

MILT PLUM

By Jim Sargent

For three straight years with the Cleveland Browns, ace quarterback Milt Plum led the National Football League in pass completion percentage, producing marks of 58.6 percent in 1959, 60.4 in 1960, and 58.6 in 1961.

Along with his 60 percent completion mark in 1960, Plum also led the NFL in yards gained per passing attempt (YPA) with an average of 9.19. In the process he threw for a career-best 21 touchdowns while tossing only five interceptions.

During his great 1960 season Plum led the Paul Brown's Cleveland team to a second-place ranking (8-3-1) behind the Eastern Conference champion Philadelphia Eagles, who finished at 10-2. The Eagles then defeated the Green Bay Packers, 17-13, to win the NFL title.

A two-time Pro Bowler (after the 1960 and 1961 seasons), Plum was the league's best passer again in 1961. But the New Jersey native was traded to the Detroit Lions in the off-season. Later, we will return to the reasons for the sudden trade.

Plum enjoyed more good seasons with the Lions, notably in 1962, when he completed 55.1 percent of his passes, and in 1964, when he averaged 53.7 percent. However, Milt never again attained the league-leading marks he set with Cleveland.

The former Penn State athlete, who grew up dreaming of making the major leagues as a catcher, played mainly a reserve role with Detroit in 1966 and 1967. He was a backup with the Los Angeles Rams in '68 and the New York Giants in '69.

For 13 NFL seasons Plum produced consistently good performances. Completing 54 percent of his 2,419 career passes, he gained 17,536 yards (7.25 YPA) and threw for 122 touchdowns.

But after 1961, Plum never again played for a club that mixed the pass so well with the running game as had the Browns, who featured Jim Brown and Bobby Mitchell in the backfield.

Many believe that in all likelihood, if he had played under a more flexible play-calling system than Paul Brown's, Plum would have led the Browns to at least one championship. The failure to win an NFL title is Milt's only regret from his stellar football career.

Young Star

Born on January 20, 1935, Milt grew up in Westville, New Jersey. With a baseball diamond and a football field behind his home, the youth excelled at both sports. At Woodbury High he was both an excellent catcher who could hit the long ball and an all-state quarterback.

Although scouts talked to him about playing minor league baseball, Milt accepted a football scholarship from Pennsylvania State University.

Penn State passed sparingly in those years (often less than a dozen aials per game). Still, head coach Rip Engle highly recommended Plum to Cleveland's legendary coach Paul Brown, who was looking for a quarterback to replace retired Hall of Famer Otto Graham

Engle told Brown that Plum was an excellent passer and a fine ball handler who could also play tough defense, punt, and kick extra points.

"He is always the first one on the field," Engle reported, "he studies game films zealously and he never gets upset under fire."

Those were qualities that Brown sought in his next great quarterback.

In 1956 Engle's team enjoyed a winning season, even though the Nittany Lions tied Pitt, 7-7, lost to Army by seven points, and fell by four points to tough Syracuse, led by All-American fullback Jim Brown. But Penn State, a four-touchdown underdog, upset Big Ten powerhouse Ohio State, 7-6.

Plum keyed the victory with his passing, running, and kicking. Twice he got off long punts that left the Buckeyes deep in their own territory. Milt boomed one punt that carried 72 yards before rolling out on the OSU three-yard line. Minutes later, after Ohio State punted, Plum drove his team 45 yards for a touchdown, a drive that was sustained by his 12-yard run up the middle on a broken pass play.

Bruce Gilmore scored for Penn State on a short run, and Plum kicked the point after. Ohio State roared back to score, mainly on the strength of an across-the-field pass. But Coach Woody Hayes made an illegal substitution on the successful extra point try. But when the try was repeated, the kick went wide, touching off a huge victory celebration in College Park!

Coming Close in Cleveland

In the NFL draft Cleveland took Jim Brown in the first round and Plum as the club's second draft choice. Plum had not been named to any All-American teams and was relatively obscure outside the East. The Woodbury High all-stater was neither a fiery leader like Detroit's Bobby Layne nor a perfectionist leader like the Browns' Otto Graham. Partly as a result, Plum never quite won the respect that his performances merited.

Tall and strong, standing 6'2" and weighing 205, Milt had a boyish face, black hair, and had a quiet sense of humor. He was an excellent all-around athlete. When he showed up at the Browns' 1957 training camp, Milt found himself competing with five other quarterbacks. He told his wife not to make plans to come to Cleveland.

"Tommy O'Connell was the number one quarterback," Plum **explained** recently. "So the rest of us threw every third day. You didn't do a lot of throwing.

"I didn't play until the last exhibition game. I had a decent game against the Rams."

