

= Joe Lillard =

Joseph Johnny Lillard Jr . (June 15 , 1905 ? September 18 , 1978) was an American football , baseball , and basketball player . From 1932 to 1933 , he was a running back for the National Football League 's (NFL) Chicago Cardinals . Lillard was the last African @-@ American , along with Ray Kemp , to play in the NFL until 1946 , when Kenny Washington and Woody Strode joined the Los Angeles Rams . Lillard received the nickname " The Midnight Express " by the media . In 1933 , he was responsible for almost half of the Cardinals ' points .

An orphan from an early age , Lillard attended Mason City High School before moving to the University of Oregon . He played twice for the university 's football team in 1931 before he was ruled ineligible by the Pacific Coast Conference (PCC) for playing semi @-@ professional baseball . The following year , he signed with the Cardinals , but played less frequently toward the end of the season . Lillard was a leading contributor for the Cardinals in 1933 , receiving praise from the Chicago Defender . His performances during the season included a game against the Chicago Bears that featured a punt return for a touchdown . However , he was ejected from two games that season for fighting , into which he was often baited by white opponents .

With the advent of an unofficial color line that excluded black players , Lillard did not play in the NFL after 1933 . He remained active in football , playing for minor league and semi @-@ professional teams , including the New York Brown Bombers , with whom he spent three seasons . Lillard was also a pitcher in Negro league baseball for five seasons from 1932 to 1944 , and a guard in basketball for the future Harlem Globetrotters . After his athletic career , he became an appliance store employee and died in 1978 .

= = Early life = =

Born in Tulsa , Oklahoma to Joe Lillard and Annie Johnson , Lillard was the first of the couple 's two children ; Johnson also had a son from a previous marriage . Lillard took up baseball at the age of six ; his other childhood hobbies included singing and tap dancing . His mother died when Lillard was nine , and his father had left about six years before that time . Afterwards , he moved in 1915 , settling in Mason City , Iowa and moving in with relatives . Lillard attended Mason City High School , graduating in 1927 . In basketball and football , Lillard won all @-@ state honors , and claimed several Iowa track titles .

= = College career = =

Although Lillard planned to attend the University of Minnesota , he changed his mind when Clarence Spears , the college 's head football coach , left to go to the University of Oregon . Lillard decided to attend Oregon , and played for the school 's freshman football team in 1930 . The following year , he appeared in two games for the varsity team . Against Idaho , Lillard was responsible for all of Oregon 's points in a 9 ? 0 Ducks win . Suspected of breaking college amateurism rules by playing semi @-@ professional baseball for the Gilkerson Colored Giants , Lillard was briefly suspended by the PCC before Oregon 's next game . The suspected violation placed Lillard 's collegiate eligibility in question . While he did play in games , Lillard claimed that he received money not for playing , but for driving the team . The decision was overturned ; according to PCC rules , no protest was possible during the week prior to a game between PCC teams . In the game against Washington , their second of the season , the Ducks claimed an upset victory , 13 ? 0 ; Lillard had a touchdown and intercepted two passes . Before Oregon 's next game against USC , Lillard was ruled ineligible by the PCC as a result of playing with the Gilkerson baseball team . Spears estimated that Lillard had provided half of his team 's production on offense , and USC defeated Oregon by 53 points in the game after the ruling . Lillard dropped out of the university after the PCC 's decision , becoming a professional football player and playing for various All @-@ Star teams that traveled across the United States .

= = Professional American football career = =

After the end of his college career , Lillard participated in a professional all @-@ star game on November 26 , 1931 ; he helped his team to a win with a 55 @-@ yard touchdown run . In a second All @-@ Star game , he recorded a 45 @-@ yard touchdown run for a Chicago @-@ based team in a 20 ? 6 win . These performances attracted the attention of NFL teams . For the 1932 NFL season , he joined the Chicago Cardinals . In his first NFL game , against the Portsmouth Spartans , Lillard converted an extra point attempt that helped secure a 7 ? 7 tie . One week later , the Cardinals tied the eventual NFL champion Chicago Bears ; Lillard 's performance was praised in the Chicago Defender , which called him " the whole show " . After wins against the Boston Braves and Providence Steamrollers (in a non @-@ NFL contest) , the number of plays in which Lillard was on the field for the Cardinals sharply declined . During the latter part of the 1932 season , " Lillard 's teammates had stopped blocking for him , " according to Coyle . Toward the end of the season , he was benched by the Cardinals ; it is unknown whether this was because of an injury or a suspension . Jack Chevigny , the Cardinals ' coach , indicated that Lillard had occasionally failed to attend practice , and had arrived late at other times . The lack of playing time for Lillard was attributed to internal disputes caused by " lackluster effort and a prideful attitude " ; the Chicago Defender offered a different explanation , accusing Chevigny of racism towards Lillard . He ended the season with 121 rushing yards in 52 attempts , and nine successful passes in 28 attempts .

Lillard was a backup in 1933 , although he was one of the Cardinals ' leading players when he received playing time . In the first game of the 1933 NFL season , against the Pittsburgh Pirates , he missed an extra point attempt that proved to be the margin separating the teams in a 14 ? 13 Pirates ' win . Lillard was subsequently ejected from the game , having been involved in a dispute with Pirates player Tony Holm . One week later , he threw a touchdown pass in a 7 ? 6 loss to the Spartans , though he received criticism from local newspapers for a missed extra point attempt and a short punt that led to a Portsmouth score . In the Cardinals ' third game of the season , against the Cincinnati Reds , Lillard kicked a fourth @-@ quarter field goal to secure Chicago 's lone win of the 1933 season . After the kick , Lillard was punched by Cincinnati guard Les Caywood ; he responded with a punch to Caywood 's head , and was thrown out of the game along with Caywood . He played a key role in the Cardinals ' October 15 , 1933 game against the Bears . In addition to converting a field goal attempt , he had 110 yards in punt returns , including a return of more than 50 yards in which he outran Bears star Red Grange for a touchdown . However , the Cardinals lost by a score of 12 ? 9 . In 1933 , the Cardinals posted 52 points in 11 games ; Lillard scored 19 himself and had two touchdown passes . He had 373 rushing yards from 119 attempts . The Chicago Defender called him " easily the best halfback in football " .

