

JOHN HANNAH

By Don Smith

The New England Patriots struggled with a below .500 record for years during the late 1960s and early 1970s. But with three picks in the first round, they looked forward to the 1973 NFL draft with high expectations. The infusion of talented new players hopefully could provide the impetus for a successful rebuilding program.

The Patriots' first pick came fourth in the drafting order and their choice was John Hannah, a 6-2, 265-pound guard from the University of Alabama. A two-time All-America, Hannah had been described by his famous coach, Bear Bryant, as "the best offensive lineman I ever coached."

Hannah quickly proved that Bryant was not exaggerating. He played with the Patriots for 13 seasons and, during that period, has been accorded virtually every honor that an offensive lineman can win. By the time he retired in the spring of 1986, he admitted that he had one more pro football goal that he coveted more than any other. That was membership in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Just five years later, Hannah's fondest hopes were realized with his election to the Hall in his first year eligibility.

Hannah is the first New England Patriot -- player, coach or administrator -- to be elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. He also was one of only two -- Gene Upshaw was the other -- who played his entire NFL career as a guard to become a Hall of Famer. Two other members, Jim Parker and fellow 1991 enshrinee Jones, played significant portions of their pro tenures at guard, and Larry Little was elected in 1994.

Some have suggested that so few guards have been elected because they play in relative obscurity in the center of violent line action where it is difficult to determine how each player is faring. However, Hannah established his superiority almost his first day in training camp and, from that point on he did make people pay attention to what he was doing.

After his first season, he was a consensus choice on the all-rookie team. In 1974, he was named to the all-AFC honor squad. Beginning in 1976, Hannah was picked as an all-pro every year for the rest of his career, a string of 10 straight seasons.

Hannah also was selected for the AFC Pro Bowl nine times in that 10-year period but he had to miss the 1984 game because of impending shoulder surgery. He won the NFL Players Association's Offensive Lineman of the Year award four straight seasons from 1978 to 1981.

In Hannah's fourth season in 1976, the Patriots rushed for a club record 2,948 yards, a mark that was surpassed two years later when the New England rushing total of 3,165 yards was a then-NFL record. The Patriots' rushing total over a two-year period in and 1983 topped the entire NFL. From every corner, Hannah was accorded a lion's share of the credit for the Patriots' ground efficiency. Born to be Great

It would seem that Hannah was born to be a football player. He weighed 11 pounds at birth on April 4, 1951, in Canton, Georgia. His father, Herb, had been an Alabama standout and a pro with the New York Giants. John also had a younger brother, Charley, who played 12 seasons in the NFL with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Los Angeles Raiders.

John weighed 35 pounds when he was a year old and 210 pounds when he was in eighth grade. He played three years at Baylor Prep in Chattanooga, Tennessee, before finishing his high school career in his home town of Albertville, Alabama.

At Alabama, he was an undefeated freshman wrestler and an accomplished discus and shot put man (61-5) in track. Altogether, he won eight sports letters in college.

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His nickname in college was "Ham Hocks" -- with the Patriots, he was respectfully known as "Hog." A three-time all-SEC guard, he won virtually every award possible after his senior season. He played in both the Cotton Bowl and Hula Bowl and then was invited to play in the College All-Star game.

The Patriots' other first-round selections, fullback Sam Cunningham from Southern California and wide receiver Darryl Stingley from Purdue, were equally highly-touted and also were selected for the College All-Star game. But in a 14-3 loss to the NFL champion Miami Dolphins, it was Hannah who opened the holes for almost every significant gain the All-Stars recorded. Several writers voted for Hannah as the game's outstanding lineman.

Skip Husbands of USC, the All-Star offensive line coach, said of Hannah: "You better believe this kid is going to be around a long, long time. He is a super guy to coach, very aggressive and quick."

A Quick Success

Hannah reported to the Patriots in time for the AFC-NFC hall of Fame game in Canton the day after the All-Star game but did not play until the next week in Schaefer (Foxboro) Stadium. By this time, eager fans were already expecting big things of him.

When asked how he thought he would handle the pressure of being a No. 1 draft choice, Hannah had a quick and confident answer: "I guess it means they expect me to play this year. Even if I weren't the first draft pick, it would still be my goal to play regularly. If it takes hard work, I am willing to do whatever it takes."

Hannah, who also was exceptionally fast for his size, was rated the second-best athlete among the nation's collegians in 1973. But there were a few who worried about his ability to make the adjustment from blocking in the wishbone offense to the pro technique of dropping back rather than charging out.

Others wondered about his 6-2 height because he would be giving away four to five inches to the defensive linemen he would have to block. Hannah wasn't concerned.

"When you are shorter, you probably have a little leverage advantage," he contended. "I don't think the size factor will hurt me at all. It's going up against people who have many years of pro experience that worries me. They know all the little tricks. I'm hoping the old pros with the Patriots will give me a helping hand and teach me the things I should know."

