

No Such Word as ‘Can’t’

Dempsey, Hirsch, McElhenny triumphed over adversity

By Kevin Errett

The most difficult thing at times is to find the strength to believe in yourself.
-- Lee Wheeler

These words should be etched on the helmet of every player in professional football. It takes “the strength to believe in yourself” to overcome handicaps, career-threatening injuries and other misfortunes on the way to becoming an NFL legend. Yet how sweet it is to see a player conquer adversity, to triumph over on-the-field injury, deformity, childhood accident, even – as was the case with Pittsburgh’s Rocky Bleier – war wounds, to enter or re-enter pro ball.

Sure, the game is big business, glamour, theatrics and hype, but it’s also courage.

On Nov. 8, 1970, placekicker Tom Dempsey of the New Orleans Saints proved to the whole world that he *could* do it, and what he did fell nothing short of miraculous.

Tom was a successful kicker, but not a phenomenal one. He booted for five different teams in an NFL career that spanned 11 seasons (1969-79). On this particular November day, however, Dempsey was the greatest kicker who ever lived.

With only seconds left, and New Orleans trailing Detroit 17-16, the Saints’ new head coach, J.D. Roberts, sent in Dempsey to try for a game-winning field goal. All he had to do was boom the ball straight for 63 yards!

“I really thought I could do it,” Dempsey claims. “I always try to remember what my father drilled into me when I was growing up – there’s no such word as ‘can’t.’ You may do it differently, but you can do it. Still, to this day, I despise the word.”

Fans were searching for the exits. Both teams considered the game over. Many were even laughing.

For Saints fans, laughter turned to pandemonium as the entire stadium watched Tom’s kick just barely clear the crossbar. While the Lions walked away with their heads down, Dempsey walked away with an NFL record – one that still stands.

The 63-yard game-winner was indeed miraculous, but Dempsey wasn’t surprised. The biggest miracle was that he ever made it to the NFL. He was born with a deformed right hand and foot (his kicking foot!), but also a burning desire to succeed.

“I’m proud to hold a record, but I don’t dwell upon it. In the NFL you’re paid to win ball games – winning is the most important thing. Personal gain takes a back seat. I couldn’t have done it without ten other guys.

“I was excited, of course, but you never put yourself above a team. I would say that the birth of my children and the day I got married were far more important to me than the field goal.”

Was his handicap a motivating force?

“I don’t think so. My hand and foot never came into play, and I never worried about them. My parents, little league coaches and high school coach were the reasons I strived for success. My high school coach was like a second father to me.

“Every day before practice, he would slap me, grab my facemask and say, ‘You feel sorry for yourself, don’t you?’

That made me PO'd, but it made me a better athlete. He really helped build my mental toughness.

"Don't get me wrong – it upset me when people took shots at me."

On Nov. 8, 1970, some of those people ate their words.

Elroy Hirsch was one of the game's greatest fighters.

At the beginning there was his nickname, "Crazylegs," coined by a sportswriter to describe the way he ran at the University of Wisconsin and later the University of Michigan. His outstanding speed and elusiveness made him one of the hardest-to-tackle halfbacks of the early 1940s.

Hirsch first played pro football in 1946 with the Chicago Rockets of the new All-America Football Conference. His courage and strength were sorely tested during his three-year stay with the fizzling Rockets.

"In 45 games, we won seven of them," he recalls. "In one game we drew only 700 people, and that was at Soldier Field, a stadium that seated 100,000."

A losing team, though, became the least of Hirsch's worries, as injuries threatened his career. In 1947 he tore back muscles and damaged the ligaments in his right knee. The big blow came the following season: a fractured skull.

"After my injury in 1948, I wondered if I was ever going to get up again ...I was stunned and afterwards didn't have any real memory. I didn't know who we were playing or what the score was.

"I was sent to a doctor and he discovered I had a fracture over my right ear. I was put into a hospital for a month and for the most part couldn't get out of bed. (But) no doctor really told me to never play again.

"It took six to eight months for my coordination to come back. I had guys throwing balls to me – over my right shoulder, then over my left. It was just a matter of me working it out.

"During the offseason I ran a lot, because I loved to run. As time went on, I forgot about it. I kept saying, "I'm fine. I'll be all right."

Hirsch's AAFC contract had run out. In 1949 he joined the team that had drafted him in the first round in 1945: the Los Angeles Rams of the NFL. But there was a slight change. He was considered injury-prone and the Rams were already stocked with running backs, so coach Clark Shaughnessy decided to convert Hirsch into a receiver.

