

Gary McDermott

This article was written by Greg D. Tranter

Gary McDermott is best remembered as the Buffalo Bills player that would not relinquish jersey No. 32 when O.J. Simpson signed with the team in August 1969. McDermott wore the jersey for Buffalo in 1968 and felt it was his right to keep it. Because of that, Simpson made his NFL debut wearing jersey No. 36 until McDermott was cut prior to the start of the regular season. McDermott was an excellent player at the University of Tulsa for three seasons and played two years in the NFL, one with Buffalo.

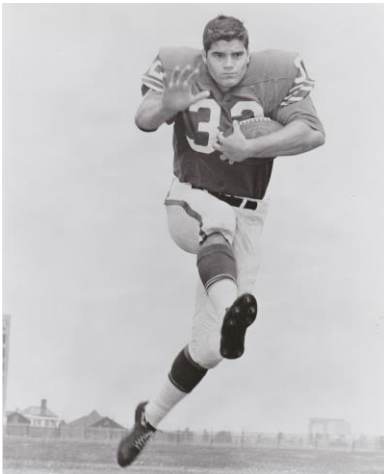


Photo Credit: Robert L. Smith

Gary Don McDermott was born June 9, 1946 in Longview, Texas to Nettie Jean and Marshall M. McDermott. Gary grew up in Longview and attended Judson High School in nearby Converse. He was a three-sport letterman at Judson. McDermott received a football scholarship from the University of Tulsa and enrolled in the fall of 1964.

He played on the Tulsa freshman team in 1964, scoring a touchdown on an 8-yard reception in a loss to Oklahoma. His sophomore season, the Hurricanes won the Missouri Valley Conference Championship, with an overall 8-2 record, behind the nation's top passing game and the country's No. 1 wide receiver in Howard Twilley. Twilley caught 134 passes in ten games. McDermott lettered, while rushing 19 times for 47 yards and catching 14 passes for 112 yards. He was slowed by a hamstring pull put appeared in 9 of the team's 10 regular season games.

Tulsa lost the Bluebonnet Bowl game to Tennessee 27-6. McDermott was a key player in the game both positively and negatively. In a driving rainstorm he scored Tulsa's only



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touchdown on a 1-yard run around left end, tying the game at six in the first quarter. He had his best yardage day of his sophomore season, rushing for 37 yards and catching passes totaling 71 yards. However, he had two fumbles that both led to Volunteer touchdowns in the loss.

Tulsa tied for the Missouri Valley Conference Championship with North Texas State in 1966 but finished the season at only 6-4 and were not invited to a Bowl game. McDermott was the second leading rusher on the team with 315 yards on 70 carries. He also caught 35 passes for 242 yards. His 75-yard touchdown reception against North Texas State spurred the Hurricanes to a 30-27 victory on October 15. He caught 9 passes for 111 yards in the game, and his 75-yard TD reception was the fifth longest in Hurricanes history.

He also sparked Tulsa to a Thanksgiving Day win over Wichita State, earning the Hurricanes a tie for the conference title. He had a nifty 38-yard run on the team's first possession setting up a touchdown. He scored on a one-yard run in the second quarter, putting Tulsa ahead for good as the Hurricanes routed the Shockers 47-14.

McDermott after the season was named to the Missouri Valley Conference All-Academic team. He had a dual major in Health and Physical Education. His coach Glenn Dobbs nicknamed him "Mickey Mac."

Gary's senior season was an up and down affair, though Tulsa finished with a respectable 7-3 record. They had some terrific and surprising victories over Arkansas 14-12 and over #10 ranked Houston 22-13. But there were equally surprising losses to Southern Illinois 16-13 and then a 54-12 smackdown by North Texas State that cost the Hurricanes the conference championship and a bowl game appearance.

McDermott starred in the upset over Arkansas, rushing 19 times for 77 yards as the Tulsa surprised the Razorbacks with a team total 174 rushing yards. Tulsa led the nation the previous five consecutive years in passing yardage but in this game, it was their running that turned the tide in the Hurricanes favor.

Gary missed five games following the team's win over Idaho State on October 7 due to a knee injury. In the five games he missed, the Hurricanes lost two, the upset by Southern Illinois and a disappointing 31-24 loss to Wake Forest. He played in the Hurricanes final three games including the upset of Houston. His final career touchdown was a 3-yard run in the third quarter, in a 35-23 win over Louisville on December 2. He finished his senior season with 227 yards on 74 carries in only five games.



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McDermott was selected to play in the Blue Gray game in Montgomery, Alabama on December 30. His Blue squad won the game 22-16, as he rushed four times for eight yards.

McDermott was a dean's list student and graduated from the University of Tulsa in 1969. Coming out of school the NFL teams considered him a well-rounded back, a good blocker, strong runner, and a good receiver. The Buffalo Bills drafted the 6-foot-1, 210-pound halfback with the eighth pick in the ninth round, 227th overall in the 1968 NFL Draft.

