

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Harry Carson

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Carson, Harry
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Harry Carson,
<b>Dates:</b>	September 1, 2016
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2016
<b>Physical Description:</b>	10 uncompressed MOV digital video files (5:08:50).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Football player Harry Carson (1953 - ) played for the New York Giants for thirteen years. A nine time Pro Bowler and Super Bowl champion, he was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2006. Carson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 1, 2016, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2016_015
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Football player Harry Carson was born on November 26, 1953 in Florence, South Carolina to Gladys Carson and Edgar Carson, Sr. He began playing football as a defensive end during his sophomore year at Wilson High School in Florence, where he also joined the Air Force Junior ROTC. In 1969, Carson transferred to the integrated McClenaghan High School, where he became a starting defensive end. Carson attended South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, South Carolina, where he was a four-year starter as a defensive lineman under Coach Willie Jeffries. Carson played a role in setting a college football record for the fewest points allowed in 1974. He graduated with his B.S. degree in education in

1976.

Carson was drafted by the New York Giants in the fourth round of the 1976 NFL draft. Under the tutelage of defensive coordinator Marty Schottenheimer, Carson was trained to play middle linebacker. He was named to the NFL's All-Rookie Team in 1976, and selected to play in the Pro Bowl in 1978, the first of nine in his career. Under Bill Parcells, who became head coach in 1983, the Giants improved, making the playoffs in 1984 and 1985. During the 1986 season, the Giants led the league with a 14-2 record, and Carson served as team captain for the team during the Super Bowl XXI victory in 1987 against the Denver Broncos. Carson led the team in tackles for five years, and served as captain for ten years. He retired from professional football in 1988.

Carson was diagnosed with post-concussion syndrome in 1990, due to the head trauma sustained during his NFL career. He became a leading voice in speaking out for the rights and proper care of retired NFL players who suffer from diseases such as chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). He released his autobiography, *Captain for Life* in 2011, and appeared in the documentary *League of Denial: The NFL's Concussion Crisis* in 2013. He was also active in healthcare organizations like Meridian Neuroscience Health System Inc., the Congress of Neurological Surgeons, and the Aplastic Anemia Foundation. Carson was inducted to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2006.

Harry Carson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on September 1, 2016.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Harry Carson was conducted by Larry Crowe on September 1, 2016, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 10 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Football player Harry Carson (1953 - ) played for the New York Giants for thirteen years. A nine time Pro Bowler and Super Bowl champion, he was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2006.

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## Restrictions

### Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The

## Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

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## Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

Carson, Harry

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Carson, Harry--Interviews

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## Organizations:

## **Occupations:**

Football Player

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

SportsMakers

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## **Administrative Information**

### **Custodial History**

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

### **Preferred Citation**

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Harry Carson, September 1, 2016. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### **Processing Information**

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## **Other Finding Aid**

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Harry Carson, Section  
A2016\_015\_001\_001, TRT: 1:30:53 2016/09/01

Harry Carson was born on November 26, 1953 in Florence, South Carolina to Gladys Eaddy Carson and Edgar Carson, Sr. His mother was born in Florence in 1919 to a family of sharecroppers who raised tobacco and cotton, and had one sister, Jessie Mae Timmons. Carson's father was born in Georgia, where he worked on the railroad, and later moved to Florence to open a juke joint. Neither of his parents graduated high school. Carson grew up in Florence, where he was the youngest of six siblings. When Carson was around five years old, his family was short of money due to his father's alcoholism and the failure of his business. His mother left her position as a cook at the Florence Country Club, and moved to Newark, New Jersey to work as a domestic, leaving Carson in the care of his older sister, Ruth Carson. Carson remembers his mother's cooking, and his trips with his siblings to visit her in Newark during the summers. Later in life, Carson befriended several white New Jerseyans whom his mother raised as children.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry Carson, Section  
A2016\_015\_001\_002, TRT: 2:31:14 2016/09/01

