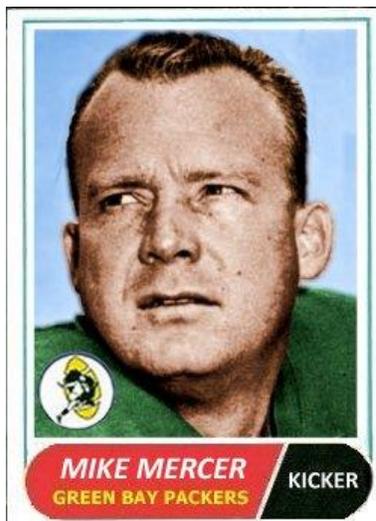


Mike Mercer

This article was written by Budd Bailey

Mike Mercer had a chance to be remembered forever.

He is best remembered by football fans as the kicker for the Kansas City Chiefs in the 1966-67 season, which means he played in Super Bowl I. If the game came down to one last kick for the Chiefs to win, Mercer would have been the one to take it.



As we know, of course, Mercer never had that chance. The Packers soundly defeated the Chiefs, 35-10, and Mercer was gone from the Chiefs in the following season. In fact, he lived the life of a stereotyped kicker from that era, bouncing from team to team over the course of about a decade. Mercer may have spoken for all kicking specialists when he told the Green Bay Press-Gazette, “You’re either a hero or a bum when you’re a kicker. You just hope the hero thing happens more than the bum.”

But Mercer did have a nice career. Along the way, he had a few moments that made him the answer to some good football trivia questions.

Mike Mercer probably never wanted to do much more than kick footballs for a living when he was growing up. After all, it ran in the family. Father Kenneth “Moco” Mercer played in the NFL’s first decade for the Frankfort Yellow Jackets. Dad scored 10



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touchdowns in his career, and added 14 extra points and seven field goals over the course of three years. After finishing there, the senior Mercer landed jobs in the Midwest. Along the way, son Mike was born in Dubuque in 1935.

In 1939, Ken became the head football coach and athletic director at the University of Dubuque. There he coached football, basketball, track, and tennis at times over the next three decades or so, and was successful at all of them. No doubt Mike watched many of those games growing up.

He played high school football at Dubuque and might be the most famous pro player to come out of that school. Dick Hoerner, who led the Rams in rushing in 1949 and played with Elroy Hirsch and Tom Harmon in Los Angeles, is the other contender for that title. Mercer was a quarterback for the Dubuque Senior Rams. Mike also ran track, competing in the shot put, discus and high hurdles.

Mike apparently learned to keep moving while in college. After high school graduation in 1953, he first landed in Minnesota in 1954. Then it was on to Florida in 1955, and – after three years in the Marine Corps - Hardin-Simmons in 1958. There Mercer played defensive back under the legendary Sammy Baugh for two seasons, until he was suspended for training violations. Mercer had one last stop in college, playing for what is now called Northern Arizona University in 1960 (it was part of Arizona State at the time). There Mercer played with another future AFL veteran, defensive lineman Rex Mirich. Mercer took part in the Sun Bowl and the All-American Bowl after the college regular season ended. The kicker led the nation in scoring in 1960.

Mercer caught the eye of scouts in that college adventure. The brand-new Minnesota Vikings took him in the 15th round of the 1961 draft (which took place on December 27-28, 1960 in Philadelphia). The top of that draft was a good one, as four Hall of Famers – Mike Ditka, Jimmy Johnson, Herb Adderley, and Bob Lilly – went in the first round. Mercer wasn't the only player taken in the 15th round who had a good-sized career. The Rams took tackle Ernie Wright four picks after Mercer went to the Vikings, but Wright already had established himself as a starting tackle with the Los Angeles Chargers by then.

