

ROMAN GABRIEL

By Robert R. Jackson

It's been eighteen years now since "the worlds biggest Filipino" has taken a snap from center in a regular season game. At 6'4" and 235 pounds, Roman Gabriel is considered the first truly big quarterback of the modern era. A trend at the time which has become standard in today's National Football League.

He was born August 5, 1940 in Wilmington, North Carolina. "It's the home of Meadowlark Lemon, Sonny Jorgensen, Michael Jordan, Charles Kuralt, and the country-western fiddler Charlie Daniels," Roman points out. "So the water and food must have been good."

Gabe was, until his teenage years, small for his age and often sickly. A self described "stubborn kid", he was afflicted as a boy with asthma so severe that he had great difficulty in even walking a few blocks to school. But the ailment gradually disappeared over time.

Although he followed in the footsteps of fellow New Hanover High star Sonny Jorgensen, during an era of ever more budding gridiron stars, the young Gabriel didn't have any boyhood sports idols. "My dad is my number one hero in my lifetime. Then from there I would say my high school coach Leon Brogden. And Earl Edwards, my college coach." Roman Ildonzo Gabriel Sr. immigrated from the Philippines in 1925. He worked as a laborer in Alaska and California before eventually settling down in North Carolina. And although he was strict with young Roman, he did encourage his son in sports from a very early age. The great love and admiration for his father is plainly evident from Gabe's expression when he speaks of him.

By the time Roman reached high school, he started getting tall and filling out into manhood. A fine all-around athlete, he was considered a prospect at professional baseball and basketball as well as football. But it was at football that he excelled. And not always at quarterback. "In high school I was a linebacker, returned punts and kick-offs, a defensive back, because you did it all. You wanted to do it all too."

A boy from a poor home, who normally wouldn't have attended college, the young passer began receiving scholarship offers from different schools. "My first love was baseball," he says. "Then after baseball, whatever I could play, because I felt that if I had an opportunity to ever go to school, it would have to be by being a good enough student athlete to get a scholarship." From among the offers, Roman chose to attend North Carolina State University.

Though he was surrounded by a mediocre team, he completed 285 of 506 passes for 2,951 yards and 19 touchdowns in his three years as a starter. And because the school didn't keep records of less than 10 interceptions, you'll not find any in his sports file at N.C. State. Which by the way is five folders long. His legendary accuracy had already begun. "It's interesting though," says Gabe. "When I was there, we didn't throw it a lot like they do now. It's amazing."

Gabriel, who often went his own way and was considered a recluse and a loner, was actually just a shy and sensitive young man. In his sophomore season, he married his high school sweetheart, Suzanne. By the time he left college for the pro ranks she had already given birth to two of their three boys. And when his popularity began to rise and life started moving faster for him, he found it difficult to be comfortable with his new found fame. "Well," he recalls, "first and foremost, then you were so doggone humble, I couldn't have done an interview like this back then. Not that you didn't want to, you just didn't know how to do it. When all these things started to happen, with hard work and your teammates, your coaches, the people that you grew up with, those are the ones who made it possible for me to do what I've done. It wasn't just me."

After the bowl appearances and All-America honors following his senior year, Roman found himself in a somewhat delightful dilemma of not only being the first round draft pick of the Los Angeles Rams in the NFL. But also the top choice of the entire American Football League draft of 1962, selected by the Oakland Raiders. However, the pre-AI Davis Raiders were a franchise in total disarray. They stood little chance of signing any of their draft picks let alone Roman Gabriel. In an attempt to save the picks for the benefit of the league, they turned their draft list over to Lamar Hunt's Dallas Texans. All of this stood to

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be a little perplexing for the young signal caller. "What it came down to with the Raiders and the Rams, I finally had to get my college coach involved because I didn't know what was happening. And I ended up signing with the Rams for \$15,000. for three years, but not guaranteed, which meant the second and third years didn't matter unless you made the team. And I ended up getting a \$5,000. bonus with the Rams. The Raiders at that time, their best offer got to be about \$12,500. So there's a big difference between \$12,500. and \$15,000."

