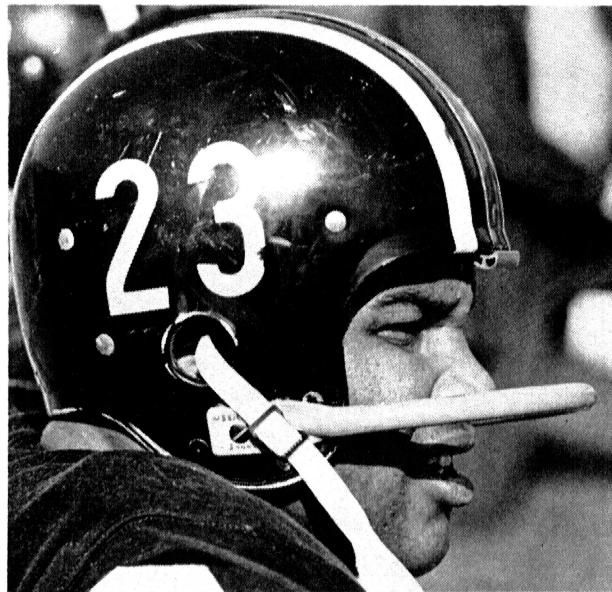


Johnny Roland



All-American

THE YOUNG MAN leaned against one of the massive Columns on the campus at the University of Missouri, pausing there to continue a conversation with a visitor. Students scurried by on their way to classes. Most of them glanced Johnny Roland's way. They smiled in recognition or waved a greeting.

A pleased and unhurried grin spread across Johnny's face. He was not self-conscious. There was no embarrassment. As a freshman or sophomore at Missouri, he might have grinned awkwardly, but today Johnny Roland is a confident and poised young man with a promising future before him—and a splendid college career behind him.

That career is one of the most outstanding in Missouri football history. Johnny Roland capped it in 1965 by earning first-team berths on the Football Coaches Association All-America, on the Look Magazine All-America selected by the Football Writers Association, on The Sporting News All-America chosen by professional scouts and on the Associated Press and United Press International All-Americas.

"He is the best defensive back I've seen in a long, long time," said coach Murray Warmath of Minnesota after Johnny's jarring tackles had played such a vital part in Missouri's 17-6 victory over the Gophers this season.

"Johnny Roland may be the finest all-round back in the United States," said Kansas coach Jack Mitchell after the 6-foot-2 and 207-pound Tiger had torn the Jayhawks for a school record-tying three touchdowns and had played his usually superb defensive game in a 44-20 Missouri triumph. "I believe Johnny is the best since Bill Vessels of Oklahoma (a Heisman Trophy winner)."

MAYBE THE PROS pinpointed Johnny's talents as a football player even more emphatically. The St. Louis Cardinals of the National Football League and the New York Jets of the American Football League both drafted him last year as a "future," an athlete who has a year of eligibility remaining but whose class is graduating.

The Cardinals, knowing they had a year to wait, still selected him on the fourth round, a rare high pick for a future. "I was surprised the Cardinals drafted me so high," Johnny said.

After the Jets drafted him high in the AFL's regular "futures" selection, a New York spokesman said, "We will bid as high as we have to go to get him."

Johnny Roland is more than a football player. He is a highly respected student who shrugs off



his celebrity status. He tends to socialize with non-athletes who like him for himself and not for his gridiron accomplishments. Yet he is one of the most popular members of the team, and he was a leader by example and by quiet word even before his teammates elected him as one of their tri-captains. He was the first Negro named a football captain in the history of Missouri University. The team he helped lead finished with a 7-2-1 record, took second place in the Big Eight and was rewarded with a Sugar Bowl berth.

QUIET AND WELL-MANNERED and talented, Johnny Roland is typical of today's Missouri University football players.

He is not a complicated person. The shortest line to victory is smashing through or diving over massed defenders at the goal line, or breaking up a pass receiver with a battering shoulder just as the foe touches the ball. (See page 12.)

And he does those things to perfection, but he prefers to talk about other matters.

"Johnny would rather discuss his faults than what he does with a football," his wife of almost two years, the former Barbara Warren of St. Louis, said the evening of Johnny's stroll around the Columns. "Football is not the center of our every action. Johnny likes a good joke and enjoys television. He used to watch Gomer Pyle a lot. That show just tickled him. He watches the Fugitive and Bonanza all the time. He loves them. He won't miss them."

"But the baby takes up most of his time at home. He loves to play with our little boy."

