

= Joe Delaney =

Joe Alton Delaney (/ dʒ?le?ni / ; October 30 , 1958 ? June 29 , 1983) was an American football running back who played two seasons in the National Football League (NFL) . In his two seasons with the Kansas City Chiefs , Delaney set four franchise records that would stand for more than twenty years .

He was a two @-@ time All @-@ American athlete for the Northwestern State Demons football team , as well as a track and field star . Delaney played two seasons with the Chiefs and was chosen as the AFC Rookie of the Year in 1981 by United Press International .

Delaney died on June 29 , 1983 while attempting to rescue three children from drowning in a pond in Monroe in northeastern Louisiana . He was posthumously awarded the Presidential Citizen 's Medal from U.S. President Ronald W. Reagan . While not officially retired , his jersey number while playing for the Chiefs , # 37 , has not been worn since his death .

= = Early life = =

The third of Woodrow and Eunice Delaney 's eight children , Delaney was born in Henderson , on October 30 , 1958 , and attended Haughton High School in Bossier Parish in northwestern Louisiana . Discouraged by his father from pursuing his dreams of playing football , Delaney became the starting wide receiver by his junior year at Haughton . Major Division I schools that scouted him included Grambling State , Texas , Oklahoma and Louisiana State .

Delaney played for Division I @-@ AA 's Northwestern State Demons from 1977 to 1980 . After telling his coach of his willingness to play football at the collegiate level , Delaney switched to the running back position . He went on to be an All @-@ American selection in 1979 and 1980 . While at Northwestern State , Delaney met his future wife , Carolyn , and they had two children by his senior year .

On October 28 , 1978 , Delaney carried the ball 28 times and gained 299 yards for Northwestern State against Nicholls State University with 263 of the yards coming in the game 's second half . Delaney 's rushing stats in the second half of the game are an NCAA record . In the same game , he scored four touchdowns , one of which was on a 90 @-@ yard run , as he led his team to a 28 ? 18 victory .

Delaney finished his career at Northwestern State with 3 @,@ 047 yards rushing , 31 touchdowns , and 188 points . In 1980 , his senior season , he was ranked eighth in the nation in all @-@ purpose rushing yards . On November 22 , 1980 he played his last game at Northwestern State and the school retired his jersey , number 44 , at halftime . Delaney was elected to the College Football Hall of Fame in 1997 .

At Northwestern State , Delaney also starred in track . In high school , he ran the 100 yard dash in 9 @.@ 4 seconds and was on the Northwestern State track and field team , which won the NCAA 400 @-@ meter relay in 1981 . He holds the school 200 meter dash record with a time of 20 @.@ 64 seconds .

= = Professional career = =

Delaney was selected in the second round of the 1981 NFL Draft by the Kansas City Chiefs . United Press International named him Rookie of the Year of the American Football Conference for the 1981 NFL season after he rushed for 1 @,@ 121 yards , set four club records , and averaged 80 @.@ 9 yards a game . Delaney 's effort helped propel the Chiefs to a 9 ? 7 record , the team 's first winning season since 1973 . In his rookie season , he was selected to the Pro Bowl after setting Chiefs records for most yards in a season (1 @,@ 121) , most yards in a game (193 vs. Houston) , most consecutive 100 @-@ yard @-@ plus games (three) and most 100 @-@ yard games in a season (five) .

After coming off the bench to record 101 rushing yards in his initial NFL action at New England , he ran for 106 yards and registered 104 receiving yards in his first professional start against Oakland .

In the Chiefs ' October 18 , 1981 game against the Denver Broncos , Delaney broke loose for a 75 @-@ yard touchdown run , but an offside penalty caused the play to be restarted from five yards back . On the second play after the penalty , Delaney scored an 82 @-@ yard touchdown , the longest rushing play from scrimmage in the 1981 NFL season .

Following Delaney 's record @-@ setting 196 @-@ yard rushing performance against the Houston Oilers on November 15 , 1981 , Oilers defensive end (and future Pro Football Hall of Famer) Elvin Bethea was quoted in saying :

A strike by NFL players and an eye injury limited Delaney 's playing time in the 1982 NFL season . He underwent surgery to repair a detached retina , and only registered 380 rushing yards in the eight @-@ game shortened season , which the Chiefs finished with a 3 ? 6 record . Delaney averaged 4 @.@ 6 yards per carry , 9 @.@ 1 yards per reception , and registered 1 @,@ 811 all @-@ purpose yards during his career with three touchdowns .

= = = Professional statistics = = =

= = Death and legacy = =

Delaney had a lifelong history of helping others , and once paid for the funeral of a former teacher whose family could not afford a proper service . On June 29 , 1983 , Delaney , who was living in nearby Ruston , went with friends to Critter 's Creek , an amusement center at Chennault Park in Monroe , Louisiana . While reportedly discouraging swimming children from venturing too far out in a pond , Delaney dove in to save three children who were screaming for help , floundering in a water hole left by recent construction work . The water hole , which covered two acres and was 6 foot deep , was not intended for swimming but to add to the park 's aesthetics . Despite his inability to swim , Delaney nevertheless tried to rescue the children . One child managed to get out of the water without harm and another was taken to an emergency room where he later died ; police recovered the body of Delaney and the remaining child . The amusement park has since been closed to the public .

Three thousand people attended Delaney 's burial and memorial service on July 4 which was held in the sweltering heat of the Haughton High School gymnasium . President Ronald Reagan honored Delaney with the Presidential Citizens Medal on July 15 , and it was presented to Delaney 's family by Vice President George H. W. Bush . Reagan 's words were :

For the 1983 NFL season , the Chiefs honored Delaney by wearing a circular patch bearing a gold eagle and the number 37 on the upper @-@ left chest of their uniforms . Haughton High School also made a park , Joe Delaney Park , in his memory . The NCAA posthumously awarded Delaney the NCAA Award of Valor in 1984 . Louisiana Governor Dave Treen presented the Louisiana State Civilian Bravery Award to Delaney 's family following his death .

Delaney 's heroism is honored through an award for one of the NFL 's best running backs who also demonstrates admirable character and unselfishness , traits that were embodied by Delaney . The award is given annually by ProFootballTalk.com.

Northwestern State 's football permanent team captains award , the Joe Delaney Memorial Leadership award , is named in his honor , as is the annual spring football game (" Delaney Bowl ") and a golf tournament that generates support for the athletic program . A permanent shrine honoring him sits under the home stands at Northwestern State 's Turpin Stadium and his number 44 jersey hangs in the football offices . In Virginia , the Delaney Athletic Conference took its name to honor his memory in the fall of 1983 , and today 13 Virginia private high schools comprise the DAC .

A group of Chiefs fans in Kansas City formed the " 37Forever Foundation , " which works with the American Red Cross to provide swimming lessons for underprivileged children . The Kansas City Chiefs unofficially retired Delaney 's jersey number 37 following his death , and he was elected to the team 's Hall of Fame in 2004 . His name is included in the Chiefs ' ring of honor at Arrowhead Stadium .