

Pete Liske

Football's first back to back 4,000-yard passer

By Ace Hendricks

Name the first player in professional football history to throw for 4,000 yards in consecutive seasons. It's not Dan Fouts. It's not Dan Marino, nor is it Warren Moon, or the Canadian passing machine Dieter Brock.

It's Pete Liske. Yes, Pete Liske. He accomplished that feat while with the Calgary Stampeders in 1967-68. While the others mentioned achieved such status also, it was Liske who set the standard.

Not sure you remember Liske? Don't recall his name? Not sure of his career?

Well, it's a career that spanned from 1964 until 1975. From New York City to Vancouver, Canada. From the AFL to the Canadian Football League to the NFL and back to Canada.

Liske threw for 26,436 yards, completed 1,845 passes in 3,349 attempts and 160 touchdowns. He threw 179 interceptions and had a completion percentage of 55.0%

Now granted those aren't in the same league as the Tarkenton's, Marino's or even the Jim Hart's of our lifetime. But Liske's passing totals are higher than those of such well-known names as Archie Manning, Norm Van Brocklin, Otto Graham and Roger Staubach.

He played for the Jets in 1964. The Toronto Argonauts in 1965 then moved to Calgary from 1966-68 crossed the border back into the United States and played for the Denver Broncos in 1969-70 before heading to Philadelphia for the 1971-72 seasons.

After his stint with the Eagles, headed back to Canadian Rockies for the 1973 and most of the 1974 season with the Stampeders. He was traded the final three games that season to British Columbia and finished his career in 1975 with the Canadian Lions.

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Pete Liske was born on May 24, 1941 in Plainfield, New Jersey. He graduated from Plainfield High School in 1959 where he was a four-sport athlete -- football, basketball, baseball and swimming.

He attended Penn State University and participated in football and baseball. Excelling in both sports. In football, Liske was a three-year letterman who started his last two seasons and played in two bowl games. Following a fine senior season, he participated in the East-West Shrine game and was the MVP of the Hula Bowl.

During his junior year he threw for a school record 12 touchdowns and led the Nittany Lions to the Gator Bowl. For his career Liske threw 24 touchdown passes.

In the spring, he was on the baseball field playing first base. In 1962 and 1963 the Penn State team qualified for the NCAA Eastern Regionals and in 1963 went to the College World Series in Omaha, Nebraska where they placed fifth.

Drafted by both leagues (10th round by the Philadelphia Eagles) and 15th round by the Jets. Liske signed with the AFL squad because the opportunity looked better in the Big Apple and because the Jets assistant coaches Chuck Knox and Clive Rush did a better job of "recruiting" Liske.

Most of the 1964 season for Liske was spent watching veteran Dick Wood throw passes for the Jets. The rookie even played safety late in the season, before starting the season finale against the Kansas City Chiefs.

Playing in two games, he completed 9 of 18 passes for 55 yards and was intercepted twice. He carried the ball once for no gain.

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After the season, the Jets traded Liske to the Buffalo Bills where things didn't look much brighter. Buffalo had one of the AFL's stars at quarterback in Jack Kemp and a future star in Daryle Lamonica as the backup. So, instead of being relegated to the taxi squad, Liske moved north of the border to play for Toronto during the 1965 campaign.

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Toronto was an organization on the downslide. They were a team with fading stars, such as Jackie Parker, Jim Roundtree and Dick Shatto.

The Argonauts finished last in 1965 with a 3-11 record, but Liske made great strides adjusting to the wider, bigger Canadian field. That season he completed 123 of 261 passes (47.1%) for 1,847 yards and 10 touchdowns. He threw 17 interceptions. Something that would plague him for most of his career. He ran for 196 yards on 38 carries and scored two touchdowns.

Although Liske had played well in his first season, Toronto traded him to Calgary for Pete Manning and Bobby Taylor. A trade that definitely benefited Liske's career.

