

JOHNNY BLOOD: THE VAGABOND HALFBACK

By Jack Henry
[From *Pittsburgh Steelers Weekly*]

Most graybeard football fans are now willing to concede that the calibre of play in the National Football League has improved over the span of the past six decades. However, some continue to contend that the present-day performers are not as colorful as those in earlier years.

On such grounds as that they may be correct and an illustration to prove such a point would be the former Steeler player-coach, Johnny Blood. In more modern times there have been such characters as Tim Rossovich, Dick Butkus, and Joe Don Looney but none really matched the eccentric Blood, who was one of a kind.

They called him the Vagabond Halfback and the Magnificent Screwball but actually he was the one and only genuine Peter Pan of pro football. He put in 15 years in the NFL, was chosen for the Hall of Fame in 1963, and even attempted a comeback as a player when he was 42 years of age.

Johnny Blood's real name was John V. McNally and he came from a wealthy family of newspaper publishers and papermill owners and he never needed to play football for a living. But that didn't stop him. In fact when he still had a year of eligibility at St. John's College in Minnesota he decided along with his buddy, Ralph Hanson, to sneak in some pro activity with the East 26th Street Liberties of Minneapolis.

Both McNally and Hanson knew the custom of the day was for college players to dabble in pro football under such assumed names as Smith or Jones. Young McNally varied the routine. He spotted a theatre marquee billing Rudolph Valentino in the film "Blood and Sand" and immediately picked Blood as his name and induced Hanson to switch his to Sand. From that day forward, Johnny signed all documents Johnny Blood.

Veteran Pittsburgh fans never will forget when Blood arrived in 1937 to be player-coach of the Steelers (then known as the Pirates) to succeed Joe Bach. The season inaugural was with the Philadelphia Eagles and on the opening kickoff Blood galloped 92 yards for a touchdown. No player-coach in NFL history ever had a more spectacular debut than that.

Blood had been with Pittsburgh earlier as a halfback for Coach Luby DiMelio in 1934, but his tenure was short and he returned to Green Bay where his memory was ever-green as a big factor in Curly Lambeau's championship years.

It was back in 1929 that Lambeau had figured he had a squad that could win the NFL title if he could add Blood, Cal Hubbard, and Mike Michalske. Curly lured Blood away from the Pottsville Maroons, induced Hubbard to leave the New York Giants, and picked up Michalske when the New York Yankee franchise began to dissolve. Lambeau's judgment was correct and he went on to coaching glory.

Prior to service under Wilbur (Fats) Henry at Pottsville, Blood had played for John Bryant with the Milwaukee Badgers and Ernie Nevers with the Duluth Eskimos. His biggest days, though, were at Green Bay and it was on the basis of his exploits for Lambeau that he attained the Hall of Fame.

Blood was a scrawny kid in high school and disappointed his father by not excelling in athletics at that time. The explanation should have been obvious since Johnny graduated from high school at 14 and was not sufficiently mature to hold his own physically with his contemporaries. However, by the time he hit the NFL he was 6 feet 2 and scaled 198 pounds.

In his prime Blood was a superb runner, excellent kicker and passer, better than average blocker, a deadly tackler and the best pass catcher in the pro league until Don Hutson came along. Some observers still argue that not even the brilliant Hutson could make more impossible catches than Johnny.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 1, No. 7 (1979)

Blood held all the major NFL pass-receiving records until Hutson joined him on the Packer roster. When Hutson arrived Blood was 32 years old but the youthful Alabama sensation could only beat him by a foot or so in the 100-yard dash. Blood in his 20's would have outrun Hutson by yards to spare.

Green Bay patrons remember a game against the Providence Steam Roller when the Packers had the ball on their own 15-yard line. One play --called the 69 -- was one in which the fullback would take a handoff from Blood while the end faked taking a handoff on an end-around. Another version was the 69-X in which Blood would fake a handoff to the fullback and instead give the ball to the end on the reverse.

In the huddle Blood called 69-XX. His teammates quickly reminded him that they had no such play. "You do now," said Johnny. "Just go through with the 69 sequence and I'll do the rest."