McDermott made his Bills debut in their opening preseason game against the Detroit Lions on August 2. He was the workhorse back carrying the ball 19 times for 50 yards and catching two passes for 11 yards in the Bills 13-9 win. Following his debut McDermott said, "Sure I was nervous. I was very nervous. But after I got into the heat of the battle, I was okay. I wasn't expecting to play that much but I was prepared for it because I know that happens sometimes."ⁱ

McDermott also had a fumble in the fourth quarter at the Lions one-yard line that did not prove costly as the Bills hung on to win. He said, "I didn't have the ball in both arms as I should have. I felt pretty bad. I thought to myself, rookie move. That's what rookies do fumble inside the five-yard line."ⁱⁱ Veteran teammate Keith Lincoln tried to console McDermott. As Gary described it, "He just told me not to worry about it, that it happens to everyone and it is over."ⁱⁱⁱ

He played in the first four preseason games and was the team's top all-around back through those games. He hurt his ankle, at first thought was a dislocation. He only missed one preseason game and was back in time for the Bills regular season opener against the Boston Patriots.

McDermott made his regular season debut against Boston at War Memorial Stadium. Gary touched the football for the first time on a kick-off, following a Patriots field goal, in the second quarter. McDermott caught the ball on the seven-yard line and returned it 16 yards to the Bills 23. Later in the second quarter he got his first carry, running for one yard before being stopped by Patriot defensive end Larry Eisenhauer. He finished his debut with two rushes for minus four yards, one pass reception for seven yards and his 16-yard kick-off return, in the Bills 16-7 defeat.

McDermott threw his first professional pass with the Bills trailing the Oakland Raiders 34-0 in week #2. He took a hand-off from quarterback Dan Darragh, rolled to his right, and lofted a perfectly thrown pass to Ed Rutkowski for a 27-yard gain. Later in the drive, the Bills scored their only touchdown of the game as Bob Cappadonna caught a seven-



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yard pass from Darragh. On the two-point conversion attempt, McDermott ran into the line but was stopped short of the goal line. The Bills lost the game 48-6 and head coach Joe Collier was fired.

The following week against the Cincinnati Bengals Gary scored his first professional touchdown on a nice run around left end for five yards, giving the Bills a 14-10 lead. He also completed another halfback option pass, this time for eight yards.

McDermott was the hero in the Bills 14-14 tie with the Miami Dolphins on October 12. With Buffalo trailing 14-6 late in the fourth quarter, Darragh tossed a three-yard touchdown pass to McDermott cutting the lead to 14-12. Bills emergency quarterback Ed Rutkowski came into the game for the two-point conversion attempt. Rutkowski described the play, "Actually I was supposed to run the ball in, and I think I could have made it. McDermott came out of the halfback spot and I had the option of either hitting him or running and he seemed pretty well covered by Jimmy Warren. The last second I looked up and Warren was coming up to get me....so I flipped it to Gary."^{iv} McDermott said, "I was just about to turn and block on Warren because I was sure that Ed was going to run it in, but the last second I looked and he was throwing the ball."^v And with those two plays from McDermott the Bills had a tie with Miami.

He got his first start on October 27 against the defending AFL East Division champion Houston Oilers. He teamed in the backfield with fellow rookie Mini-Max Anderson. McDermott carried the ball five times for 14 yards and caught three passes for minus ten yards in the Bills 30-7 defeat.

His next start came four weeks later, on November 24 and it was his best game as a Buffalo Bill. With the Bills trailing 28-14 in the fourth quarter and the ball at the Denver four-yard line, McDermott ran the ball three consecutive times. On his third try, he crashed over from two yards out for the touchdown. The Bills converted a two-point conversion and trailed 28-22. Following a blocked punt and with the Bills trailing 31-22 with two minutes remaining, McDermott sprinted around left end for a three-yard TD, cutting the Bills deficit to 31-29, following the extra point.

In a wild affair, the Bills recovered a fumble on the Broncos next possession and Bruce Alford kicked an 18-yard go ahead field goal with 30 seconds left. On the Broncos ensuing possession, quarterback Marlin Briscoe completed a 59-yard pass to Floyd Little and following a five-yard penalty against Buffalo, the Broncos were on the Bills 26-yard line. Bronco place-kicker Bobby Howfield promptly buried a 32-yard field goal with ten seconds left, giving the Broncos an improbable 34-32 victory.



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McDermott played his heart out. To go along with his two touchdowns, he rushed eight times for 25 yards and caught six passes for an additional 78 yards in the heartbreaking loss. He started the next week against the 9-2 Oakland Raiders. In almost a stunning upset, the Bills lost 13-10, as McDermott had his best rushing day as a Bill. He ran for 59 yards on 15 carries. The Bills had two chances to win or tie in the fourth quarter, the first was stopped by a fumble at the goal line by quarterback Ed Rutkowski and the final chance was a missed 42-yard field goal by Bruce Alford with 48 seconds left.

