

Joe Schmidt: He was Always in the Way!

By Don Smith

Joe Schmidt won just about every honor a middle linebacker can earn during his 13 success-studded seasons with the Detroit Lion. He gained a lasting reputation among those who played with and against him for being the finest field leader and the best man at his job among the many hundreds of his contemporaries. It is a reputation that has not waned, even though Joe played his last National Football League game in 1965.

Listing all of Joe's playing honors would take volumes. In short summary, he was voted to the NFL all-star team eight times. He was named to the Pro Bowl nine straight years from 1955 through 1963 and he saw his teammates name him their Most Valuable Player in 1955, 1957, 1958 and again in 1961.

For all of these honors, perhaps the finest accolade an athlete can earn is the universal respect of his opponents and teammates and Joe earned this kind of acclaim in abundance.

"If I were to start a team from scratch and pick out just one player," Norm Van Brocklin said at the time he was the Minnesota Vikings' coach, "I'd select Joe Schmidt to form the core of my team."

"He's a cat!" the Green Bay Packers great coach, Vince Lombardi, once said. "He's one of the top linebackers. A great diagnostician. A great tackler. A strong defensive leader."

"Joe is the best linebacker in the league," Paul Hornung, Green Bay's multi-threat offensive star, said a little more directly.

John Henry Johnson, then the No. 5 rusher in pro football history, put it another way: "He's always in the way!"

A cluster of the NFL's top running backs once were polled to determine the attributes of the ideal middle linebacker. The star rushers felt that the best height was 6-2 or 6-3 with weight between 225 and 235 pounds. In this respect, the 6-0, 215 pound Schmidt didn't qualify. But in every other respect, he fit the "perfect linebacker" to a "T."

He anticipated plays with uncanny accuracy. He barked split-second assignments to his teammates on the fearsome Detroit defensive unit. He was a deadly tackler. He was fast enough to evade a 250 pound guard, move laterally along the scrimmage line to follow the play and be able to drop back to cover passes. He was strong enough to power past a potential blocker to crumble a play.

If you had to pick Schmidt's greatest talent, it might well be his uncanny knack of seemingly always knowing what the opposition was going to do. To frisk the opposition of its advantages, Joe studied every foe constantly. He learned what to expect from every opponent at a particular point in the game. On the field with the play unfolding, he quickly analyzed the "keys" – the moves of the center, guards, quarterback and fullback – and reacted instantly, with a clear picture in his mind of where the ball was going.

Schmidt's defensive calls featured a lot of red-dogging and he had a wide variety of blitzes in his usual "game plan."

"I'd say about 75 percent of our defensive rushes feature some form of red dog," Schmidt conceded at the height of his career in 1962. "It confuses the offense and keeps them off balance." It was a guessing game, but Schmidt was usually right.

Schmidt didn't exactly create the middle linebacking position but it was a job that was developed in the 1950s with the change of the ordinary defensive structure to the presently-used 4-3 alignment. Without

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question, he was the first to play the position with such finesse that even the masses in the stands could see the growing value of the “defensive quarterback.”

Joe started playing tough sandlot football when he was only 14. He played tackle on a team of much older players, many of them World War II veterans, but he switched to fullback when he played at Pittsburgh’s Brentwood High School. He was still a fullback when he entered the University of Pittsburgh but Pitt Coach Len Casanova, possibly the first to recognize Joe’s great linebacking possibilities, moved him to the defensive unit as a middle guard.

Schmidt had a long history of injuries at Pitt – two broken ribs as a freshman, a broken wrist and a shoulder separation as a sophomore, a badly wrenched knee as a junior, and a torn knee cartilage and a concussion as a senior. About the only thing not injured at one time or another was his confidence in himself and his enthusiasm for the game.

Because of his injury background, Joe wasn’t considered a good draft risk and, had it not been for the insistence of Lion assistant coach Buster Ramsey who had seen Joe play well in the Senior Bowl, he might not have been drafted by anyone, let alone a World Championship team. The Lions took Schmidt in the seventh round. There was no way they could have suspected they were acquiring the rights to a man who would become one of history’s greatest stars, so perhaps it is understandable that Schmidt received a cool reception when he reported to the Lions’ office for the first time.

In his company was highly-rated Gene Gedman, a halfback who was Detroit’s No. 2 pick. General Manager Nick Kerbawy rushed out to greet Gedman, but totally ignored Schmidt until Gedman introduced him. Even then Kerbawy showed only mild interest. “Say,” he said to Joe, “why don’t you go on out to our training camp right now. It’s not far, out in Ypsilanti. You can catch a bus across the street on Michigan Avenue.” Then, turning to Gedman, Kerbawy continued: “Say, Gene, would you like to play some golf?”

Once in his camp, Schmidt’s reception from the salty Lions’ veterans was, predictably, belligerent. Rookies might take jobs away, the veterans always reasoned, so rookies were treated accordingly. Soon after the start of camp, Dick Flanagan, a popular veteran linebacker, was traded. Bobby Layne, Detroit’s super field general, sidled up to Schmidt and warned: “Flanagan’s gone now. You’d better be good, rookie!”

Schmidt quickly proved to be more than just good, but it wasn’t until mid-season that Layne and the other veterans finally accepted Schmidt into their ranks. One day they invited the heretofore-ignored rookie: “Let’s go have a beer,” and Joe knew then he was officially regarded as a Lion.

Within two years, he was an all-NFL star and he never had to worry again whether he was accepted or not. He reigned as the king of the playing pride until after the 1965 season, when he retired to accept the job as the Lions’ linebacking coach.

Then his problems began anew. For the first big task for Coach Joe Schmidt was to find a suitable replacement for Player Joe Schmidt. Obviously, it was an impossible task!

LINEBACKER
College: Pittsburgh
6-0 222
Detroit Lions: 1953-65
Born: January 18, 1933, in Pittsburgh, PA