

HUGH McELHENNY: THE KING

By Joseph Hession

Excerpted from Forty Niners: Looking Back

Hugh McElhenny knew he was breaking a cardinal rule when he fielded a punt on the four-yard line, juked a couple of Chicago Bears and took off on a 96-yard scamper for a touchdown.

A veteran would have allowed the punt to go into the end zone. But McElhenny wasn't a veteran; he was a rookie playing in his fourth league game in 1952. McElhenny's rookie mistake was ignored but his running ability wasn't overlooked.

"After the game in the locker room," said McElhenny, "Frankie Albert gave me the game ball and said, 'You're now the King.' Then he turned to Joe Perry and said, 'Joe, you're just the Jet.'"

That's when the legend was born. "The King" was finally coronated. And McElhenny was definitely royalty. In the open field he had no peer, dancing past bruising tacklers with the grace and beauty of Baryshnikov. He was an artist unleashed on a canvas of green grass, sprinting and slashing like no one before him.

McElhenny began to make his presence known barely 24 hours after reporting to the San Francisco 49er training camp. He played in the College All-Star game on Friday night, reported to camp on Saturday, and was in uniform on Sunday for an exhibition game against the Chicago Cardinals. He hadn't even had time to learn the names of his teammates when he found himself in the 49er backfield.

"Frankie had called a time out and asked Buck Shaw to put me in the game," McElhenny said. "Buck told him I didn't know the plays yet. At that time, Frankie pretty much had his way with Buck, so Buck went along with him. In the huddle, Frankie drew a play on the ground and told everybody what to do. He threw me a pitchout and I ran 42 yards for a touchdown."

It's hard to find a Hugh McElhenny story that doesn't in some way involve Frankie Albert. If not for Albert's acute judgment of talent and character, McElhenny might have played elsewhere. It was at the Hula Bowl in 1952 that Albert first laid his eyes on "the King." The game matched the best college players in the country against top professional talent. Albert happened to be on hand to represent the pros. McElhenny played in two games, made the All-Hula Bowl team, and attracted Albert's eye. Frankie immediately got on the phone and told Buck Shaw he had to pick McElhenny in the upcoming draft. The 49ers made him the ninth college player picked in 1952.

When Albert introduced McElhenny to his new teammates for the first time he said, "I'd like you to meet a man who took a cut in pay to become a professional."

McElhenny considers it a curious statement because it was Albert who advised him what kind of contract to ask for when he was bargaining with 49ers' owner Vic Morabito. The contract negotiation took place at the Sheraton Hotel on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles.

"Vic Morabito sat down and said to me, 'Well, Hugh, what do you want?' I said I wanted \$30,000. I was a first round pick. He told me they were thinking about something in the range of \$5,000. I told him I could have signed with the Los Angeles Dons for \$10,000 when I got out of high school. At that point he excused himself, got up and never came back. I even had to pick up the check." McElhenny eventually signed for \$7,000.

It was a bargain for the 49ers. McElhenny's exceptional running skill earned him Sport Magazine's Player of the Year award in his rookie season. But his reputation as a game breaker made him a marked man

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around the league. Everywhere he went defenses devised plans to stop him. Some devised ways to cripple him. The didn't want to just tackle him; they wanted him out of the lineup.

The Chicago Bears had one of those piece defenses. In 1954, the 49ers and McElhenny were on their way to an exceptional season when he separated his shoulder against the Bears. Joe Perry, John Henry Johnson and Y.A. Tittle, the three other members of that "Million Dollar Backfield," couldn't take up the slack. With McElhenny out of action, they lost three straight games and finished 7-4-1.

That year still evokes good memories for McElhenny because it was the first year the "Million Dollar Backfield" was together. McElhenny rates it the best backfield that ever played.

"That was one hell of a backfield," he said. "Even with all that talent, we could never quite win it. We had an injury here, an injury there. In 1954 we had nine starters injured.

"Perry was an exceptional guy to be with in the backfield," he said. "He was such an outstanding team player. Running backs are only as good as the guys in front of them. I don't know how many times he laid a block that sprang me. I'm just proud to say I was in the same backfield as him.

"Now I keep waiting for John Henry Johnson to go into the Hall of Fame. I don't know why he isn't. That would really be something. We probably would be the only backfield in history to all be in the Hall of Fame.

"Y.A. Tittle used to joke about trying to keep us all happy by giving us the ball. He certainly had his hands full because we all had egos."

One of the disappointments of McElhenny's nine years with San Francisco was the team's inability to win a championship despite having such outstanding individual players as Tittle, Johnson and Perry. Nevertheless, the 49ers were competitive throughout the 1950s. The highlight of that decade was 1957 when San Francisco forced a playoff with Detroit. One of the games that got the team there is etched in McElhenny's memory.

With two games left in the season, the 49ers needed a win against the Baltimore Colts to stay alive in the race for the Western Division title. San Francisco was behind, 13- 10, but driving, when Tittle was hurt. Rookie John Brodie was motioned off the bench and onto the field.

"When Brodie came into the huddle, he looked around and said, 'What do I call?' I told him to throw me the ball. I was going to do a little down and out and he could throw it to the sidelines."