The 1965 Calgary team had finished 13-3 and lost the Western Final to Saskatchewan. Eagle Day was the veteran pivot for the Stampeders and had been with them since 1961 and was the opening day starter for the 1966 season, but after a 1-5 start, Liske became the starter. Calgary finished 6-9-1 and missed the playoffs, but had played well down the stretch. Liske had entrenched himself as the starter and Day had made his way into the Continental Football League.

Liske had put up good numbers, 146 of 283 passes for 2,177 yards and 14 touchdowns. He had raised his completion percentage to 51.5% and rushed for 163 yards on 46 carries and three touchdowns. (Jeff Atcheson was the leading rusher with 230 yards). He had also caught a pass for 16 yards and intercepted two as a defensive back.

He had made a strong passing combination with Canadian great Terry Evanshen who led the league in receiving (67 catches for 1,200 yards and 9Td's).

The following year in 1967, Liske and his teammates devoured their opponents and finished 12-4, winning the regular season Western Division. Nine Stampeders received All-Western honors and five of them gain All-Canadian.

During the season, Calgary outscored its opponents, 382-219. Jerry Williams, an innovative coach, turned Liske loose on the league. Throwing to a solid group of receivers in Evanshen, Herm Harrison, Jerry Shaw and Bob McCarthy, Liske leads the league in passing.

Setting personal and Stampeders passing records, Pete completed 303 of 508 passes for 4,479 yards and 40 touchdowns. On October 15th, Liske set a club record (which still stands today) by pitching six touchdown passes in a 51-29 victory over Winnipeg.

He became the first player in the Western Division to throw for more than 4,000 yards. More importantly, he threw just 25 interceptions. He added 206 yards on 50 carries and a touchdown.

Liske won individual awards at a rapid rate. The four-year player won Calgary's Most Outstanding Player, Western Division Most Valuable Player, All-Canadian and league Most Outstanding Player. The only piece of hardware yet to win was the Grey Cup.

But, in the Western Final, the Stampeders were defeated by Saskatchewan in a best of three series, 2-1. They won the first game 15-11 on November 18th. Then on successive games, November 22nd and 26th they fell to the Roughriders (11-9 and 17-13).

The 1968 Calgary team returned with the nucleus of the same players as the year before and once again, Pete and the rest of the offense had a tremendous season. The Stamps scored 412 points in 16 games, but finished second in the West at 10-6 behind Saskatchewan (12-3-1). The individual awards eluded Liske in 1968, but he still finished with an outstanding season.

He threw for 4,333 yards (his second season of 4,000 yards) threw 31 touchdowns and yielded 28 interceptions. He completed 271 of 438 passes for a personal best (61.9%) passing percentage. On September 29th, Liske threw for an amazing 553 yards against the Roughriders in a 38-35 victory. He scored four touchdowns and rushed for 71 yards on 42 carries.

Facing Edmonton in the Western Semi-Final, Calgary beat the Eskimos, 29-13, then upset Saskatchewan in two games (32-0, 25-12) in the Western Final to gain a birth in the Grey Cup championship.

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Next Calgary played Ottawa and its legendary Canadian quarterback Russ Jackson. The game was played at Toronto's CNE stadium on a cool, damp November 30th.

It was Calgary's first Grey Cup appearance since 1949 when they had faced Montreal.

Ottawa jumped out to an early lead before Liske rallied his team to 14 unanswered points. A 1-yard sneak by Liske and a 21-yard pass to Evanshen late in the first half gave the Western team a 14-4 lead at intermission

But in the second half Ottawa scored 20 consecutive points to take the lead, 24-14 with less than five minutes to play in the game. Then, with less than two minutes to play, Liske again found Evanshen – this time a 2-yard pass – to cut the lead to 24-21. Calgary was unable to get the chance for victory and the Stamps fell before 33,185 fans in attendance.

Liske had played a fine game, completing 21 of 36 passes for 258 yards and two touchdowns with an interception. He added another 21 yards on the ground and scored a touchdown. Jackson, meanwhile, was 8 of 17 for 185 yards and 1 touchdown and added 43 yards on four carries and a TD.