During his time in the NFL , Lillard was regarded as a player with multiple talents , possessing the ability to complete passes and execute running and kicking plays . Author Charles Ross called him " a superior athlete " due to his skills in baseball and basketball , and added that in the NFL " arguably he was one of the best players in the league . " He was frequently baited into fighting by opposing white players . His responses during these incidents went against cultural expectations for African @-@ American athletes ; Sports Illustrated 's Daniel Coyle wrote that they " were regarded by all whites and many blacks as prideful foolishness , if not sheer lunacy . " It is not known how other Cardinals players viewed Lillard . Cardinals coach Paul J. Schissler said that he was forced to remove Lillard from some games due to injuries suffered when teams " gave Joe the works " . Lillard also received racial abuse from fans ; author Alan Howard Levy wrote that spectators in Portsmouth , Ohio regularly taunted him when the Cardinals played there . After the 1933 season , Lillard was not retained by the Cardinals , and he did not play again in the NFL . The Cardinals ' decision was criticized as racially motivated by African @-@ American publications . Schissler acknowledged the existence of an unofficial regulation against African @-@ American players in the NFL , and stated that the team 's move was aimed at protecting them and Lillard from violence . In his two @-@ year NFL career , he had 171 rushing attempts , in which he gained 494 yards . The media gave him the nickname of " The Midnight Express " .

After his NFL career ended , Lillard joined the Westwood Cubs of the Pacific Coast Football League

for the 1934 season , throwing the most touchdown passes of any player in the league and compiling the second @-@ most touchdowns on runs . In 1935 , he drew interest from coach Fritz Pollard , who was leading the New York Brown Bombers , a semi @-@ professional team of African @-@ American players . Based in Harlem , the team competed against minor league sides and clubs not affiliated with a league . Lillard had played for a Chicago team coached by Pollard before entering the NFL , and decided to join the Brown Bombers . In his first game with the team , on October 13 , 1935 , Lillard scored two touchdowns against the Cagle All @-@ Stars in a 28 ? 6 New York win . After three more victories , the Brown Bombers faced the Passaic Red Devils , a three @-@ time champion of Eastern American football leagues . Despite suffering from an illness , Lillard converted a drop kick attempt and intercepted a pass , returning it 52 yards for a touchdown . He was responsible for all of the Brown Bombers ' points in their 10 ? 3 win over the Red Devils . Lillard stayed with the Brown Bombers through the 1937 season ; the team went out of business in 1938 . That year , he was a member of an All @-@ Star team of black players that played an exhibition game against the Bears , losing 51 ? 0 .

In later years , Lillard played for various minor league sides ; In 1938 , he joined the American Association 's (AA) Clifton Wessingtons , playing one season for the club and earning second @-@ team AA all @-@ star honors . The following year , he spent time with two AA teams : the Brooklyn Eagles and Union City Rams . Lillard was named captain of the Rams , making him the first African @-@ American to earn that title on " a major mixed @-@ race pro team . " His final year in minor league football was 1941 , as he played for a short period with the AA 's New York Yankees .

= = Other sports = =

In addition to his professional football career , Lillard was a right @-@ handed pitcher in the Negro leagues for five seasons . In 1932 , he joined the Negro Southern League 's Chicago American Giants and posted a 2 ? 2 win ? loss record . The Giants moved to the Negro National League before the start of the 1933 season , in which Lillard was the starting pitcher in five games and had a 4 ? 0 record , along with a .387 batting average and two home runs as a hitter . He started twice in 1934 , and did not record a decision on either occasion . Lillard did not play in any more recorded games until 1937 , when he had an 0 ? 1 record for the Giants , who by this time were playing in the Negro American League (NAL) . His final Negro league season was 1944 ; Lillard played with the NAL 's Cincinnati / Indianapolis Clowns , who had open roster space because of players lost to World War II . Along with Sol Butler and Bobby Marshall , he was one of three Negro league baseball players to also compete in the NFL . Author Charles Ross wrote that " He possessed an exceptional fast ball , but erratic control . " Previously , Lillard had been on the Savoy Big Five basketball team (the future Harlem Globetrotters) as a guard .

= = Later life and legacy = =

In the late 1930s , Lillard began writing a column on sports in the Independent News . Later in his life , he moved to Astoria , Queens , working at an appliance store and for Vinn Sporting Goods . Lillard had a stroke on September 18 , 1978 , and was afflicted with agnosia as a result ; he died in New York City 's Bellevue Hospital Center .

After five black players appeared in NFL games during the 1926 season , the number of African @-@ Americans in the league declined to between one and two each season until Lillard entered the league . He was the lone African @-@ American playing in the NFL in 1932 and one of two in 1933 ; the other was Ray Kemp , a tackle with the Pirates . Following the 1933 season , an unofficial gentlemen 's agreement was reached between the NFL 's owners not to employ African @-@ American players . Incoming segregationist Boston Redskins owner George Preston Marshall was thought to have been behind the agreement . After the introduction of an unofficial color line , no African @-@ American played in the NFL until 1946 , when Kenny Washington and Woody Strode joined the Los Angeles Rams . Author Charles Ross wrote that " NFL owners may have used Lillard 's volatile personality as an excuse to ban other black athletes . "

