

Ken Houston Makes A Habit of Being The Best Strong Safety

By Steve Guback
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His jersey already hangs in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. It's the pale blue one he wore with the Houston Oilers and it's there because he holds the all-time record of nine interceptions returned for touchdowns.

Those who know about such things also feel a bust of Ken Houston eventually will be there, too, among the game's legendary giants.

"It's something I hadn't thought about until recently," Houston said. "I would like to be there someday, but I guess it wouldn't be the last strike if I didn't get there because I don't want to set myself up for any disappointments. But that's the ultimate, as far as being remembered. For years and years, after you're dead and gone, people can go there and see who and what you were. . . .

Ken Houston said he will just put his faith and trust in God that things will turn out all right. He always has, and they always do. No player in pro football has a record to match his: Pro Bowl status with both the AFL and the NFL for 11 consecutive years.

Yet, the Redskins' strong safety may be the game's most unheralded superstar — and certainly the one least affected by success.

He has only one football motto: "Try to improve every day." The big plays, the interceptions and the unforgettable tackles are the by-products of that philosophy he has followed staunchly for a dozen years.

You see him now with his long, fluid stride, with his almost lanky, yet sinewy, muscular body, and he seems made for his position. But who could have known that 20 years ago when high school freshman Kenny Houston was marching in the school band. . . .

"I played everything: the tuba, the trombone, the french horn, the trumpet," he recalled with a laugh. "After my freshman year, I went out for football, because everybody in my small high school in Lufkin, Texas, went out for either football or basketball. I started out on the 'B' team and I got to liking the game."

Houston comes from what he describes as "your average black background." He has a brother a year and a half older and two sisters. His father was a dry-cleaner.

"There wasn't a lot of money around, but we weren't poor, either," Houston said. "I felt like we were comfortable, because the family had a whole bunch of love. We had a very religious background. My mother was very religious and she brought us up under discipline. Like my brother and I weren't really allowed to go out. When we got to be juniors and seniors, if we went out we had to be home by 11:30. We had to come and go together everywhere we went."

"That's basically the same way now. If I happen to go home, and we go out together, we come home together. That's something that's just been written in our family."

In those days, Houston worked during the summers, cutting lawns, delivering papers, caddying and doing odd jobs. "The big thing was to save enough money to buy school

clothes and school supplies." When it came time to go to college, he had only two scholarship offers. On the day the scholarships were to be given out, one of the two, Bishop College, withdrew its offer.

"Prairie View wanted a big tackle, Wiley Smith, who was captain with me in high school," Houston explained. "He told them the only way he would go is if I came along. It really was a package deal, and I went there."

So Ken Houston, a 194-pound center, joined Prairie View's assortment of 280-pound linemen.

"At that time, Prairie View was the college as far as Texas and being black. They just got the cream of the crop of all the Texas athletes. They had them 280, 290, 300 pounds. When I got there, they had four teams, plus a group they called 'Others.' I was on the 'Others.'

"The way I got switched to defense was funny. We had two 300-pound defensive tackles. The only way I could block those guys was by cutting them down around the ankles. It would accomplish the job, but our offensive coach didn't want any cutting. I did it one day and he said I couldn't play offense for him any more. The guy who is head coach down there now, Hoo Wright, took me under his wing and made me a middle linebacker. He knew I was a sitter."

When Houston was a junior in college, his father had a stroke. "My mother had to take over the dry cleaning business, which my father had bought at the time. My brother was in the service in Germany. My sisters were in college, so she had to run the business by herself. I thought I was going to have to drop out of school. We had talked about it, and God pulled us through. We didn't have an abundance of money saved up, but she kept the cleaners going. And then suddenly my brother came home from Germany. That kept me going to college."

Houston never has lost the humbleness of his past. In the offseason he works with the March of Dimes, with Athletes in Action, with the Little Leagues, with the homes for the elderly and with church groups. He even sings in the church choir. And he goes back to his old neighborhood in Lufkin.

"There's a lot of poverty there now," he said. "We've had a lot of dropouts. There's a chance to do a lot of work there right at home. You meet kids everyday you can help, things you wouldn't normally see."

Houston considers that the greatest honor he has received came during the offseason when he was selected to receive the Bart Starr Meritorious Award in Green Bay. "Here I am going about doing my business in Washington and they think of me in Green Bay. To me, this is an honor. I didn't even know I crossed his mind."

Although Houston, the Redskins' best player, is almost revered among Washington's knowledgeable football aficionados, he admits he cried the day he learned that the Houston Oilers had traded him.

