

AAFC Player Profile: Joe Perry

Fletcher Joseph Perry (January 22, 1927 – April 25, 2011) was an American professional football fullback who played in the All-America Football Conference (AAFC) and National Football League (NFL). He played for the San Francisco 49ers from 1948 to 1960, the Baltimore Colts from 1961 to 1962, and returned to the 49ers in 1963 for his final year in football. He was exceptionally fast, a trait uncommon for a fullback and one which earned him the nickname, "the Jet".



The first African-American to be named the NFL Most Valuable Player (MVP), he became one of American football's first black stars.

After playing a season of college football for the Compton Junior College, Perry joined the U.S. Navy. While playing football in the military, he was spotted by the 49ers, who signed him into the AAFC. He spent the next 13 seasons playing for San Francisco, where he was featured in the "Million-Dollar Backfield", made three straight Pro Bowl appearances, and in 1954 was named the NFL MVP. He was the first player in the NFL to rush for 1,000 yards in consecutive seasons, doing so in 1953 and 1954. Perry retired in 1963 as the league's all-time leader in rushing yards, and in 1969 he was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. His jersey number 34 was retired by the 49ers in 1971.

1946 -1948 AAFC.

While playing for Alameda, Perry was scouted by the NFL's Los Angeles Rams, who offered him a \$9,500 salary. He turned down the offer and instead signed with the San Francisco 49ers of the AAFC for \$4,500. His decision was based on his trust in 49ers owner Tony Morabito, who Perry described as like a father. He was the team's first African-American player.

It was during his first practices with the 49ers that he earned his nickname, when quarterback Frankie Albert exclaimed, "You're like a jet, Joe," after Perry had shot out of his stance so quickly that Albert could not hand him the ball in time. Albert's successor at quarterback, Y. A. Tittle, echoed his sentiments. "He was the fastest player off the ball in the history of the world," Tittle told the San Francisco Chronicle. "You'd take the ball from center and turn, and he was already gone through the hole." Tittle became one of Perry's closest friends.

Black players were a novelty in pro football when Perry entered the league, and he was faced with racial abuse and discrimination on and off the field. "I can't remember a season when I didn't hear a racial slur," he said. "Someone would say, 'Nigger, don't come through here again', and I'd say, 'I'm coming through again, and you better bring your family.'"

When he was invited to play in the 1949 AAFC All-Star game in Houston, he and other black players on the all-star team were not allowed to stay in the same hotel as white players. There was initial uncertainty over whether or not black players would be allowed to participate in the game at all. Perry's 49ers teammates, however,

were more accepting of him, and provided him strong support from the outset.

With the 49ers in the AAFC, Perry led the league in rushing touchdowns in both 1948 in 1949, and also in rushing yards in 1949. He had the first and only kick return touchdown of his career in 1948 when he returned a kickoff 87 yards against the Brooklyn Dodgers. Following the season, Perry was invited to play in the 1949 AAFC All-Star game against the league champion Cleveland Browns. The AAFC folded soon after and the 49ers were absorbed into the NFL in 1950.