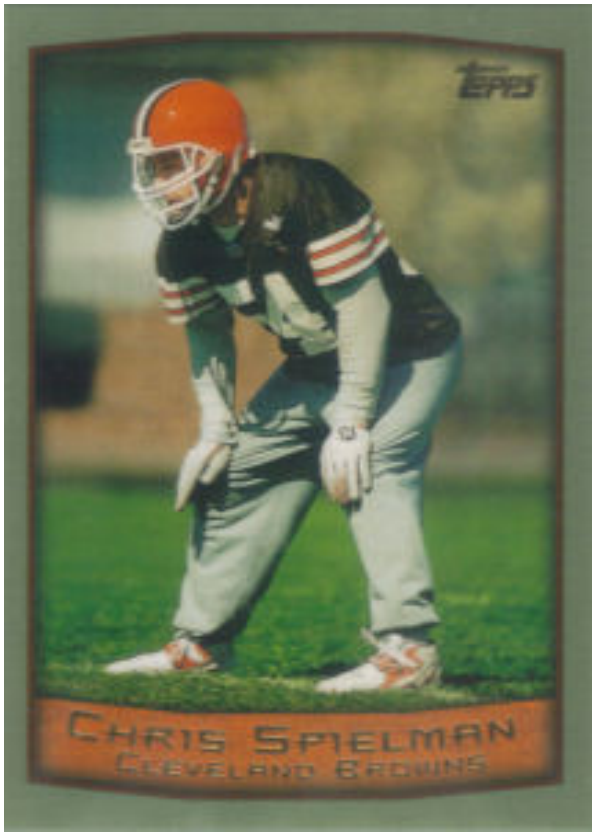


Question: What do Ernie Davis, Robert Popelka, and Chris Spielman have in common?

You may know the Ernie Davis story, recently reintroduced to public awareness through the release of the move, *The Express*. Davis had just won the Heisman Trophy in 1961 as a running back who'd succeeded Jim Brown at Syracuse. He was the first black player to win the award. He was drafted by the Washington Redskins and promptly traded to the Cleveland Browns for future Hall of Famer Bobby Mitchell. Davis suffered from leukemia and died in 1963.

Robert Popelka? He was a running back in high school with a ton of speed. Southern Methodist University signed him in 1969 and tried him out at safety. As a backup in 1970, it is said he blasted a receiver so hard that it stopped practice while the entire team ooh-ed and ahh-ed.

Some began calling him “Pop-a-lick”. The Browns drafted the All-American in 1973, in the 14th round. Since my name matches his, I like to think we’re related. Since my speed does not match his, I pretty much know we’re not.

Chris Spielman was an established NFL linebacker when the New Browns acquired him for their inaugural season of 1999.

Answer to the question above: These are my three favorite Browns who never played for them in a regular season game.

Spielman is the only one I’ve ever seen play. And he’s earned his rank as number one in my mind.

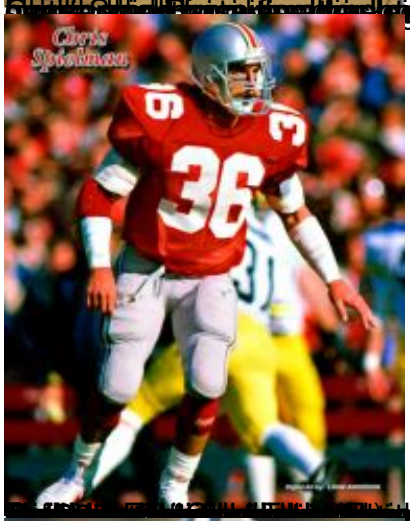
Many Ohio football fans have known who Chris Spielman is for thirty years now. After having grown up in Canton, he burst on the scene at Washington High School in Massillon. Some maintain that the school recruited him and his brother Rick by hiring his father Sonny as a teacher and coach.

Sonny Spielman had been a long-time head coach at Timken High School in Canton. He is credited for the last run of success the football program had, back in the ‘70s. The elder Spielman was an intense, maximum-effort coach. His motto is said to have been, “you gotta love it” as the way to success in football.

At Massillon, Chris Spielman starred as a running back and as a linebacker. His team appeared in the state championship game in 1982, falling to perennial power Cincinnati Moeller and coach Gerry Faust. The loss wasn’t for lack of effort from Spielman; Massillon head coach Mike Currence has noted that his prized linebacker was his defense’s only decent matchup vs. Moeller’s future Notre Dame golden-domers Hiawatha and D’Juan Francisco. Spielman joked that Massillon had become the ’public school champions’. Spielman was highly decorated for his play at Massillon, and even though he didn’t have prototypical size and speed, countless colleges recruited him. He had the quintessential ‘high motor’, pacing the sidelines even after being removed from games during garbage time. He was a legend in his own time, even appearing on a Wheaties box while in high school.

At one point, it appeared Bo Schembechler was about to land the recruit for Michigan. Spielman’s father joined Currence in counseling the player to sign with The Ohio State Buckeyes. OSU coach Earl Bruce speaks about how Spielman hesitated on the telephone when he called him with his decision. After the pause, Spielman declared, “I’m gonna be a Buckeye!”

LOMBARDI AWARD


Chris Spielman
36

54

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9aSFIMbUmY

36