Harry Carson grew up in Florence, South Carolina, and exchanged letters with his mother, Gladys Eaddy Carson, who worked as a domestic in Newark, New Jersey. He was left in the care of his older sister, Ruth Carson, and paternal great-aunt, Louise Wilburn, who was an employee of the McLeod Regional Medical Center in Florence. Carson's relationship to his father, Edgar Carson, Sr., was strained, as his father often spent his mother's earnings on alcohol, and did not attend Carson's

football games. Carson began his education at Holmes Elementary School, where his first grade teacher, Flora Washington, stressed discipline and penmanship. At Wilson Junior High School, Carson joined the Reserve Officers' Training Corps, and played saxophone in the band. In the ninth grade, Carson tried out for varsity football at Wilson High School, but was not in adequate shape. Instead, he joined the Florence Boys Club team under Coach E.J. McIver, and trained to try out for the school team the next year.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry Carson, Section  
A2016\_015\_001\_003, TRT: 3:31:09 2016/09/01

Harry Carson did not make the football team as a freshman at Wilson High School in Florence, South Carolina, and suffered a concussion during tryouts. He joined the team the following year, and played as a defensive end for Coach William Long. At the time, Carson admired National Football League defensive linemen Willie D. Davis, Buck Buchanan and Deacon Jones. When the schools in Florence integrated in 1970, Carson transferred to McClenaghan High School, where he played on an integrated football team under Coach Ladson Cabbage. Carson recalls how students seated themselves by race at pep rallies, and how white players traveled to Myrtle Beach on the weekends, while he and his black teammates watched college football on television. On one occasion, they boycotted practice in response to Coach Cabbage's support of the white players during an argument on the team bus. Carson also joined the school's Reserve Officers' Training Corps chapter, and served as its flight commander during his senior year.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry Carson, Section  
A2016\_015\_001\_004, TRT: 4:30:17 2016/09/01

Harry Carson's girlfriend at McClenaghan High School in Florence, South Carolina, Donna Rae Hawkins, introduced him to better study habits and her supportive family. Carson was elected senior class president, and quit the football team that year after being insulted by Coach Ladson Cabbage, leading some college teams to rescind their interest. Upon graduation, he enrolled at South Carolina State College in Orangeburg on a full scholarship

to play for Coach Oree Banks. In his freshman year, the football team won only one game, and Banks was replaced by Willie Jeffries. Carson's college teammates included future professional players Barney Chavous and Donnie Shell, as well as Thomas Holliday, a backup offensive lineman who targeted Carson for hard hits during practice. During his junior year season, the team's defense allowed only twenty-nine points, setting a National Collegiate Athletic Association record. As a senior, Carson changed positions to nose tackle, and graduated with a degree in education.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry Carson, Section  
A2016\_015\_001\_005, TRT: 5:29:46 2016/09/01

Harry Carson was scouted by Emlen Tunnell and Rosey Brown of the New York Giants while playing at South Carolina State College in Orangeburg, South Carolina. The Giants selected him in the fourth round of the 1976 National Football League (NFL) draft, on the recommendation of assistant coach Marty Schottenheimer. During the offseason, Carson trained to change positions from defensive end to middle linebacker, a key role on the defense. Although some coaches were skeptical of Carson, believing that he had faced weak competition in college, he was named the Giants' starting middle linebacker midseason. He recalls meeting announcer Howard Cosell, and starting in his first game against the Minnesota Vikings. Although head coach Bill Arnsparger had previously won a Super Bowl with the Miami Dolphins, he failed to motivate star Giants players Craig Morton and Larry Csonka, and was fired. Carson was chosen for the NFL's All-Rookie Team, but the Giants did not follow through on a promise to renegotiate his contract.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry Carson, Section  
A2016\_015\_001\_006, TRT: 6:30:24 2016/09/01

Harry Carson served as the New York Giants' middle linebacker, and emulated Willie Lanier, the National Football League's first black middle linebacker; Jack Lambert of the Pittsburgh Steelers, who won four Super Bowls in the 1970s; and Bill Bergey of the Philadelphia Eagles. Carson played in his first Pro Bowl in 1978, and was named the NFC Linebacker of the Year in both 1978

and 1979. He recalls his surprise when some teammates used amphetamines, and his irritation with the Giants' losing records in the 1970s. In 1980, Carson suffered a knee injury, and missed half the season. The Giants drafted linebacker Lawrence Taylor in 1981; and, while Carson was initially skeptical that the team needed another linebacker, he was won over by Taylor's athleticism. The same year, Carson battled depression, losing interest in football and considering suicide, and consulted psychologist Frank Ladata. Carson's daughter, Aja Carson-Gurley, was born in 1978, the same year that his mother, Gladys Eaddy Carson, passed away.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry Carson, Section  
A2016\_015\_001\_007, TRT: 7:29:37 2016/09/01

