

BUBBA SMITH: ALL TOO REAL

by Mike Gershman

"When hearing tales of Bubba Smith,
You wonder, is he man or myth?"

-- Ogden Nash

Quarterbacks who faced a charging Charles "Bubba" Smith generally found him -- at 6'8", 280 pounds -- all too real.

A legend in East Lansing, Smith was a two-time All-America at Michigan State and an All-Pro before a freak accident hampered his effectiveness and shortened his playing career.

He was born in Beaumont, Texas, and his father, coach Willie Ray Smith, bred three All-State Smiths -- Willie Ray, Jr., Tody, and Bubba. Willie Ray, Sr., made Charlton Pollard a perennial power in Texas school football; the school was 11-0 Bubba's senior year, and recruiters wore out the rugs in the Smith household until he decided on MSU.

As a sophomore, he starred on a team that yielded just 76 points in eleven games. In 1965, MSU beat UCLA, 13-3, shut out Penn State, 23-0, and held Michigan to minus 51 yards rushing. Before the Ohio State game, Buckeye coach Woody Hayes warned that his team would run directly at Bubba; Smith stuffed the running attack, and MSU won, 32-7.

The Spartans beat Notre Dame, 12-3, in South Bend to finish unbeaten but lost a Rose Bowl rematch to UCLA, 14-12. Despite the loss, Smith was called "the Deacon Jones of the college ranks" and was a consensus All-America selection.

In 1966, Michigan State won its first nine games. The day before MSU was to play undefeated Notre Dame for the national championship, Smith roared by the Irish practice and was jailed on the eve of the Big Game. Released in time to play in the infamous 10-10 tie, he was a unanimous choice for All-America honors, was named MVP in both the College All-Star and Senior Bowl games, and became the first player picked in the 1967 combined AFL-NFL draft.

All-Pro tackle Bob "Boomer" Brown bested him in their first meeting, but Smith took round two. Brown told Quarterback, "You people of the press will never know how good Bubba Smith is until you put on a uniform and go out there and play him...He is a load and you can quote me."

Smith ran into a yard marker in a 1972 exhibition game and missed the entire season. Exiled to Oakland, he played with Houston his last two years and made his swan song memorable by making twelve unassisted tackles, sacking Bob Griese twice, blocking an extra point, and knocking aside a field goal. After a six-year stint as a Miller Lite spokesman, he scored a popular success acting in the series of Police Academy movies.