The play worked when Blood faked to the fullback and then faked to the end on the end-around. Blood then tucked the ball under his arm and whirled his way 85 yards for a touchdown. During his career with the Packers, Blood reached pay dirt 37 times.

Once when the Packers clinched a league championship a victory party was held on the train back to Wisconsin. Blood reeled off some antics that enraged the towering end, LaVern Dilweg. LaVern chased Blood from the club car through all the other cars and figured he had him trapped on the rear platform. Football's Peter Pan then hoisted himself on top of the moving train. Dilweg sensibly gave up pursuit and Blood made his way back on the top of the train and dropped into the cab to startle the engineer and fireman. They were entertained by him for the remainder of the trip.

Although Blood never had the need to make money from football he was not against turning a quick maneuver. For example, late in the 1932 season he figured an American pro team would be an attraction in Hawaii. He cabled the sports editor of the Honolulu Star-Advertiser and suggested a New Year's Day event matching Green Bay with a Hawaiian All-Star outfit.

Meanwhile, Blood delivered a sales pitch to Lambeau, who said he would be in favor of a post-season game as long as Green Bay received a \$9,000 guarantee. Blood then sent a second cable to the Honolulu newspaper explaining that the Packers would perform for a \$10,000 guarantee or 50 percent of the gate, whichever was higher.

The offer was okayed and the game was played. Blood turned over \$10,000 to Lambeau, who was delighted to pick up more than he had bargained for. The 50 percent of the gross brought in \$1,200 additional, which Blood cheerfully pocketed.

The story is often told, on one occasion Blood while player-coach for Pittsburgh attended a Sunday game in Los Angeles. Friends in the pressbox questioned Blood as to why he was on the West Coast and Blood replied that the Steelers had an open date. The scoreboard showed otherwise. Pittsburgh was in action without the boss being present. Such curious memory lapses or nonchalance frequently kept Johnny in hot water.

Getting back to collegiate days, Blood, at the close of his junior year at St. John's, suddenly decided he would like to become a Knute Rockne protege at Notre Dame. Reasoning that Notre Dame officials knew nothing about him, he enrolled as a freshman and eventually reported for the yearling squad handled by George Keogan.

Keogan, who became better known in later years as the varsity basketball coach of the Fighting Irish, believed Blood could be useful but wanted him to be a tackle. Blood insisted he was the fastest man on the South Bend campus and wanted no part of an assignment in the line.

Keogan tossed Blood off the squad, but he remained for a spell at Notre Dame, playing basketball at the South Bend YMCA and helping quarterback Harry Stuhldreher with his poetry assignments.

After World War II service in the China-India-Burma theater Blood returned to pro football. He was 42, but he finally became convinced that he was too long in the tooth and returned to St. John's College to earn his degree 26 years late.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 1, No. 7 (1979)

His mind evidently returned to the closing days of his player-coaching tenure at Pittsburgh. It was then his habit to inject himself into the lineup in the late stages of a game, annoying his teammates who wished to reject him as an incoming substitute.

In retrospect, few members of the pro Hall of Fame can show better credentials than Blood did when he was honored in 1963. Certainly no other member was as unpredictable. Probably his wife Marguerite Streater McNally, put it best when she said: "Even when Johnny does the expected, he does it in an unexpected way."

This was true even when publishers convinced him to write a book. Everyone figured it would be a saga on football. Instead, it was a highly rated effort on the Malthusian theories of economics.

* * * * *

McNALLY, John V.

(Johnny Blood; The Vagabond Halfback)

Position: HB-BB-DB-TB-WB-FB

Born: November 27, 1904, at New Richmond, WI

Died: November 28, 1986, at Palm Springs, CA

6-1, 188. College: St. John's (MN); Notre Dame

Pro Career: 14 years: 1925 Milwaukee Badgers; 1926-27 Duluth Eskimos; 1928 Pottsville Maroons; 1929-33, 1935-36 Green Bay Packers; 1934, 1937-38 (player-coach) Pittsburgh Pirates
1931 All-NFL 1st team, Official Team

Chosen by Hall of Fame Selection Committee to All-1920s Team

Charter Member of Pro Football Hall of Fame 1963