In the end, Plum emerged as the number three quarterback behind O'Connell and Ohio State's John Borton. Later, O'Connell injured his ankle, and Plum started the last three games. But before playing Detroit in the next-to-last game, Milt became ill with intestinal flu.

On a Sunday so wet and slick that receivers could hardly keep their footing, Detroit, led by the great linebacker Joe Schmidt, blitzed on three plays out of four. Plum's receivers were often not open, and sometimes they slipped and fell. All too often the gutsy quarterback had to eat the ball or run for short gains. The Lions won, 20-7.

In the NFL championship game on December 29 at Detroit's Briggs Stadium, the Lions overwhelmed the Eastern Conference Champion Browns, 59-14. O'Connell played the first half and completed four of eight passes, but he threw two interceptions.

Plum started the second half, completed five of 13 passes, and he also threw two interceptions. Even though he scrambled for 45 yards on three plays, it proved a tough ending to a difficult rookie season.

"Whatever the Lions did that day, they did right," Plum recollected. "Tobin Rote was the quarterback. They faked a field goal and threw a touchdown pass. They faked a punt and threw a touchdown pass. They led 31-7 at the half. We came out in the second half and scored right away.

"I said, 'Well, we got the momentum back. We're back in it.'

"But we kicked off, and they ran it all the way back for a touchdown. You could just see the air go right out of the bubble. That game was a nightmare."

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 22, No. 6 (2000)

In 1958 O'Connell retired, Borton's arm went dead, and Plum led the Browns to a 9-3 record and a second-place finish behind the Giants. Actually, both clubs tied for first with 9-3 marks. Charley Connerly, Frank Gifford, and company beat Cleveland in the final regular season game, 13-10, thanks to Pat Summerall's 49-yard field goal.

A week later New York won the playoff and the conference title, 10-0. The New Yorkers scored on an unusual play. Frank Gifford ran a reverse and, at the 10-yard line, pitched a lateral to quarterback Charley Connerly, who scored on the 18-yard play.

With a 10-0 lead by halftime, the Giants' defense prevailed. Jim Brown, who rushed for a record 1,527 yards in 1958, was held to eight yards on the ground—thanks in part to the tough play of linebacker Sam Huff, who keyed on Brown.

In 1959 Plum prevailed as the Browns' number-one signal caller, despite an early challenge from strong-armed rookie Jim Ninowski, drafted out of Michigan State. Milt clinched his spot after sparking Cleveland to an exhibition win over the Rams.

Afterward, Paul Brown told reporters, "Plum gives the team confidence. I've always been aware of the importance of experience, but I thought I might short-cut it [with Ninowski]. I guess it isn't possible."

With Plum throwing the ball and runners Jim Brown and Bobby Mitchell carrying the pigskin, Cleveland produced a 7-5 record and tied the Eagles for second place. But the powerful Giants won the Eastern Conference with a 10-2 record.

One of Cleveland's fine wins came over the Baltimore Colts, 38-31. In that classic matchup Johnny Unitas passed for four touchdowns while Jim Brown ran for five scores.

The Browns faced third-and-long 11 times in that game. In those situations, Plum hit on eight of 11 passes, including fourth quarter completions to Bobby Mitchell for 17 yards on third-and-five, and to Billy Howton for 19 yards on third-and-nine, the latter play coming with less than two minutes in the game.

Still, Cleveland lost the division because of three tough defeats by a total of six points. The Giants beat the Browns in game three, 10-6. Later, the Browns suffered back-to-back losses at the hands of Pittsburgh and San Francisco, both by scores of 21-20.

In 1960 Plum enjoyed his greatest year. With Ninowski traded to Detroit and Len Dawson as his understudy, Plum produced his first Pro Bowl season. In 12 games he completed 151 of 250 passes for 2,297 yards and 21 TDs.

Also, the former Penn State great put up league-best numbers with his 60.4 percent completion rate and his 9.19 yards gained per passing attempt.

Further, Milt threw only five interceptions, leaving him with a quarterback rating of 110.4. The low interception rate (he threw 8 INTs in 1959 and 10 in 1961) was a planned effort on his part to take fewer risks.

"Nothing can change the shape of a ball game like an intercepted pass," Plum told reporters. "Take a quick example. We have the ball on the 50-yard line, third down and long yardage. One of my receivers looks like he might break away, and I take a chance and throw. But the ball is intercepted on the 30. They have a new lift, and they come out raring to go. This can be the turning point of the ball game.

"Now take the other side of the case. Suppose I take my licks and hang on to the ball. We're still in possession, with another down. We can kick it out of bounds. We've lost the ball, but we've given them no momentum."

