

Tommy McDonald

Pro Football Hall of Fame Class of 1998

By Joe Horrigan

Although Tommy McDonald won the Maxwell Award in 1956 as the nation's most outstanding college football player, some pro scouts dismissed the Oklahoma All-America running back as "too small" to play in the National Football League. The fact was at 5-9 and 175 pounds, McDonald was small by NFL standards. What the nay-saying scouts failed to recognize however was that what McDonald lacked in size he more than compensated for in athletic ability.

No one understood that better than Oklahoma coach Bud Wilkinson. Before the 1957 draft, the Philadelphia Eagles asked the Sooners' coach for his assessment of McDonald. "I don't think Tommy is big enough to make it as a running back in the pros," he informed the team. "But man," he continued, "he'd make one excellent flanker."

Wilkinson's evaluation proved to be prophetic. Drafted in the third round by the Eagles, McDonald went on to become one of the NFL's greatest receivers.

Born on July 26, 1934, McDonald was raised on a 180-acre farm in Roy, New Mexico. "Dad was a part-time farmer, part-time electrician, and a full-time sports lover," McDonald reflected. Clyde McDonald recognized and encouraged his son to develop his athletic skills. He even rigged up a spot light on the house so Tommy and his older brother C.R. could play basketball at night after milking the cows.

As an electrician, the elder McDonald did a lot of power-line troubleshooting in towns around Roy. During school vacation Tommy would go along with his father. Often, strangers would gather to watch as Clyde McDonald would work on the lines. "Dad would strike up a conversation with somebody," Tommy recalled, "and, first thing you know, I would be running a race with some guy's son." Usually his father would wager \$5 or \$10 that his son could outrun any and all challengers. "I earned Dad a nice piece of change that way," McDonald said with a smile.

Roy High School had a total enrollment of just 150 students and all of them were much bigger than the 5 foot 1, 98-pound McDonald. Tommy's father and his football coach felt he should stay back a year to give him a chance to grow. Although young Tommy didn't want to repeat the grade, he reluctantly agreed after his father promised to buy him a motor bike. "I fooled them all," McDonald later joked. "I didn't grow an inch."

The following year the McDonald family sold their farm and moved to Albuquerque. There, Tommy developed into one of the state's best high school athletes. As a senior at Highland High School he averaged more than 20 yards per carry in football and broke the state scoring record with 157 points. He also set a scoring record in basketball, and won five gold medals in state track meets.

Despite his outstanding accomplishments only two schools, New Mexico and Southern Methodist offered him football scholarships. Tommy wasn't interested in attending either. "I went to Oklahoma almost by accident," McDonald related. "Bruce Drake the Oklahoma basketball coach was in Albuquerque coaching an all-star high school basketball team. He stayed over to watch an all-star football game I was playing in and asked me to have my parents write to Oklahoma."

Based on Drake's recommendation, Bud Wilkinson invited McDonald to visit the University of Oklahoma. Soon thereafter he accepted a scholarship offer.

During his three years of varsity competition at Oklahoma, the Sooners never lost a game, captured two national championships, and went to the Orange Bowl. In addition to being an outstanding ball carrier, McDonald was also utilized by Wilkinson as a passer on the option play. It was, however, during his senior season that football fans may have gotten their first glimpse of what was to come.

"When I was senior, Coach Wilkinson gave us a passing play with me as the receiver," McDonald remembered. "It was simple enough. At the snap I ran to the line of scrimmage and milled around for a couple of counts, trying to get lost, and then busted out behind the defense." Six times the play resulted in touchdowns, including a long one against Texas. In that game, McDonald delighted his fans by making a dramatic fingertip catch for a touchdown. It was so spectacular that one observer suggested afterward that McDonald caught the ball with his fingerprints, not his fingertips.

Touchdown receptions and fingertip grabs became routine for McDonald during his pro career that saw him play seven seasons with the Eagles (1957-63), one with the Dallas Cowboys (1964), two with the Los Angeles Rams (1965-66), and one each with the Atlanta Falcons (1967) and the Cleveland Browns (1968).