"Everyone tells me I'm raising a tackle," Johnny said. "I'm not sure I like that. But maybe I am. John Jr. weighed 8 pounds 14 ounces when he was born last March. I weighed under 6 pounds 8 ounces when I was born."

Even in football season, Johnny avoided letting the sport dominate his home life.

"I was nervous my first game in high school, but I haven't been since and that makes it easier on everyone at home, I'm sure," he said. "I just try to think what I have to do. If I get too keyed up, I play my worst game. I just try to relax."

"Can he relax!" his wife said with a laugh. "Anywhere and anytime. We had a library date the first time we went out and he fell asleep on me. When he woke up, he had to dash off. Some date!"

"Really, though, he does have a tremendous knack of relaxing. He's even more relaxed before a game than he usually is. On a Friday, he'll come home at noon when I do and put some records on and we'll dance. Or he'll play with the baby."



THE MATURITY Johnny shows in coping with a college game of football was reflected early in his life. Nearly his every step has been a firm one.

When Johnny started his first year in high school in Corpus Christi, Texas, he did not go out for football, although he had been an outstanding performer in junior high school.

"My high school was tough scholastically," he said, "and I wanted to make sure I did all right. It was integrated. Most of our segregated schools hadn't been too difficult. I didn't want to be another one of those having trouble when he got to the integrated high school. I couldn't do it alone, but I wanted to make sure there was one more guy like me who was doing well. So I didn't go out for football at first. Oddly, when I finally did go out, my grades started getting even better."

His actions early in his high school career were not a crusade worn on a sleeve. To hear Johnny, it was no crusade at all. It is just that he was attempting to cope personally with existing situations. His thinking was equally deliberate when it came to choosing a college.

"As you know," Johnny said, "I signed a letter of intent first to enroll at Oklahoma. That was before the letter of intent was binding. After I signed, I started thinking about it. What about the future? I decided I would rather not live in Oklahoma. I'd rather live in Missouri. It was not a question of race, but I guess maybe I was subconsciously influenced by it.

"I thought my best opportunities might come in the state where I attended college and I felt I definitely would prefer living in Missouri to living in Oklahoma."

WHEN JOHNNY was growing up in Corpus Christi, he seldom encountered the harsher realities of life. There were no shock or pains.

His father provided a comfortable home. He was employed by the federal government and painted military aircraft at what was first a naval station and later an Army base at Corpus Christi. Johnny's mother and father were an alert couple who encouraged him in his school work and his athletics.

"You could sense his upbringing by the way he acted," said Bill Callahan, sports publicity director at Missouri. "He is a gentleman."

Baseball was Johnny's first love and watching baseball is one of his greatest enjoyments today. He began playing baseball for a Cub Scout team coached by his father. Later, he took up football.

"We played unorganized football on a dirt parking lot near our house," Johnny said. "Not touch. It was always tackle. We played without pads, but we didn't worry." Johnny laughed. "If I went out

now without pads, I'd be scared; I'm scared when I play touch football now," said the rugged defensive back whose vicious tackles have frightened many an opponent.

In junior high, Johnny was a football, baseball and track star. He bypassed basketball. "I wasn't any good," he said with a sheepish grin. "I didn't have that eye."

Then came his six-week divorce from football in high school. "But I changed my mind after I talked a few times with our head coach, Pete Reagus," Johnny said. "He didn't talk me into going out, but he gave me the bug again and I finally went out."

JOHNNY PLAYED "B" team football his first year. Significantly, the Missouri offensive star who was to become a defensive All-America started out as a defensive back.

But no one, at Missouri these past few years or at Johnny's high school several years ago, ever discounted his offensive potential. In Johnny's third week on the high school "B" team, his teammates were having difficulty moving the ball in the first half of a game. Johnny's coach told the young back that he would start the second half on offense to see if he couldn't put some punch into the attack.