At the time, Roman was unaware that Lamar Hunt had become a new player in the high stakes signing game. Hunt had been trying to call Roman. But neither Hunt nor Gabriel would ever make any gain from the conversation. As Gabe recounts, "Elroy Hirsch, the Rams general manager, and I were sitting in the Sir Walter Raleigh Hotel, and he took a call. It was Lamar Hunt, but we didn't know that. Elroy talked to Hunt for roughly half an hour or more. Hunt made a fine pitch for the Texans and the AFL. He was offering me \$100,000.00 to come play in the American Football League. But I didn't take the call; Elroy Hirsch did. So I ended up going with the Rams."

Would the story be any different today if he had answered the phone? "Probably, because I know my coach was more interested in not necessarily in which team I played for, the Raiders or the Rams, but where I'm getting the most financial stability. Because having two kids in school at the time, I couldn't even join the fraternity because I didn't have the money."

Joining the Rams as a rookie for the 1962 season, he stepped from notoriety into obscurity. "I took my \$5,000 bonus and bought a station wagon (a chevrolet Impala), we packed up and drove across country. And, actually it was one of those dreams that come true but, not knowing what to do with it, stepping into somebody else's shoes and field and so forth. And not knowing what to expect. And not being accepted, because you really weren't back in those days. So it took a while. I was made a tight end, a receiver, a third quarterback for two or three of my first years with the Rams. It's frightening..."

His rookie season was also the worst in franchise history, with the team winning but one game all year. Coach Bob Waterfield, himself a legendary quarterback and future Hall Of Famer, was distant, moody, and never lent too much of himself to his players. Eight games into the season he suddenly retired, turning the team over to assistant Harland Svare.

"It was probably the best thing that happened to us because as great a quarterback as Bob Waterfield was, he wasn't very much of a communicator as far as a coach. Bob was a very quiet, low profile type guy. Tremendous competitor. But he expected you to know how to do things without him telling you. Overall it was probably a good move. Now if you ask me (about) the guy who took his place, if that was a good move? I would tell you no. Even though I got a chance to play under him -- a little bit!"

Though Gabe's league rankings were better, his interception ratios were better, and he seemed to instill a better air of confidence and leadership than his quarterback counterparts on the team, Roman Gabriel seldom got the starting nod. He often came in only when others got hurt. It eventually started to take its toll on the young man's own confidence in himself. "I started to have self doubts myself, because I'd been accustomed to being able to play and starting at most anything I'd done as a kid and through college. But all of a sudden I'm on the bench or lining up in practice at tight end or wide receiver, and they keep bringing all the quarterbacks in. There came a time when I was doubting whether I could play."

Things started to come to a head in the 1964 and 1965 seasons when Harland Svare became adamant about his intentions to go with Bill Munson as the starter. "I just think that he felt like there was always somebody out there who was better than me. And in '65, the way it all came down, I started the last four games and we won three out of four of them. So I asked Harland what the scoop was going to be. Was I going to be the quarterback or have a chance to play? And of course he said he was going to start Munson when he was well again. So I talked to the owner who was Dan Reeves at the time, and told Dan that I wanted to be traded to the Atlanta Falcons. So, Harland was gone the next year and George Allen was the coach."

Another disappointment of the 1965 season was the loss of second year man Bucky Pope to a knee injury. "The Catawba Claw" only caught twenty five passes on the year, but his ten touchdowns were the league's season high, and his 31.4 average yards gained is number two on the single season receiving chart.

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"It's a shame that he got hurt," says Roman. "Bucky would have been the compliment to Jack Snow that we needed to take that next step that we never were quite able to. We had a big problem on the other side, we never had one guy that was stable enough to be able to carry that position. There was no guy at that time that I could see, maybe other than Boyd Dowler. And Boyd, as good as he was with the Packers, didn't have the same speed as Bucky. He would have broken a lot of records. And who knows, he would have been there with the best of them even now. That's how good he was."

