

Isaac Curtis

Football

Class of 1969

A 1969 graduate of Santa Ana High School where he played football and ran for the track team. Curtis was a star running back at Santa Ana High. His former coach, Tom Baldwin, called him "the best running back to ever play in Orange County."

Curtis received a football scholarship to the University of California, Berkeley. For three years, he excelled as a member of Cal's track team, and he was a running back and kick returner for the football team, setting several rushing records.

After he finished his junior season, Curtis transferred to San Diego State University where he excelled under coach Don Coryell, who moved him from running back to receiver. In his senior year, Curtis caught 44 passes for 832 yards and seven touchdowns.

Entering the 1973 NFL Draft, the Bengals drafted Curtis in the first round as the 15th overall pick. He went on to play his whole career in Cincinnati, retiring in 1984. Curtis brought world-class speed to the NFL, running the 100-yard dash in 9.3 seconds as a member of Cal's track team. Curtis also recorded a time of 20.7 seconds in the 200-meter dash in Los Angeles in 1970. Bengals coach Paul Brown said that what he liked the most about Isaac Curtis was not so much his athleticism, but his always quietly confident personality, saying "He's a very gentle person...no jumping up and down, spiking it, or trash talking".

Curtis was a Pro Bowl selection four times (1973–1976) and was selected 2nd Team All-Pro for three consecutive seasons (1974–1976). Curtis helped lead the Bengals to a Super Bowl appearance in the 1981 season and had a solid performance in Super Bowl XVI, catching three passes for 42 yards. Years after his retirement, his quarterback Ken Anderson said that Isaac Curtis was "The Jerry Rice before Jerry Rice".

In his 12 NFL seasons, Curtis totaled 416 receptions for 7,101 yards and 53 touchdowns, while also gaining 76 rushing yards on 25 carries.

His 17.1 yards per catch average is a Bengals record and his 7,101 receiving yards was a franchise record until broken by Chad Johnson on September 16, 2007. His 53 touchdown receptions were a Bengals record until surpassed by Carl Pickens in the late 1990s. He accomplished all of this in an NFL era that was dominated by the running game.

Because of his world-class speed, there weren't defensive backs that could keep up with him and all teams would double and sometimes even triple cover him. In 1973 in his first year, the Bengals won the Central Division and faced the eventual Super Bowl Champions, the Miami Dolphins. Don Shula's defensive backs didn't have the speed to cover Curtis and decided that he would have them push, bump, and hold him down the field. After that game, NFL defenses including the Steelers started doing the same thing to stop Curtis. Coach Brown wanted the rule changed, telling the NFL Competition Committee, "What good is it for us to have performers, if they aren't allowed to perform." The NFL agreed and they implemented the "Isaac Curtis Rule", which states that a defender is only allowed to block a receiver within five yards of the line of scrimmage. After the initial yards, any contact will be considered holding, which is a five-yard penalty and an automatic first down.

"He changed the game," said former Bengals teammate and wide receiver Cris Collinsworth. "There's no question because no one could keep up with him. They put in the five-yard bump rules and all that crazy stuff that it all eventually became.

According to Curtis's former teammate and Bengals radio analyst, Dave Lapham, Curtis was "Larry Fitzgerald with speed. He'd blow away any of the top guys today in the 40. World class speed and flypaper hands? He might have the best hands of anyone I've ever seen."

Another teammate, cornerback Louis Breeden, who practiced against Curtis and played against the likes of Swann, Stallworth, Steve Largent and James Lofton, said "as a Defensive Back I had more respect for Curtis than anyone I ever played...Lynn Swann, Steve Largent, James Lofton. In terms of being able to get open, plus the ability just to run past you. Athletically, there was nobody like him."

Professional Career Stats:

- **4 Time Pro Bowler**
- **17.1 Yards Per Catch Avg. (1st in franchise history)**
- **7,101 Receiving Yards (2nd in franchise history)**
- **53 Touchdowns (5th in franchise history)**
- **416 Receptions (5th in franchise history)**
- **20 100-Yard Games (2nd in franchise history)**
- **3 Consecutive 100-Yard Games (t-2nd in franchise history)**
- **5th longest reception in franchise history (85 yard TD from Ken Anderson – 12/12/76 at NY Jets)**
- **T-3rd most postseason receptions in franchise history (13)**
- **T-3rd most receiving yards in franchise history (184)**
- **2 postseason receiving touchdowns (2nd in franchise history)**