"It tore me up," he recalled. "I felt I had been betrayed. I had just talked to Sid Gillman about a week before and he told me there was no way they were going to trade me. All my family and my wife's family were

from around Houston. It was mostly frustration, I guess. I cried that night, but in the same sense I was happy. I knew I was going to a team that was established and had just gone to the Super Bowl the year before."

George Allen, then the Redskins' coach, gave up five players to get Houston in one of his best deals. Of the five players, only tight end Mack Alston, now with Baltimore, is still playing. The others — Jim Snowden, Mike Fanucci, Jeff Sevenson and Clifton McNeil — never amounted to much with the Oilers.

There is some feeling that Gillman thought he was pulling a fast one. Houston was 28 years old at the time, he had had two knee operations that left him with no cartilage in his left knee, and he was coming off a season in which he had been severely hampered by a dislocated big toe.

"It was rumored that I couldn't run any more. I honestly believe that was the key to me being traded. Other teams didn't know that I was coming off the injury. They had a chance to get something for me, and they did."

When Houston heard that five players had been traded for him, he recalled that he flinched. "It just put me under too much pressure. At one time, I had this thing in my mind that I would play a year for each guy he gave up for me instead of retiring."

But Houston now is in his seventh

year with the Redskins — all of them Pro Bowl years — and still going strong.

"Every year I think about retiring," he confessed. "You wonder if you should come back. You wonder if you can still perform and you wonder what the coaches are thinking. There's a ton of things that go through your mind once you get to be an older ball player."

Yet, at 34 — he will be 35 in November — Ken Houston said the game is getting easier for him.

"Any time they let a player go, he can still play another year, but then you have to consider the team," he said. "At the end of this year, I'll evaluate myself and see what they're thinking. But it gets easier after a dozen years. The relief is in knowing that you're not going to have to play much longer. The pressure really is on the younger guys, because they've got to come through and try to play for five or 10 years or whatever. With me, the end, so there's no pressure."

Houston laughed. "When I get out, I'll be the crowd. I love playing. I love Sunday. Believe it or not, I'll be in training camp, because I care a man's soul. A team is developed."

Perhaps no play is more firmly etched in the mind of any Redskin fan than Houston's

Garrison in 1973. On fourth and goal with 16 seconds left in the game and Washington leading, 14-7, Dallas quarterback Craig Morton completed a short pass over the middle to Garrison. With the game riding on the play's outcome, Houston met Garrison one-on-one, lifted him up and stopped him on the one-yard line.

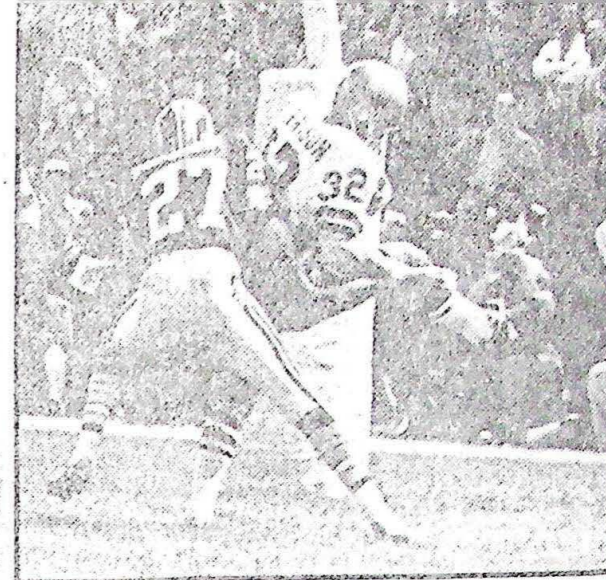
"That was the play of my career," Houston said. "Everybody knew Walt Garrison. People still come up to me and maybe they won't know my name, but they'll remember that play."

Houston has always been a nemesis to the Cowboys. The next year in an emergency role when Larry Jones was hurt, Houston returned a punt against the Cowboys for a touchdown. The following year, he made an interception in overtime to stop a 30-24 Redskins victory. Even last season, he made an interception to stop a Dallas drive and

with my wife. If she's in the school system, we'd have the same kind of hours, the same days off. It's hard to live while you're playing football. I just want to live. I don't want a high-pressure job. I just want the kind of job that I can put myself into where I can also have some time for myself."

But for now, as long as he puts on the jersey with the familiar No. 27, Houston wants to triumph. He is the perennial optimist. He refuses to listen to the prophets of doom and despair.

"I'll tell you what: With the way the wild-card situation is set up, I'll be surprised if we don't make the playoffs this year, because we've got some very solid ball players. We've got young kids who can play. It's going to take some time, but we've got four exhibition games. All football is, is being aggressive. If you've got people knocking the heck out of somebody, you're going to win your share of ball games. It's not about



—Randolph Rault

—Washington Star Photographer Robert Gresier