

The Steelers' Pro Bowl Guard of the Early 1950s

By Jim Sargent

In mid-June of 1954, while preparing for what became his last pre-season football camp, George Hughes received a letter on what to expect from the Pittsburgh Steelers' business manager.

Again the Steelers would train at Saint Bonaventure University in Olean, New York. The club would send further details about travel routes and facilities, since players paid their own way to National Football League camps.

Regarding necessities, Francis Fogarty explained that the team would provide all equipment, except shoes:

"Each player must furnish his own shoes both for practice and games. There are shoes on hand in our camp that can be purchased at cost, if you so desire." When he reread the letter recently, George Hughes laughed and reminisced about playing professional football in the early 1950s.

Although few football fans will remember Hughes today, the former All-American guard from the College of William and Mary became one of the NFL's top linemen from 1950 through 1954. Despite playing for a team that posted mediocre records, he was selected for the Pro Bowl after the 1951 and 1953 seasons.

Proud, down-to-earth, and witty, the Pro Bowler explained that it was tough to compete, let alone excel, when the NFL was composed of 12 clubs using 33-man rosters.

George Hughes, the eldest son of Frank and Eunice Hughes, was born on August 19, 1925, in Norfolk, Virginia. An energetic, talented, friendly youth, George grew up playing sports, notably sandlot baseball and football.

During the Great Depression, George helped his family by working part-time. On December 7 of his junior year, George's generation was stunned by the bombing of Pearl Harbor. He had just completed his first season of football at Norfolk's Maury High. In 1942 he became a standout center on offense and defense, served as the team's captain, and punted for an average of nearly 50 yards. Years later, he was selected to the All-Time All-Tidewater team.

World War II had lasting consequences for Hughes and millions of young people. After graduating from high school in January 1943, George joined the Air Force.

"I trained for about four months, and they made me a gunner on B-29s," Hughes recalled. "I went to India first, then to China, flying in both places, and we ended up on Tinian, flying the B-29s out of the Mariana Islands. I flew 22 missions. When the war was over, I came back."

Hughes, thankful the war was over, was ready to go to college. He and high school teammate Jack Cloud, a fullback and linebacker who became a tail gunner during the war, decided to go to college together. They picked William and Mary, because it was close to home. They enrolled in January 1946.

Hughes and Cloud chose William and Mary partly because of the college's fine academic reputation. Also, W&M was a football powerhouse in the South.

Hughes teamed up with many outstanding athletes in college, including Cloud, who went on to a four-year NFL career, and Lou Creekmur, who starred for ten years as an offensive guard and tackle with the Detroit Lions.

R.N. "Rube" McCray was William and Mary's football coach, and he was happy to have veterans report for practice in 1946. Hughes, who stood 6'1" and weighed 220 pounds, showed good quickness, speed, and strength.

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The 21-year-old freshman also displayed the positive attitude and strong work ethic that lasted throughout his career. His excellent athletic skills also helped the track team when he, and Creekmur, put the 12-pound shot.

Although the college had only 2,000 students, William and Mary fielded strong teams in the late 1940s. The entire offensive line from the 1949 squad later played professional football. In addition, Hughes, Cloud, and Creekmur were named All-Southern Conference as well as to some All-American teams.

Hughes was chosen to play in the inaugural Blue-Grey Game and the College All-Star Game. Each year at Soldier's Field in Chicago, the NFL sponsored an exhibition between the league's current championship team and the nation's outstanding collegians. In 1950 the All-Stars beat the Philadelphia Eagles, 17-7.

Hughes also got a big boost from one coach:

"My good fortune was that I could run as fast as most of the backs....Anyway, I was practicing against Leo Nomellini, an All-American from Minnesota, and Eddie LeBaron was the quarterback in this particular practice session. I went by the defensive man about six or seven straight times to get LeBaron.

"There was an assistant coach named Harris who came from Holy Cross. He blew the whistle and said, 'This boy's going to start somewhere.'

"The next day they moved me to offensive guard, and I started the ball game there.

"At that point in time, I had only seen one professional football game in my life, and that was the Redskins. Having the coach say I would start made me feel that I could go to Pittsburgh and make the Steeler ball club. So that moment at the All-Star game was a real confidence builder for me."

Hughes was Pittsburgh's third draft choice in 1950, after top pick Lynn Chandnois of Michigan State and second pick Ernie Stautner of Boston College. Following the All-Star game, the Norfolk native traveled to Pittsburgh to begin his pro career.

