next, Olsen nailed Donny Anderson for a big loss. All four defenders rose up to contain a plunge on third down. And on fourth down on the Green Bay 27, linebacker Tony Guillory blocked an Anderson punt. The Rams took possession on the five-yard line. With 34 seconds to play, Roman Gabriel passed to Bernie Casey for the winning touchdown.

The following week the Rams met Baltimore for their divisional championship. The two had tied early in the season, but Baltimore had smothered all other opposition. Johnny Unitas was at the height of his skills, to be picked at the season's end as NFL Player of the Year. That day, however, the Fearsome Foursome sacked Unitas seven times for a total loss of 48 yards. They forced two interceptions, one when Olsen batted Unitas' arm as he was passing. In the final minutes, Unitas was dropped three times in four downs to end up on the four-yard line. The Rams won the game and the title, 34-10.

Those days propelled Olsen into the high-income brackets and into off-field prominence as well. He collected virtually every honor that could come a defen-

sive lineman's way. He was chosen for the first Bowl ten years in a row, named to the writers' All-Pro selections nine times and to the players' list six times. The Old Rams voted him most valuable player in 1970, outstanding defensive lineman 1967 through 1970, and named him to the All-Time Rams' team. The shelves in his den virtually groaned under the weight of game balls and miscellaneous plaques and trophies collected throughout his career.

One of the photographs in Olsen's den shows actor Brian Keith in a frontier cavalry uniform standing next to another uniformed actor who resembles the late Dan Blocker. It is Olsen in *One More Train To Rob*, his third movie. He has also been a sportscaster and, with Gabriel, co-host of a television interview show, *Man To Man*, which matched up sports figures and celebrities. Now he is director of a mini-conglomerate, Gabriel's partner in "a Porsche store" and "a Volkswagen store," and a high-priced "motivational" speaker at industrial sales meetings. He follows a life style that is opulent but not flashy. His home is a baronial stucco affair in one of Los Angeles' poshest suburbs, San Marino.

While Olsen himself has flourished, the Fearsome Foursome has gone the way of earlier dinosaurs. Grier went first, to a career as singer and actor. Brown, who replaced Grier, followed him into football retirement in 1969, but not into movies. Lundy signed on as line coach with the San Diego Chargers, then was tragically felled by a deteriorative muscular disease which has left him unable to walk and frequently unable to talk. Jones departed last winter, traded to San Diego for three draft choices and a linebacker. Olsen is the sole survivor, D'Artagnan without the Musketeers. He anchors a revamped foursome, which is promising but unseasoned. Its members are Merlin's brother Phil, a tackle eight years younger but of identical Olsenian dimensions; Coy Bacon, an All-Pro defensive end last year who had 14 quarterback sacks and was voted the team's outstanding defensive lineman; Fred Dryer, a newcomer from the New York Giants who alternates at end with Jack Youngblood, a 22-year-old second-year man.

The cast is new, but Merlin Olsen's role is familiar. "Whoever he's playing with, he's the glue that holds them together," says Roman Gabriel, Olsen's roommate and long-time friend.

"Dave Jones was the inspirational force of the Foursome," suggests Sid Hall, the Rams' defensive line coach, "but Oley provided the leadership."

Olsen is still leader of the Rams' foursome, but he is a new kind of leader, more daring than he used to be. The Friday before the Cincinnati game, Olsen sat in his living room, dressed in Rams' T-shirt and

Khaki shorts, one leg flung over the arm of a chair, and talked about his style of play, his style of leadership.

"It's different this year," he said. "I got to let my experience help the others, teach them what I know. And I know that Phil or Bacon or Dryer is going to play a more conventional game than Deac did when he was next to me. They're still learning, after all. But that frees me to take more chances, and that's something I like to do."

"I think one of the reasons the Foursome played so well together was that we were close personally," he continued.

"It's important in a unit like that to know and understand each other, to learn how the others think and what they're likely to do. We always had an understanding on the Foursome of how each would play his game. We never had to stop and ask, 'Now what's he going to do? What should I be doing?'"

"That was especially true of Deac and me. There weren't any questions between us. He knew what to expect from me, and I from him. He was quicker than I was; sometimes I'd almost reach the quarterback, and I'd see Deac go flashing by. But that meant that sometimes he'd leave some territory uncovered. I accepted the responsibility of covering that territory. I'd see him give a guy a head-fake and then go hard inside, and I knew I had to take the outside. Or he'd go hard outside and I had to protect that gap. I must say, I miss the guy a lot."

Jones and Olsen played side by side for ten years and were close friends off the field, yet, as one Ram official puts it, "Two more unlikely buddies couldn't be imagined." To begin with, Jones is a southern black from South Carolina State College, and Olsen, a Utah Mormon, is a practicing member of a church which officially denies blacks leadership status. In addition, Jones was rambunctious, Olsen quiet; Jones was spectacular, Olsen steady. Yet the two spent their off-hours together, visited each other's homes frequently and even today, with Jones playing for San Diego, telephone each other regularly.