As a rookie McDonald was initially used as a kickoff and punt return specialist. Then, in the ninth week of the season, in a game against the Washington Redskins, Coach Hugh Devore sent him in as a flanker. McDonald wasted no time in showing what he could do. The rookie receiver scored two touchdowns. The first was a 61-yard pass-and-run play that the late NFL Commissioner Bert Bell called, "One of the greatest catches I have ever seen in pro football."

In the final four games of the season McDonald caught nine passes for 228 yards and three touchdowns. His 25.3-yard average and touchdown-to-reception ratio of 1-in-3, were omens of great things to come.

In 1958, Buck Shaw replaced Devore as the Eagles' coach. He immediately installed McDonald as a starting end on the right side. That was also the year that quarterback Norm Van Brocklin joined the squad. Van Brocklin became McDonald's personal tutor. He taught the speedy receiver not to run "full throttle" until he got behind the defender so that he could better control his moves. The veteran quarterback also schooled McDonald on how to "be an actor" and not tip defenders that a play was coming his way.

"Tom Fears and Elroy Hirsch were actors," Van Brocklin told McDonald, referring to his former Rams teammates. "They would come out of the huddle on a pass play looking poor mouth, as if they never expected the ball to come within a mile of them." Tommy knew exactly what Van Brocklin meant. "Van taught me to concentrate," McDonald remembered. "I would go out on the flank thinking, 'Am I giving it away?'"

From 1958 through 1960, the Van Brocklin to McDonald combination was one of the most feared and respected pass-catch teams in the league. Tommy, who led the league in touchdown receptions (9) in 1958, quickly earned the reputation of being a "big play maker," as scoring tosses from Van Brocklin became commonplace.

In a game against the New York Giants in 1959 the tandem hooked up for a then-club record 91-yard scoring play. That same season, in a game against the Washington Redskins, Tommy hauled in nine Van Brocklin passes for 153 yards and three touchdowns. Quickly establishing the reputation of "having the finest pair of hands in football," McDonald finished the season behind only Raymond Berry in receptions and touchdowns. This despite the fact that he played much of the season with a broken jaw. "Most of the time," Van Brocklin once observed, "Tommy doesn't have to run a pass pattern against a defensive back. He just beats him."

In 1960, McDonald and Van Brocklin continued to blend their skills as the Eagles progressed to the NFL championship game. During the regular season, McDonald set a new Eagles record with 13 touchdown receptions.

Eagles fans had waited 11 years for their team to return to the NFL Championship Game. Their patience, however, was rewarded on a cold afternoon on December 26, 1960, when the Eagles defeated the favored Green Bay Packers 17-13 for the league title.

For the most part, the game was a defensive struggle with the Packers taking an early 6-0 lead off of two Paul Hornung field goals. However, midway through the second period, McDonald in his usual confident manner, informed Van Brocklin that he was sure he could penetrate the Packers' secondary. Van Brocklin listened. First, from the Eagles 43, he found McDonald for a 22-yard gain. Then, on the next play he again spotted his reliable receiver and fired the ball down field. In typical fashion, "Touchdown

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Tommy" grabbed Van Brocklin's 35-yard bomb and tumbled headlong into the end zone and a snow bank for the score. A field goal before the end of the half extended the lead to 10-6. The Eagles went on to win 17-13. It was the only title game a Vince Lombard team ever lost.

As expected, Norm Van Brocklin retired following the Eagles championship victory. The loss of the veteran quarterback was a major concern of the Eagles faithful. "What's everybody so worried about?" McDonald reportedly said to Sonny Jurgensen, Van Brocklin's successor. "You just throw the ball. I'll make you just as great a passer as I made Van Brocklin."

Of course McDonald was just kidding, but in 1961 he again showed he could back up his talk with results. That season Tommy caught 64 passes for 13 touchdowns and gained a league leading 1,144 yards.

The following year he almost duplicated his 1961 performance when he caught 58 passes for 1,146 yards and 10 touchdowns. For his efforts he was named to his fourth and fifth consecutive Pro Bowls. From 1958 through 1962 McDonald scored 56 touchdowns in 63 games.

