

John B. “Red Ball” Sample



John B. “Red Ball” Sample was inducted into the Hawk Hall of Fame in 1977. The year was 1954, and America was slowly changing. John B. Sample, or as some called him, “Johnny” or “Red Ball”, came to Maryland State College (MSC) from little Northhampton County High in Northampton, Virginia. John graduated from MSC in 1958 with a degree in Physical Education.

Maryland State College, now the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, Hall of Famer, and NFL great Johnny Sample, passed away Tuesday morning at Misericordia Hospital near his home in Philadelphia, according to the Philadelphia Inquirer. The cause of his death has not

been disclosed; he was 67.

The Maryland State standout was a legend for the Hawks and had a stellar professional career. In 1957, John, an outstanding back on both offense and defense, was selected to the Little All-American Team by the Pittsburgh Courier and to the All-Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) Team.

During his time at MSC, John’s heroic offensives helped the Hawks to an overall record of 28 wins, 1 loss and 1 tie, while averaging 21.6 points per game. In addition, John’s dynamic leadership and aggressive style of play enabled the Hawks to win two CIAA championships in 1955 and 1957. John holds the distinction of being the first player from a historical Black college selected to play in the nationally recognized College All-star Game.

He played defensive back for the New York Jets and Baltimore Colts among others. He played on the Jets' 1969 championship team and is best remembered professionally for intercepting a pass during New York's 16-7 upset victory over Baltimore in Super Bowl III. Stepping in for quarterback Joe Namath to conduct the opening coin toss prior to the start of Super Bowl III, Sample called the coin toss correctly, declared the Jets would receive, then looked into the eyes of his friend and former Colts teammate Lenny Lyles and reportedly said "the first one goes to us."

The prediction proved to be prophetic. The Jets would go on to make history that day, beating the Colts 16-7 to become the first AFL Super Bowl champion. Sample would retire after that season. His legend on the UMES campus is even more fondly

remembered. "Sample was a once in a lifetime student-athlete. Most people never realized that in college Sample excelled in Track & Field, Baseball, Gymnastics and Basketball, as well as the sports for which he is nationally known.

I recall seeing him do an exhibition in gymnastics on the rings and preformed a crucifix and nailed it. He mastered the trampoline as well as the floor exercises. This was an all around athlete," said Nelson E. Townsend, Director of Athletics.

"He was one of the great ones," said Ms. Gail Aiken, Director of Alumni Affairs and Development for the Department of Athletics. "Johnny was bigger than Art Shell before there was an Art Shell, he, [Shell], Emerson [Boozer] and Roger Brown, among others helped shape the football tradition here on campus."

As a player at Maryland State he was named an All-American at halfback in 1954, '55 and '57. Sample was unanimously selected by the Pigskin Club of Washington as the Outstanding Player in the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (CIAA) in 1955. He was the first black player from a predominantly black school to play in the College All Star game held in Chicago.

As a Hawk, Sample tallied 2,381 rushing yards, 37 touchdowns, 42 conversions and four field goals. He also played baseball and basketball for the Hawks and was inducted into the UMES Hall of Fame in 1977. He graduated from Maryland State in 1958. During his football career at now UMES, he lost only once, tallying 28 wins, one loss and one tie.

Sample began his professional career in 1958 as a draftee of the Colts. He didn't see much of the field until the 1959 Colt Championship game when he intercepted two passes in the fourth quarter returning them 76 yards, including one that was a 42-yard touchdown. That contest is now known as "The Greatest Game Ever Played" after the Colts outlasted the New York Giants 23-17 in overtime. In his first two seasons with the Colts he ran back 22 punts for 129 yards and gained 457 yards on 17 kickoff returns. In 1960 Sample was traded to the Pittsburgh Steelers. He later spent the 1963 season as a Washington Redskin but was traded in 1966 to the Jets, his final NFL team.

Sample was a marked man in the league. Known for his quick feet, his authoritative tackles, and his intimidation of wide receivers, Sample was one of the outstanding cornerbacks of his era. His aggressiveness often led to disputes with opponents, coaches and even owners. In his 11-year career in both the NFL and AFL he tallied 41 interceptions and four for touchdowns. He also played in the famous "Heidi" game against Oakland in 1968.

Mr. Sample played football at Overbrook High while Wilt Chamberlain was a student there, and about the same time John Chaney was at Ben Franklin High. "I know him as a very dear friend," said Chaney, the Temple men's basketball coach. "He always championed young people. He always fought for the downtrodden." A close friend, basketball impresario Sonny Hill, said Mr. Sample was a tough player with a soft soul. "He was as docile as one would be until you riled him," he said. "I use the terminology 'to

know him is to love him.' He was never out to hurt anyone. He tried to touch people who didn't have the same opportunities."

In his book, *Confessions of a Dirty Ballplayer*, Mr. Sample talked about trying out for the Phillies. "I was hitting the ball into the stands and off the walls," he said. In the summers, he often returned to Philadelphia, playing league basketball to stay in shape for football. "My God, he was someone I never wanted to guard," Chaney said. "He was mean. He'd get right into your shirt." Chaney said Mr. Sample belongs in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. "I don't know why he's not in the Hall of Fame," he said. "He'll get there one of these days." Ray Didinger of NFL Films said Mr. Sample played in a legendary time and was a legendary player. "In a lot of ways, he was ahead of his time," Didinger said, recalling the elaborate notes he kept on receivers. "John was very much a student of the game. The perception was that he was the rough guy who knocked people around. He was a cerebral type of player, too."

