

Ernie Davis – Library of Congress Photo not available

Ernie Davis never played a single down in the National Football League (NFL). Yet he was inducted into the Hall of Fame as a running back—a tribute to both his unfulfilled potential and his inspirational character.

Davis was born on December 14, 1939, in New Salem, Pennsylvania. In the first of the tragedies that were Ernie's lot in life, his father was killed in an accident before Ernie was born. When he was 14 months old, his mother left him with her parents who raised him in the west Pennsylvania coal town of West Union while she sought employment. Davis grew up with the dream of emulating Pennsylvania coal country heroes such as Johnny Lujack and Stan Musial who made good in pro sports. At the age of 12, Davis was reunited with his mother when they moved to Elmira, New York. Ernie became a four-sport wonder at Elmira Free Academy High School, earning 11 letters. Basketball appeared to be his best sport. Davis was the leading scorer on a team that won 52 consecutive games over his final two seasons. However, football was his first love, and so he turned down a basketball scholarship for a chance to play at Syracuse University, the school where Jim Brown, a fellow African American who happened to be the greatest runner in football, had just paved the way. While at Syracuse, Davis broke most of Brown's school records. In his sophomore year, Davis provided the team's main offensive threat as the team was undefeated during the 1959 regular season. He then scored 16 points as Syracuse beat Texas 23-14 in the Cotton Bowl to finish the year as the top rated team in the nation. Davis finished his career with 35 touchdowns and an average of 6.6 yards per carry. He capped his senior year by becoming the first black athlete to win the Heisman Trophy, awarded to the top college player.

Life seemed almost too good to be true when Davis learned that the Cleveland Browns had selected him as the first overall choice in the 1962 draft. That would unite him with Jim Brown in what promised to be the finest backfield duo in NFL history. But in July 1962, just as the Browns were beginning training camp, Davis fell ill and was diagnosed with leukemia.

Widely admired for his positive demeanor and the seriousness with which he took on the responsibility of a role model for younger children, Davis battled the disease for nearly a year before he succumbed on May 18, 1963. He remained such an inspiration to those around him that his junior high school was renamed after him; the Browns retired his uniform number, 45; and in 1987 he was voted into the NFL Hall of Fame. Davis's story was widely publicized for the first time in 2008, as he was the subject of the full-length feature film *The Express*.

References and Further Information

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