"The Deac and I had a great relationship," Olsen says. "I learned a lot from him and Lamar and Rosey Grier. I got a real education. I didn't grow up around black people, and I didn't know any until I met black athletes in college. I'm afraid I didn't understand the problems of the black man in today's society. Thanks to them, I'm a lot more sensitive to such things than I might have been otherwise."

"I don't think we've had any real racial problems on the Rams. To me that's more likely to happen on a club that's going badly. It's easy then for some guy to convince himself that the problem is that he's discriminated against, or that favoritism is being shown one race over the other. At the same time there's little doubt

that I got some breaks over the years that Deac never got because he was black and I was white. He never had the kind of business opportunities I had, for instance."

With Jones gone, Olsen has either Dryer or Youngblood on one side and his brother Phil on the other. He wants passionately for his brother to succeed, but all the Rams from coach Tommy Prothro down maintain that Merlin is scrupulous about not favoring Phil over the other linemen. Bill Nelson, whom Phil beat out for the second starting tackle job, even credits Merlin with being the biggest influence on his play. And Phil, whose quiet, reflective manner resembles Merlin's own, declares, "Oh, he helps all the young defensive linemen." But Phil adds, "He's the guy I go to and say, 'Look, I'm seeing this or this and I don't know what to do.' And he always does. Like one time last year against Pittsburgh, they kept working this particular trap against me time and again until Merlin showed me how to handle it."

Merlin Olsen came to the Rams as a first draft choice and college lineman of the year in 1962, but by his own admission, he was a raw rookie. His Utah boyhood had been, to say the least, sheltered. The oldest boy among nine children of a government soil scientist, he grew up in the quiet university town of Logan, 100 miles northeast of Salt Lake City, where there were not only no blacks but few Jews, Catholics or run-of-the-mill Protestants, either. Almost the entire community was Mormon, many of them related. Logan had an old-fashioned respect for the middle-class values which Olsen still retains.

As a boy, he spent long hours in the outdoors. He would take his flyrod and waders and camp overnight or for the weekend in the spectacular reaches of Logan Canyon. One summer in high school he worked on a construction project in Yellowstone National Park. He lived alone in a back-country cabin, cooked his own meals and fished every evening for cutthroat trout. Once his father came to visit him in the bear-infested country and returned home to report, "We'd better get him out of there. He's beginning to growl."

Olsen's parents were both of ordinary size, but by the time he was 12 it was evident that young Merlin was going to be tremendous. When he entered Logan High School, he weighed over 200 pounds, and at one point in his spectacular growth he gained 20 pounds in a month. The high school coach took one look at him and made him a tackle, capitalizing not only on his size but the remarkable speed and agility he had even then. When he finished high school, numerous colleges sought him, but he chose to stay in Logan to attend Utah State University, a little-known and little-regarded school football-wise. His renown spread so swiftly that he became a unanimous All-America although

most of the writers had never seen him play. The Rams won him from the Denver Broncos in a spirited bidding contest before the AFL-NFL merger agreement ended such competitive bidding.

Some of the habits that Olsen still retains were set in that rookie season. He was chosen All-Pro, but he questions now whether he actually deserved the honor. Sheer brute strength, he quickly learned, was not sufficient in the professional game as it had been in high school and college. Headwork counted at least as much as size and heft. He became an avid student of the intricacies of defensive lineplay, putting his keen mind in command of his agile body. It is a subject he discusses with ardor.

"A good defensive lineman has to be part charging buffalo and part ballet dancer," he says, "and he has to know when to be each. It's not simply a matter of physical ability. It's more an emotional state and an ability to concentrate. If you haven't those you can't generate the horsepower to make the right things happen. Some of the elements of good defensive line play can be learned. The emotional and mental qualities can't.

"You can compare us to boxers. We're counter-punchers. We wait for the opponent's action and then react. You're always ready to move, but you do nothing until your man makes his move. Yet you must be off the ball so quickly and read the play so quickly that you get where the play is developing at the same time or even ahead of the offensive blockers.

"Ability to rush the passer is critical. You can learn to play against the run, but pass-rushing must be more instinctive. Lots of defensive linemen can't do it and this is basically what separates them into categories. Then, too, you have to learn to handle screens and draws."

When you watched the old Foursome bear down on a quarterback, you could get the impression that they were savage headhunters, out to separate his skull from his shoulders. They seemed to share a deep hatred of quarterbacks.

"I room with a quarterback," Olsen says, "and I don't want to see him killed any more than the opposition's guy. I've never believed that you have to hate anybody to play football. I know that I differ in that respect from a lot of players and coaches. But I think if you're tuned in to your own responsibilities and what you're going to do, if you're motivated by pride and not by hate, by your goals for yourself and not the actions of others, by your own desire to win—that's a lot easier to tie a career to than hatred."