The Jets organization expressed sympathy yesterday. "On behalf of the New York Jets organization, we are saddened and extend our heartfelt condolences to the family of Johnny Sample," Jets coach Herman Edwards said. "Johnny dedicated his life to football and had a passion for the game. He will always have a special place in Jets' history as a member of the Super Bowl Championship team. The Jets, and the NFL Community have lost a friend in Johnny Sample."

"His participation in two of the most significant games in NFL history, the 1958 championship game and Super Bowl III, symbolized the champion John was," Colts owner Jimmy Irsay said. WBC middleweight champion Bernard Hopkins said he knew Sample for 18 years. "He was a standup, speak-his-mind kind of guy," Hopkins told the AP in a phone interview. "It's like getting hit with a right hand that you can't shake off. He is my best older, elder friend." Sample testified in 1970 to a federal grand jury claiming blackballing practices by a league that he felt practiced racial discrimination

After his pro football career, Sample became a passionate contributor to tennis. He sponsored several grass-roots programs for kids, supported amateur and professional tournaments, worked behind-the-scenes in supporting players, particularly African American and women players, and became a professional lines person. The imposing sight of Sample calling lines at the Masters in Madison Square Garden kept even the mercurial John McEnroe in line.

An accomplished tennis player in his own right, Sample earned a No. 1 ranking in various senior age groups of the American Tennis Association. Sample began working in sports radio, hosting the Eagles pre-game show. He also hosted his own sports talk radio show in Philadelphia up until last year and spent a lot of time working with his 10-year-old daughter who is a junior player. Upon retirement Sample also opened a sporting goods store in Philadelphia called Sample's End Zone.

Sample died of heart disease. Sample has one son and two daughters. Another son is deceased. Funeral services will be held Monday, April 25 from 9am to noon in

Philadelphia at the St. Carthage Catholic Church at 63rd and Cedar. The following are some selected quotes from the New York Jets fact book about Johnny:

- Has been starting left cornerback for two seasons (1966 to 1967)
- He was co-captain of the defense in '67 and he joined Jets as a free agent
- He broke into pro ball under head coach Weeb Ewbank at Baltimore Colts
- He played on 1958 to 1959 championship clubs and he starred in title game with touch down return
- He was all-NFL in '61 with Pittsburgh while made four interceptions for Jets last fall
- He returned one interception for 41 yards for a touchdown that beat Buffalo
- He led club in interceptions in 1966 with six
- He was a standout in college on both offense and defense
- He is an excellent speaker and has done good work on radio and TV
- He constantly talks to opposing players on the field.

Johnny's NFL statistics are as follows:

		Defense						
<u>Year</u>	<u>Team</u>	<u>Games</u>	<u>INT</u>	<u>Yards</u>	<u>Avg.</u>	<u>TD</u>	<u>Fum.</u>	<u>Points</u>
1958	Baltimore Colts	12	0	0	0.0	0	0	0
1959	Baltimore Colts	12	1	10	10.0	0	1	0
1960	Baltimore Colts	11	4	27	6.8	0	3	6
1961	Pittsburgh Steelers	14	8	141	17.6	1	0	12
1962	Pittsburgh Steelers	6	0	21	0.0	0	0	0
1963	Washington Redskins	2	1	0	0.0	0	0	0
1964	Washington Redskins	14	4	31	7.8	1	0	6
1965	Washington Redskins	13	6	57	9.5	0	0	0
1966	NY Jets	13	6	32	5.3	0	0	0
1967	NY Jets	14	4	53	13.3	1	0	6
1968	NY Jets	<u>14</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>88</u>	<u>12.6</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>6</u>
Career Totals		<u>125</u>	<u>41</u>	<u>460</u>	<u>11.2</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>36</u>

		Punt Return				Kick Return			
<u>Year</u>	<u>Team</u>	<u>PR</u>	<u>Yards</u>	<u>Avg.</u>	<u>TD</u>	<u>KR</u>	<u>Yards</u>	<u>Avg.</u>	<u>TD</u>
1959	Baltimore Colts	22	129	5.9	0	17	57	26.9	0
1960	Baltimore Colts	14	101	7.2	0	18	519	28.8	1
1961	Pittsburgh Steelers	26	283	10.9	1	23	532	23.1	0
1962	Pittsburgh Steelers	4	1	0.3	0	2	52	26.0	0
1963	Washington Redskins	<u>2</u>	<u>45</u>	<u>22.5</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0.0</u>	<u>0</u>
Career Totals		<u>68</u>	<u>559</u>	<u>8.2</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>60</u>	<u>1,560</u>	<u>26.0</u>	<u>1</u>

<u>Year</u>	<u>Team</u>	<u>Other Stats</u>
1960	Baltimore Colts	Rush: 1/7yds

Source: Portions of this story are taken from the Philadelphia Inquirer's official obituary by Shannon Ryan. Contact Ryan at 215-854-5503 or sryan@phillynews.com. Maryland Eastern Shore General Releases.