

1949 AAFC Player Profile: Marion Motley

Marion Motley (June 5, 1920 – June 27, 1999) was an American professional football player who was a fullback and linebacker for the Cleveland Browns in the All-America Football Conference (AAFC) and the National Football League (NFL). He was a leading blocker and rusher in the late 1940s and early 1950s and ended his career with an average of 5.7 yards per carry, a record for running backs that still stands. A versatile player who possessed both quickness and size, Motley was a force on both offense and defense. Fellow Hall of Fame fullback Joe Perry once called Motley "the greatest all-around football player there ever was".



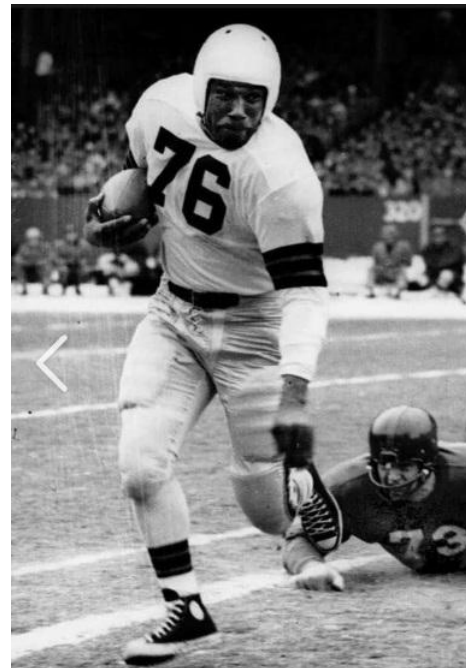
Motley was also one of the first two African-Americans to play professional football in the modern era, breaking the color barrier along with teammate Bill Willis in September 1946, when the two played their first game for the Browns.

Motley grew up in Canton, Ohio. He played football through high school and at Nevada from 1940 to 1942, before enlisting in the military during World War II. While training in the U.S. Navy in 1944, he played for a service team coached by Paul Brown. Following the war, he then went back to work in Canton. Paul Brown invited Motley to try out for the Cleveland Browns, a team he was coaching in the newly formed AAFC pro football league. Motley made the Browns in

1946 and became a cornerstone of Cleveland's success in the late 1940s. The team won four AAFC championships before the league dissolved, and the Browns were absorbed by the more established NFL. Motley was the AAFC's leading rusher in 1948, and the NFL leader in 1950, when the Browns won another championship.

1946 - 1949 AAFC.

After the war, Motley went back to Canton and began working at a steel mill, planning to return to Reno in 1946 to finish his college degree. That summer, however, Paul Brown was coaching a team in the new All-America Football Conference (AAFC) called the Cleveland Browns. Motley wrote to Brown asking for a tryout, but Brown declined, saying he already had all the fullbacks he needed. At the beginning of August, however, Brown invited Bill Willis, another African-American star, to try out for the team at its training camp in Bowling Green, Ohio. Ten days later,



Brown invited Motley to come, too. "I think they felt [Willis] needed a roommate," Motley later said. "I don't think they felt I'd make the team. I'm glad I was able to fool them."

Both Motley and Willis made the team and became two of the first African-Americans to play professional football in the modern era. The Los Angeles Rams of the National Football League had signed

the only other black players in pro football earlier that year: Kenny Washington and Woody Strode. The four men broke football's color barrier a seven months before Jackie Robinson was promoted from the Class AAA Montreal Royals to join the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. Motley felt the Browns would likely be his only opportunity to make a career of football. "I knew this was the one big chance in my life to rise above the steel mill existence, and I really wanted to take it," he said.

Motley was signed to a contract worth \$4,500 a year (\$74,296 in 2025 dollars). With the Browns, he joined a potent offense led by quarterback Otto Graham, tackle and placekicker Lou Groza and receivers Dante Lavelli and Mac Speedie. He was a force to be reckoned with in the AAFC and helped the team win every championship in the league's four years of existence between 1946 and 1949. He had a combination of quickness and power – he was listed at 238 pounds – that helped him plow through tacklers. He was also an able pass blocker and played on defense as a linebacker. Motley rushed for an average of 8.2 yards per carry in his first season. His forte was the trap play, a scheme where a defensive lineman was allowed to come across the line of scrimmage unblocked, opening up space for Motley to run. He led the league in rushing in 1948 as the Browns posted a perfect 15–0 record. He was the AAFC's all-time rushing leader when the league folded after the 1949 season and the Browns were absorbed into the more established National Football League (NFL). The Browns had a 47–4–3 overall regular-season win-loss-tie record during the AAFC years as Motley rushed for a total of 3,024 yards. In five AAFC playoff games for the Browns (all victories), Motley ran for a combined total

of 453 yards with five touchdowns, recording 100-yard games in the Championship twice.