

R. C. OWENS: ALLEY OOP

By Joseph Hession

From *Forty Niners: Looking Back*

It seemed unlikely that a rookie receiver playing in his sixth NFL game would leap into the stratosphere, gram a 50-yard pass above Detroit's All-Pro secondary and score a winning touchdown with 10 seconds on the clock.

But that's exactly what R. C. Owens did in 1957 when he and Y.A. Tittle made the Alley-Oop pass as much a part of San Francisco as Coit Tower and the Golden Gate Bridge.

Owens' touchdown reception against the Lions that day was not the first time the Alley-Oop was put to use, but it was certainly the most dramatic.

San Francisco trailed Detroit, 31-28, with 1:20 to play. The 49ers had the ball on their own 38-yard line. Three straight pass completions by Tittle moved the ball to the Lions' 42. There was 11 seconds to go. Everyone at Kezar Stadium knew what was coming. The Lions completely surrounded Owens all the way downfield. Tittle let fly a rocket that sailed about 50 yards in the air. In the end zone, All-Pro Jack Christiansen covered Owens along with Jim David. Owens leapt, grabbed the pigskin over the defenders and scored. San Francisco won, 35-31.

"That Detroit game was probably the most satisfying win for me," Owens said. "Detroit had just scored to go ahead and Abe Woodson made a good kick return. Y.A. went to work after that. Overall, it was a great game played by two great teams."

The Alley-Oop pass was a standard part of the 49ers' offensive plan in 1957. Tittle claims it was developed by accident. Owens says it was an accidental design.

While preparing for the second league game of 1957, the 49er defense was devising ways to stop the Los Angeles Rams. Coach Red Hickey had Y.A. Tittle throw long, high passes into the secondary to prepare it for Bill Wade and Norm Van Brocklin, the Rams' quarterbacks. They gradually realized that R. C. Owens was leaping over the defensive back and catching the passes.

"It was noticed that I could outjump the defenders," said Owens. "Red Hickey, Frankie Albert and Y. A. Tittle all decided this might be something we could use in a game. Then we wondered what to call it. Somehow we decided on Alley-Oop. In the first game against the Rams, it was used twice for completions, one of those with a touchdown."

Actually, that was not the Alley-Oop's first appearance. It had been used once before in a preseason contest against the Chicago Cardinals in Seattle.

"When we used it against Chicago, we had no name for it at the time," he said. "It was still the Alley-Oop but nobody recognized it."

Owens' jumping ability, which he cultivated as a basketball star at College of Idaho, was one of the factors that made the Alley-Oop successful. Tittle's confidence in the unorthodox pass was another.

"Y. A. Tittle believed in it," said Owens. "When a quarterback believes in something he'll use it. The team believed in it so everyone came together when it was called. The line blocked well because they knew it would work."

"I guess you could say the Alley-Oop was the same as a Hail Mary pass, except we didn't pray."

The 1957 San Francisco team was loaded with offensive weapons. No other team in the league could match the backfield of Tittle, Perry and McElhenny. Billy Wilson, Clyde Conner and Owens gave Tittle a

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trio of excellent pass receivers. But the 49ers rarely demolished their opponent. Virtually every game that year was a cliffhanger.

"It was the best 49er team I played on," said Owens, who spent five years, from 1957 to 1961, in a 49er uniform. "Mac and 'Joe the Jet' were something. The Jet was good on those quick openers. Mac was a zig and zag type runner. He had great peripheral vision.

"Abe Woodson was another weapon. He was a spectacular kick returner who always got us in good position. He was a Big Ten hurdles champ. You'd always see him hurdling over people. We were always in it with Abe because he would get us good field position."

Since Owens contributed to one of the most exciting seasons in the team's history, one would expect him to choose a heart-stopping Alley-Oop reception as his most thrilling moment that year. Not quite. It was a last-minute reception against the Chicago Bears, but the Alley-Oop was not involved. With the Bears leading, 17-14, and 20 seconds to play, Chicago went into its prevent defense in an effort to stop the long pass by Tittle.

"The Bears were all set to stop our last-second drive," he said. "I was going downfield and someone knocked me down and out of bounds. I crawled back into the end zone on my knees. Tittle kept pumping the ball looking for someone. Finally, he threw to me. I was still on my knees. It was a touchdown. The refs didn't see me out of bounds or it wouldn't have been allowed. Halas was irate. He was kicking the dirt and kicking at the referees. It was a thrill just to beat George Halas."

Although Tittle and Owens hooked up successfully for several years, it was in 1961, when John Brodie was running the offense, that Owens had his best statistical season. That year, he caught 55 passes for 1,032 yards. He became the first 49er receiver to gain over 1,000 yards through the air.

As a wide receiver, Owens became intimately familiar with some of the hardest hitting defenses in football.

"The Chicago Bears and Detroit Lions were always tough," he said. "Both teams had tough traditions, tough players and tough defenses. They gave you headaches. When they hit you, they really tattooed you. Bill George from Chicago, for example, was a headhunter. Doug Atkins was another who liked to hit."

Kezar Stadium had a growing reputation in the 1960s as a haven for rowdy fans. At one time city officials considered building a moat around the stadium to keep fans off the field after the game. Owens memories of the fabled stadium on the edge of Golden Gate Park are more peaceful.

"Kezar was a nice stadium," he said. "There's a lot of nostalgia there. One thing I remember about Kezar was the seagulls. There was always seagulls at one end of the stadium and as soon as the play went to that end, they all took off and flew to the other end.

"Another memorable thing about Kezar Stadium was the wrong-way run by Jim Marshall. Bruce Bosley ran after him and shook his hand.

"Fans got a little upset out there once in a while. They threw a few things. One time a guy got upset at a Bears game and ran on the field and kicked Papa Bear -- George Halas. Overall the place is full of good memories. I enjoyed it."

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R.C. OWENS

Born: November 12, 1934, Shreveport, LA

Hgt: 6-3 WGT: 195

School: College of Idaho

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PASS RECEIVING RECORD							
YEAR	TEAM		LG	NO	YDS	AVG	TD
1957	San Francisco	49ers	N	27	395	14.6	5
1958	San Francisco	49ers	N	40	620	15.5	1
1959	San Francisco	49ers	N	17	347	20.4	3
1960	San Francisco	49ers	N	37	532	14.4	6
1961	San Fransisco	49ers	N	55	1032	18.8	5
1962	Baltimore Colts	...	N	25	307	12.3	2
1963	Baltimore Colts	...	N	1	7	7.0	0
1964	New York Giants	...	N	4	45	11.3	0
8 years				206	3285	15.9	22

Additional: Scored one TD on lateral (23 yards) 1961.