

Conditioning for a Purpose.

What's your Program?



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A Little Bit of Salt and Pepper

by Mike Rathet

Mike Rathet is an Associated Press sports writer and a contributing editor for Pro Quarterback Magazine. This article originally appeared in Kansas City Magazine.

Sports and athletic competition inevitably pit one man against another. Most often it's an opponent on another team that you must compete against. But sometimes it's your teammate that you must battle to win a starting position on the team.

Willie Lanier and Jim Lynch of the Kansas City Chiefs know what it means to compete for the same job. Just five years ago, they reported to the Chiefs' pre-season training camp with the same job in mind: middle linebacker. Their abilities, as far as could be determined from their collegiate performances, were equal.

But another factor—their skin color—loomed in the back of each player's mind as an unknown factor. Jim Lynch who is white and Willie Lanier who is black were faced with the fact that they would compete under the strain of race consciousness. Their battle for middle linebacker is a story in three phases—the awareness, the competition, and the relationship. When Lynch and Lanier were drafted early in 1967 to replace aging veterans Sherrill Headrick and Smokey Stover at the middle linebacking spot, they both realized that the Chiefs were looking for someone to fill the sensitive leadership position. The big question—the one that stirred the awareness of the situation—was whether Lynch, white, from Notre Dame, the Maxwell Trophy winner, would have the edge because of those factors over Lanier, black, from Morgan State, a Little All-American.

Equal Opportunity?

Would there be equal opportunity?

That the two linebackers can now smile at the Salt and Pepper nickname that Lynch applied to them tells more than any words, but neither could help having that question pop into his mind at the time.

Lanier, of course, was more conscious of it. He was fully aware during his senior year, as he looked forward to the draft, that pro football, at that time, had just one black middle linebacker—Houston's Garland Boyette.

Lanier recalls, "I used to sit with some of my teammates at Morgan and try to figure out how I compared with other middle linebackers who were seniors. The two I felt were near me as far as ability



Jim Lynch and Willie Lanier team up to stop Bill Brown of the Vikings.

was concerned were Bob Matheson (now with Cleveland) and Lynch. As far as I was concerned at the time, I had to assume that there would be discrimination. I'd heard them call the middle linebacker the quarterback of the defense and I knew there hadn't been any black quarterbacks. I also realized that *assuming* didn't necessarily mean there *had* to be discrimination."

And what went through Lynch's mind?

"I looked at the situation and I knew automatically something was built in there," he recalls. "I knew there was going to be competition, but as it turned out it was never a competition of personalities. It never developed into an 'I'm going to play, you're going to sit your butt on the bench' competition. As for black middle linebackers, I didn't think about that. It never occurred to me that there were never Negro middle linebackers."

End Phase 1.

Begin Phase 2—the competition.

That started with the exhibition season and Lanier quickly moved ahead of Lynch, who lost valuable time playing in the College All-Star Game. And when Lynch finally reported to camp the first thing he noticed was the ferocity with which Lanier was tackling.

"That's why I believe he was out to prove something—he was so intense," Lynch points out. "He's one of the most naturally strong persons I've ever met. I've never seen anyone before or since hit that hard and with that intensity.

"You know how the helmet is supposed to be convex? Well, he'd come off the field and his would be concave from hitting so hard."

Hard Work Pays Off for Lanier

Lanier's ability was enough to win the competition, and he began the season as the No. 1 middle linebacker. Lynch, caught somewhat short after reporting late, switched between middle and an outside spot without ever feeling that he had made significant progress. But there was no resentment.

"I played all three positions during the exhibition season," Lynch recalls, "and I really didn't know what I was. I just knew I wanted to play football. I've never really considered myself a great athlete. I was only so-so in basketball, nothing in track and couldn't play baseball. If they didn't have linebackers in football, I couldn't play football either."

But the door was barred. Lanier was in the middle, perennial all-star Bobby Bell was at one outside position and another veteran, Bud Abell, at the other outside post. The straightest line to a job, however, still appeared to be middle linebacker.



Lanier carries an intercepted pass toward Miami's end zone as Lynch roots him on.

Lanier Suffers Head Injury

And so the season moved on, Lanier holding the middle until he sustained a head injury that caused double vision, the end to his rookie season coming when he was unable to play against San Diego.

The new middle linebacker: Jim Lynch. He started the next game at Oakland and the Chiefs went on to win their last three games in a row, leaving him No. 1 going into the 1968 season.

Battle of Lynch vs. Lanier Is Renewed

The battle was joined once more in the exhibition season with each finding himself playing a half, then watching a half. So they decided it was time for a talk.

"We spent about an hour-and-a-half talking things over," Lynch reveals. "Willie and I both wondered out loud what was going on. I told him we were like Salt and Pepper — not because of color but because we complemented each other. There were things he could do better — like sticking his nose right in, because he's a lot more like Dick Butkus (of the Chicago Bears) and a lot stronger than I am. And there were things I could do better. I didn't feel he could play pass coverage on the outside as well as I could.

"We sort of both came to the conclusion that we were both good football players and that we would both be playing, if not at middle linebacker, at outside linebacker, and it wasn't a case where if he was

playing and missed a tackle I was happy, or if I was in and blew a pass coverage he was happy.

"We didn't want it to become a cut-throat competition. We realized neither was going to get cut, both were going to play—and we didn't want anything to become a problem."

End Phase 2. Begin Phase 3—the relationship.

Phase 3 actually started just before the regular season opened when Hank Stram, the Chiefs' head coach, finally reached the same decision that Lynch and Lanier had reached several weeks earlier—both should be playing.

"He called me in on Monday following our final exhibition game," Lynch recalls, "and said he didn't want me to get the impression that Lanier had beaten me out at middle linebacker. He said he wanted to play the eleven best players on the team and he just felt I could play the outside better than Willie and Willie could handle the middle better than me."

The competition had ended and it was, in fact, a plus for the Chiefs as the Bell-Lanier-Lynch linebacking trio gave the Chiefs a starting crew that was as capable, if not better, than anything in the business.

Lanier/Lynch Relationship: Mutual Respect

During the year both Lynch and Lanier had time to analyze the relationship that had been established between them through the awareness of color and the clash of competition. Both liked what they saw.

"I have to admit I was leery of the situation at the beginning," Lanier says. "Maybe it's only a natural feeling under the circumstances, but I couldn't help thinking we wouldn't get along well. But it's turned out to be just the opposite. Jim's very easy to get along with.

"After I got to camp that first year and got to know him as a person, our relationship became one of mutual respect and friendship."

Lynch is far more expansive on the subject, possibly because he seems to have found some answers for himself through the competition and the relationship.

"I can only guess what it means to be black," Lynch says. "But I know it's tough. There might be some prejudices I'm not even aware of and there may be some that are imagined. But I do know Willie, and I know he's his own man.

"He's very articulate, very intelligent, and he thinks things through for himself. He will never be a militant, but he also never will be stepped on. He's a man, and I think things are to a point with him where it doesn't concern him at all that he's black—it's just not a factor."



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