Cleveland improved to 8-3-1 in 1960, thanks to a balanced offense. Jim Brown led the NFL's rushers with 1,257 yards, averaging 5.8 yards per carry. Overall, thanks in large part to Plum's excellent skills, the Browns gained 2,044 yards through the air and 1,930 more on the ground.

But again Cleveland suffered tough losses, three by a combined 10 points. In a 31-29 loss to the Eagles, Gern Nagler broke into the open and looked up to haul in Plum's bomb. Instead, Nagler glanced at the

defender and dropped the football. In the 17-17 tie with the St. Louis Cardinals, a game which Cleveland led 17-0 at the half, Sam Baker missed a short field goal.

As a result, the Norm Van Brocklin-led Eagles won the conference with a 10-2 ledger, despite losing game one to the Browns, 41-24. The Eagles then captured the NFL title by stopping the Green Bay Packers, 17-13.

"In 1962," Plum explained, "the Browns traded Bobby Mitchell to Washington for the number one draft choice. The Browns wanted Ernie Davis out of Syracuse. That would give them two big backs, like Jim Taylor and Paul Hornung of Green Bay. But unfortunately, Ernie contracted leukemia, and he never played a down in the NFL. By then I was in Detroit.

"But the whole idea was to run the ball and control the game. We passed the ball here and there to keep the defense off-balance. We threw in the 30s if we were losing, and in the high 20s if we were winning. We just didn't pass that much.

"Basically, with the Browns we relied on one good receiver, Ray Renfro. I wanted the offensive coach to use Bobby Mitchell as a wide receiver, but they kept him in the backfield."

Calling All Plays!

But there was a bigger problem. Paul Brown called all of his team's plays from the bench. The plays entered the game with substitutes, often rotating guards. Plum knew that his coach's play calling hurt the Browns in key situations, because players on the field were not allowed to make adjustments, if they were needed, at the line of scrimmage.

"Paul Brown called all the plays. There were two things. Up until about 1955 or 1956, Brown didn't have any blitzing.

"Also, the Browns didn't have a check-off system. Teams started to realize that the quarterback couldn't do a thing at the line of scrimmage as far as changing the plays. So the quarterback started getting hit a little more by the other teams.

"Paul Brown's theory was, 'Well, we got beat on that play.' He did not want the game in anyone else's hands but his.

"In five years I called two plays of my own.

"I went to Detroit and you could check off the whole play book, which isn't necessary. But you do need five or six plays that you can check off.

"I used to tell this story about the Browns. 'If all the other team's defensive backs went to the men's room, and we had a running play called, we still ran it.'

"If we had a run to the right and all eleven guys stood out there, we still had to run it, or call time out!"

"Also, the Browns didn't have a full-time coaching staff. We had five coaches, and one served as the general manager. At Detroit in 1961, two of the five coaches were part-time. That's the way the NFL operated in those years."

After the 1961 season, Plum was quoted in an AP story as calling Paul Brown's offense *stereotyped*. In short order Cleveland traded Plum to Detroit. He was joined in the trade by rookie running back Tom Watkins and linebacker Dave Lloyd. The Browns received Jim Ninowski (who had earlier been traded to Detroit from Cleveland), running back Hopalong Cassidy, and defensive end Bill Glass.

"A newspaper guy got me traded," Plum explained, "by writing a fictitious story. We met after the season, and he told me that he wanted to write a story about what players do in the off-season. We met in the Browns' office, just the two of us. We talked, but we said hardly anything about the season.

"The story came out in a couple of days and reported that I said, 'If Cleveland had an audible system, we would have won the championship.' Two weeks later I was traded.

"Paul Brown always did everything the same way. He went to Fort Myers, Florida, in January. His whole season was organized the same way. We practiced the same way on the first day, the 5th day, the 20th day, and so on. In January he went to Florida. The article came out. He never called me, or had anyone call me, to ask if the story was true.

"A neighbor came over to our house and said he heard on the radio that I was traded. He asked, 'Why?'

"I said, 'Excuse me. What are you talking about?'"

The Lions

For the next six seasons, Plum gave Detroit his best effort.

"With the Lions, we had good receivers: Gail Cogdill at wide receiver, Terry Barr at flanker, Jim Gibbons at tight end, and Pat Studstill filling in. But we didn't have the great running back. We had Nick Pietrosante. But he wasn't a big back like Jim Brown or Jim Taylor. Pietrosante was a good blocker, but he couldn't carry the whole load."

"So Detroit was always looking for a good running back. They picked up Tom Watkins, Amos Marsh, Joe Don Looney, and others. Also, Detroit often drafted good defensive players, because they had a good defense.

"We drafted good offensive players, but some of those didn't turn out. On top of that, Detroit was not paying much money in the early 1960s, when the new American Football League was offering big salaries."

