

# Tom Who?

## Pro Football Hall of Fame Class of 1999

By Joe Horrigan

Although he played at the somewhat obscure position of offensive left guard, Tom Mack was one of the most honored players in the National Football League during his 13 star-studded seasons with the Los Angeles Rams from 1966 through 1978. He never missed a game during his 184-game tenure, a consecutive game streak third in Rams' history behind only Jack Youngblood and Merlin Olsen. During the years that Mack played, the Rams enjoyed 12 winning seasons in 13 and compiled a .720 won-lost record (129-48-7). They won their division eight times and wound up in four NFC championship games.

Even so, Mack, like most offensive linemen, spent much of the early years of his career in relative anonymity. In fact, he was affectionately known by his teammates as "Tom Who."

"That all started one day when George (Rams' trainer George Menefee) and I wanted to play golf," explained Mack. "George called for reservations and put them in the name of Tom Mack of the Rams. The guy at the course said, 'Tom who?' And I've been stuck with that name ever since."

To his teasing teammates or the uninformed, he may have been "Tom Who," but to opponents Mack was simply known as "the best." The 6-3, 250-pound lineman earned the first of 11 Pro Bowl invitations after his second season in 1967. From that year through his final 1978 campaign, Tom missed earning a Pro Bowl spot only following the 1976 season. At the time of his retirement, his 11 Pro Bowl games ranked him in a fourth-place tie with Bob Lilly among those with the most appearances in the post-season classic. Olsen ranked first with 14 appearances and is followed by Jim Otto and Ken Houston with 12 each. Mack was also all-pro or All-NFC nine times in a ten-year span from 1969 through 1978. As was the case with the Pro Bowl invitation, he missed All-NFC acclaim only in 1976.

Born in Cleveland, Ohio, on November 1, 1943, Mack was a receiver at Cleveland Heights High School and still fondly recalls his first and only touchdown in more than 20 years of competition. "I was a junior in high school then, a receiver," he recalled. "Somebody blocked a punt and I fell on it for a touchdown. Then I caught a pass on the conversion. I wasn't exactly a spectacular receiver."

Apparently at least one of Mack's former high school teammates shared his self-assessment. "Hey, no kidding," he asked Mack at their ten-year high school reunion, "when did you start getting good."

Tom came from an athletic family. His father, Ray, played major league baseball with the Cleveland Indians. "I think it's a bit tough on a kid being the son of a major league athlete," Mack said. "A lot is expected of you athletically. My high school baseball coach thought I was better than I really was. I could hit for power, but not for average. I wasn't much of a football player either. At 16 and 17, I hadn't filled out yet."

Following high school, Mack decided to attend the University of Michigan where he earned a degree in engineering. When asked why he chose Michigan over the logical home-state choice Ohio State he explained, "Ohio State never offered me a scholarship. Michigan was the only major college that offered me one."

Initially, Mack struggled at Michigan just to stay on the traveling squad. Then, in his junior year he was converted to an interior lineman where he earned a starting role as a tackle. That year Michigan won all but one game and went on to beat Oregon State 34-7 in the Rose Bowl. The following year he was selected All-Big Ten and named All-America by the United Press International and the National Enterprise Association. He was also invited to play in the East-West, Hula Bowl and College All-Star games.

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In 1966, Mack was the No. 1 pick of the Rams and the second overall choice in that year's NFL draft. He was one of only two rookies to survive the entire season on George Allen's veteran-dominated squad. In Allen's five years as coach of the Rams, only two rookies ever became starters, running back Larry Smith and Mack.

Tom got his chance to start when starter Don Chuy was injured prior to the fifth game of the season. Mack started the next three games, then relinquished the role briefly to Ted Karras before grabbing the starter's job again. He remained the Rams' starting left guard for the next 12 years.

"Rookies are fine," Allen said, "but when it comes to winning championships, I'll take my chances with veterans." Allen made the exception to his rule for Mack, because he felt Tom was "extremely intelligent."

Mack's first start came against the Detroit Lions. The man opposite him was Roger Brown, a 300-pound all-pro. "The first time I drove at Brown, I hit him too high and it was just like hitting a solid wall," Mack recalled. "I didn't budge him an inch. I was amazed. I always considered myself pretty strong. In college I went into every game confident I could move my man. But Brown was something different. He looked even bigger than 300 pounds and he was quick as a cat. The first thing I knew he slapped my helmet so hard it almost took my head off."

Although Mack's recollection of his first start sounds like it was a mismatch, the fact is that Brown only got to Rams quarterback Roman Gabriel once that day, and only after the veteran quarterback had released the ball. In addition to keeping Gabriel safe in the pocket, much of running back Dick Bass' 137 yard rushing that day was the result of Mack's path-clearing blocks.

