

## Black History Month 2024

# Sam Mills

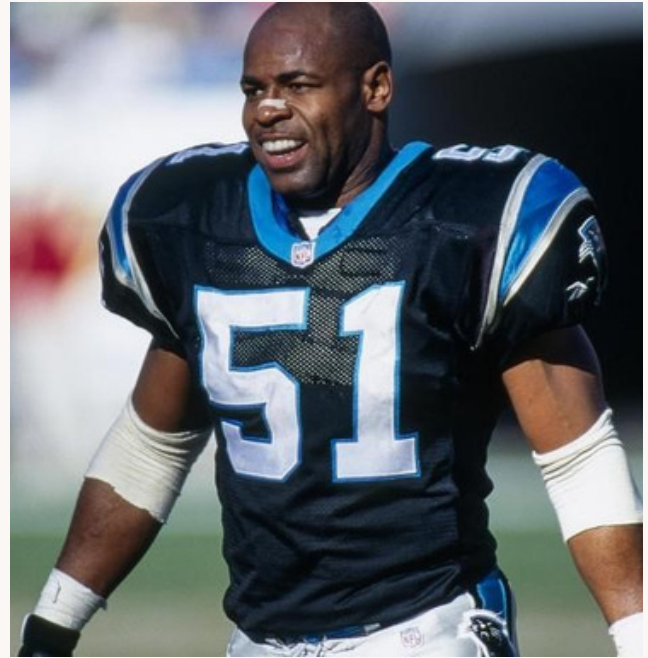
Few athletes in the history of New Jersey sports defied the odds more than Sam Mills, starting from his days competing at Long Branch High School and lasting all the way until his induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Born on June 3, 1959, he grew up in Long Branch as part of large family. In high school, he was a football standout at linebacker and tight end and a champion wrestler. During his time there, he also competed in basketball and track and field. He graduated in 1977.

He seemingly had all the traits to be a sought after college athlete, except for one thing - size. He stood 5-9, and when he reached the state wrestling finals as a senior, he did so as a 188 pounder. Never mind his strength, character or heart. He was short, so college football programs didn't seem to care.

He wound up trying out for the team at Montclair State. Not only did he make the squad, he set several school records (including 22 tackles in a game and 501 tackles in a season) and became a dominant NCAA Division 3 All-American.

Still, it's extremely hard for D3 players to make it in the pros, no matter how big they are. And for one his size, it's almost impossible to even get a look.



He graduated from Montclair State in 1981, and later that year, went undrafted and then to training camp with the Cleveland Browns and was soon cut. The next year, he went to camp with the Toronto Argonauts of Canadian Football League and was again cut.

His next option was to teach and coach at East Orange High School. That's what he was doing when a last-chance football offer came his way - to try out for the Philadelphia Stars in the brand-new United States Football League.

The Philadelphia coaching staff wasn't sure when they saw his diminutive size. But once they saw him hit, Mills was offered a contract on the spot.

He was a three year fixture for the team, helping it to two USFL championships.

When the league then folded, Stars coach Jim Mora got the job of coaching the New Orleans Saints in the NFL. Mora wasn't his original coach with the Stars, and at first had to be convinced that a 5-9 linebacker was worth keeping. But when Mora moved on to the NFL, Mills was one of a few Stars players he brought with him.

Just like he produced for every other team that gave him a chance, Mills became a standout for the Saints, and quickly emerged

as one of the best linebackers in the NFL during an era when it featured some all-time greats at the position. The fact that he was facing offensive linemen much taller and up to 100 pounds larger didn't seem to matter.

In his second season, the Saints had a winning record for the first time in their two-decade history. Mills was selected to Pro Bowl, something that would happen four more times in his career.

He remained with New Orleans until joining the expansion Carolina Panthers as a free agent in 1995. He played there for three seasons before retiring after the 1997 campaign. In his second year there, he was named NFL Defensive Player of the Year. He finished his NFL career with 1,265 tackles over 181 games played.

He was inducted into the NJSIAA Hall of Fame in 2001.

Upon retirement, he joined the Panthers coaching staff. In 2003, he was diagnosed with cancer and given months to live. He continued treatments while the team made a run that year all the way to the Super Bowl, and he made a famous motivational speech to the team which contained the words "Keep Pounding," which became the team's slogan and is associated with both Mills and the Panthers to this day.

Sam Mills passed away at age 45 on April 18, 2005.

His No. 51 jersey was retired by the Panthers later that year, one of many major honors bestowed on him in the years that followed. The biggest came in 2022, when he was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. His presenter that day was Jim Mora.

His wife, Melanie, spoke on Sam's behalf.

"On the surface, the Sam Mills story is the story of a man who was told that he wasn't good enough to play college football," she said. "He wasn't big enough to play professional football, and, at the age 27, he wasn't young enough for the NFL. And yet here we are today, celebrating him. That's because Sam worked harder than his peers. He took advantage of every opportunity."

The impact of Sam Mills was summed up earlier by Frank Glazier, his football coach at Long Branch.

"He became a hero to all the kids in Long Branch. He became somebody for all of them to be like. He showed every one of them that they can get a chance to better themselves, too. He changed the whole character of the town."