



TWO NOVA

Terrell Davis and Curtis Martin are great friends

It should have been one of the more gratifying games in his young career. But for Denver Bronco running back Terrell Davis—on his way to a three-touchdown, 154-yard performance against the New England Patriots—that November '96 afternoon

was filled with mixed emotions. While Davis was pleased with his role in helping his team rout the Pats, 34-8, he still felt sympathetic toward his New England counterpart and close friend, Curtis Martin, who was held to 13 yards on only seven carries.

"The whole game, I was like, 'Why aren't they giving the ball to Curtis?'" Davis says. "I

root for him when I see him on TV and when he's playing against us. I'm like his hidden fan. It's kind of wild."

It certainly is a bit unusual when you consider that football is often equated with war. Quarterbacks, known as

field generals, attempt to throw bombs before defenders have a chance to blitz and sack them. Games are played on the gridiron and won in the trenches.

Nevertheless, off the field, friendships sometimes stretch from sideline to sideline. "Some people you click with without even really talking to them," says Martin, who

DAVIS



-and even greater runners

spent that autumn afternoon suffering through his team's loss while silently celebrating his friend's success. "He's a person who I took a liking to from the first time I saw him, and we've been real cool ever since."

The bond that ties Martin and Davis together can be traced back to the first time they met at the Blue-Gray game nearly five years ago. Their friendship was natural, since they had so much in common. They are the same age, have suffered their share of personal tragedies, were raised in single-parent homes and were both selected as late-round NFL picks due to injury-plagued senior seasons.

sons, their lives and careers have run down similar paths that one could easily mistake them for fraternal twins separated at birth.

"It's kind of eerie how our careers have paralleled," Martin says. "He's somebody I could look at and see a mirror image of myself."

Martin, out of the University of Pittsburgh, and Davis, from the University of Georgia, took the NFL by surprise during their rookie season in '95. Martin, a third-round (74th) selection by New England, and Davis, a sixth-round (196th) pick by Denver, spent that inaugural NFL year proving that their injury-laden senior seasons were aberrations.

Martin, a 5-11, 200-pound outback running back, responded to his underdog role by posting the greatest rookie rushing performance since Eric Dickerson's in '83. Martin set franchise rookie records in carries (368), yards (1,487) and touchdowns (14). His gaudy totals were good enough to lead the AFC in rushing and rank him third in the NFL behind Emmitt Smith (1,773) and Barry Sanders (1,500). It was the fourth-best rookie rushing mark in NFL history, trailing only Dickerson (1,808), George Rogers (1,674 in '81) and Otis Anderson (1,605 in '79). For his efforts, Martin earned Rookie-of-the-Year honors and a trip to Hawaii for the Pro Bowl.

The 5-11, 200-pound Davis spent his freshman NFL season catapulting from eighth on the team's training camp depth chart to second (to Martin) in the Rookie-of-the-Year voting. Davis, a north-and-south runner, became the lowest drafted player in NFL history to rush for 1,000 yards. He finished third in the AFC in rushing (1,117) and ninth in the NFL. Davis was selected as a Pro Bowl alternate and his teammates voted him the club's offensive MVP.

"We both felt that we got drafted a lot lower than we should have been," Martin says. "So it was like a personal challenge between me and him."

The friendly rivalry between Martin, a Pittsburgh native, and Davis, a San Diego kid, heated up even more in the '96 season. This time it was Davis (345 carries for 1,538 yards), the 21st running back selected in '95, who held the statistical advantage over Martin (319 carries for 1,152 yards), the 10th ball carrier chosen.

The 24-year-old Davis, who is seven months older than Martin, bagged the AFC rushing crown and set new franchise records in yards, carries and touchdowns (16). Davis finished only 18 yards short of Sanders' league-leading total and also became the 14th NFL player to register 1,000-yard rushing totals in his first two seasons. His banner season earned him the Associated Press' Offensive-Player-of-the-Year award, his first Pro Bowl appearance and a third place finish in the league's MVP voting.

