I have always been fairly Cleveland-centric when it comes to my national sports interests. I follow the Buckeyes, but when the Browns draft their rookies every year, I typically need to rely on local coverage to fill me in on who "we" got (yes, I say "we"). This is especially so these days; I actually have managed to avoid watching the next starting quarterback of the Cleveland Browns, Landry Jones of the Oklahoma Sooners. That's not easy to do when you spend as much time following sports as I have.

Greg Pruitt was one player with whom I bucked this trend. When I was a kid, I was well aware of the leader of that Oklahoma Sooners' offense. The national focus was trained squarely on the little sparkplug, and Pruitt had responded with some of the best years ever in college football history.

It didn't hurt that we shared our first name. There aren't too many Gregs on the national stage, and many of them are either preppies or goobers. Think Greg Brady. I liked Graig Nettles, but the Indians had a policy against having good players on their roster so they traded him to the Yankees (spit). Greg Pruitt was a very cool Greg. At 5'7", 156 lbs in college, he was smaller than almost everyone else on the field. He was also the fastest. I couldn't believe it when my Cleveland Browns selected him with the 30th overall pick in the 1973 NFL Draft, after the forgettable first round picks of Steve Holden and Pete Adams.

Greg Pruitt was from Houston, Texas, close enough to where Browns linebacker Robert L.

Jackson grew up that they played some sandlot baseball against each other. Oklahoma assistant coach Barry Switzer later said that Sooner recruiter Bill Michaels had his eye on Elmore High School in the inner city in Houston. "He had been down there for years and recruiting, knew the coach Wendell Moseley well, and he was sold on this kid. Problem is, he is the only one. He had to come sell me and (head coach) Chuck Fairbanks, and I'll tell ya, I worked him out and violated the NCAA rules." (*The Die-Hard Fan's Guide to Sooner Football*, Jim Fletcher) Switzer has been one of several who related the later story of how pro scouts would watch him quietly for a while, then invariably ask, "Greg, how tall are you?" Finally, one day, Greg Pruitt stopped and made an emphatic point to the scouts. He said, "You know, we run this way (motioning left and right), not that way (up and down) at Oklahoma." Switzer had tee-shirts made in Pruitt's honor which said "Hello" on the front and "Goodbye" on the back. The shirt was publicized nationally. Switzer warned him that one of those shirts would be hanging in the locker room of the opponent in their next big game, against USC. Pruitt gained over 200 yards in the Oklahoma win.

Pruitt used his size to his advantage. Nobody could get a clean hit on him. He also had a little Deion Sanders in his demeanor off the field, speaking confidently with a smile that shone with a gold tooth. Pruitt's persona was much larger than his physical stature, leading to his college teammates giving him the nickname "The King."

Greg Pruitt has an interesting place in the history of college football. His career there was during the glory days of the wishbone offense. The offense had its roots in 1950s; Emory Bellard had seen an early variation of the wishbone as an assistant high school coach in Texas. By 1967, Bellard was an assistant with the Texas Longhorns under head coach Darrel Royal. Royal had seen Texas A&M coach Gene Stallings' option offense beat Bear Bryant's Alabama Crimson Tide in the 1968 Cotton Bowl. Since Texas had running backs but not a very good passing game, Royal instructed Bellard to design a triple option offense. Bellard gave him the wishbone.

The term "wishbone" is credited to a Houston sportswriter; it is an offensive formation with typically one tight end and one wideout. In the backfield is the fullback, directly behind the quarterback, along with two halfbacks behind and to either side of the fullback. The effect from a bird's eye view is that of a chicken wishbone. The idea is to take advantage of any mismatch which the quarterback can identify. The quarterback always at least fakes a handoff to the fullback; he might decide to give it to him if the defense seems vulnerable up the middle. If he does not hand the ball off to the fullback, he runs along the line with the halfback right behind him. The defensive player stringing out the play eventually must commit to either the quarterback or the halfback. To whom he commits dictates whether the quarterback keeps the ball or pitches to the trailing halfback.

The Oklahoma Sooners copied their rivals from Texas, and ran the wishbone all the way into the 1990s. Greg Pruitt has been described as the "patriarch" of this offense. In 1971, with Pruitt as the featured runner, the Sooners set the all-time NCAA rushing average record of 472.4 yards per game, a record which still stands. Many games resembled rushing attacks the Browns have encountered over the last thirteen seasons: the cumulative yardage often was only limited by the 100-yard-long playing field.

By the time Greg Pruitt joined the Browns, he'd grown much bigger... to 5'9" and 190. He played in 4 Pro Bowls. He was the heir to the Browns' running back tradition, taking over for Leroy Kelly. He was a multi-purpose threat- as a runner, a receiver, and as a punt and kick returner. His return ability was every bit as dangerous as later return men such as Josh Cribbs and Devin Hester. One of my favorite plays was the halfback option pass, with Pruitt pulling up to throw. During his years with the Browns (1973 - 1981), he was 8 for 18 passing with six touchdowns.

As a runner, he enjoyed three 1000 yard seasons in a row from 1975 through 1977. In 1978, he caught 65 passes including 4 touchdowns. Remember when Art Modell moved the team, and was compelled to leaved the "name, the colors, and the history" of the Browns in Cleveland? Greg Pruitt is at the top of many of those lists of offensive and return records for the franchise.

Many remember Greg Pruitt because of the Greg Pruitt Rule, which bans the use of tearaway jerseys. Several players had used these over the years; Pruitt would get dozens of these mesh jerseys made at a time and the concept is most often credited to him. He'd slash through defenses, which often at most could only get a hand on him. They'd end up with only a handful of jersey as he scooted away. There were two problems with this. One, to make this work, Pruitt could not wear a shirt under the tearaway; otherwise the defense would just grab the undershirt. Having to replace his shirts in the cold winds of winter on Lake Erie bothered him. Two, defenses figured out that when his shirts were torn, the officials made him leave the game due to a rules infraction. So during important parts of the game, they would just walk up to him and rip his jersey to send him to the sidelines. Pruitt stopped wearing the tearaways, and the NFL soon outlawed them as well.

During the Kardiac Kids era in Cleveland, Pruitt was hobbled with leg injuries and only played sporadically. He was traded to the Los Angeles Raiders for the 1982 season along with Lyle Alzado and was almost exclusively a returner, making the Pro Bowl again in 1983. Browns' head coach Sam Rutigliano later said he regretted letting Pruitt go. His better judgment would have been to keep him as a receiver. While he was in L.A., Pruitt helped groom rookie Marcus Allen.

Forrest Gregg, Browns' head coach prior to Rutigliano, once told this writer that he feels Greg Pruitt should be in the Hall of Fame.

Greg Pruitt settled in Cleveland after his career was over. His son, Greg Pruitt Jr., was a star running back for Shaker Heights High School, and then for North Carolina Central University from 2004 through 2006. Upon graduation, he received some local flack for his tryout as an undrafted free agent for the Baltimore Ravens. On February 24, 2008, he was the victim of a shocking, senseless attack during a robbery attempt at his cousin's home in Shaker Heights. He was shot in the head and critically wounded. After several weeks in the hospital, he was released; fortunately, the bullet missed his brain. Reportedly, Greg Pruitt Jr. is completely recovered today.

Greg Pruitt remains one of my favorite Browns. Unlike many Browns, who seem to care about the team less than their fans do, he maintains he "always did appreciate the Cleveland fans ... I got it as a player. Some players today don't understand that it's the fans that make you." (*Clevel andMagazine.com*
, Jay Casey)

Thank you for reading.