Plum earned more with Detroit than he did with Cleveland. He signed with Detroit for \$20,000. During his last two years, he earned over \$50,000. Those were good salaries for the time period.

Milt enjoyed success with the Lions, although he was often rotated with another quarterback. For example, under head coach George Wilson, Plum was the usual starter in 1962, but Earl Morrall came off the bench in several games.

- * 1963: Morrall won the starting position, but Plum relieved him in several times
- * 1964: the two signal-callers switched again, with Plum starting most of Detroit's games
- * 1965: under new head coach Harry Gilmer, Morrall was traded, Plum became the starter, and George Izo was the backup
- * 1966: rookie Karl Sweetan started most of the time, but Plum played six games and completed 82 of 156 passes, good for a nifty 56.2 completion rate

Detroit had a very good team in 1962, finishing second in the Western Division to Green Bay (13-1) with an 11-3 record, despite handing the Packers their only loss—the so-called Thanksgiving Day "massacre."

But in 1963, after three straight second-place finishes, Detroit's great defense was crippled by injuries and the suspension of tackle Alex Karras for gambling. As a result, the Lions fell to fourth with a 5-8-1 mark.

In 1964 Detroit's aging defense was not bolstered by a strong enough offense, as Coach Wilson alternated Plum and Morrall at quarterback. Despite improving to 7-5-2, the Lions again finished fourth.

Detroit fared no better under a new head coach in 1965 and 1966. Harry Gilmer's Lions ranked sixth out of seven teams both years, going 6-7-1 in '65 and 4-9-1 in '66.

"Detroit was notorious for changing quarterbacks," Plum observed. "Whenever something went wrong, they yanked the quarterback. It was between Bobby Layne and Tobin Rote, Rote and Earl Morrall, Earl and I, Karl Sweetan and I.

“George Wilson called me in a couple of times and said, ‘Milt, we’ve got to do something. It’s not your fault, but we’ve got to make a change.’

“I was told before I got to Detroit that the newspapers were ruthless. Even if you won, they wanted to dig something up. ‘Why didn’t you win by a bigger score?’ ‘Whose fault was it that you lost?’

“For the papers, it wasn’t enough for Detroit just to win. I got to the point that I wouldn’t do an interview any more. Finally, the P.R. guy came to me and said, ‘We’ll do the interview together. I will proofread it before it gets printed.’ So that’s what we did.

“It was not a good situation in Detroit. I was told by a couple of people when I got traded, ‘When you read the paper Monday, you will think it was a different ball game.’

“As I told you earlier, I was traded due to a fictitious story by a sportswriter. I don’t know what the Detroit press is like today, but writers were vicious in the 1960s.”

Looking Back

Asked about his career highlights, Plum replied, “One of them is that I played professional football for 13 seasons.

“This may surprise you, but my ambition was to play baseball. I almost didn’t go to college. All my life was baseball, baseball, baseball. It came down to, ‘In football, you either make the NFL or you don’t.’

“When I got out of college in June 1957, it was too late to try minor league baseball. At that time pro football started in July. I got drafted number two, so I tried out with the Browns. I made it, and I hung around football for 13 years.

“God gave me the gift for throwing. I threw hard as a catcher, and I threw hard as a quarterback. In tennis I try to hit the ball hard. But I can’t hit a golf ball worth a damn!”

Another highlight was Detroit’s 1962 Thanksgiving Day victory over Green Bay by a final score of 26-14. In that impressive win, Plum threw two touchdown passes to Gail Cogdill. Leading at the half, 23-0, Detroit’s vaunted defense, led by big Roger Brown, hammered Green Bay’s quarterback Bart Starr for 11 sacks.

That Sunday evening, Plum and Cogdill sat in the audience on “The Ed Sullivan Show.” Sullivan introduced them as the heroes of Detroit’s victory over the NFL champion Green Bay Packers.

“Milt Plum is a super guy,” Jim Gibbons recalled. “He had great potential. Milt could do a lot of things really well on the football field. During the years he played for the Lions, the whole team should have played better, but we didn’t. Our lack of a better record certainly wasn’t Milt’s fault.”

Milt is retired, but he keeps busy with golf and family activities. He has a collection of awards, trophies, pictures, and memorabilia such as old Cleveland programs. Last year he was among more than 50 former Browns who signed autographs at a reunion held at Cleveland’s new stadium the Saturday after Thanksgiving.

Following in the footsteps Otto Graham, Plum suffered by comparison when he starred for the Cleveland Browns. An all-around athlete and a fine player who was respected and liked by his teammates, Milt Plum enjoyed some of the best seasons produced by any NFL quarterback in the late 1950s and early 1960s.