In addition to big plays and touchdowns, McDonald was his team's biggest cheerleader. His sometimes zany enthusiasm made him a fan favorite. "He just lives in another world," marveled his friend and roommate Jurgensen.

Whenever the exuberant McDonald would score a touchdown, he would put on a one-man show. He would throw the ball up in the air, do a little dance and then run and jump into the arms of his sometimes unsuspecting quarterback. He once knocked Los Angeles Rams quarterback Bill Munson flat on his face when he tried to jump on his back. "It was the hardest I was hit all afternoon," Munson joked.

Remarkably tough, Tommy missed only three games during his first 11 seasons. During that time he caught at least one pass in 93 consecutive games.

Fans loved his David-like play amongst the NFL Goliaths. As if to challenge opposing defenses, the feisty mighty-mite made a point to never let a defender know he got the better of him. Seeming to invite disaster, the durable receiver is believed to be the last player to play without a face mask. Whenever he was tackled he would always bounce right up as if he hadn't been touched and hustle back to the huddle. "I don't like to let some big guy on the other team think he can hurt me because I'm small," he explained. Some of his teammates, however, joked that his real motive for hurrying back to the huddle was so that he could suggest the next play. More often than not, it included Tommy's number 25.

"I use to have to shut him up," Van Brocklin once said. "But," he added, "he had a very high percentage of success on the plays he brought back to the huddle."

Off the field McDonald was just as entertaining, exuberant, and dependable as he was on the field. His jovial, sometimes kooky nature, earned him endorsement and promotional opportunities that were virtually unheard of at the time. He even wrote a book, *They Pay Me To Catch Footballs*.

It was, however, as an author that his off-the-field reliability was once challenged. After agreeing to attend a book-signing session at a local department store, Tommy realized that a mandatory practice would prevent him from being on time. Determined to fulfill his commitment, he still reported to the store - albeit an hour late, unshowered, and still in full uniform. His patient fans loved it.

McDonald's days in Philadelphia, however, came to an end in 1964 when he was traded to the Dallas Cowboys. After a somewhat disappointing season in Dallas, he was again traded, this time to the Los Angeles Rams.

"I feel that I have four good years left," the good natured McDonald told a Los Angeles reporter. "Us little fellows age slowly. I still have the physique of a 25-year-old - a 25-year-old girl, that is."

A perfectionist, Tommy was convinced he was still able to contribute. His determination to prove a point, plus his never-ending enthusiasm earned him his sixth Pro Bowl bid in 1965. His 67 receptions for 1,036 yards and 9 touchdowns was second only to Dave Parks of the San Francisco 49ers.

True to his prediction, McDonald managed to play another season with the Rams and then one each with the Falcons and Browns. By the time he finally retired in 1968, after 12 NFL seasons, McDonald ranked

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 20, No. 4 (1998)

sixth all-time in receptions (495), fourth in yards receiving (8,410), and second in touchdown catches (84). His career ratio of touchdowns-to-receptions is a remarkable one in 5.9.

"It was always up to me to show that I could play the same games as the big guys," he once said. With his induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1998, Tommy McDonald no longer has anything to prove.

Thomas Franklin McDonald

Wide Receiver. 5'9", 176. Oklahoma

Born July 26, 1934, Roy, New Mexico.

Receiving	Gm	No	Yds	Avg	TD
1957 Phi	12	9	228	25.3	3
1958 Phi	10	29	603	20.8	*9
1959 Phi	12	47	846	18.0	10
1960 Phi	12	39	801	20.5	13
1961 Phi	14	64	*1144	17.9	*13
1962 Phi	14	58	1146	19.8	10
1963 Phi	14	41	731	17.8	8
1964 Dal	14	46	612	13.3	2
1965 LARm	14	67	1036	15.5	9
1966 LARm	13	55	714	13.0	2
1968 Atl	14	33	436	13.2	4
1969 Cle	9	7	113	16.1	1
12 years	152	495	8410	17.0	84