

THE ART OF SPORT WITH ERIC DICKERSON

Following a standout career at Southern Methodist University, Eric Dickerson burst onto the NFL scene. The second overall draft choice ran for 18 touchdowns and a league-leading 1,808 yards for the Los Angeles Rams in 1983, then broke the NFL's single-season rushing record with 2,105 yards in 1984 and led the league in rushing again in 1986 with 1,821 yards. After a contract dispute with the Rams, Dickerson was dealt to the Indianapolis Colts in 1987, but nothing changed on the field. In his first full season with the Colts, Dickerson won his fourth rushing title, scampering for 1,659 yards and 14 touchdowns in 1988. The five-time All-Pro hung up his cleats following the 1993 season, finishing his career with 13,259 yards, which at the time was second only to Chicago Bears legend Walter Payton. The Texas native was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1999, and he spoke with *Yankees Magazine* editor-in-chief Alfred Santasiere III last year at the Joe Namath Foundation's celebrity golf tournament in Farmingdale, New York.

YANKEES MAGAZINE: *Through your foundation, you do so much charitable work that benefits young people. What has compelled you to focus your efforts on today's youth?*

ERIC DICKERSON: I think it's very important to give back to young people because they represent our future. We were all young at one time, and we all needed someone to look up to. For me, that person was my dad. I loved sports and I looked up to athletes, but the most important role model I had was my father. Our program focuses on the importance of kids having a man in the house to look up to. I really enjoy what I'm able to do with my foundation.

YM: *Looking back at a big decision you made during your youthful days, what led you to attend Southern Methodist?*

ED: Well, my first choice was to go to the University of Oklahoma. (Head coach) Barry Switzer came to our state championship game, and they recruited me heavily. He came to my house and showed me a VHS tape of the national championship they had just won. I committed to Oklahoma, but when he left the house, my mother said, "You're not going there. I don't trust him." She wanted me to stay in the state of Texas, and my second choice was SMU because I really liked (head coach) Ron Meyer. My mother

liked him just as much, so in the end, he got my mother's trust, and that's how he got me.

YM: *Your 1982 team racked up a 10-0-1 regular season record but didn't get the opportunity to play for a national championship. What are your most enduring memories of that team and that season?*

ED: We were the best team in the country, no doubt about it. It's sad that we didn't get a chance to play for a national championship, especially when you consider that it had more to do with things that were out of our control. Penn State got to play for the national championship, and they had one loss. I believe that if Ron Meyer was still our coach, we would have defeated Arkansas rather than tying, and we would have probably gotten the chance to play Georgia for all the marbles. But what I'll always remember is that we were a close-knit football team. We had guys who weren't afraid to fight and take care of other players, and we had some of the most talented players in the country. Overall, we had a great mix, and that was a special season.

YM: *Moving to the NFL, you set the standard for rookie running backs in 1983 when you rushed for 1,808 yards. What factors do you believe enabled you to make the transition from college to the pros so seamlessly?*

ED: First of all, it was the God-given talent that I had. I was big and fast, and I wasn't afraid or intimidated even as a rookie. Don't get me wrong, I was nervous every time I stepped on the field, but I was always up for the challenge. I was confident in my abilities from the first day I put on an NFL uniform. I didn't care about the fact that I was a rookie; I wanted to be the greatest player out there. I loved comparing my skills to everyone else's. More than anything, that's what set me apart.

YM: *How much pride do you take in having set the single-season rushing record in 1984?*

ED: I take a lot of pride in that record. Our Los Angeles Rams football team wanted that record. I got close the year before, and we all knew that we had a chance to get it in '84. I give all the credit to my offensive line and our receivers and everyone who blocked for me. I was fortunate enough to be on a team that had really good players up front, and our coach, John Robinson, let me run the football constantly that season. I'm proud that the record has stood the test of time, and it's something that will always mean a lot to me.

YM: *You led the league in rushing four times — three times in Los Angeles and once with the Colts later in your career. Which of those rushing titles was the hardest to capture?*