

New York Times - December 14, 2008

Richardson: Meticulous Workhorse With a Smile

By GREG BISHOP

Someone once told Tony Richardson that each N.F.L. collision equated to running full speed into a garage door. Now in his 15th year in the league, on the cusp of playing in his 200th regular-season game, Richardson conservatively estimates that he has absorbed 5,000 collisions.

And unlike garage doors, opposing linebackers hit back. "I don't know if one day I'll be 50 and have a tough time getting around," Richardson, a Jets fullback, said. "But you do think about those things."

Growing up in Germany, Richardson dreamed of becoming an accountant, hitting calculators instead of cornerbacks. Undrafted out of college and released by the Dallas Cowboys after a year on the practice squad, he still hoped to play five seasons.



Then one day he woke up and realized he had become the old guy, a veteran who would soon be the same age as his head coach, whose teammates inquired about the days of leather helmets.

Richardson turns 37 this week, but his teammate Dustin Keller said he could still pass for 14. In fact, his smile, the one his former teammate Matt Birk listed as Richardson's chief attribute, reveals the improbability of his career. Despite learning soccer before football, despite playing a position populated by men with thick necks who go weeks without bathing, after Sunday's game against Buffalo, Richardson will have played in more games than all but six N.F.L. running backs. Always with that smile.

"How many years has Tony been playing?" Jets Coach Eric Mangini said. "Pro football, college football, high school football, pee-wee football — it's like a million games when you add it all up."

Richardson was 8 when his father, Ben, transferred from Germany to Kentucky to be an Army drill sergeant. Richardson and his siblings served as little soldiers. He used to hate the weekends spent raking leaves and painting bedrooms. Once, his father made him wash the car seven times until not a speck of dirt remained.

Ben Richardson had one motto: do it right the first time. Discipline became a way of life. At his houses in Kansas and Minnesota, the closets are color-coordinated, the shirts pointed the same direction, the furniture and the fabrics all selected by Richardson and arranged just so.

Birk said Richardson dressed like a senator on the road. Tony Gonzalez, a Kansas City teammate, said Richardson had an extreme personality, culled from his upbringing and evidenced on the field when he once broke a teammate's nose — in warm-ups. "He's the type of person who alphabetizes his CD collection," Gonzalez said. "He gets facials and manicures. He's that meticulous. He's really like a general."

Early in his career, the general needed guidance. He found it in the office of Lamonte Winston, the Chiefs' player development director. Winston felt Richardson spent too much time partying and not enough thinking about his future. So Winston asked: "When you're no longer Tony Richardson, No. 49, who are you going to be? When are you going to grow up?"

Richardson said, "From that day on, I started getting serious."

Gonzalez described the change in Richardson as instant, a U-turn without slowing down. Richardson finished his undergraduate degree at Auburn, earned an M.B.A. in finance and studied through the N.F.L.'s entrepreneurship program at Harvard, Stanford and the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. "I think he's got like 78 degrees," Keller said. Richardson also majored in football recovery. Running back Emmitt Smith served as his first mentor. He taught Richardson the benefit of building a team of massage therapists and nutritionists, even acupuncturists, responsible for his body.

At times, doctors would tell Richardson he would miss weeks. By Thursday, he would be back at practice. He reserves his most difficult workouts for early in the week — conditioning on Monday for the soreness, heavy lifting on Tuesday, his only "day off." Last week, Keller and Richardson finished their workout by squatting 405 pounds.

"He is as razor sharp as a Marine sword and as polished as one too," Winston said.

From that discipline and routine, Richardson constructed an unlikely career in which he made three Pro Bowls and paved the way for five running backs to record seven 1,000-yard seasons. The latest addition to that club, Thomas Jones, called Richardson "the best fullback in the league, hands down."

Dick Vermeil, his coach in Kansas City, said Richardson carved holes from anticipation, from knowing not only where defenders were going, but also the precise moment they would arrive. He crunched linebackers instead of numbers, yet still found what he had sought in accounting: a definitive answer for each assignment.

Adrian Peterson, a running back Richardson blocked for on the Vikings last season, says sometimes he catches a Jets game on TV, turns to teammates and says, "You miss that, huh?"

Richardson always gave Peterson the same advice: it's all about longevity. Still, Richardson never felt secure in the N.F.L. He was the first running back since Bo Jackson to start at Auburn as a freshman, but he was not drafted.

Ben Richardson wishes his son would retire. He worries about the toll of injuries. On the day Richardson helped Marcus Allen break the N.F.L. record for rushing touchdowns, he broke his wrist so badly that when trainers removed the tape, it hung limp. He also had surgery for a torn rotator cuff.

But after almost 15 years at a position that ranks among the most brutal on the football field, Richardson has remained relatively healthy. "That says something about his longevity, his toughness," said Carl Peterson, the Chiefs' president. "Without question, he's one of the hardest-working, most conscientious players I've ever been around."

The Jets recently nominated Richardson for the league's Walter Payton Man of the Year award. Teammates speak of his community involvement in reverential tones. They point to his more than 1,000 appearances, to the child with leukemia he befriended who was buried in his jersey, to the man who stopped Richardson in the grocery store and tearfully told him that his daughter slept with the dictionary she had received from one of Richardson's projects.

"I just wanted to adopt him," Vermeil said. "In my coaching career, he's one of the most special human beings I ever met."

In an interview conducted over spaghetti with seafood at a Manhattan restaurant, Richardson said he wanted to play at least one more season with the Jets. Options for after football include coaching, broadcasting, front-office work or a position with the players union, for which he serves on the executive committee.

Carl Peterson said that as long as he worked in football, he would have a job for Richardson. Winston suggested he go into politics. Gonzalez, who noted that Richardson presided over his commitment ceremony with his girlfriend, said Richardson could run his own church. Ben Richardson voted for Christian radio. Birk said Richardson should run for president.

"Anything Tony ever set his mind to, he was successful at," said Ben Richardson, a retired sergeant major.

Regardless of the choice, Richardson's legacy will be built on 15 years of stories. Everyone has a favorite. For Carl Peterson, it involves the funeral for Chiefs linebacker Derrick Thomas. After Richardson spoke to a crowd of thousands, he reached behind his back and pulled out an Alabama hat and placed it on his head. As an Auburn man, Richardson said, he would not don the hat of a bitter rival for anyone but Thomas.

"That's Tony Richardson," Winston said. "That's why he'll be my favorite guy until the day I die. I'd do anything in the world for him. He helped me become a better man. I didn't realize it until he grew up and became T-Rich."

At his house in Kansas City, Richardson keeps a set of trading cards from his rookie season. Each year, he removes the players from the 1994 draft class who retire. Now, from a stack of hundreds, fewer than 10 remain. "The last of the Mohicans," Richardson said. "You think first-rounders are going to last forever. You think you're a free agent, you might not be here long."

Yet here he is, a baby-faced bachelor about to play his 200th regular-season game. Always with that smile.