"As I got closer and closer to the rushing title, I really started to want it more and more," Davis says. "Unfortunately, it didn't happen. But if I had to lose it to somebody, who is more deserving than Barry Sanders? He's one of the best in the game."

However, in the end, Martin, the 15th NFL player to notch 1,000-yard seasons his first two years in the league, still got the last laugh. His New England team competed in Super Bowl XXX while Davis' club watched it on TV.

"He's beaten me at everything," Davis says. "He went to the Pro Bowl before I did. He went to the Super Bowl before I did. Hopefully, I'll be at the Super Bowl this year and win it before him."

It's heartwarming to hear Martin and Davis talking about rushing titles and Super Bowls when you consider all that they have overcome to arrive at where they are today.

Martin's childhood was filled with tragedy. He found his maternal grandmother murdered when he was 10 years old, his maternal aunt was killed in a car accident when he was 12 and his best friend was shot



to death when Martin was 14. Later, Martin was caught in the crosshairs of a Pittsburgh gang shooting. His mother, Rochella, worked three jobs to raise him after his father abandoned the family, and she had him told her son not to come home from school until he had enlisted in an extracurricular activity. Curtis chose football, and the rest is history.

"When you see a woman work as hard as she did to keep clothes on my back, food in my stomach and [give me] the things that I wanted, it encouraged me to do my best," says Martin, who also credits God for helping him find his purpose in life. "I felt like I couldn't let him down after all she had been through."

Like Martin, Davis experienced personal loss early. His father, John, died of lupus when he was 12, and his surrogate brother, James Pennington, was murdered a few years later. If that wasn't enough, Davis' early years were plagued with migraines so excruciating that he considered suicide. He still suffers from them to this day, and missed parts of two games in '96 because of them. Davis' high school football career was so uninspiring that his only scholarship offer was from Long Beach State. When coach George Allen died and the football program was dropped before the completion of his freshman year, Davis transferred to Georgia.

"It wasn't my aspiration to play [pro] football," Davis says. "I didn't really play much in high school. I thought that would be the last of my football. Then I went to college and I thought that would be the end of it. And now I'm here."

Martin and Davis followed similar paths through college. After promising freshman sophomore seasons, they both exploded in the junior year. Martin rushed for 1,075 yards and seven touchdowns on 210 carries, and Davis rambled for 824 yards and five touchdowns on 167 carries. But their senior seasons were washed out by injuries, as were their chances of being high picks in the NFL draft.

"We got a lot of heat when we drafted Davis," says Bob Turner, the Broncos' running back coach. "Everybody was like, 'Why did you draft this guy? But he was a guy that we did our ground work on and we just crossed our fingers and hoped that he was still around when we got to pick.'"

While their lifelines have run mirror courses, the traits that Martin and Davis take to the end zone are totally different.

Martin, whose running style most resembles that of Barry Sanders, changes direction on a dime, has the power to run a defender over and the quickness to make him miss. He can also catch balls out of the backfield.

"When I'm running the ball, it's almost like a state of panic or paranoid state," Martin says. "As soon I see a hand, I'm jerking away from it. I run to where the defenders are not."

Davis, on the other hand, runs like no other in the game. He runs with excess body lean, superior vision, great foot quickness, and is smart enough to know all the blocking schemes. He is one of the few backs in the league who is as good without the football as he is with it.

"When I'm running the ball, I want to see the same thing a person sees when they are watching the game," Davis says. "I want to be a little bit more comfortable and react a little faster to the holes and my blocks."

As heirs apparent to Thomas, Smith and Sanders, both Martin and Davis know exactly what they need to do to fill their shoes. "Those guys have been 1,000-yard rushers ever since I could remember," says Davis of the league's aging star running backs. "That's what me and Curtis are going to try and do. Be consistent year in and year out." **B**

MARTIN



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