Gary finished his rookie season playing in all 14 games with four starts. He rushed for 102 yards on 47 carries and caught 20 passes for 115 yards. He also completed two of three passes for 35 yards and led the team in touchdowns with four, plus his game tying 2-point conversion. The Bills finished with the worst record in the NFL at 1-12-1 and were awarded the first pick in the 1969 draft, which would net them superstar running back O.J. Simpson.

During the off-season, McDermott married his college sweetheart, the former Judith Ann Thompson.

In the Buffalo Bills 1969 media guide, McDermott was described as, “Showed himself to be a versatile back in rookie season. Was slowed for a time by an elbow dislocation...A good runner...Fine pass receiver and threat on option pass...Needs some work on pass blocking... led the team in touchdowns.”^{vi} Despite Simpson being drafted it appeared he had a good shot to make the team as a back-up running back.

McDermott created some controversy early in the Bills training camp. He wore jersey No. 32 throughout the 1968 season. O.J. Simpson had worn jersey #32 during his Heisman Trophy career at U.S.C. It was thought that because of Simpson’s stature as the #1 pick in the entire draft that McDermott would give up the jersey to Simpson.

Simpson missed the first couple weeks of training camp in a contract dispute with Buffalo. He finally signed his contract, after missing two preseason games, on August 9. When McDermott was approached by the Bills to give up his #32 jersey to Simpson, he said no. Here is how Jack Horrigan, Buffalo Bills Public Relations Director related the story. “The night he arrived (Simpson) for training camp I drove out to the airport to pick him up. Now, we had a kid halfback named Gary McDermott who wore jersey No. 32 and it never occurred to me that McDermott would hang us up about that number, 32. We were figuring, of course, on O.J. wearing it. But McDermott just bucked, said No. 32 was his and he wasn’t about to give it up to a rookie ballplayer.”^{vii}

“Yes, I have to say it bothered me a little. When I got O.J. to the car at the airport, I told him about the hang-up. I said, I know how you feel about wearing No. 32, and how



U.S.C. has retired that number now that you're gone. If you want to make something of this, I know it will be resolved in your favor."^{viii} "Well O.J. got real quiet for a moment and then he said to me. 'Mr. Horrigan, I didn't come here to Buffalo to wear a number I came to play football.'"^{ix} The issue was resolved, and McDermott wore No. 32 for the remainder of the preseason games and O.J. donned jersey No. 36.

McDermott played in all six of the Bills preseason games, as the team struggled winning only one. The highlight of his preseason was a 25-yard touchdown reception from Tom Flores in the Bears game on August 30. The TD cut the Bills deficit to 17-13 but they went on to lose to Chicago 23-16.

Gary was the Bills final cut. He was released on September 11, only three days before their opening game. With his release O.J. was given jersey No. 32, the number he wore for the remainder of his NFL career. Simpson played four preseason games wearing No. 36.

McDermott was signed later in the season by the Atlanta Falcons. He played in the Falcons final four games of the regular season. He rushed the ball seven times for six yards. The highlight of his Falcons tenure was getting hit in the helmet with a snowball from angry Philadelphia fans in the Eagles season finale at Franklin Field. The Falcons trounced the Eagles 27-3, as the Philly fans displayed their hostilities.

He spent his off-season as a deputy sheriff in Covington, Georgia. The Falcons kept McDermott on the squad, and he attended the first few weeks of training camp in 1970 but was cut on August 4. His football career was over.

He joined the Secret Service following his football career.

End Notes:

ⁱ AP, "Rookie from Tulsa Thrown to the Lions," *The Oklahoma City Times*, August 6, 1968, p11

ⁱⁱ AP, "Rookie from Tulsa Thrown to the Lions," *The Oklahoma City Times*, August 6, 1968, p11

ⁱⁱⁱ AP, "Rookie from Tulsa Thrown to the Lions," *The Oklahoma City Times*, August 6, 1968, p11

^{iv} Dilley, Ans, "Darragh's Bad Wheels Make Rutkowski Hero," *Fort Lauderdale News*, October 14, 1968, p46

^v Dilley, Ans, "Darragh's Bad Wheels Make Rutkowski Hero," *Fort Lauderdale News*, October 14, 1968, p46

^{vi} Buffalo Bills 1969 Media Guide, p30

^{vii} Nason, Jerry, "AFL Brethren High on O.J.," *The Boston Globe*, November 21, 1969, p29

^{viii} Nason, Jerry, "AFL Brethren High on O.J.," *The Boston Globe*, November 21, 1969, p29

^{ix} Nason, Jerry, "AFL Brethren High on O.J.," *The Boston Globe*, November 21, 1969, p29