One of Roman's other favorite receivers at the time was Tommy McDonald. One of the last men to play without a face mask, McDonald was a wild and crazy guy who was fearless over the middle and would catch anything he could touch. If you ever watch an old game film of the 1965-66 Rams, he'll be the guy running to the sidelines and jumping on Roman's back, and knocking him to the ground with unbridled joy.

"As good as Jack Snow was coming across the middle, there's no one, that I've ever played with and threw a football to that was as good as he (McDonald) was. And we had him in the twilight of his career. There was no one tougher. And he practiced the same way ... If there was a ball in reach, he wasn't afraid to dive for it. It didn't make any difference if it was mud, snow, or whatever. But he had an enthusiasm -- and still does -- for life that carried over from football."

The height of the AFL-NFL signing war, sponsored in part by the newly appointed AFL commissioner Al Davis, did not exclude Roman Gabriel. In May of 1966, amid the turmoil of the AFL's ongoing raiding of top-notch NFL quarterbacks, the Oakland Raiders announced that they had signed Roman Gabriel for the 1967 season.

"Al Davis was a wheeler-dealer. He was put in a position where they wanted to extract a merger from the National Football League, and realistically, if they had listened to Al Davis at that time, regardless of whether someone likes it or not, they wouldn't have had to pay as much money to get into the NFL. Al had the National Football League at his feet.

"At that time," (signing with the Raiders) "that was prior to George Allen. And again as I mentioned, my history with Harland Svare, in knowing that as long as he was coach, I wasn't going to play. And at that time, that's when all of this came down. I was offered a huge amount of money. Especially compared to what I was making with the Rams. And then, (at) the time that I signed, George Allen was hired as the Rams coach. And I entrusted him with my career because he went to work and got me more money from the Rams. Still nowhere what I could have gotten from the Raiders, but he promised me that if I was the best, I'd get a chance to play. He's the reason I sent back my contract with the Raiders and signed back with the Rams. That's how much confidence that I had in him as a coach and a person."

When George Allen was hired to coach the Rams things began to fall into place, starting with a winning attitude. As was his trademark, Allen traded away draft picks and some of the more questionable young talent on the team for proven veterans who would have a more sudden impact. The result was a staunch defense, a ball control offense that made fewer mistakes, and the first winning season since 1958.

"As you can see, when he took over, the difference in the quality of our team," Gabe says. "George knew how to communicate with people, with the team. Also the individuals within the team. You just knew the work ethic that he had. And there was never a problem myself as far as work ethic because that's the only way I existed. But there were at that time, and still are today, some players that need to be pushed harder and harder. And George knew how to get the best out of all of us. George was always at his best. Some people can be at their best four days a week, the other three they don't know where they are. But with George, seven days a week he was at his best."

The next year saw the Rams take an even greater step forward into the playoffs, with what was probably the best team in all of pro football in 1967. After a 3-1-2 start the Rams raced to the best record, and most points scored in the NFL with a mark of 11-1-2 and 398 points. The highlight of the year was a 34-10 dismantling of the powerful Baltimore Colts which allowed Los Angeles to capture the Coastal Division title.

Anticipating the playoff game with the Rams, the Packers All-Pro guard Jerry Kramer wrote in his famous diary, "We've never, as long as I can remember, gone into a game with so much respect for an opponent. We respect their front four, we respect Roman Gabriel."

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Although the Rams lost the playoff game in Milwaukee County Stadium, the season wasn't wasted on their quarterback. The team's ball control offense allowed Roman to throw more passes underneath to his backs and tight end, spreading the ball around. This helped him mature into a great accurate passer who led the league in least interceptions thrown with 16.