Olsen offers a scholarly clarification. "Of course, my job calls for me to *attack* the quarterback. If I don't do that, I'm not performing my job successfully. That doesn't mean I have to break his leg or smash his head. It *does* mean that I have to get to him before he



throws the ball, so he can't get rid of it or throws a bad pass or an interception, or at least hit him hard enough that he'll remember it in the future, and that'll cause him to hurry the ball sooner.

"Part of the job, too, is to test the quarterback's courage. The toughest thing he has to do is stand there knowing he's going to get rapped and wait until the last possible second to give his receivers time to get open, all in full consideration of what's going to happen to him.

"Some of them can't do it. They run out of the pocket or give up the ball—I don't mean the ones who adopt the scrambling style, but others. Some of them conclude after a time that standing there in the face of a roaring rush doesn't make quite as much sense as it used to. They let go of the ball just a fraction of a second sooner than they once did.

"I have a lot of respect for the courageous ones. Unitas, Starr, Namath. A guy who plays on those knees has to be courageous. I think Roman Gabriel shows tremendous courage. He's one of the most courageous people I know. This kid Anderson of the Bengals is amazing. You wouldn't believe the raps he takes and still comes back for more."

In the matchups of offensive and defensive linemen that take place each Sunday, Olsen says, he finds his opponents steadily tougher. The man he faces in the biting and struggling of the pit is usually an offensive guard, sometimes a center, sometimes both. At both positions, the quality, as he says, "has improved tremendously. The exception today is a guard who doesn't meet the standards." The renewed emphasis on the running game over the past two or three seasons reflects the upgrading of offensive line play. The Rams, like other teams, now place more stress on offensive line coaching.

Over the years, Olsen says, he has duelled with some great guards, but he refuses to single out any except to say of Green Bay's Jerry Kramer, "He and I had some great battles." Now Olsen and Kramer work together—on business deals.

Fortunately, Merlin contends, he's met up with very few who bend the rules and take cheap shots when the officials are not looking. "There's not much dirty play," he says. "I mean, it depends on what you're talking about. There's a lot of holding, but I don't count that sort of thing.

"The other stuff, anybody who tells you there's a lot of it is usually the kind of guy who brings it on. There are players who cater to that kind of game. They do it to get attention. They'll take a shot at somebody right out in the open. They get a lot of publicity that way.

"I suppose I could get pushed far enough to take a

shot at somebody, but I've trained myself never to lose my temper. After all, if you take one shot and an official sees it, you're on the bench, and then what good are you to yourself or the team? Anyway, there are ways to get even within the scope of the game. You can put a helmet in somebody's ribs. There are perfectly legitimate ways to use the shoulder or the forearm or the head, ways that will get your point across very effectively so that the guy on the receiving end of the blow will remember."

**O**lsen is so level-headed, so moderate off the field, that he is one of the few pro football players who does not take an absolute pro-or-con position on the anti-football thesis put forth by Dave Meggysy who wrote about his career in *Cut of Their League*.

"You know, I had Dave and Jerry Kramer and Norman Mailer on the television interview show one time," Olsen says. "Mailer said afterwards it was the only time he ever found himself occupying the middle ground in an argument. I don't know. I think there's a lot of truth and a lot of half-truth in what Meggysy says. I'm not so blind that I think the game is above criticism. Nothing is perfect. There are many things in football I'm unhappy about.

"On the other hand, I object to a man who picks out nothing but the bad, and makes his living saying that football is evil. I don't have any respect for the professional dissenter.

"Every man who wishes to be part of society and part of any functioning organization accepts that he is going to be exploited to some degree. That's the price he chooses to pay for becoming part of something. But he need not lose his individuality unless he wishes to. If you simply hook your body into the system and accept all that is done to you, then you're not much of a man. It wouldn't be possible or conceivable for me to do that, and I couldn't have much respect for a man who did."

One of the measures of the respect his teammates have for Olsen is that he has repeatedly been a player representative and took part in the Players Association negotiations of 1970. At the moment, he is the Rams' assistant representative, and he anticipates taking an active role the next time the owners and the players negotiate. "I find that very interesting," he said, "You'll find me volunteering for anything that needs to be done. We have many matters still to settle in that area."

As the Rams prepared themselves for Cincinnati at Blair Field at Long Beach State College, Olsen kept his teammates loose with gibes and jokes. He tossed what he called his "Hoyt Wilhelm knuckleball" to one of the Rams publicity men. Holding the football by the point, Merlin hurled it underhand with all his strength at his "catcher." The ball described a crazy pattern of dips and drops in its flight, and the press aide kept

stopping it with his ribs and forearms.