Brodie threw the pass under a heavy rush, McElhenny caught it, and the 49ers won.

McElhenny regards the ability to run with a football as something of a mystery. He had been a prep hurdling champion at George Washington High School in Los Angeles, and that training helped him develop as a running threat. But there is something undefinable that the great backs possess, he said. The intuitive cutbacks and changes of direction that were McElhenny's trademark are something that can't be programmed.

"Speed is one ingredient," he said. "I had pretty good speed but I couldn't beat Joe Perry in the 50. I could beat him in the 100 though. To be a good running back, well, it's just God's gift. It's not something you can teach. I did things by instinct. Running, balance, all of it was instinct. You also have to know where other people are in the field."

He generally doesn't like to compare the modern players with those of his era because he disagrees with the argument that today's players are better athletes.

"We'd probably be just as good as these guys playing today," he said. "They are bigger and faster, but we'd probably have been bigger and faster if we had the same training methods, the vitamins and all that."

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McElhenny remains a 49er faithful to this day. He credits the success of the present team to the system used by Bill Walsh more than the individual players.

"You have to look at Bill Walsh's system," he said. "How do the 49ers evaluate their players? How do they find players that fit into the system that well? If one guy gets hurt, it won't affect the team. They have other talented players that will fit into the system and do just as well.

"The loss of the quarterback might make a difference, but (Matt) Cavanaugh does a good job when he's in there. They have great athletes on that team, but the important thing is Walsh knows how to use them. He knows how to get the maximum effort out of his players.

"The organization is great to us. Eddie DeBartolo and Bill Walsh always try to keep in touch and make us part of the organization. They invite us on road trips every year. That's real gratifying to know they want you to still be a part of the team. Many teams just forget about us old guys.

"I don't want to be overly sentimental, but I'll always be a 49er."

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Named to Associated Press All-America College Team in 1951 All-Pro & Pro Bowl:
 1952 - AP, UP, New York News (first team); Pro Bowl
 1953 - AP, UP, New York News (first team); Pro Bowl
 1954 - New York News (first team); UP, Sporting News (second team); Pro Bowl
 1956 - Sporting News (first team); AP, UP, NEA, New York News (second team); Pro Bowl
 1957 - AP, NEA (second team); Pro Bowl
 1958 - Pro Bowl
 1961 - Pro Bowl

HUGH EDWARD McELHENNY "The King"

Born December 31, 1928, at Los Angeles, CA
 Hgt: 6-1 Wgt: 205 College: Washington

Year	Team	Lg	GM	ATT	RUSHING			PASS RECEIVING			
					YDS	AVG	TD	PC	YDS	AVG	TD
1952	SF	N	12	98	684	*7.0	6	26	367	14.1	3
1953	SF	N	12	112	503	4.5	3	30	474	15.8	2
1954	SF	N	6	64	515	*8.0	6	8	162	20.3	0
1955	SF	N	12	90	327	3.6	4	11	203	18.5	2
1956	SF	N	12	185	916	5.0	8	16	193	12.1	0
1957	SF	N	12	102	478	4.7	1	37	458	12.4	2
1958	SF	N	12	113	451	4.0	6	31	366	11.8	2
1959	SF	N	10	18	67	3.7	1	22	329	15.0	3
1960	SF	N	9	95	347	3.7	0	14	114	8.1	1
1961	Min	N	13	120	570	4.8	3	37	283	7.6	3
1962	Min	N	11	50	200	4.0	0	16	191	11.9	0
1963	NYG	N	14	55	175	3.2	0	11	91	8.3	2
1964	Det	N	8	22	48	2.2	0	5	16	3.2	0
13 years			143	1124	5281	4.7	382	64	3247	12.3	20

Year	Team	Lg	PUNT RETURNS			KICKOFF RET.			SCOR.	FUM			
			NO	TDS	AVG	TD	NO	YDS			AVG	TD	PTS
1952	SF	N	20	284	14.2	1	18	396	22.0	0	10	60	5
1953	SF	N	15	104	6.9	0	15	368	24.5	0	5	30	6
1954	SF	N	8	78	9.8	0	8	210	26.3	0	6	36	4
1955	SF	N	7	10	1.4	0	9	189	21.0	0	6	36	3
1956	SF	N	15	38	2.5	0	13	300	23.1	0	8	48	4
1957	SF	N	10	41	4.1	0	-	-	-	-	3	18	8
1958	SF	N	24	93	3.9	0	2	31	15.5	0	8	48	10

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1959 SF	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	24	1
1960 SF	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	6	2
1961 Min	N	8	155	19.4	1	2	59	29.5	0	7	42	8	
1962 Min	N	5	43	8.6	0	7	160	22.9	0	0	0	3	
1963 NYG	N	13	74	5.7	0	6	136	22.7	0	2	12	3	
1964 Det	N	1	0	0.0	0	3	72	24.0	0	0	0	0	
13 years		126	920	7.3	2	83	1921	23.1	0	60	360	57	

Additional statistics: Completed two passes in three attempts for 13 yards and a touchdown in 1953 and threw one incomplete pass in 1956, two in 1958 and one in 1961.