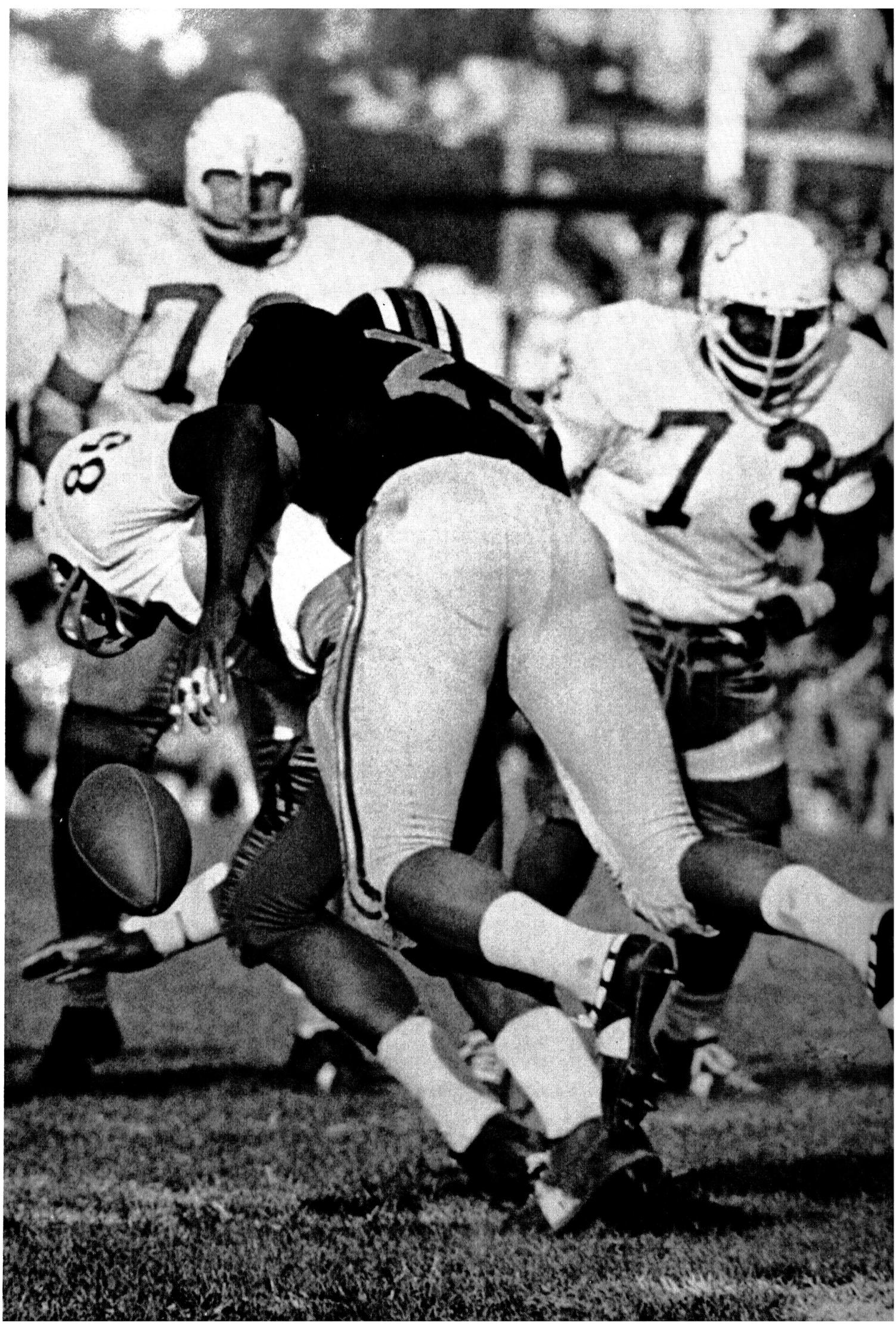
He went in at left half and on the first play ran 50 yards for a touchdown.

As a junior, Johnny was shifted to right halfback. His versatility again was the reason he was asked to change positions. "We had a fine running halfback named Bobby Smith. He's with the Buffalo Bills in the AFL now. We didn't have anyone to block for him. I was a pretty good blocker, so they put me at right half to clear the way for Bobby. I didn't mind at all."

Not even the streaking Bobby Smith could blot out Johnny Roland's offensive potential. By the seventh game, opponents were keying on Smith. Johnny began carrying the ball more often then. He gained 300 yards in those last three contests. As a senior, he tore up Texas schoolboy opponents. He was so outstanding he made the prep All-America. About 50 colleges came rushing to his doorstep.

"Up to then, I still didn't have any preference when it came to football or baseball," he said. "I was even thinking of pro baseball. But when I got all those football scholarship offers, I knew I wanted to go to college and I forgot about baseball."

JOHNNY CAREFULLY WEIGHED his opportunities. "The best places for me to play football appeared to be the Big Ten and the Big Eight, all



things considered," he said. "I had some doubts about the Big Ten. There were so many boys going there. I was afraid I'd get lost in the shuffle."

Despite Johnny's feelings, that would have been an unlikely occurrence.

Johnny settled on the Big Eight, and finally Missouri, where head coach Dan Devine and defensive backfield coach Clay Cooper had made such a deep impression on him.

