

Bill Nelsen:

The Quarterback As Commander

By Ed Gruver

He was called "Commander Nelsen," a nickname hung on him by Cleveland Browns' teammate Jim Houston after the British battle leader, Admiral Nelson.

And despite a drenching rain that dampened the Dallas Cotton Bowl on Sunday, Dec. 28, 1969, Bill Nelsen showed he was every bit at home amid watery conditions as Britain's naval hero. Throwing for 219 yards and one touchdown, Nelsen dissected the Dallas "Doomsday" defense, 38-14, to capture the Eastern Conference championship.

Nelsen's cool performance against the computer-complex Cowboys marked the high point of his 10-year NFL career that lasted from 1963-72. Playing on knees weakened by injuries and scarred by a surgeon's scalpel – his right knee bore four incisions; his left knee two – Nelsen twice led the Browns to within one win of the Super Bowl.

Doug Dieken, a standout offensive tackle for Cleveland from 1971-84, recalled walking into the Browns' training room the day before games and seeing Nelsen having excess fluid drained from his swollen knees. It was just one of the prices Nelsen paid so he could play the next afternoon.

"He was tougher than hell," Dieken said of Nelsen, and while much was made at the time of the bad knees of New York Jets' quarterback Joe Namath, Dieken believed Nelsen's knees were at least as bad as Broadway Joe's.

"If not worse," Dieken added.

Like Namath, Nelsen played courtesy of one-and-a-half pound aluminum braces that supported his battle-scarred legs. And like Namath, he never complained about his condition.

"There's not much left to my knees," he said at the time, "but I get by the best I can."

It was an attitude that earned the respect of the Browns, who obtained Nelsen in a 1968 trade with rival Pittsburgh to back up starter Frank Ryan. Nelsen had been drafted by the Steelers in 1963 out of USC. Steelers' scout Fido Murphy was familiar with Nelsen's success at Southern Cal, which included a 42-37 Rose Bowl win over Wisconsin. When Pittsburgh picked

Nelsen on the 10th round of the draft, an excited Murphy called it "the world's greatest upset."

Murphy convinced the Steelers that Nelsen had "a pro arm," but Pittsburgh boss Buddy Parker wasn't sure the California native could make it in the NFL. Bobby Layne's retirement as Steelers' QB following the '62 season opened a roster spot for Nelsen, but he played sparingly his first two seasons, attempting just 44 combined passes. Parker believed that a QB "has to be around five years before he's anything as a pro." Nelsen, however, emerged from the third-string in a 1965 preseason game against Minnesota, shredding the Vikings for 172 yards passing and three TDs.

He played in 12 of the Steelers' 14 regular-season games in '65, then was named starter in '66 when Bill Austin replaced Mike Getto as Pittsburgh's head coach. The second game of the season saw Nelsen's knees mashed when he was hit by Roger Brown, a 300-pound defensive tackle for the Detroit Lions. Nelsen returned from knee surgery to play in Pittsburgh's final four games in '66, completing a career-high 56.3 percent of his passes and tying an NFL record by completing 13 consecutive passes.

Nelsen reinjured his knees in '67 and played in just eight games. But his occasional flashes of brilliance convinced Cleveland head coach Blanton Collier to trade for Nelsen in '68.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 22, No. 3 (2000)

Coming off a season in which they had captured the Century Division title, the Browns started the '68 campaign 1-2. Lopsided losses to Dallas and the Los Angeles Rams saw Ryan's offense generate a combined 13 points in both games, and Collier was convinced he needed to make a move to save the season.

Playing against his former teammates in his first start of the season, Nelsen hit on 16 of 25 passes for 190 yards in a 31-24 win over the Steelers in Week Four. Two weeks later, Nelsen threw three TDs in a 30-20 upset of the previously unbeaten Baltimore Colts. Guiding the Browns to a 10-4 record and the Century Division championship, Nelsen completed 51.9 percent of his passes and threw for 2,366 yards and 19 TDs.

Playing before a packed house of 81,497 in Cleveland's Municipal Stadium on Saturday, Dec. 21, Nelsen connected on a 45-yard TD pass to halfback Leroy Kelly just before halftime, spurring the underdog Browns to a startling 31-20 upset of the Cowboys.

Nelson threw for 203 yards and drew high praise from his head coach.

"I've seen quarterbacks with great ability who cannot win," Collier said later. "To win, you have to have confidence in yourself and in your teammates. Nelsen has it."

One win away from Super Bowl III, the Browns were beaten the following Sunday, 34-0, by the revenge-minded Colts on a cold, dark afternoon in Cleveland. Despite the championship game defeat, Nelsen and Co. bounced back in '69. Throwing for a career-high 2,743 yards and 23 TDs, Nelsen quarterbacked Cleveland to a 10-3-1 record and another Century Division title.

He followed with his memorable performance against the Cowboys in the rain-soaked Cotton Bowl. Dressed in Cleveland's dark brown and burnt-orange colors and wearing his familiar number 16, Nelsen painted a vivid portrait that day of a quarterback as field commander.

"He seeks advice and takes blame," Collier said. "Other players like that."

The Browns, however, were dealt another disappointing blow in the NFL championship game in Minnesota.

Playing amid frozen sunshine and eight-degree cold, Nelsen suffered a pinched nerve in his throwing arm on an early hit by Vikings' defensive end Jim Marshall. Nelsen played through the pain, completing 17 of 33 passes for 181 yards and one TD, but the Browns fell short of Super Bowl IV, 27-7.

Cleveland slumped to a 7-7 record in 1970, their first year in the newly-aligned Central Division of the American Football Conference. The '71 season was Nelsen's last hurrah. Playing on knees almost totally bereft of cartilage, the 30-year-old QB completed 53.5 percent of his passes and threw for 2,319 yards to lead the Browns to a 9-5 record and the Central Division crown.

Rematched against their post-season rivals from the old NFL, the Baltimore Colts, in an AFC playoff game in Cleveland the day after Christmas, the Browns dropped a 20-3 decision.

Nelsen, who struggled to find the holes in the Colts' complex zone defense, completed just nine passes and was intercepted three times. He was replaced late in the game by young Mike Phipps, then retired following the '72 season. Nelsen's career numbers show he completed 50.6 percent of his passes (963-for-1,905) for 14,165 yards and 98 TDs.

From 1973-84, Nelsen lived a nomadic life as a quarterbacks coach for several NFL teams, including New England, Atlanta, Tampa Bay and Detroit. He retired to Florida following the '84 season, and now works four days a week at an Orlando-based golf shop. When he's not selling clubs, he's swinging them; he spends his three free days each week on the links.

But it is his inspiring play at quarterback – when he commanded an offense that included backs Leroy Kelly and Bo Scott, receivers Paul Warfield, Gary Collins and Milt Morin, and linemen Monte Clark and Gene Hickerson – that remains a vivid image for those who watched the Browns back in the late sixties.

"I've always known I wasn't a classic quarterback," Nelsen said, "but I always felt I was smart enough and strong enough to do the job if I could play with the proper help."

And it all came true in Cleveland.

