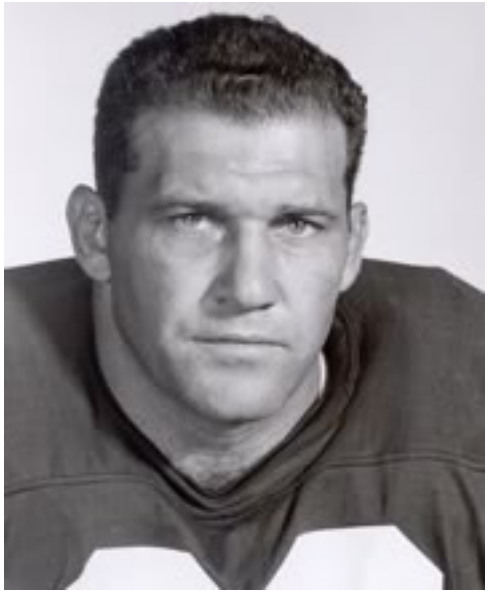
Believe it or not, there was a time when Cleveland Browns offensive linemen were known for being more than swinging saloon doors to the backfield. Long before LeCharles Bentley blew out his knee on the first contact drill of training camp, long before the team bought Joe Andruzzi and Cosey Coleman based on their Super Bowl name recognition and not their actual ability, long before Ross Verba tried to make his life into a movie ("North Dallas Forty" ... or was that "Debbie Does Dallas"?), there was Gene Hickerson. And in a move that was long overdue, Hickerson was elected to the Hall of Fame yesterday. Papa Cass touches on this Browns legend in this Super Bowl Sunday piece.



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Hickerson will become the 16th Browns player enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame this summer. Like every Brown currently in the Hall, his name harkens back to far better times for the franchise, an era that now only exists in black-and-white photographs and reel-to-reel news film.

As an offensive guard, he was one of the battering rams who helped Jim Brown and Leroy Kelly become the gold-standard rushers of the 1960s. He helped form the wall that allowed quarterback Frank Ryan lead the Browns to the 1964 NFL title, Cleveland's last in a major sport.

Hickerson did it all largely out of the spotlight. You might think current NFL offensive linemen do thankless Yeoman work. Hickerson did his work with remarkable consistency in an era when the pay was part-time and players couldn't lean on massage therapists and whirlpools that grade out as high-powered Jacuzzis.

And he did it for 15 years from 1958 to '73, missing only the 1961 season with a broken leg.

His ability to last so long at arguably the most physically grueling of all NFL positions draws comparisons to another 2007 Hall of Fame inductee, Bruce Matthews.

In many ways, Hickerson is one of the great perseverance stories in football. A seventh-round draft pick out of Ole Miss, his presence as a fixture on the Browns offensive line was hardly etched in stone. He worked his way up from obscurity to six straight Pro Bowl selections from 1966-71.

in 1971, at the tail end of his career, when most players are entrenched in their ways, Hickerson accepted a move from right guard -- where he had played his entire career to that point -- to left guard.

Though he was one of the best offensive linemen of his era, enshrinement in Canton eluded him for many years. Despite campaigning by many of his former Cleveland teammates, including Brown and Kelly, Hickerson had to wait 34 years from the end of his career to finally enter the Hall.

It was a long time in coming. Hickerson's omission from Canton was one of the most glaring in any sports hall of fame.

Should the Browns draft Wisconsin's Joe Thomas or any other offensive lineman this spring, he would be wise to educate himself on the career of Hickerson. Not so he can learn to bleed brown and orange necessarily, but so he can learn about the traits that can make an ordinary lineman into a legend.