Cooper may not have realized it then, but the boy he had played such a major role in attracting to Missouri was to become the cornerstone of a secondary second to none. The trio of Roland, Ken Boston and Gary Grossnickle earned Cooper's stamp as "the best deep defense we have ever had at Missouri" after the 1965 season. Yet in the spring and summer of 1961, when Cooper was recruiting Roland, the Corpus Christi sensation was sought primarily for his offensive abilities.

He displayed them early. In the first game of the 1962 varsity season, sophomore starter Johnny Roland gained almost 200 yards rushing and scored a school record-tying three touchdowns against California. As Bob Broeg, a Missouri alumnus and sports editor of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, wrote, "What's he going to do for an encore?"

Before the season was over, Johnny had rushed for 830 yards. That was the ninth best figure in the country and the most yards ever gained by a sophomore in Missouri history. Behind him were the Steubers, the Ices, the Brinkmans, the Entsmingers, the Braznells, the Wrens and other outstanding backs.

The 78 points scored by Roland are the second-highest total ever tallied by a Tiger, exceeded only by Bob Steuber's 121 in 1942.

MISSOURI'S GREAT HALFBACK was not a sprinter. "I guess I've done 10.2 seconds in the 100-yard dash," he said. But he had powerful legs, an amazing sense of balance and a shuffle-and-fake that threw opponents off just enough so they grabbed only some bruises as he flitted by.

Johnny's great rookie season brought him first-team all-conference honors as an offensive halfback in a league with such offensive stars as Gale Sayers of Kansas, Jim Grisham and Joe Don Looney of Oklahoma, Dennis Claridge of Nebraska and Dave Hoppmann of Iowa State.

Johnny Roland was on top of the world. And then his world broke at his feet.

Before spring football practice was to begin in 1963, Johnny lent his automobile to another student. The auto showed up the next day with two tires and wheels that had been swapped with those on another vehicle.

"He didn't tell me, but I knew he didn't have anything to do with it," said Barbara Roland, who only a short while earlier had become engaged to Johnny.

"I didn't talk about it then and I'd rather not talk about it now," Johnny said in a quiet voice, a crooked little smile touching a corner of his mouth.

Johnny was charged with a misdemeanor and was fined \$50. School officials suspended him from the University.

Harry Farrar, columnist for the Denver Post and divorced from the Missouri scene, wrote recently, "A lesser man would have said to hell with it and would have accepted a fancy salary offer from a Canadian pro club that pleaded for his services."

JOHNNY PACKED HIS BELONGINGS and moved to Kansas City, where he had been offered a job while he was out of school.

"He was awfully low when he went to Kansas City," Barbara said. "But I knew he was going to come back."

He did. After sitting out a semester, Johnny was told he could re-enroll, although he would have to miss the 1963 football season while he regained scholastic eligibility.

By the start of the 1964 pre-season drills, Johnny was married to Barbara, in good standing scholastically and eligible for football again.

Along about then, several sound and sober persons close to football passed along the word that Johnny Roland had been totally without responsibility in the incident in 1963. His only crime had been his refusal to divulge the names of those who had borrowed his automobile.

Columnist Farrar, in Denver, put it in print: "A pro scout 'cleared' Roland . . . The commercial league spy, fearing that Roland might just possibly be a bad risk, had agents check the affair like a super-sleuth . . . Roland was clear, the pro scout told a Missouri coach. Another guy (who left the University) stole the tires. Roland simply refused to shift the blame."