Harry Carson made twenty-five tackles during the New York Giants' game against the Green Bay Packers in 1982, but missed half the season due to a players' strike. In the 1980s, Carson witnessed several severe injuries among National Football League players: Joe Theismann broke his leg while playing against the Giants, and never fully recovered; and former Giant Doug Kotar died from a brain tumor in 1983, one year after retiring. Carson also sustained a severe concussion while tackling Washington Redskins player John Riggins. In 1984, the Giants made the playoffs under Coach Bill Parcells, but lost to the San Francisco 49ers. By that time, Carson was suffering headaches and memory loss due to head trauma sustained while playing football, but nonetheless remained with the Giants in 1985. That year, Carson popularized the tradition of dumping a bucket of Gatorade onto Coach Bill Parcells after a win with nose tackle Jim Burt. Carson also worked during each football offseason at the Grumman Aerospace Corporation.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry Carson, Section  
A2016\_015\_001\_008, TRT: 8:29:54 2016/09/01

Harry Carson captained the New York Giants in 1985, and began a tradition of team dinners at the Beefsteak Charlie's restaurant. In the 1986 National Football League season, the Giants qualified for Super Bowl XXI, and played against the Denver Broncos and their quarterback, John Elway at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California. It

was the only time in Carson's career that he reached the Super Bowl, and he represented the team for the pregame coin toss. The Giants struggled in the first half of the game, but improved to defeat the Broncos, winning the championship. In 1987, the Giants did not qualify for the playoffs, as tackle Karl Nelson was diagnosed with cancer, and replacement players lost three games during a players' strike. During Carson's final season in 1988, he was accused by the Giants of drug abuse, and so he refused the team's plea for him to return for the 1989 season. He became a commentator for several stations, but was fired from the Big East Network for losing his train of thought on air.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry Carson, Section  
A2016\_015\_001\_009, TRT: 9:29:35 2016/09/01

Harry Carson retired from the New York Giants in 1989, and watched with pride as the Giants, including his former teammates Pepper Johnson and Carl Banks, won Super Bowl XXV in 1991. After retiring, Carson was diagnosed with post-concussion syndrome. He also attended the funeral of Mike Webster, his former opponent with the Pittsburgh Steelers, who committed suicide in 2002. Webster was diagnosed post-mortem with chronic traumatic encephalopathy by Dr. Bennet Omalu. Carson mourned the suicides of several other National Football League (NFL) players who suffered from brain trauma, including Ray Easterling, Junior Seau and David R. Duerson. When Carson was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2006, he called upon the NFL to provide care to retired players. In 2013, the NFL agreed to a \$765 million settlement for former players with post-concussion syndrome. Carson appeared in documentaries such as 'League of Denial' and 'Cost of Glory' to raise awareness about brain trauma in football.

Video Oral History Interview with Harry Carson, Section  
A2016\_015\_001\_010, TRT: 10:36:01 2016/09/01

Harry Carson was encouraged by his coaches, Romeo Crennel and Len Fontes, to become a National Football League (NFL) coach himself, but turned down the opportunity in order to spend time with his children. Instead, he became the executive director of the Fritz

Pollard Alliance, and worked with Chairman John Wooten to advocate for the hiring of minorities as NFL coaches. Carson had three children: Aja Carson-Gurley, who was the mother of Kellen Carson-Gurley and Jamison Carson-Gurley; Donald Carson, who survived a bout of aplastic anemia, and then became a medical doctor; and Lucky Carson, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran. In 2006, Carson became the 231st person to be elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. He spoke at the induction ceremony, despite his frustration toward the organization for not electing him sooner. Carson describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community, and how he would like to be remembered. He concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.