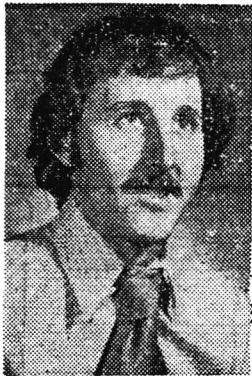


O.J. faced the finish with style

ATLANTA — O.J. went out not with a bang, but a whimper.

Oh, it would have been nice if he had run 98 yards the first time he touched the ball, scored eight touchdowns and led his team to victory. No one really expected that, though, from a 32-year-old running back with a gimpy knee. Especially one playing on a team with the worst record in the NFL.



Warner

Still, it was a disappointment. A reminder, if you will, that Hollywood endings are largely confined to the movie sets where O.J. will now turn his attention. For on his final day as a football player, Orenthal James Simpson — arguably the greatest runner of all time — lined up on only three

plays, fumbled the first time he carried the ball and gained a total of 12 yards. In his glory days, 12 yards was a carry, not an afternoon.

To make matters worse, O.J. had to watch from the sidelines as his team — the San Francisco 49ers, the subject of so many of his boyhood dreams — finished a miserable season with a 31-21 defeat at the hands of a mediocre club from Atlanta.

Afterwards, O.J. removed his shoulder pads and jersey and retreated to a special room where he was asked to share his most private thoughts with dozens of strangers armed with tape recorders, cameras and note pads. This he did, with a display of patience and good cheer which has marked his career even in the roughest of times. Standing in a crowded corner where oxygen was a rare commodity, he dutifully answered every question, gave every autograph and smiled at every lens that was directed at him.

Simpson admitted that it was a melancholy moment for him after 11 pro seasons, after gaining 11,236 yards, after breaking NFL rushing records and thrilling fans everywhere. The Juice was leaving the game that brought him fame and wealth known to few earthlings.

"I was a little down (before the game)," he said, "but not as much as I thought I'd be. I looked in the stands and tried to record it all in my mind. But I don't think it's really hit me yet.

"I thought it would be confusing and it is. It's hard to decipher what my emotions are right now."

Simpson revealed, however, that he was relieved that he got another chance to carry the ball after fumbling in the first quarter. After that initial carry, he wasn't used again until the 49ers' last drive of the day. But when he got a final chance, he made the best of it, running 10 yards for a first down to keep the drive alive.

"I was a little worried because I didn't want to end on a bad note like a fumble," he said, "but I knew coach (Bill Walsh) would put me back in. I'm just glad I had a chance to redeem myself."

No bitterness

Slowed by three knee operations, Simpson has spent almost all of his final season on the sidelines. Sunday he watched his replacement, fourth-year man Paul Hofer, have a banner game with 77 yards rushing and 130 yards in pass receptions.

Simpson said he is not bitter about finishing his career as a benchwarmer.

"I'm a realist more than anything else," he said. "The season ended with the better player playing. Paul is also much more suited to our style of play.

"I've always said that I'm a team player and this year I had a chance to prove it. I felt I could contribute something even when I wasn't playing. I hope I did."

Simpson is a man seemingly incapable of bitterness. This despite the fact he spent nearly all of his NFL years (nine in Buffalo, two in San Francisco) on second-rate teams that could not do his talents justice.

"Sure, I would have loved to play in a Super Bowl," he said, "but I never had the chance to play for a championship organization. I've a lot of ups and downs, but I take particular pride that I was able to accomplish what I did under such chaotic conditions."

His first winner

Asked to identify his greatest thrill in pro football, Simpson reflected for a minute before answering.

"I'd have to say it was the first game of the 1973 season. The Bills had never had a winning season in my time there and we had lost all six preseason games that year. But we went to New England and beat them and I got 250 yards which was an NFL record at the time. We were 1-0, my first time on a winning team at Buffalo."

Looking back, Simpson said he wished he had been "more vocal" to the management during his early years in Buffalo when he was miscast as a blocker and pass-catcher. But other than that, he couldn't think of much else he would have done differently.

When he spotted actor Lee "Six Million-Dollar Man" Majors being interviewed on the other side of the room, however, he joked, "Hey Lee, could I have one of those bionic legs? I really could use one."

Bad knees and all, with or without football, don't feel sorry for O.J. With his acting and his movie company and his commercials, he isn't about to starve.

"I'm going to Tennessee tonight for a business appearance," he said. "Then it's back to L.A. to promote my company's new TV movie, Goldie and the Boxer. Then I've got my contract with NBC — I'll be doing the Rose Bowl you know.

"I plan to stay around football, too. I love the game and that's where a lot of my friends are. I'll never get completely away from football. It's too much a part of my life."

At the urging of a 49ers' publicity man, Simpson started to walk out of the interview room toward his locker. He had a plane to catch in less than an hour. But as he walked, he couldn't bring himself to cut off the questions and the autograph seekers. It was another 15 minutes before he made it to his stall.

There, he stripped off his uniform for the last time and ran toward the showers — smiling.