Hughes soon learned about the tough life of the NFL: "In those days you played 20 football games, but eight were exhibition games, which you got nothing for.

"In fact, if you were away to play a Saturday night ball game, and you were going to stay the night, they would give you \$5 for dinner and breakfast. \$5 for both!"

Hughes signed for \$5,500, then a good lineman's salary, which reflected his stature as an All-American and as the third man drafted. But in five years he never earned as much as \$7,000.

"The reason I went to Pittsburgh," Hughes recollected, "I was actually going to coach here at Woodrow Wilson High, which is across the river. I was going to teach five Biology classes, be the head track coach, and be the assistant football coach, and then be head coach next year.

"They started out offering me \$2,500, and they got up to \$2,800. My wife Kate had been teaching school. She started out over in that area for a little over \$100 a month, but she had been raised by 1950.

"The superintendent said, 'Well, that's all we're going to offer you. Between you and your wife, we don't offer any family more than \$5,000. That's it. That's the maximum.'

"That's when the Steelers came along and started offering \$5,500.

"I said, 'I don't know where Pittsburgh is, but I'm gone!'"

Hughes was a regular for the black-and-gold clad Steelers for five straight seasons, playing 60 games without missing once due to injury or illness. He was selected to the league's second annual Pro Bowl in January, 1952, and played for the American Conference squad at Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum.

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Hughes was also named to the Eastern Conference's team for the fourth Pro Bowl, after the 1953 season. He and Kate made a second trip to Los Angeles, along with teammate Lynn Chandnois, a standout back who was voted the NFL's Player of the Year in 1952.

Back in 1950, when Hughes broke in with Pittsburgh under Coach John Michelosen, the Steelers were still playing the single wing offense. But pro football was using the T-formation to open up the offense, as teams began emphasizing the passing game.

Pittsburgh finished with a 6-6 record in 1950 and 4-7-1 in 1951. Under Coach Joe Bach in 1952 and 1953, the club was 5-7 and 6-6, respectively. When assistant Walt Kiesling became head coach in 1954, Pittsburgh posted another 5-7 season. In other words, Hughes never played for a winning team during his five seasons.

For two years the speedy Virginian started at right guard, but he also played on special teams and in goal-line situations. Besides Hughes in 1950-51, the Steeler blocking front included Dick Tomlinson and George Nicksich at guard; Lou Allen, Frank Wydo, and Jack Wiley at the tackles; and Bill Walsh, Bob Balog, or Frank Sinkovitz at center.

Pittsburgh's defense featured ends Bob Davis, George Hays, and Bill McPeak; tackles Ernie Stautner, Carl Samuelson, and Walt Szot; and linebackers Darrell Hogan, Joe Hollingsworth, and Jerry Shipkey. Depending upon the circumstances, a player could be switched to a another position--and moved from offense to defense, or vice versa.

By 1952, when Hughes was switched to tackle, a shift that resulted from his aggressive blocking, the Steelers were changing linemen. Dick Fugler joined Hughes at tackle; Rudy Andabaker, Earl Murray, John Schweder, and Pete Ladygo played guard; and Bill Walsh, Frank Sinkovitz, and Lou Levanti were centers.

Ernie Stautner and Lou Ferry anchored the defense at tackle, George Hays, Bill McPeak, and George Tarasovic covered the ends, and the linebackers were Dale Dodrill, Jerry Shipkey, and Darrell Hogan, along with Levanti and Sinkovitz.

By 1954, Hughes' final season, George led the tackle corps of Bob Gaona, Nick Bolkovac, and Joe Matesic. Andabaker, Ladygo, and Schweder operated out of the guard slots. The center was Walsh, backed up by Stan Sheriff and Lou Tepe, both of whom doubled as linebackers.

On defense, Steeler fans could watch McPeak, Dewey Brundage, and Joe Zombek playing end; Stautner, Ferry, and Tom Palmer at tackle; and backing up the line were Dodrill, Sheriff, Tepe, and Dick Flanagan.

During Hughes' five years, the Steelers had nobody better at offensive guard or tackle. Only one Steeler made the Pro Bowl more than twice: linebacker Jerry Shipkey (1951, 1952, 1953). Other linemen selected for the Pro Bowl were center Bill Walsh (1951, 1952); defensive end Bill McPeak (1953, 1954); Ernie Stautner (1953, 1954), later the only Steeler Hall of Famer from the 1950s; and middle guard Dale Dodrill (1954).

