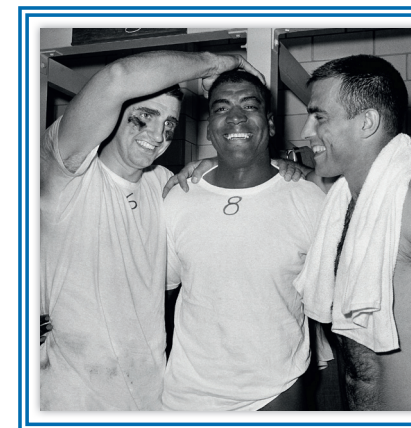
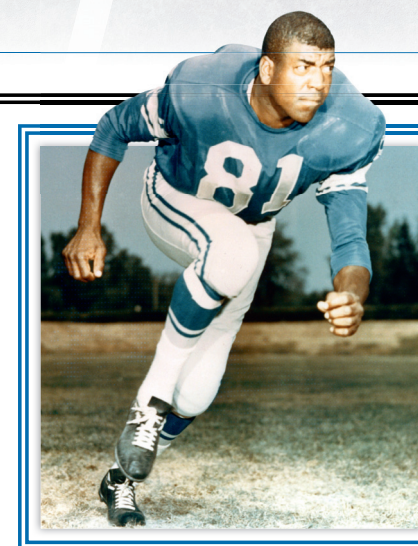




LIONS LEGEND

"Night Train" Lane

Words: Hillel Kuttler



"Supposedly, he didn't like his job, was on a bus in LA, saw the Rams office, got off the bus and asked for a tryout"

At training camp this summer, a boy admired the Detroit Lions replica jersey Richard Walker wore, with "NIGHT TRAIN" stitched across the back shoulders.

"He's my dad," Walker responded, referring to his late father, Dick "Night Train" Lane, a Hall of Fame cornerback for the Lions, Los Angeles Rams and Chicago Cardinals.

The boy said: "Oh, I play him on *Madden* all the time. Your dad is my best overall player on defense."

The youthful assessment, insofar as defensive backs is concerned, was held by Lane's contemporaries – he played in the NFL from 1952 to 1965 – and plenty of other observers.

There's the nickname. And Lane's passionate, high-calibre play. And the numbers. And the rich life he led.

First, the moniker. Two explanations prevail: that Lane took late-night trains to avoid flying, and that a song lyric was applied to him. Walker recalls his dad telling him that a Rams teammate who liked the song *Night Train* pinned the nickname on Lane.

The teammate "was always playing the song," said Walker. "[Lane] was heading out the door, and the guy said, 'Night Train'... After that, everyone started calling him that, and he just rode with it."

Ferocity? The NFL eventually banned Lane's trademark corralling of ball carriers by the neck, dubbed the "Night Train Necktie".

Then there is one marvellous statistic. Rare is the athlete who sets a league record as a rookie – which Lane did with 14 interceptions in 1952 – let alone have the mark stand for six decades and counting. Since Lane's 14, only seven men have tallied 12 or 13 interceptions in a season – none since 1980. And Lane set the mark when teams played 12-game seasons.

Lane compiled 68 career interceptions. He was named in 1994

to the NFL's 75th Anniversary Team.

Jerry Green, a Detroit journalist who covered Lane with the Lions and has attended NFL games since the 1930s says, "I would say he's the best defensive back ever."

Lane would bequeath the Detroit secondary to Lem Barney, who arrived in 1967. Scouting for the Lions, Lane attended several of Barney's Jackson State University games.

"He said I'd tear the league apart with my skills. It was great, encouraging, to hear that from a guy who was a Hall of Famer," said Barney, who'd be voted into Canton too. "It made a difference, because I played the same position Night Train played: the left corner."

Lane hardly took the conventional route to the NFL, and that is part of the Night Train legend.

"Supposedly, he didn't like his job lifting oil-covered sheets of metal into a bin, was on a bus in LA, saw the Rams offices, got off the bus and asked for a tryout," said Green. "We spoke about it 50 years ago, and he said it's true."

Green remembered Lane as "a ferocious football player, but his personality was not ferocious. It

was friendly and humane."

That aspect came out in Lane's years as an administrator in Detroit's Police Athletic League. His sons also remember him as the dad who took them to Thanksgiving Day games at Tiger Stadium and to Super Bowls, who introduced them to friends who were golfers, football players and actors. Lane was married to another legend: singer Dinah Washington.

In the 1970s, he even worked as a bodyguard for Redd Foxx, the *Sanford and Son* star and comedian.

"Both of them were hard-charging, charismatic guys," his son, Richard Lane Jr, said.

News of Night Train's death broke in the days leading up to Super Bowl XXXVI in New Orleans. There, Green approached St Louis' Aeneas Williams, a pigskin descendant of Lane, playing the same position for the same franchise.

Williams "said he knew about him and admired him," Green recalled.

"It tells me that Night Train as a player spanned different generations and is part of NFL history," Green said. "I found that impressive." 🏈