Mercer turned up at the Vikings' first-ever training camp in the summer of 1961. Years later he told the Pioneer Press that he remembered the entrance of standout halfback Hugh McElhenny, the biggest name on the roster in preseason. "We practiced right on (Lake Bemidji)," Mercer said to the St. Paul Pioneer Press. "I was there early with the

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rookies, and then when the veterans were due, up pulls Hugh McElhenny pulling this great big boat. If he was driving a boat like that to training camp, I knew he had to be pretty good.”

Mercer won the place-kicking job with the Vikings, and scored the first points in the history of the Minnesota franchise. It was a 12-yard field goal in the season opener against the visiting Chicago Bears.

Fran Tarkenton stole the show that day, throwing four touchdown passes and running for a fifth score in a stunning 37-13 win over the established Bears. Mercer, by the way, averaged 46 yards in his three punts that day. “We had played them two weeks before in a preseason game and they had kicked our butt,” Mercer told the St. Paul Pioneer Press in 2019. “They thought they were going to do it again. They were probably overconfident.”

The win in the opener might have been the highlight of the season. Minnesota went 3-11 in 1961. Mercer went 0 for 3 on three-pointers in the season’s second game, and was 9 of 21 in field goals that season and 36 of 37 on extra points to total 63 points, second on the team behind wide receiver Jerry Reichow.

However, Mercer’s luck changed in 1962. He missed his first five field goal attempts for the Vikings. That prompted the volatile coach of the team, Norm Van Brocklin, to throw his keys at Mercer – connecting on the kicker’s backside. At some point soon after that, Mercer was out of a job – and stayed unemployed for the rest of the 1962 season.

Luckily, there were plenty of positions out there for kickers thanks to the American Football League, and Mercer found one of them. He landed the kicker/punter job with the Oakland Raiders, replacing the 43-year-old Ben Agajanian. Mercer went 8 for 21 on field goals in 1963, led the AFL in extra points with 47, and averaged more than 40 yards per punt. His accuracy on three-pointers moved above 60 percent for the Raiders in 1964 and 1965. One of his highlights took place on December 22, 1963 when his 39-yard field goal held up as the winner in a 52-49 win over the Oilers.

Father Ken was proud of his son’s work in pro football. He also noticed Mike’s paychecks. “My boy Mike makes more now for a single season than I did for all my years in pro ball,” he said during his son’s time with the Raiders.

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If Mike didn't realize it before, he soon found out that there's no such thing as job security for a kicker. Mercer went 1 for 4 to start the 1966 season with the Raiders, and was cut. That started him on one of the oddest adventures in AFL history.

The Buffalo Bills decided they needed some depth at kicker, so they signed Mercer to their developmental squad until they could decide whether to replace Booth Lusteg with the veteran. That arrangement lasted four days. Kansas City Chiefs kicker Tommy Brooker was injured during a loss to the Bills on October 2. Chiefs coach Hank Stram chatted with Buffalo coach Joel Collier on their way off the field, and they essentially worked out something of a deal. The Bills agreed to loan Mercer to the Chiefs for the rest of the season; the price was a fifth-round draft pick. Collier said to Mercer that he didn't have to report to Kansas City if he didn't want to go, but Mercer decided to switch to the Chiefs.

That turned out to be a great move. Mercer had a great season, hitting on 20 of 26 field goals in 10 games with Kansas City. That set an AFL record, and was the best percentage in pro football. He was 5 for 8 from 40 yards or more away. Mercer kicked four field goals in a 32-24 win over the Jets in New York on November 27 that wrapped up the division title.

The Chiefs finished the season with an 11-2-1 record, and then pounded the Bills in Buffalo, 31-7, to advance to the first Super Bowl. There he had the honor of starting the game by making the opening kickoff. Mercer had an extra point and a 31-yard field goal (the first FG in Super Bowl history) in the first half as Kansas City only trailed Green Bay, 14-10. (For the record, he also had the first missed field goal in Super Bowl history.) But the Packers scored the game's final 21 points to win going away, 35-10.