“We had quite a bit of success (in Calgary), especially with the passing game,” Liske recalled. “Mostly because of a good innovative coach (Jerry Williams) and a bright and talented core of receivers, a good, solid o-line and excellent defense (Wayne Harris, Jerry Keeling, Jerry Campbell, Don Luzzi, Larry Robinson) We could get it done pretty well, but most of all we had a great deal of fun as a team, on and off the field.”

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Following the 1968 season, Liske shopped himself around to teams in the United States for another chance to play at the highest level. Liske had become a Canadian Football League star and was looking for the same opportunity in the AFL or NFL.

After having interest in a few teams, he chose the Denver Broncos because he and his family enjoyed the area and the opportunity looked good for playing time.

The Broncos had a veteran quarterback in Steve Tensi, but he seemed to be bitten by the injury bug throughout his career. Liske was his backup when the season started, but shortly after the first game saw his first action.

In week two, against the Super Bowl champion, New York Jets, Tensi was injured early in the second quarter and Pete was thrust into action with his team down, 13-0. With a Mile High Stadium record 50,583 fans behind him, Liske completed 11 of 21 passes and two touchdowns as he rallied Denver to a 21-19 victory over the Jets. Liske admits this was a special game for him, with the presence of Joe Willie Namath as Jets quarterback and the fact that the Jets head coach Weeb Ewbank had traded him earlier in his career.

The Broncos suffered a rash of injuries that season and finished at 5-8-1. Liske played in seven games during the season and completed 61 of 115 passes for 845 yards and nine touchdowns. He was intercepted 11 times.

The good season that Liske had enjoyed did not give him the starting position for the 1970 season. Once again, Tensi was the opening game starter until yet another injury caused him to miss the remainder of the season. Liske, along with workhorse running back Floyd Little, was in control of the offense, but once again the Broncos suffered through a 5-8-1 season. Playing in 11 games, Liske completed 112 of 238 passes for 1,340 yards and seven scoring plays. Again he threw 11 interceptions. He finished 12th in the AFC that season.

Traded to the Eagles for the 1971 season, Pete was reunited with Williams, who was now the head coach of the Eagles. The Eagles organization was one that hadn't had a winning season since 1966. Journeyman Norm Snead had been their quarterback but was sent to the Minnesota Vikings. The 1970 Philadelphia team had finished last in the NFC East at 3-10-1 and the future didn't look much different when the Eagles lost their first three games by a combined score of 110-24. Williams got the axe and the Eagles hired Ed Khayat.

The Eagles lost their first two games with Khayat, but then suddenly went on a 6-2-1 tear to finish a respectable 6-7-1. With a nearly non-existent rushing attack (Aging Ronnie Bull led with 351 yards) Liske was forced into throwing much more than anticipated. He completed 53.2% of his passes (143-269) for 1,957 yards and 11 touchdowns. He was intercepted 15 times and finished 9th in the NFC in passing statistics.

Winning four of its last five games in 1971, the Eagles were looking forward to the upcoming season with optimism. Liske was named one of the team captains, but the miracle season was not to be. The Eagles finished 2-11-1 and were last in the NFC East. Its victories were against an aging Kansas City team, 21-20, and the Houston Oilers, 18-17.

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The Eagles had drafted John Reaves in the first round and Liske found himself sharing the position with the rookie. The Eagles had a solid receiving core of Harold Jackson, Ben Hawkins and Harold Carmichael, but very little else to help them. Jackson led the NFL in receiving with 62 receptions for 1,048 yards, but just 4 touchdowns. Liske did fairly well when he played, completing 71 of 138 passes for 973 yards and 3 scores.

After the season, Khyat was out as head coach and Mike McCormick was hired. His hiring spelled the end of Liske's career in Philadelphia as the new regime made several changes and started from scratch. Liske was now in search of a new team.

Returning to Calgary in 1973, the situation was one that was completely different that of the first stint. Jim Duncan was the coach and they finished 6-10 and failed to make the Western playoffs. Liske was the starter the entire season and completed 226 of 409 pass attempts (55.2%) for 2,861 yards and 12 touchdowns. Once again, he threw a high number of interceptions (21).