"There was no one out there that could read defenses any better than me. I know Unitas gets a lot of credit for that, there are a lot of guys that do. The two things that I brought to the table were consistency and I could read defenses well. As a result, the way we played was conducive to George Allen's scheme of offense, because as you well know he was a defensive coach. We didn't make mistakes. And on top of that, we had to spread the ball around because we didn't have the game-breakers, didn't have the speed."

After a string of injuries, the team fell to second place in the division in 1968 with a record of 10-3-1. At season's end, team owner Dan Reeves fired head coach George Allen. The great majority of the Ram's players raised an immediate outcry in favor of the deposed coach. "I don't know how many people will admit it" he says, "but we had everything to do with it. Hell, you had 65 to 75 percent of the best players on the team there, saying we might not play if George is not back." At a press conference to name the new head coach, Dan Reeves announced the return of George Allen.

The Los Angeles Rams started the 1969 season with an 11-0 mark, the best record in the National Football League. But, in an unprecedented move on the part of George Allen, the coach eased up once the division title was in hand. He gave his starters a break and allowed his reserves a chance at some playing time. The Rams lost their final three games and a conference playoff against Minnesota.

But despite the team's disappointment, Gabriel himself had his finest season as a pro. He led the NFL in least interceptions thrown with seven, a least interception percentage of 1.68, and passing touchdowns at 24. He was named All-Pro and the league's 1969 MVP. In the four seasons since the arrival of head coach George Allen, Roman had thrown 814 completions for 10,232 yards and 78 touchdowns. His accuracy was outstanding, and his interception rate was so low that he was running ahead of the lifetime record for NFL passers.

"All of that meant to me exactly what I feel in my life today," he says. "If you're around good people and you work together as a team, good things happen to you."

Although 1970 brought another winning season. A combination of stiff competition from the 49ers and a loss to the Lions in the season finale knocked the Rams out of the division race and the playoffs altogether. Despite a fine record of 49-17-4, owner Dan Reeves, who by this time was already dying of cancer, fired George Allen at season's end.

During two lackluster seasons under new head coach Tomny Prothro, Roman suffered with a torn tendon in the elbow of his throwing arm. At the same time his relationship with the Rams began to sour.

"I had a torn tendon, but they kept telling me that I was a psycho, that I didn't have a problem. So to get through the season -- I couldn't throw the ball five yards without my arm hurting me -- I started going to acupuncture, because I was getting so many shots already. And I already had the arm operated on the year before. I made it through the season, but the reward I got was that I was a psycho." The "psycho" did however lead the NFL in 1971 in least interceptions with 11 and lowest interception percentage of 2.97.

After the 1972 season, the Ram's new general manager Don Klosterman traded Pro Bowl defensive lineman Coy Bacon and running back Bob Thomas to the San Diego Chargers in exchange for quarterback John Hadl. After Gabe then asked to be traded away, many falsehoods quickly arose over the supposed indignity that he allegedly suffered from the Hadl acquisition.

"Hadl and I were friends, and he called and said he was going to be the quarterback, and we'd have a great time together. Just because he was coming to be the quarterback and we were friends, the Rams had basically told me that I was going to be a back-up if I came back. But I wasn't done, and I guess they didn't know me."

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Traded to the Philadelphia Eagles in exchange for receiver Harold Jackson and first round draft picks in 1974 and 1975, Roman Gabriel left the Rams as the team's all-time leading passer with 22,223 yards and 154 touchdown passes.

"When somebody tells you you're not good anymore, and somebody tries to berate you by passing around the league that you're a troublemaker and all of a sudden after being there eleven years I'm a troublemaker supposedly. And you have an opportunity to come with people like a Mike McCormack who's now with the Panthers, a Boyd Dowler, and a guy who I thought was a good owner, Leonard Tose. And they spent a lot of money to get me because actually, the trade should have been made in January, but when the Rams found out that the Eagles really wanted me, they doubled the price."

