

## **GEORGE McAFEE: "ONE-PLAY"**

By Bob Barnett & Bob Carroll

On the northern edge of Ironton, Ohio, a town of about 15,000 people located 140 miles upriver from Cincinnati there is a sign which says, "Ironton, Ohio, birthplace of George McAfee, member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame."

Everyone in this part of the Ohio Valley knows Ironton as a football town annually producing one of the top-rated high school football teams in the state. Some people also recall that during the 1920s Ironton had a great semi-pro team called the Tanks, who in 12 seasons compiled 85 wins and only 19 losses against other semi-pro squads and even NFL teams. In 1930, the Tanks' final season, they had the audacity to challenge -- and beat -- the Portsmouth Spartans, New York Giants, and Chicago Bears.

"I can remember seeing the Tanks play when I was a child," said McAfee recently. "They were tough. I still can't understand why Glenn Presnell (the Tanks' star and later an All-Pro with the Portsmouth Spartans and Detroit Lions) is not in the Hall of Fame."

McAfee, who was actually born in Corbin, KY, on March 13, 1918, but the family soon moved across the river to Ironton. He was 11 years old when the Tanks disbanded. He later was a prep football star at Ironton High School and an All-America at Duke University in Durham, NC. But how did he get into the Pro Football Hall of Fame? Anyone knowing no more about the great Bear runner than his career totals might well ask this question.

There are -- as Harry Truman once remarked -- lies, damned lies, and statistics. He might have been talking about George McAfee. From 1940 to 1950, he gained only 1,685 yards rushing. Sure, he lost almost four years to World War II, but his best rushing season totaled only 474 yards -- a month's work for Walter Payton. But stats are only one part of the story -- in McAfee's case, a very small part.

He was, for a time, the most dangerous weapon in football. They called him "One-Play" because he was likely to go all the way any time he handled the ball. George Halas traded three experienced linemen to Philadelphia for McAfee after the Eagles made him their number one draft pick in 1940.

But, when the Bear owner first saw McAfee he must have wondered whether the reed-thin 165-pound halfback would last more than "one-play" in the NFL.

The answer came in a practice scrimmage at training camp. Quarterback Sid Luckman called a dive play and the linebacker saw it coming. "Oh, oh," moaned Halas, "that kid will get killed!" The "kid" zipped into the hole on one side and the linebacker crashed in on the other. The kid gave the linebacker a leg, took it away, and was gone far down the field. The linebacker lay in the hole with the dirt he'd tackled.

"I think we've got something here," said Halas.

What they had was a jet-propelled dervish who could dart through a pinhole, cut like a high-price surgeon, keep his balance better than any C.P.A., and be 40 yards downfield before a safety could yell, "Here he comes!"

But Mac was more than just a runner. He played for the Bears during the 1940s, an era in pro football when triple threat backs were common and players played both offense and defense. What made McAfee unique was that he could do everything, and do it well.

His rookie year (1940) with the Bears was a season which today's over-specialized pro football players can only dream about. In his first game with the Bears, he returned a kickoff 93 yards for a touchdown. McAfee didn't often return kickoffs; teams seldom got the opportunity to boot more than once or twice to the Bears in those days. The Bruins of the early '40s were so good they made peanut butter out of the rest of the league and so deep that even McAfee seldom played more than half a game.

He did return a lot of punts, and at this specialty he was among the best who ever lived. It took nearly 30 years and a couple of rule changes before anyone could top his career average per return.

Besides returning kickoffs and punts, he rushed for 253 yards, threw two touchdown passes, caught seven passes for 117 yards (16.7 yards per catch), punted and played defensive halfback.

The 1940 Bears won the Western Division championship with an 8-3 record and crushed the Washington Redskins 73-0 in the NFL Championship Game. McAfee scored on a 35-yard interception.

"My biggest game was that 1940 championship. The Redskins had beaten us 7-3 three weeks before in Washington. To come back and beat them 73-0 for

the championship was a great thrill," McAfee recalled recently.

If possible, the 1941 season was even better for the Bears and McAfee. The Bears won 10 of 11 regular season games, beat the Green Bay Packers in a playoff for the Western Division championship, and beat the New York Giants 24-14 in the NFL Championship Game. Mac's performance was equally outstanding. He rushed for 474 yards (7.2 yards per carry), caught seven passes for 144 yards (20.5 per catch), intercepted six passes, punted, ran back kickoffs and punts, threw a touchdown pass, and scored 12 touchdowns. Obviously he was named to every All-Pro team.

Other backs began wearing lowcuts in imitation of Mac, but they only resembled him in photographs. In action he was a blur.

The United States entrance into World War II near the end of the 1941 season erased almost four seasons from McAfee's playing career. Soon after the 1941 championship game Mac enlisted in the United States Navy. "I didn't want to be drafted. I enlisted as did so many other young men at the time," recalls McAfee. "I felt like it was my duty and the thing to do."

In August, 1945 he was on a ship bound for Hawaii and the Pacific War when the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan. The war ended and McAfee was discharged in time to join the Bears for the final three games of the 1945 season. But could he still play pro football? The question was quickly answered. After four days of practice, he went in against the Steelers for a little exercise.

