

Joe Perry, "The Jet"

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by Joseph Hession, Foghorn Press, @ 1985

Joe Perry was designed to be a fullback. He carried the ball with the power and grace of a panther, defying tacklers to strike. The first time he touched the ball in a league game, he bolted through a hole in the Buffalo Bills defense and dashed 58 yards to score.

Y.A. Tittle, the quarterback for most of Perry's years in the 49er backfield, took extra haste when handing the ball to "Joe the Jet." He was so quick off the snap, he often shot past Tittle before the quarterback could turn to make the handoff.

His playing weight was 195 pounds and that was distributed over a 6-foot frame. Opponents claimed he was bigger. He could run to daylight, or create his own running room by bowling over potential tacklers. He made a habit of carrying opposing players for extra yards.

Perry gained 8,378 yards in the National Football League and another 1,345 in the All-America Football Conference. He averaged over five-yards per carry. After 16 years of professional football, "Joe the Jet" retired in 1963 with more rushing yards than any player in NFL history. That record stood until someone named Jim Brown came along to break it.

In the mid-1950s, Perry teamed with Y.A. Tittle, Hugh McElhenny, and John Henry Johnson to form the most famous backfield in football. With three great running backs hungry to carry the ball, Tittle's chore was to keep them all happy.

"Tittle would try to divide the ball between us back there as much as possible," Perry said with a laugh. "He kept me satisfied anyway."

Indeed, Perry's 1,929 lifetime carries has been surpassed by only seven other running backs in NFL history.

Perry was discovered playing football when he was a running sensation for the Alameda Naval Air Station Hell Cats. John Woudenberg, an offensive tackle for the 49ers at the time, is credited with the find that became a 49er gold mine.

After playing two years with the 49ers in the All-America Football Conference, Perry and the club moved to the NFL. Although the established league was reputed to have fiercer competition, Perry saw little difference between the two leagues.

"The first year in the NFL we weren't too succesful," he said. "We were 3-9. The next two years we almost won the thing. There wasn't a real big difference. There was one game though when we played the Bears that I noticed it. They won 13-7. But they beat the hell out of us physically. We were beat up pretty good. I guess that was the only game where I noticed a difference in the leagues."

"They could play good defense in the old league too. I remember one game in the AAFC against the New York Yankees. They had a middle linebacker who followed me everywhere."

"There is quite a difference between my era and football now. The game is more scientific now. There are more specialists. In my day we had 33 players and 22 of them went both ways. As far as I am concerned football is football, just get out there and play."

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Perry has nothing but praise for the quarterbacks he worked with in the 49er backfields. "Frankie Albert and Y.A Tittle had different styles but they excelled in their own way," he said. "They were quarterbacks that reflected their separate eras."

"Frankie Albert was like a riverboat gambler," Perry said. "He had a sharp mind and did the unexpected. He was unpredictable. But if you gave him something he would run the same play 20 times until you stopped it. He used to throw a quick pass to Strzykalski. One game he threw the same pass over and over for about five yards. We marched right down the field and scored."

"Y.A. Tittle was a brainy quarterback. He was a thinker and he had a strong arm. He would stay in that pocket and wait for the man to get open. He'd wait until he got done what he had to do."

Perry is diplomatic about praising his peers on the gridiron. All the running backs he saw had something that made them professionals. But he is not shy about praising his fellow running back, Hugh McElhenny.

"Mac was the best open field runner of our era. He was a will o' the wisp out there. Sayers was a great open field runner too but he was different than Mac. It's hard to pinpoint what it was."

Not all of Perry's memories of life in the NFL are rosy. He was one of the first black men in professional football, joining the 49ers just a year after Jackie Robinson broke the color line in professional baseball. He encountered racism both on the field and off. His teammates were very supportive, he says, as was the club management.

"I was the first black to play football here," he said. "It was rough as hell. There were a lot of unpleasant things that happened. Lots of things were said on the field. You could imagine what they were. It was probably worse playing football instead of baseball, like Jackie Robinson did, because football is such a physical game."

"The 49ers were great though. If one person was in a fight, the whole team was in a fight. We were like a big family. That was part of the Morabito influence. Italians always do things family style. We always had meals family style. In training camp, the food was on the table and you just served yourself."

Like most former 49ers who played in the 1950s, the year 1957 is one that stands out. Many players recall the playoff loss to Detroit that year. Others remember the 49ers' powerful offense and the Alley-Oop Pass. Perry remembers the game against the Chicago Bears at Kezar Stadium.

"That game stands out for me because it is the game when Tony Morabito died," Perry said. "I had been hurt for several weeks. At halftime, Chicago was ahead 17-3. We got word that Tony had died. The mood turned pretty somber. You could hear people crying, that's how much people loved the guy. I played the second half and we all made a great comeback. We ended up winning 21-17."

Perry played 14 years with the 49ers and another two for the Baltimore Colts. He was the first man in NFL history to rush for over 1,000 yards in two consecutive years. In 1953 he rushed for 1,018 yards, a feat that inspired owner Tony Morabito to reward Perry with a \$5,090 bonus, \$5 for every yard. In 1954 he ran for 1,049 and was named the NFL's Player-of-the-Year. He is also the 49ers' all-time leading rusher. Although proud of his accomplishments, there is one award that tops them all.

"The biggest thrill for me has to be making the Hall of Fame," he said. "There is no way anything could surpass that."

Since retiring, Perry has not missed the game. He doesn't miss the long flights in propeller-driven planes or the games on frozen fields in Green Bay and Cleveland. He has remained a devoted 49er fan, however, and the new version of the 49ers is a sight to behold, he says.

"I think they'll be there for years to come. They have depth and talent at every position. That's what it's all about."

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JOE "THE JET" PERRY

Fletcher Joe Perry

Fullback 6-00 203

Compton, J.C. * Jordan HS, Los Angeles, CA

Born: 01/22/27, Stevens, AR

Pro Football Hall of Fame

YEAR	Team	LG	Gm	ATT	YDS	AVG	TD
1948	San Francisco	AAC	14	77	562	7.30	*10
1949	San Francisco	AAC	12	115	*783	6.81	*8
1950	San Francisco	N	12	124	647	5.22	5
1951	San Francisco	N	11	136	677	4.98	3
1952	San Francisco	N	12	158	725	4.59	8
1953	San Francisco	N	12	*192	*1018	5.30	*10
1954	San Francisco	N	12	*173	*1049	6.06	8
1955	San Francisco	N	11	156	701	4.49	2
1956	San Francisco	N	12	115	520	4.52	3
1957	San Francisco	N	8	97	454	4.68	3
1958	San Francisco	N	12	125	758	6.06	4
1959	San Francisco	N	10	139	602	4.33	3
1960	San Francisco	N	8	36	95	2.64	1
1961	Baltimore	N	13	168	675	4.02	3
1962	Baltimore	N	11	94	359	3.82	0
1963	San Francisco	N	9	24	98	4.08	0
16 years			179	1929	9723	5.04	71