In 1973, his first year with the Eagles, he answered the critics by leading the National Football League in passing yards with 3,219, passing yards per game at 231, most completions with 270, and tied for most touchdown passes (with Roger Staubach) at 23. He was named Comeback Player of The Year. And his leadership elevated the level of play of every one around him, as many players such as Harold Carmichael, Tom Sullivan, and Charlie Young came through with banner years of their own.

After a hot start in the 1974 season, six straight losses killed any hopes to make a run at the playoffs. And after starting the first eleven games Gabriel was benched in favor of youngster Mike Boryla. "Mike (McCormack) figured that it was time to try to build his team around a younger quarterback," he says. "It wasn't really a popular decision on my part naturally, but I stayed and hung in with the decision."

After a decent comeback in 1975, in which he was the seventh-ranked quarterback in the National Conference, Roman was set back after knee surgery in the off-season and had difficulty rebounding in 1976.

"From the time I left the Rams in 1973 to go to Philadelphia, my right knee never was really that good. In fact I had to have it drained once every two weeks, every year I was there. But that particular year when I had it reconstructed, Dick Vermeil said I might as well not come back because Boryla was going to be the starter."

So Roman went back to his home in Rancho Mirage, California and rehabilitated his knee. With five weeks to go before the start of the season he got a call from a friend on the Eagle's coaching staff who said that Vermeil wanted to know how his knee was and if he could come back and play. "I said well, we'll find out."

His final season in 1977 was as anticlimatic as was his first. But with only three attempts, and one completion for 15 yards, he wasn't disheartened. "I took that position," he says. "It was my last year and I was told that was going to happen before the season started."

When George Allen accepted the head coaching job of the Los Angeles Rams for the 1978 season, he called Roman Gabriel and asked the 38-year-old veteran to join on. With a chance to reunite with his former coach and mentor, combined with the opportunity to be a part of a playoff-caliber team with serious championship potential, he agreed.

"Now I'm gonna tell you something that never came out," says Roman. "George was going to take the Saints job, and the Rams, somehow they persuaded him to come back. Because the Rams knew that if he went with New Orleans, he would be winning there long before Jim Mora started. So he asked me if I would come back and be a third quarterback and his quarterback coach. And I said, well sure, love to. And that's when I knew George did not have the same control that he always had with the Redskins and Rams because he said, 'Well you have to work out in front of Klosterman.'"

So, Roman went up to Long Beach for the the special workout and threw the ball for Klosterman who then told Allen, "Well he's got to come back and we'll negotiate later."

Roman meanwhile, had been driving the 100 or so miles round trip, two to three times a week to work out with the team during the off-season and attend mini-camps, all the while having yet to sign a contract. Allen then held a special tryout and brought in 300 guys and asked Roman to come in and throw, mentioning that Klosterman would be there.

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"Klosterman doesn't show up," says Gabe. "And he's got his flunky there telling me, 'What do you want to be the coach and player with the Rams?' I told them, I made X amount of dollars my last year. The whole thing was that they didn't want me there. And what it ended up being is that I actually offered my services, just to have that opportunity, for \$100,000.00 paid over ten years. Not too many people would, but I wanted that opportunity. But still nothing ever happened."

The head coach was somewhat shocked when his long-time pupil informed him afterwards that he still did not have a contract. Allen promptly called Rams owner Carroll Rosenbloom to discuss the matter. Then as a personal favor to Allen, Roman went ahead and threw for the tryout and also participated in a couple mini-camps, all without liability insurance, compensation, or any form of contract as protection.

When Coach Allen went to Washington to retrieve some of his personal belongings, the Rams called Gabriel in for a physical. He says, "The big thing was my knee supposedly, because it didn't bend and flex. They knew that three months before I went there. And then they said I wasn't as sufficient on the treadmill as I should be, but yet, my pulse rate was 38 at that time in my career because I was always working out. But, I got let go. And George didn't even know."

When Allen did find out, he asked Roman as a last resort, to call Carroll Rosenbloom to see if he could demonstrate the things he could do with his body as a result of his martial arts training.

