

MIKE PEMBERTON: VOICES

The 'Kansas Comet': More than a hero



Dubbed the "Kansas Comet" for his blurring speed, Gale Sayers' football career blazed bright and brief. Hampered by

knee injuries, Sayers played in only 68 games over a seven-year pro career. Yet his performance was so dominant he was a first ballot Pro Football Hall of Famer and the youngest player to ever be inducted.

Watch YouTube footage of Sayers and marvel. Speed, strength, agility on display like no other back since ... no, ever. Helpless defenders freeze, stumble, grasp at air, as the smooth-running Sayers, seeing all, the ultimate escape artist, slips and slides his way downfield. Then, BOOM, he blasts past everyone through a sliver of daylight — "I only need 18 inches," he said — and uncorks his sprinter's speed.

In one spectacular kickoff

return, Sayers carries the ball like a loaf of bread, shifting it from one hand to the other as he zooms past defenders, the epitome of cool. A student of the "act like you been there before" school, Sayers does not showboat after the touchdown. He downshifts to a stroll and tosses the ball to the ref. Just another day at the office.

Born in 1961, I was too young to remember Sayers' playing career. I was 10 years old, however, when "Brian's Song," the story of the African-American Sayers' friendship with the white Brian Piccolo, a fellow running back, premiered on TV. Sayers and Piccolo were roommates for road games in the mid-1960s, a source of controversy for segregationists. Piccolo died of cancer at age 26. The movie propelled James Caan and Billy Dee Williams to stardom while adding depth to the public image of football players, allowing people to see the men behind the facemasks.

About Voices

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The film was my introduction to Sayers as a player, but, more importantly, Sayers the man. This quote from his biography, "I Am Third," sums up Sayers' approach to life: "God is first. Family and friends are second. I am third."

"You can't teach speed," coaches say, and Sayers emphasizes his abilities were God-

given. Sayers was an athletic prodigy, a Mozart in pads, talent coursing through his veins at birth, but he also worked at his craft and fully developed his gift.

As taken as I was by Sayers' athletic greatness, "Brian's Song" and "I Am Third" helped me recognize at 10 that my athletic heroes were mere mortals, subject to the same travails as everyone else, and not superhuman. Sayers told me he was "third" and, by implication, not to put him on a pedestal.

It is a perspective that many folks of all ages struggle with as we extend exceptional talent — athletic, musical or theatrical, for example — to all aspects of a person. The "O.J. Simpson is a great athlete, so he must be a wonderful husband, father, friend and all around person" mythology that blinds too many of us to reality.

Recently, Sayers' family revealed he suffers from dementia. Thanks to Sayers'

words from 45 years ago, I'm no celebrity worshipper, but the revelation struck a nerve. I've never met Sayers or interacted with him personally in any manner, yet I grieve for him and his family in a way that I have not for other celebrities.

Perhaps it's because I connected to him as a man, not a mythical figure. I see him as a mentor, not an idol. Sayers' magical runs caught my boyhood fancy, but his conduct as a flesh-and-blood person impacted my life. It is for those lessons that I think of him differently than I do many other boyhood heroes and why his struggles touch me.

Gale Sayers is no hero. He's something much more for me. And I thank him.

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