When Lance Rentzel commented that he was still hurting from the week before, Olsen commented, "Time to hang them up when you're still sore on Friday." When a Gabriel pass was deflected by a high wind and fell to the ground like a wounded bird, Merlin cracked, "Better get a duck stamp for that one."

Repeatedly, during the defensive drills, there were little conferences involving coach Hall, Olsen and linebacker Merlin McKeever, who calls the defensive signals. Sometimes one of the young linemen would also be included. The group was discussing how they would play the Bengals, who offered a balanced game with a good ground attack and sharp passing, a fitting test for Olsen's description of the Rams' defensive philosophy: "We believe you bend, but never break. We're willing to give away small things in order to contain the long gainer, the bomb. And we're aggressive. We want to force mistakes, and take the ball away with good field position as often as possible. We try to do that without weakening ourselves in other ways."

When the drill ended, big No. 74 led his teammates in a running lap around the field. He moved pretty swiftly for a defensive lineman. "Once, in college, they let me play fullback," Merlin says. "It was in a snowstorm, and we were way ahead, so they gave me the ball. I ran 21 yards with it before I tried to turn the corner. That was my mistake. I skidded right off the field and into a snowbank."

**I**n his entire career, Olsen has scored only one touchdown, in his rookie pro season; once he rambled 58 yards with an intercepted pass before the intended receiver, Billy Joe Conrad, rode his back for ten yards and wrestled him to the ground. "My wife doesn't think I score enough," Olsen says. "Still, Deac has never scored a touchdown at all."

Olsen didn't get much of a chance to score on Sunday. As Mack had predicted, the Paul Brown-coached Bengals offered the Rams tough opposition. Los Angeles scored early, after the Bengals had fumbled the opening kickoff. The game then settled down to a grueling battle of the lines. Even in the pressbox atop the huge Coliseum you could hear the thwack of helmets against pads. In the first half Gabriel could not put together a sustained offense and had to settle for a field goal and a safety that gave the Rams a 12-0 lead.

In the second half, Cincinnati began to dominate. The Ram defense was on the field nearly constantly, and in the hot Coliseum temperatures they appeared to wilt. Anderson, the young quarterback whom Olsen had praised, was forced to leave with a bruised left shoulder midway through the third quarter, and the veteran Virgil Carter came in to direct the Bengal offense. He connected with short swing passes and mixed them with darts around end by Fred Willis and Essex

Johnson. A "flea-licker" triple reverse ending in a pass put the Bengals on the scoreboard, and a Horst Muhlmann field goal and a Ram safety evened the score in the fourth.

**O**lsen was being repeatedly double-teamed by guard Pat Matson and center Bob Johnson. The Rams had expected that, and even welcomed it, since it sprung Bacon to take dead aim on the quarterback. Once he dumped Anderson for a nine-yard loss and a few plays later teamed with Dryer for a second sack, which popped the ball loose from the passer's grasp, with Dryer recovering, Olsen sacked Carter once for eight yards and a few moments later trapped the quarterback against the sidelines and knocked the ball out of his hands, but the ball bounced forwards and then out of bounds, giving Cincinnati an unexpected first down. On another series of downs, Olsen was rather ignominiously caught offside twice in a row, one of the penalties giving the Bengals another first down. The line's brightest moments came when three times their ferocious rushing caused Muhlmann to miss field goals from within the 25. Los Angeles seemed ready to settle for a 12-12 tie when, with 21 seconds left, they suddenly put together two 15-yard runs, a 17-yard pass and a personal foul penalty to reach the Bengal 32. With three seconds left on the clock, David Ray kicked a field goal, Los Angeles won by an 18-12 score—and the Rams' prospects for a playoff position dramatically brightened.

Afterward, Olsen, 15 pounds lighter and wincing from a fresh ankle injury to go with the lame knee and bandaged hands he had taken into the game, sat in his dressing alcove and reviewed the game. "Oh, it was rough in there," he said. "I gained a lot of respect for that line. They're some real tough individuals. That Matson showed me everything I'd come to expect from the films, and more. Mostly they were getting to us with the run. And with Carter in there, he's a little better runner than Anderson. That gave them another running threat they could use."

Asked to explain the two offside penalties, Olsen looked sheepish. "I'll bet you won't see me get two more the rest of the year," he said. "It was just that Carter's rhythm threw me off. I'd gotten adjusted to Anderson, and at that point of the game I was too keyed up and I just couldn't switch my timing quickly enough."

Merlin stood up, a towel draped around his shoulders, and headed for the trainer's room to have his ankle tended and to soak his battered hands in a paraffin bath. Olsen likes to take good care of his hands. Once, in a game, he had a hand gashed so badly that it required dozens of stitches to close the wound. That injury really shook up Merlin Olsen. It was so bloody and so painful he almost let the team doctor treat it *before* he finished playing the game.

