



## **Mike McBath**

This article was written by Greg D. Tranter

Mike McBath played for Joe Paterno at Penn State, helping lead the Nittany Lions to their first bowl game in the Paterno era. He also was an All-East performer. McBath was drafted in the fifth round of the 1968 NFL draft by the Buffalo Bills and played five years with the club. He finished his pro football career spending one season with the Florida Blazers of the World Football League, as they came within one point of winning the league championship. He was later a very successful businessman and was a co-founder of the Arena Football League's Orlando Predators, the most successful franchise in league history.



Photo Credit: Robert L. Smith

Michael Strickler McBath was born May 29, 1946 in Woodbury, New Jersey. McBath attended Woodbury, New Jersey High School. He played varsity football for three seasons and Woodbury never lost a game. McBath played both ways, on the offensive and defensive lines, and their quarterback was Willie Murray. Mike was co-captain his senior year as the Herd finished 9-0. He was named to the All-South Jersey scholastic football team following his senior year. He was also an honorable mention on the Associated Press All-State team. Mike also was an excellent basketball player at Woodbury and participated in track, throwing both the discus and the shot-put while winning several meets.



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McBath had good football genes as his late father, George, was a Little All American at Ursinus College. Mike was recruited by Penn State head coach Rip Engle and was offered a scholarship. He jumped at the chance to play for the Nittany Lions. He played on Engle's final Penn State team which finished the year 5-5. He played defensive tackle behind Jerry Sandusky, Dave Rowe and Rich Buzin. The highlights of their season were wins over Boston College, 17-0, West Virginia, 44-6 with McBath recovering his first career fumble, and Maryland, 19-7. McBath played very well in his debut game, a loss to Michigan State in the season opener.

He became a starter in his junior year, Joe Paterno's first season as head coach. His fellow defensive tackle mate was Mike Reid, a music major and country music artist and composer, who became a first round NFL draft pick #7 overall, and a two-time All-Pro NFL player. In Paterno's first season as the head man the Nittany Lions finished 5-5 and were trounced by the three ranked teams they played, #1 Michigan State, 42-8, #4 UCLA, 49-11, and #5 Georgia Tech, 21-0.

McBath's senior year was a breakthrough for the Penn State football program as they compiled an 8-2 record. Only a one-point loss to Navy and a two-point loss to #3 ranked UCLA kept them from an unblemished regular season record. .

McBath had an excellent senior season. He was awarded a game ball for his outstanding play in Penn State's 21-14 victory over West Virginia on October 21. In Penn State's upset of unbeaten North Carolina State on November 11, McBath played his best game at Penn State in the 13-8 victory. He recovered three fumbles and knocked down two passes in the upset. The Nittany Lions also had impressive wins over Miami (FL) 17-8, Syracuse, 29-20, and Pitt, 42-6.

Penn State was selected for its first bowl game in five years, with an invitation to the 1967 Gator Bowl. It was also Paterno's first bowl game as head coach and McBath's only bowl game experience. Penn State jumped to a 17-0 lead, but Florida State came back in the second half to earn a 17-17 tie.

Following his senior season, Mike was named All-East second team defensive tackle. He was also named to the All-Pennsylvania Grid first team. McBath was selected to play for the North in the 1968 Senior Bowl, played on January 6. The North lost to the South 34-21 with Boston Patriots head coach Mike Holovak coaching the North squad.

McBath was also an outstanding student. He earned a master's degree in economics and was seen as a deep thinker by those who knew him. He later studied for a doctorate in finance and management at the University of Florida. His doctoral thesis was "Wage and Salary Determination in the National Football League."<sup>i</sup>



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McBath was drafted in the fifth round by the Buffalo Bills in the 1968 NFL Draft on January 30. “McBath learned from his mother last night that the Buffalo Bills had picked him in the fifth round of yesterday’s pro football draft.”<sup>ii</sup> His mother said, “he seemed pleased with the news. I know Mike was hoping to be picked by a team located in a northern area. He suffers from asthma and was afraid of the effect a southern climate might have on him.”<sup>iii</sup>

He had outstanding strength and speed for a lineman and the Bills were in a rebuilding mode following a subpar 1967 season. Prior to that, the team had won two AFL Championships in 1964 and 65 and just missed a third, losing to the Kansas City Chiefs 31-7 on January 1, 1967. McBath had an opportunity to not only make the team but to eventually become a starter in the NFL.