Few of those names are well known because linemen seldom get much publicity. For instance, on May 28, 1953, Hughes was pictured in the Norfolk Ledger-Dispatch because he had just signed his fourth pro contract. But the story mainly added a few career highlights, including that he was a physical education instructor at Woodrow Wilson High in the off-season.

What about big games? Hughes recalls one famous game in 1952, when Pittsburgh belted the New York Giants, 63-7.

"Lynn Chandnois had a big day that day," Hughes recalled. "He ran back one kick for a touchdown, and he ran for another touchdown." At that time, the 63 points were the most scored by a Steeler eleven, and it was the worst defeat suffered by the Giants.

Also, the defense held the vaunted Giants to 15 yards rushing!

Mostly Hughes recalls the grueling regimen of preseason training as well as the rough schedule of regular season games played against stronger teams.

Why did the Steelers did not win more games?

"First, we played the single wing, and that formation was dated, as far as the talent goes.

"When we went to the T-formation, we had a lot of good talent. But I don't think the talent was used properly in many ways. We could have had a better record in wins and losses.

"You could use the word 'conservative' about how we played, when a more wide-open game was where the scoring came about.

"With John Michelosen and Joe Bach and Walt Kiesling, it was a situation where time had passed them by, in terms of the way the game was being played."

Hughes and Kate Parker, whom he married on June 5, 1948, began to raise a family. George, Junior (now a medical doctor), was born in Pittsburgh in 1952. Later, the couple had two daughters, Kathy and Susan. In mid-1954 Hughes, who saved as much as possible from his Steeler salary, and a friend invested in the George Hughes Hardware.

When a recession occurred in early 1955, Hughes, then 30, decided to stay in Norfolk and protect his investment:

"I said, 'I beat my brains out playing pro ball for five years, and I'm not going to lose it in a recession.' So I gave up going back to Pittsburgh because of the George Hughes Hardware, which lasted until 1994."

In addition, Hughes became active in community affairs, got involved in officiating football, and launched a coaching career. After assisting Gary Glick for a year, Hughes coached the Norfolk Neptunes (1965-71) of the Continental Football League. George coached players such quarterback Dan Henning, later the head coach at Boston College, and lineman Otis Sistrunk, who later enjoyed a standout career with the Oakland Raiders.

In the mid-1970s Hughes went north and coached the line and special teams with the Ottawa Rough Riders (1974-81) of the Canadian Football League. In 1976, behind quarterback Tommy Clemens of Notre Dame, Ottawa won the Grey Cup for the CFL Championship. The club won four division titles by 1981.

A dedicated family man and a good citizen, George served many organizations, including the Norfolk School Board (1961-68), the Norfolk City Council (1969-74), and the Lions Club, which honored him as the Melvin Jones Fellow in 1994.

As the years passed, the former Pro Bowler received recognition for his dedicated performance on, and off, the gridiron. His honors include being selected to the William and Mary Sports Hall of Fame in 1969, the Chesapeake Athletic Club Man of the Year in 1977, the Norfolk Sports Club's Sportsman of the Year in 1979, the Virginia Sports Hall of Fame in 1983, and the William and Mary All-Time Football Team in 1990.

In fact, in 1977 the Chesapeake Athletic Club created an annual award for William and Mary's top lineman. Hughes makes the presentation each year at a banquet held in Norfolk.

Hall of Famer Lou Creekmur called Hughes the salt of the earth. "George was a great player," Creekmur told me. "He had the quickness, the speed, and the strength to hit hard and do a terrific job of blocking. But he never really got the recognition he deserved, which certainly was not helped by playing for Pittsburgh."

George Hughes' career represents the best of the NFL's unsung heroes from the pre-1960 era: the rugged linemen who fought weekly battles on the violent fronts of pro football. Without standout athletes such as Hughes clearing the way, great backs such as Chandnois would not have become famous.

GEORGE HUGHES

OT-OG

George Samuel Hughes 6-1 225

William & Mary

High School: Maury (Norfolk, VA)

Born: August 19, 1925, Norfolk, VA

Drafted Round 3 1950 by Pittsburgh

Year Team Gm

1950 Pittsburgh 12

1951 Pittsburgh 12

1952 Pittsburgh 12

1953 Pittsburgh 12

4 years 60