As it turned out, Hannah's concerns were unwarranted. He quickly showed the attributes -- quickness, dedication, consistency, intensity, intelligence -- that would place him a cut above the other guards in pro football. He became equally efficient as a pass protector or a run blocker and a major asset as a pulling guard.

When he was the Patriots' offensive coordinator, Hall of Famer Jim Ringo said: "John has better pulling speed than Jerry Kramer and Fuzzy Thurston, even though he is 20 pounds heavier than either of them."

Winning Over Temper and Pain

Hannah also was acclaimed for his willingness to work harder and longer than anyone else, whether it was on a steaming summer day in training camp or an icy field in gray December.

"Bear Bryant taught us how to win when I was at Alabama," Hannah said. "He inspired you to give your maximum effort on every play. He told us that usually a game is decided by only four or five plays. You never know when those plays are coming so you have to be ready on every play."

Whatever kind of work standards he expected of himself, Hannah also expected the same of his teammates. And he never hesitated to tell an errant teammate what he thought. Even at the College All-Star game, he accused some of his teammates at halftime of "hot-dogging" out on the field.

Early in his career, Hannah did have to learn to control a vicious temper that often got him into hot water with friend and foe alike. With the help of his wife, Page, who had been his high school sweetheart, he turned to religion after his rookie season. While he did not profess to have been magically transformed into a perfect Christian, he did realize that he was causing himself a lot of problems and that some changes were in order.

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On the field in 1974, he played with the same intensity but felt much more under control. "I lost my temper a couple of times, once with Will Foster in practice and once against Alan Page in a game," he admitted. "I wasn't proud of it."

Hannah's love of football was always foremost but many times that meant playing with pain. He considered this to be a by-product of football, something which he endured for most of his NFL career. He missed only five games in 13 years because of injuries but there were many games in which Hannah played when a lesser competitor would have remained on the bench.

"To be great, you have to forget about pain," he insisted. "If it's not going to hurt you permanently, it's cheating your teammates if you don't play. You're deserting them."

Great, But Frustrated

In spite of his dedication on the field, the free-thinking Hannah experienced a somewhat up-and-down relationship with the Patriots management. In 1974, he backed management by ignoring the NFL player's strike. But in 1977, John and his tackle running mate, Leon Gray, left camp when the Patriots refused to renegotiate their contracts. Eventually, they were ordered by the NFL to honor their contracts or sit out the year so they returned to play in the fourth game of the regular season.

Hannah was particularly unhappy when coach Chuck Fairbanks left the Patriots late in 1978. Fairbanks was replaced first by Ron Erhardt and then by Ron Meyer in 1982. Hannah thought Meyer's off-the-field rules for the squad were childish and he complained constantly about the Patriots' simple game plans and the comparative lack of pro experience of Meyer's staff.

Before the 1983 season, John threatened to retire because "football is no fun for me anymore. Winning is more important than money and we haven't been winning." However, he eventually decided to keep playing.

Actually, the Patriots did have winning records in nine of Hannah's last 10 seasons but they made the playoffs only in 1976, 1978 and the strike-shortened 1982 season. They did win the AFC East championship in 1978. Two years earlier, the Patriots had one of their better teams but lost in the final seconds of a playoff game to the eventual Super Bowl champion Oakland Raiders.

In Hannah's 13th season in 1985, the Patriots finally won the AFC championship. They became only the third wild-card playoff team to reach the Super Bowl.

A Patriots' victory over the Bears in Super Bowl XX would have provided a perfect climax to Hannah's exceptional career but instead it was a 46-10 loss. Hannah, playing with torn rotator cuffs in both shoulders and a knee that would not work, was comparatively ineffective against the Bears' ballyhooed rookie, William "Refrigerator" Perry. "No question about it. Losing that game was my biggest disappointment," Hannah said.

Somehow, Hannah managed to play in the Pro Bowl a week later but off-season surgery on both his shoulders and his knee made him recognize that continuing to play would permanently jeopardize his health. So he retired in June, 1986.

Hannah left football for a financial management career in the New England area with his head held high. "I guess I just want to be remembered as a player who did the best that he could with what he had."

* * * *

HANNAH, HERB OG

Herbert Hannah

6-03 265 Alabama

Baylor Prep [Chattanooga, TN]; Albertville HS [AL]

Born: 04/04/51, Canton, GA

All-America 1971-72

Selected on 1st round in 1973 NFL draft

All-Pro 1976-85

Pro Bowl following 1976, 1978-85 seasons (Did not play 1983)

NFLPA Offensive Lineman of the Year 1978-81

Pro Football Hall of Fame 1991

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YEAR	TEAM	LG	GM
1973	Bos	.. N	13
1974	Bos	.. N	14
1975	Bos	.. N	14
1976	Bos	.. N	14
1977	Bos	.. N	11
1978	Bos	.. N	16
1979	Bos	.. N	16
1980	Bos	.. N	16
1981	Bos	.. N	16
1982	Bos	.. N	8
1983	Bos	.. N	16
1984	Bos	.. N	15
1985	Bos	.. N	14
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13 years			183