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# The passing of Fullback U: Proud tradition moves aside in new-look offense

By **Zac Howard**  
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*Despite originally being upset about the move, Lonnie Pryor enjoyed great success as FSU's fullback.*  
USA Today Images

Lonnie Pryor cried the day he switched to fullback.

Following an injury to Florida State's starting fullback at the time, Daniel Gard, running backs coach Dexter Carter told Pryor to take a snap at fullback one day at practice during the 2009 season.

“He pulled me to the side and was like, ‘Lonnie, just focus on playing fullback,’” Pryor said.

A four-star running back in high school, Pryor had dozens of offers from elite programs across the country. He knew a position switch would end his dream of being the first 1,000-yard rusher at FSU since Warrick Dunn.

“I bawled when I got home,” Pryor remembered. “I called my high school coach.”

After collecting himself, Pryor then called Jimbo Fisher, FSU's offensive coordinator at the time, and the two discussed the move for more than an hour over the phone. With other talented tailbacks on the depth chart, Fisher said this was the best way to get him on the field.

“It hurt my heart, man,” Pryor said.

Florida State fans are understandably eager to see Willie Taggart’s Gulf Coast Offense arrive this season.

"Lethal simplicity" and an up-tempo pace are welcomed changes following the methodical pro-style offense of Jimbo Fisher -- which seemed to wear down fans more effectively than it did opposing defenses the last few seasons.

However, the absence of a traditional fullback may prompt nostalgia for those die-hard FSU fans who treasure memories of the beloved characters who played the position over the years. Names like William Floyd, Edgar Bennett, Dayne Williams, Marion Butts and Mark Lyles come to mind, among dozens of others.

"I don't think any other school has the same tradition we have when it comes to fullback," James Coleman said.

Coleman played fullback for FSU from 2002-2005. He said legendary head coach Bobby Bowden once told him he was one of the top five fullbacks he ever coached.

"I think that's B.S., because I can name five guys that I think were better than me," he said.

Coleman, who writes about FSU football for college football website Gridiron Now, said he expects the existing fullbacks on FSU's roster to be used primarily in the passing game, in more of an H-back role.

"I think Coach Taggart will bring something to it that will be different than Bobby, but you'll see toughness," Coleman said. "Jimbo had it in the beginning."

Toughness is a requirement for excellence at the position and part of what endears fullbacks to fans.

"You definitely can't be a diva," Coleman said. "There's no such thing as being a diva if I gotta go hit a guy that's 250 pounds and probably runs a little bit faster 40 than me. I gotta go punch him in the mouth."

Coleman, a Tallahassee product, came to FSU as a linebacker but switched to fullback with the hope of seeing the field more often. Still, the willingness to sacrifice carrying the ball for clearing a path doesn't go totally unrewarded.

"When I played fullback, I got the ball a lot," Pryor said. "When you think about 'Big Pad Chad [Abram],' he got the ball a lot. Dude scored in a national championship game."

Unlike Pryor and Coleman, Bowden recruited Clarence "Pooh Bear" Williams to play fullback at the outset. Despite rushing for over 5,000 yards in high school, Williams' size made him a perfect fit.

"Basically, they try to find a big athlete," Williams said. "Hopefully, he's physical enough to block and fast enough to run routes and catch the ball. I had those skills."

Williams didn't obsess over how often he got the ball, but he acknowledged that former offensive coordinator Mark Richt frequently called pass plays for the fullback, in addition to handoffs.

"I knew I was going to get the ball on third-and-short and forth-and-short," he said. "I was okay, because that was my role and I understood that."

In fact, just about everyone in the stadium understood that.

"They used to start yelling 'Pooh' before I got the ball," Williams said. "When I'd get the handoff, hearing the stands doing the 'Pooh,' it was just crazy."

The fullback dive, utilized in short-yardage situations when only a yard or two was needed, seemingly never failed.

Through the years, FSU fans grew to become enamored with "34 Wham."

"Bobby loved that play," Coleman said. "Coach would talk about it in practice. That was really one of the plays that he was known for."

"It's a guaranteed first down," Pryor said.

A lifelong Seminole, Willie Taggart certainly understands the rich tradition, so perhaps he will implement the play into his offense as a tribute.

In the meantime, some fans might feel a bit wistful the first time they see bubble-screens and shotgun handoffs down after down.

Florida State's offense should be more potent this season, and the scoring almost certainly will increase. But deep inside, some will miss the days when Florida State was considered Fullback U.

"I'll definitely be sad," Pryor said. "Especially when it's third-and-one."

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