McBath signed with the Bills on July 5 for a \$17,000 annual salary. He made his NFL debut in the Bills opening preseason game. He played special teams and defensive tackle in Buffalo’s 13-9 victory over the Detroit Lions on August 5. McBath made the team and his regular season debut was September 8. He played special teams in the Bills 16-7 loss to the Boston Patriots.

McBath missed the next five games with a minor injury and was placed on the teams’ taxi-squad. He was reactivated prior to the Bills October 20 rematch with the Patriots. He played the final eight games, appearing primarily on special teams. He played behind veterans Tom Sestak and Jim Dunaway. He ended his rookie campaign playing in nine of the Bills 14 games, as the team finished with the worst record in pro football at 1-12-1.

Sestak retired after the 1968 season, opening an opportunity for McBath in 1969. He worked hard throughout training camp but instead of winning the defensive tackle starting job, he won the right defensive end spot. He took over for Tom Day, who also had retired.

McBath started all 14 games at right defensive end. The Bills improved to 4-10 in 1969 with first year head coach John Rauch and the addition of O.J. Simpson. In Buffalo’s 16-13 victory over the Cincinnati Bengals, in the snow on November 30, McBath had a key fumble recovery and 10-yard return. The recovery set-up a Bills field goal in the victory.

Al Cowlings, Buffalo’s first round draft choice in 1970 took over for McBath as the starting defensive end. McBath was relegated to reserve duty and special teams. He started three games as an injury replacement and in all played in 12 games. McBath had one fumble recovery and also returned one short kick-off for seven yards. The Bills slightly regressed, finishing with a 3-10-1 record.



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The wheels completely came off the team bus in 1971. Bills owner Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. had a dispute with head coach Rauch in training camp and accepted his resignation on the spot. Wilson put Player Personnel Director Harvey Johnson in charge and the Bills went on to win one game and lose 13. McBath played in 13 games with five starts and recovered one fumble, returning it four yards.

Johnson shook up the starting line-up for the Bills October 23 match-up with the Chargers, and inserted Mike into the starting line-up. It paid immediate dividends as McBath recovered a fumble on the first play from scrimmage. The Bills offense could not move the ball and then Grant Guthrie missed the 35-yard field goal. The Bills went on to lose the game 20-3. McBath started the next four games, but the overall defensive results were the same and he was back as a reserve to finish out the season. The Bills defense gave up a league worst 394 points, 28.1 points per game. Only the Bills 1984 team has allowed more points per game in team history.

McBath was back for the 1972 season and new head coach Lou Saban. Injuries pretty much wiped out McBath's year. He started the opener at defensive left tackle in the Bills 41-24 opening day loss to the New York Jets. He was injured in the game and did not return to the Bills line-up until November 5. He substituted in the game against the Dolphins, re-injured himself, in the Bills 30-16 loss and was out for the remainder of the season. At the conclusion of the season he was released by the Bills.

He ended his career in Buffalo having played 50 games with 23 starts over five seasons, with his final contract paying him a robust \$24,000. The five year stretch McBath played for the Bills was the worst five-year period in team history. The five teams sported a record of 13-54-3, a winning percentage of .207.

When he was released by the Bills after the 1972 season, Washington Redskins head coach George Allen recruited him to come to DC to play for the Over the Hill Gang. McBath signed a contract in February 1973 but had second thoughts before training camp began and decided not to play. He said, "By then I was a businessman, in Orlando, with the real estate in a boom period, and I didn't want to leave. Besides, I wasn't exactly excited about pro football any longer. It didn't excite me to pull on a uniform any longer and go to practice."<sup>iv</sup>

His final season of professional football was with the Florida Blazers of the new World Football League. Though he was a successful businessman at this point, he wanted to give football one more chance. He was offered a three-year no cut contract by Jack Pardee of the Blazers. It was too good to turn down.