In the spring of 1967, Mercer took part in an odd "competition" created by Sports Illustrated magazine. The idea of "soccer-style kicking" – approaching the ball from the side before kicking instead of directly behind it – had been brought to pro football by Pete Gogolak of the Bills in 1964. A few others followed him. The magazine flew Mercer and the Eagles' Sam Baker to England for a kicking competition against a rugby player and a soccer player.

All kicked American footballs at various distances. It should be noted that the two Englishmen had never booted footballs before. The winner was Mercer, who made 17 of 25 field goal attempts. Baker was second at 14 of 25. The straight-on American kickers may have won the battle but eventually lost the war, as the so-called sidewinders proved

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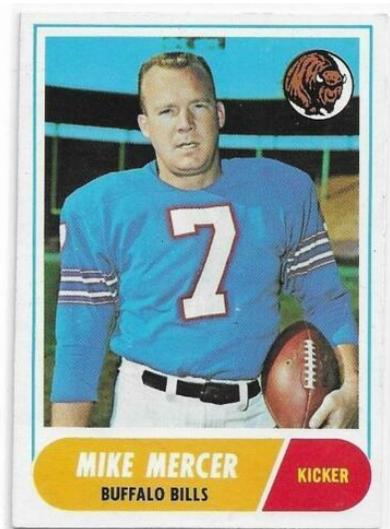


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more accurate. The last kicker in the NFL to approach the ball from directly behind it was Mark Moseley, who retired in 1986.

Mercer probably wouldn't have complained if he had gone back to the Chiefs, but the Bills took him back for the 1967 season. He replaced Lusteg as the regular kicker for Buffalo, while the Chiefs drafted Jan Stenerud to do the kicking. Mercer scored 73 points to lead the Bills, and he made a 51-yarder on opening day against the Jets to set a team record. In that same game, he was the hero, as he kicked the game winning field goal with four seconds remaining propelling the Bills to an improbable 20-17 victory. But the Bills' great run through the middle of the 1960s came to an emphatic halt that year. They finished 4-10, and were about to enter a bleak period of team history.



In 1968, the Bills went 1-12-1, the worst record in the league. Mercer didn't see much of it. He missed four field goals in three games and had an injured hamstring. Bruce Alford moved into the kicking role, and Mercer eventually was released – which was fine with him. “We weren't winning, and I knew there was a spot in Green Bay, but I couldn't be released until I was well. ...I went and saw (coach) Harvey Johnson. I said, 'I'm good to go.' He said, 'Well, Alford's doing really well.' He was. ... So I got released.”

That made Mercer free to head to Green Bay. The Packers – who had won the first two Super Bowls in the previous two years - had used Jerry Kramer, Chuck Mercein and Errol Mann as kickers early that season, but none of them could convert on half of their

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field goals. Mercer signed a contract and went 7 for 12 on three-pointers, a good-sized improvement. As for Green Bay, it fell to 6-7-1 as Vince Lombardi had retired as head coach.

Mercer was invited back to the Packers for 1969, but was off target with his kicks too often. He made 5 of 17 field goals and was cut in favor of Lusteg – who was even worse with a 1 for 5 success rate. From there, Mercer moved on to the Chargers for the 1970 season. San Diego told Dennis Partee to stick to punting and gave Mercer the job. Mike was 12 for 19 in field goals in his last season as a professional. That San Diego team went 5-6-3, and is the last team to tie three games in a single season.

That was it for his athletic career. Mercer always liked the real estate business, and he moved into it full-time on the West Coast once football was done. Mercer wound up hitting 102 of 193 field goal attempts, which wasn't too bad in that era. He also kicked 288 of 295 extra point attempts. Mercer averaged 40.5 yards on 308 career punts. His 594 career points put him first among all Marines who played NFL football, according to research done by the PFRA's John Gunn in 2002.

And Mercer has one more piece of obscure history to his credit. He was the model for the poster used in the first national "Punt, Pass and Kick" competition back in the 1960s.

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