Blessed with exceptional speed, Mack confessed to a preference for run blocking. "There is not a lineman on the club -- maybe in all of pro football -- who doesn't like to hit on a running play better than he likes to pass block," he once explained. "I've always thought the best thing I have going for me is my speed."

In 1973, Chuck Knox replaced Rams head coach Tommy Prothro, who two years earlier had replaced Allen. Known for his preference for the ground game, Knox brought with him an approach and attitude that pleased Mack. "Motivation, or lack of it, was a big thing last year. But I've always believed that somebody else can't motivate me," Mack said. "However, somebody else can give me a reason to motivate myself and this is what Knox does. The other thing he has done is create a very close team."

Next to his family, Mack once said that the other members of the Ram offensive line are the "most important people" in his life. "I want to be able to do my job," he said, "so I don't let them down, to take pride in what I do, and pride in my unit."

In 1973, Mack and fellow linemen Charlie Cowan, Ken Iman, Joe Scibelli, and John Williams demonstrated just how well they could do their job. The proud but under-appreciated line led the way for Rams' running backs as the team piled up 2,925 yards rushing, at the time, the third most in NFL history. In describing Mack's play, line coach Ray Prochaska called him "spectacular."

Although Mack achieved personal success with his all-pro and Pro Bowl recognition, the one thing that eluded him was playing on a Super Bowl team. It was frustrating for the veteran lineman. "I don't believe any team in football has been to the playoffs as many times as we have without getting to the Super Bowl," he once commented.

Mack's first missed opportunity came in 1967. The Rams that year rolled to a 11-1-2 record but were eliminated in the first round of the playoffs by the Green Bay Packers, a team they had beaten two weeks earlier.

"I'd had a great game against Henry Jordan," Mack recalled of their first meeting. But in the playoff game, Jordan got the better of the then-young lineman. "He made a fool of me," Mack said. "He got three quarterback sacks. I didn't have the maturity to handle it."

Two years later, after finishing first in the NFL Coastal Division, the Rams traveled to Minnesota to face the Vikings in the conference championship. Mack had a terrific game. He controlled the Vikings' star defensive end Alan Page all day. "After 1967," Mack said, "I made a vow never to humiliate myself like that again. I was having a great game against Page. He never saw the quarterback all day."

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Trailing 23-20 late in the game, the Rams were driving toward what looked to be at least a game-tying field goal, when Mack blocked Page at the line of scrimmage.

"Ken Iman and I double-teamed Page on the block; we fired out and knocked him three yards off the line of scrimmage. He kept his balance and straightened up and Gabe (Roman Gabriel) threw the ball right to him. I couldn't believe what had happened. Ken and I did our job and we turned the guy into a hero. They just ran the clock out."

In the 1974 playoffs, it was Mack and Page again. Trailing 7-3, the Rams had moved the ball to the Vikings' six-inch line. Confident in his line, quarterback James Harris called for a quarterback sneak. "The Vikings were playing a gap defense and Gary Larsen was on my inside," said Mack. Gary jumped, but not offside. When that happened, Page charged forward and knocked me over backwards. Alan immediately began pointing and yelling 'He moved! He moved!'" One official threw his flag and immediately signaled the Vikings offside. However, the side judge intervened and overruled the call.

"He said someone in the Rams interior line moved and that it must have been the guard," recalled Mack. I hadn't moved a muscle until Page knocked me over, and I was being called for the penalty. I couldn't believe it." Following the penalty assessment, Harris attempted a pass into the end zone that was picked off by the Vikings. "And that," said Mack, "was the end of that." The Vikings went on to win 14-10.

"It was a tough defeat because we left Minnesota knowing we were the best team, but it didn't reflect on the scoreboard. Minnesota was going to the Super Bowl and we were going home."

If you listen to Mack, who unquestionably was his own harshest critic, you might begin to think he was solely responsible for every loss the Rams ever experienced. Nothing could be further from the truth. The fact is, Tom Mack was a dominant force on a very good team. A leader off the field too, Tom was team captain and a voice of reason as the player representative with the NFL Players Association.

Fittingly, Mack's final game was the 1979 AFC/NFC Pro Bowl played in the Los Angeles Coliseum. When the retiring 13-year veteran entered the game, an appreciative Los Angeles crowd rose for a standing ovation. "I sure didn't expect that," he said after the game as he removed his uniform for the final time. "It really makes me feel good to know that the people of Los Angeles have appreciated me that much."

Although Mack may not have earned the public acclaim due him to wear a Super Bowl ring, his election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame is an affirmation of the tremendous impact "Tom Who" had on his team and the world of pro football.