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The Blazers had a terrific season on the field. They won 14 of their 20 regular season games, winning the Eastern Division title. They defeated the Philadelphia Bell 18-3 in the first round of the playoffs and then defeated the Memphis Southmen 18-15 to qualify for the first World Bowl.

In the World Bowl in front of 32,376 fans at Birmingham's Legion field, the Blazers were defeated by the Birmingham Americans 22-21. Florida trailed 22-0 and made a rousing fourth quarter comeback, scoring three touchdowns. In the WFL, a touchdown was worth seven points. To score an extra point, the teams had to run or pass, they could not kick, from the five-yard line to gain a single point. The Blazers failed on all three extra point attempts and thus lost by the single point.

McBath was named to the WFL All-League Team by Pro Football Weekly at defensive tackle. He was joined on the defense by other former NFL players, defensive end Gerry Philbin, defensive tackle John Elliott, defensive end Louis Ross, linebackers Ross Brupbacher and Rudy Kuechenberg and cornerback Miller Farr.

McBath said after the season, "Had the most fun of my life. Didn't make any money, but the season proved something for me – there are still people in this world who would play the game only for the love of it. That might sound like bleep, but it was true. For the first time in my life, football was fun. F-U-N."<sup>v</sup>

He was not kidding when he said he didn't make any money. For ten weeks he did not get paid. He was given an IOU that by the end of the season totaled over \$25,000. When the Blazers went out of business, those IOU's were only worth the paper they were printed on.

McBath became a stockbroker following his football career, but football was never far from his mind. In 1991 he teamed with, former baseball manager and player, Davey Johnson and formed the Arena Football League's Orlando Predators. As McBath tells it, "We started it in 1991 and actually we were the greatest team in the history of Arena Football. We sold out every game, five out of six years. We were the most successful team: winning, attendance, everything in the history of the league."<sup>vi</sup>

Under McBath's ownership the team was 59-25, qualified for the playoffs in every season except one, and played in three Arena League Championship games, losing all three. He sold the team in 1997 and the following year they won their first of two Arena Bowl Championships. McBath again got involved with the club in 2004, losing another Arena Bowl before the league went defunct in 2012. The Predators finished with a 179-105 regular season record with 19 consecutive playoff appearances and a 23-17 playoff record with two Arena League Championships in seven appearances.



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McBath had a highly successful business career spending several years as a senior vice president with the Union Bank of Switzerland, formerly Paine Webber. He was a member of the company's "Presidents Club" for top producing brokers for over 25 years.

He was president of the Retired NFL Players Association for a time and was on the Board for over ten years. He also was involved in an organization called the "City of Legends", in Clermont, Florida, with a mission "To Continue to Manage and Maintain the Finest Retirement Village in the World, through Benefits and Services for Professional Athletes."<sup>vii</sup>

McBath is married to his wife Carmen and they have one adult son, Taylor. They reside year-round in Florida.

McBath was inducted into the Gloucester County Sports Hall of Fame in 1992 for his accomplishments while at Woodbury High School.



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### End Notes:

<sup>i</sup> Samuels, Leroy, "A Season of IOU's, McBath found football to be fun in WFL's First Season," *Courier-Post*, Camden, New Jersey, April 26, 1975, p41

<sup>ii</sup> Staff, "Buffalo Drafts Mike McBath, Ex-Herd Star," *Courier-Post*, Camden, New Jersey, January 31, 1968, p42

<sup>iii</sup> Staff, "Buffalo Drafts Mike McBath, Ex-Herd Star," *Courier-Post*, Camden, New Jersey, January 31, 1968, p42

<sup>iv</sup> Samuels, Leroy, "A Season of IOU's, McBath found football to be fun in WFL's First Season," *Courier-Post*, Camden, New Jersey, April 26, 1975, p41

<sup>v</sup> Samuels, Leroy, "A Season of IOU's, McBath found football to be fun in WFL's First Season," *Courier-Post*, Camden, New Jersey, April 26, 1975, p41

<sup>vi</sup> Gehman, Jim, "Bills Alumni Spotlight: Mike McBath," BuffaloBills.com, accessed July 30, 2020

<sup>vii</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20110202120212/http://thecityoflegends.com/>, accessed July 30, 2020