"I said, 'George, that's asking a hell of a lot.' I called him and he said no. So no one really knew for sure what had transpired. I had a lot of people ask me, especially some of the writers who knew me. I just said, 'Hey, I wasn't wanted and now I'm going back to Rancho Mirage.' It's probably the best thing that happened because they fired George Allen."

Gabriel spent some time in the USFL as the offensive coordinator of the Boston Breakers and Arizona Wranglers. And later as the head coach of the Raleigh-Durham Skyhawks of the WLAF.

"I enjoyed those things," he says. "Before I retired I wanted to coach. I wanted to have a sports complex, which we were able to do. I wanted to do sports commentary, which I was able to do. I also wanted to one day end up back here (N.Carolina), and I'm here. There's been more good things that have happened to me, far above the bad things. Naturally, when you play as a player in the NFL, the ultimate goal is you wish you can get to the Super Bowl and win. I'm glad I didn't get there and not win. It's never easy. I can imagine getting there and not winning it and never getting the chance to get back. But sure, I miss that fact that I wasn't on a Super Bowl team that won. Screw the losing"

There is also a finer side to the man -- the humanitarian side of Roman Gabriel. He's lent his name to many different charitable functions, such as Quarterback Legends. In the spring of 1978 he and Phillies pitchers Tug McGraw, Steve Carlton and a couple others bicycled from Pennsylvania to Florida. They rode for 15 days making two stops a day while raising money for Jerry's Kids.

"We went through Plains, Georgia, and met Jimmy Carter's mom," says Roman. "And we met Billy Carter and had a Billy's Beer which was terrible."

Roman does a great deal of charity work in his community and can be found all over the Carolina's contributing to various functions such as autograph signings, speaking engagements, softball games and golf tournaments hosted by such NFL luminaries as Jim Kelly and Mel Blount, not to mention some of his own such as Legends of the Game and The Roman Gabriel Celebrity Tournament. In the last 20 years Roman and his lovely wife Lisa, through their private little entity known as the RG Sports Connection, and many others that they have been associated with, have raised over four million dollars for charity. His turn to give back to others some of the good fortune that he's received during his career.

"You're fortunate that you can choose the way you'd like to give back because in the long run you help more people and more people can get involved. This way we're all contributing to different charities and lots of people."

Roman Ildonzo Gabriel Jr.
6-04 235 lbs.
Born: 08/05/40, Wilmington, NC
New Hanover High School, Wilmington, NC
North Carolina State University

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		G	ATT	COM	YDS	AVG	TD	INT	
1962	Rams	N	6	101	57	670	6.63	3	2
1963	Rams	N	12	281	130	1947	6.93	8	11
1964	Rams	N	7	143	65	1236	8.64	9	5
1965	Rams	N	7	173	83	1321	7.64	11	5
1966	Rams	N	14	397	217	2540	6.40	10	16
1967	Rams	N	14	371	196	2779	7.49	25	13
1968	Rams	N	14	366	184	2364	6.46	19	16
1969	Rams	N	14	399	217	2549	6.39	24	7
1970	Rams	N	14	407	211	2552	6.27	16	12
1971	Rams	N	14	352	180	2238	6.36	17	10
1972	Rams	N	14	323	165	2027	6.28	12	15
1973	Phi	N	14	460	270	3219	7.00	23	12
1974	Phi	N	11	338	193	1867	5.52	9	12
1975	Phi	N	11	292	151	1644	5.63	13	11
1976	Phi	N	4	92	46	476	5.17	2	2
1977	Phi	N	13	3	1	15	5.00	0	0
16 yrs			183	4498	2366	29444	6.55	201	149

All-Pro 1969; Pro Bowls; 1968, 1969, 1970, 1974

1969 NFL Most Valuable Player

1973 NFL Comeback Player of The Year

Head Coach: 1991 Raleigh-Durham Skyhawks WIAF