It was a good move for all concerned.

"I loved the position," Hirsch remembers. "I doubt that I would have made it to the Hall of Fame if I remained a halfback. I wasn't really good at it. Pass-catching was the only way I could have gotten in."

His finest season came in 1951, when he caught 66 passes for 1,495 yards (a 22.5-yard average) and 17 touchdowns – all NFL highs that year.

"Everything in life is based on *timing*," he says. "I was around at the right time. The Rams had two great quarterbacks (Hall of Famers Bob Waterfield and Norm Van Brocklin) and Tom Fears (Hall of Fame end). And I thank the good Lord for giving me the ability to run and catch passes."

Apparently the good Lord didn't stop at that. He also gave Hirsch the mental strength to play tough and the physical strength to be an effective blocker. In short, he could hit as low and as hard as the next guy.

Unfortunately, in 1953 Hirsch met up with that next guy: Hardy Brown, the notorious head-hunting linebacker of the 49ers. While trying to block Brown, Hirsch received a blow to the head, compliments of Brown's knees. Hirsch saw white flashes, then passed out.

He suffered the same injury the following week against the Chicago Cardinals – a knee to the head. Soon afterward, he began having problems focusing his left eye. This time, it seemed everyone considered Hirsch finished – everyone but Hirsch, that is. The thought of quitting football never entered his mind.

“You gotta love the game,” he explains. “I never wanted to let down the team. Remember, our rosters were a lot smaller then. And besides, where else was I going to make \$12,000 a year?”

Hirsch lasted twelve seasons (1946-57) and caught 387 passes for 7,029 yards and 60 TDs – not bad for a man twice considered finished in his prime.

“You should always give 110 percent and you should always try harder than the other guy,” he says. “The word ‘can’t’ shouldn’t be in your vocabulary. ‘Try’ should be in capital letters.”

Now 67, Hirsch enjoys a wide variety of sports, including golf, tennis and half-court basketball.

“All of a sudden,” he says, “they’re a lot of fun.”

Just as Hirsch was the dominant receiver of the 1950s, Hugh McElhenny was the dominant running back. A breakaway specialist for his 13 NFL seasons, he didn’t produce the total yardage of heavy-duty runners like Jim Brown or Walter Payton, but the fact that he could produce at all deserves respect. As an 11-year-old, he stepped on a broken bottle and severed all the tendons in his right foot. Doctors said he would never walk again.

He remembers the accident well: “The doctors said my foot would stop growing and that I would be crippled. I was too young to realize what the future held for me, though.”

By hard work, he not only walked, he *ran* – right into the Hall of Fame, earning his nickname, “The King,” along the way.

Besides the accident, another force might have kept McElhenny out of football – his father.

“I just wanted to play football, plain and simple,” he recalls. “In high school, my father wouldn’t sign my insurance certificate to play, so I asked my mother to do it. In my first game I broke my collarbone. After that, my father told me to just go ahead and play.”

And play he did: an All-American at Washington U., an all-pro, 13 touchdown-filled seasons in the NFL. His sudden bursts, fakes and sidesteps are legendary. No one would have guessed he played in pain.

“At Washington U., doctors discovered a problem in the arch of my foot – one that stemmed from the childhood accident,” he explains. “My foot had to be injected with Novocain. In two games, I had to wear a steel plate in my shoe. Obviously, I wasn’t very productive.”

But he apparently held his own. In three years at the university, McElhenny set a Pacific Coast Conference career rushing record with 2,499 yards. That’s what the school hoped he would do when it was one of 63 colleges competing for the right to educate the young halfback. The NFL would be just as pleased.

McElhenny’s finest years came with the San Francisco 49ers, who drafted him in the first round in 1952. As a rookie he had the longest punt return (94 yards), the longest run from scrimmage (89 yards) and the top rushing average (7.0 per carry). He was a unanimous Rookie of the Year, and many wondered what he could possibly do for an encore.

Answer: In 1954 he gained 515 yards for an 8.0 average in only half a season! Only a shoulder injury kept him from a then-rare thousand-yard year.

Today McElhenny is the director of trade relations for Alpac, the third-largest Pepsi-Cola bottling company. Does he feel that the handicapped tend to give extra effort?

“I believe so. There was this kid in high school who always wanted to play football, but he had polio. His senior year he made the team at guard and was one of our most dependable guys.

“If you try, then more people begin to respect you. I always use the words ‘we’ and ‘will,’ even today in my work habits. I never use ‘can’t.’”