Pete returned in 1974 with the Stampeders but lasted just 13 games before being traded to the B.C. Lions who were on a playoff run. The Lions finished 8-8 and were coached by Eagle Keys, a longtime Canadian coach. He had acquired Liske for the playoffs.

In the Western Semi-Final, the Lions faced Saskatchewan and were defeated, 24-14. Keys had used an unorthodox quarterbacking scheme during the game by using Liske in the 1st and 3rd quarters against the wind and Don Morehead in the 2nd and 4th quarters with the wind. Unfortunately for Keys, it proved fatal as soon after the loss, he was fired as coach of the Lions.

Liske had done very well that season, leading the Western Conference in passing. He completed 228 of 392 passes (58.1%) for 3,259 yards and 10 TD's.

In his final season, new coach Cal Murphy took over with minimal success. The Lions finished 6-10 and did not make the playoffs. Liske threw for 2,310 yards (152-280) and 13 Touchdowns.

"Cal Murphy was our coach, and did a good job," explained Liske, "But he was more into a running type quarterback."

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Liske later retired and explained he had no hesitations of making the decision.

"I remember waking up one morning in Arvada, Colorado (our home in the Denver area) and saying to my wife, it feels right that it's time to retire." Said Liske, "We had decided when our kids reached junior high days that we wouldn't split living half a year where we played and the other half in Denver."

Following retirement, Liske went into the business world and was General Manager of Belting Industries from 1976-84, leaving there he became an Associate Athletic Director at the University of Washington where he instituted mentoring programs for student-athletes.

In 1992 he became the Athletic Director at the University of Idaho and oversaw a program that produced NCAA postseason appearances every season during his tenure. Then in 1996, he was hired as the University of Toledo's AD where he was in charge until 2000. He now is involved in the athletic department at his alma mater Penn State as the Director of Major Gifts.

Liske also had an extensive background in officiating. He was a football referee for the Western Athletic Conference from 1977-83 and for the NFL from 1983-89.

"My strengths were being able to utilize the assets we have available to a high degree. I was fairly bright in being able to think on the field and recognize things that were happening," explained Liske when asked about his abilities, "I was pretty accurate throwing the ball and a good competitor. I needed ability around me and if we had it, I could maximize it.

"My weakness was not being a strong armed guy who could carry the team on my back nor was I a scrambler type (like Staubach or Tarkenton) who could make the big play out of a tough situation. I was more of a Bart Starr type player, a thinking type of QB."

And one that threw his way to 4,000 yards back to back before anyone else.

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Pete Liske

Liske, Peter Adrian
Penn State

QB-DB

6-2, 199
HS: Plainfield

B: 5/24/41, Plainfield, NJ

Drafted: 1964 Round 10 (Philadelphia); Round 15 (NY Jets)

Year	Team	G	PASSING					RUSHING		
			Att	Cmp	Yds	Td	Int	Pct	Att	Yds
1964	NY Jets	2	18	9	55	0	2	50.0	1	0
1965	Tor	11	261	123	1847	10	17	47.1	38	196
1966	Cal	14	283	146	2177	14	15	51.5	46	163
1967	Cal	16	508	303	4479	40	25	59.6	50	206
1968	Cal	16	438	271	4333	31	28	61.9	42	71
1969	Den	7	115	61	845	9	11	53.0	10	50
1970	Den	11	238	112	1340	7	11	47.1	7	42
1971	Phil	14	269	143	1957	11	15	53.2	13	29
1972	Phil	14	138	71	973	3	7	51.4	7	20
1973	Cal	16	409	226	2861	12	21	55.2	19	65
1974	Cal-B.C.	16	333	199	2891	9	12	59.8	16	27
1975	B.C.	16	280	152	2310	13	9	54.2	24	31
CFL		105	2512	1420	20898	117	112	56.5	235	759
NFL		48	778	396	5170	30	46	50.9	38	141
Combined Stats		153	3390	1816	26068	147	158	53.6	273	900

Liske's NFL Career Passer Rating was 60.5