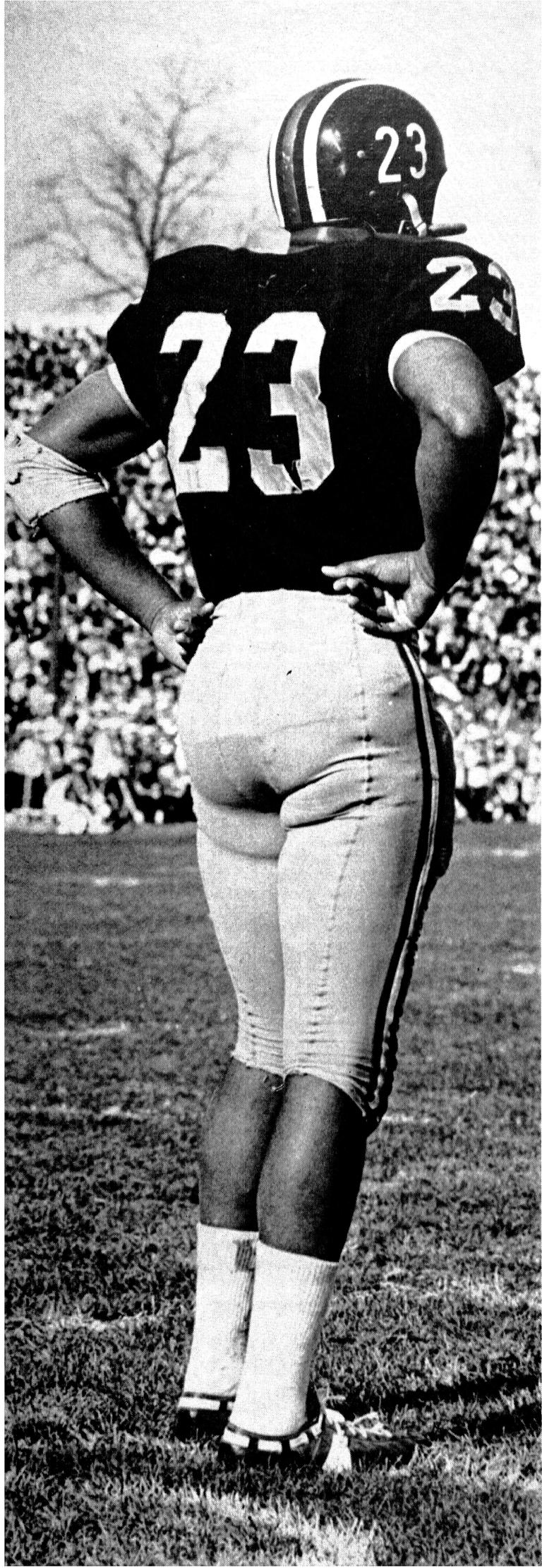
AS COACH DEVINE'S team neared its 1964 opener, Johnny was considered Missouri's bright offensive hope by most Tiger fans. The Tigers, however, were facing a desperate problem: A gaping defensive backfield.

Missouri's first foe in 1964 was California, with its great passer, Craig Morton.

"The week of the California game, they told me they wanted me to switch to defense," Johnny said.

Johnny continued, "I knew we needed help there

(Continued on Page 36)



JOHNNY ROLAND

Continued from Page 13

and I knew what would happen if we went up with a weak secondary against Craig Morton. I wasn't real happy, but I made the switch."

"Johnny likes to do his best," Clay Cooper said. "The only thing that bothered him then was he wondered if he really was a defensive back. He lacked confidence. Toward the end of the 1964 season, he really wanted to play and did. And in 1965, he was one of the best, if not the best defensive back we've ever had: A vicious tackler and with the size you seldom have in the secondary."

But the road was not easy.

"That first year, 1964, was difficult," Johnny said. "As the season progressed, we weren't doing too well and I wondered if I was doing the right thing. It looked as if they needed me on offense, and we weren't beating anybody with our defense. Especially me. But I got better. I got confidence. As I got confidence, I decided I was right to have made the switch when the coaches had asked me to. There's something about defense: Stopping the other guy, taking the heart out of his offense."

Johnny did it to perfection; the young man who was an All-Big Eight offensive back as a sophomore in 1962 was named to the No. 1 all-conference team at defensive halfback as a junior in 1964.

THIS YEAR, he was just short of unbelievable. His 65-yard touchdown runback with a punt in the fourth quarter gave the Tigers a 14-14 tie with powerful UCLA. His punt runbacks broke Oklahoma's back as Missouri beat the Sooners for the first time in Columbia since 1945, and did it by a whopping 30-0. Against traditional rival Kansas, he not only scored those three touchdowns, but he also intercepted a pass and recovered a fumble.

Swift and sure, using blockers perfectly, he returned 32 punts for 430 yards, a 13.4 average, for the fourth-best figure in the country. In kickoff returns, he was fifth in the Big Eight with 10 for 260 yards, a fat 26.0 average. And though he was primarily a defensive back, Johnny was fifth in the Big Eight in scoring with 36 points.

A vicious tackler . . . A talented pass defender . . . A leading punt and kickoff returner . . . And still considered by many as the top all-around halfback on the 1965 Tiger team.

"Where do you play him?" one pro scout mused. "Wherever you need him. He can do the job. He can play wherever he wants to play."

Dave Lipman

About the author: Dave Lipman, B.J. '53, is a sports writer for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, where his boss is Sports Editor Bob Broeg, B.J. '41.

Photography by Ken Heinen.