"Take it easy, George," Halas warned. "You're not ready to play."

"I understand, Coach," said Mac. He "exercised" for 12 minutes, running the ball only five times. The result was 105 yards and three touchdowns.

Obviously World War II hadn't hurt his speed, but in 1946 a knee injury kept him out of all but three games. That injury also changed his career. "After I hurt my knee I couldn't run like I had before so I was happy to play mostly defense," said McAfee. Even with the injured knee he ran for 392 yards, caught 17 passes for 227 yards, and scored eight touchdowns in 1947. The following season he intercepted six passes. He retired following the 1950 season.

Since then, more runners have been labeled "great" than soup cans have been labeled "Heinz." Where does that leave "One-Play?" Halas had a stock answer: "The highest compliment you can pay a ball carrier is just to compare him to McAfee."

"I retired from pro football after the 1950 season. I just felt I like I had enough. It was a long season and I had a couple of small children and a business to run. I had just had enough," said McAfee. "I got into the oil business the year before I left the Bears" -- a Shell Oil distributorship in Durham -- "so I blended into the business world. I didn't miss playing pro football."

He continued to operate his distributorship until 1981. He is now retired and continues to live in Durham. "Pro football was a wonderful part of my life," McAfee said. "I thoroughly enjoyed my association with the Bears. But it was a part of my life just like college was a part, business was another part, and I am in another part now that I'm retired. You had better believe there is a life after pro football, and it is a good life. I have a lovely wife, nice children, and we are happy as larks down here in Durham."

McAfee, however, hasn't forgotten his Ironton days. "You tell those people in Ironton that I will be back for 'Sports Day' this summer (1984). I wouldn't miss it," McAfee said. "Is that sign still up on the edge of town?"

## **McAFEE, George Anderson (One-Play)**

Position: HB-DB

Born: March 13, 1918, in Corbin, KY

Height: 6-0 Weight: 177 College: Duke (1937-38-39)

College Honors: Named to several All-America teams

Named to National Football Foundation Hall of Fame

Draft Choice: First round Phila. 1940 (Traded to Chicago Bears)

Pro Honors:

1940 All-NFL New York News 2nd team

1941 All-NFL Official Team, A.P., U.P. N.Y. News, all 1st team

1948 All-NFL U.P., N.Y. News, both 2nd team

Inducted in Pro Football Hall of Fame 1966

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YEAR	TEAM	LG	GM	====RUSHING=====				PASS RECEIVING=				TOT
				ATT	YDS	AVG	TD	NO	YDS	AVG	TD	INT
1940	ChiB	N	10	47	253	5.4	2	7	117	16.7	0	na
1941	ChiB	N	10	65	474	*7.3	6	7	144	20.6	3	6
			1942-44 Military Service									
1945	ChiB	N	3	16	139	8.6	3	3	85	28.3	1	1
1946	ChiB	N	3	14	53	3.8	0	10	137	13.7	3	3
1947	ChiB	N	12	63	209	3.3	3	32	490	15.3	1	1
1948	ChiB	N	12	92	392	4.3	5	17	227	13.4	2	2
1949	ChiB	N	12	42	161	3.8	3	9	157	17.4	1	6
1950	ChiB	N	12	2	4	2.0	0	-	-	-	-	2
8 years			74	341	1685	4.9	22	85	1357	16.0	11	21

YEAR	TEAM	LG	GM	==KO RETURNS==				=====SCORING=====						
				NO	YDS	AVG	T	TD	XP	XA	FG	FA	PTS	
1940	ChiB	N	10	na	na	na	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	18
1941	ChiB	N	10	na	na	na	1	*12	0	0	0	0	0	72
			1942-44 Military Service											
1945	ChiB	N	3	5	98	19.6	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	24
1946	ChiB	N	3	3	96	32.0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	18
1947	ChiB	N	12	1	23	23.0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	24
1948	ChiB	N	12	1	25	25.0	0	8	0	0	0	0	0	48
1949	ChiB	N	12	-	-	-	-	5	0	0	0	0	0	30
1950	ChiB	N	12	1	23	23.0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
8 years			74	11	265	14.0	2	39	0	0	0	0	0	234

YEAR	TEAM	LG	GM	=====PASSING=====						PUNTING	
				ATT	COM	PCT.	YARD	TD	IN	NO	AVG
1940	ChiB	N	10	11	4	36.4	50	2	0	22	39.0
1941	ChiB	N	10	3	1	33.3	44	1	0	12	35.8
			1942-44 Military Service								
1945	ChiB	N	3	1	0	00.0	0	0	0	2	31.0
1946	ChiB	N	3	2	1	50.0	0	0	0	-	-
1947	ChiB	N	12	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	35.5
1948	ChiB	N	12	4	0	00.0	0	0	0	1	18.0
1949	ChiB	N	12	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1950	ChiB	N	12	1	0	00.0	0	0	1	-	-
8 years			74	22	6	27.3	94	3	1	39	36.9

YEAR	TEAM	LG	GM	=PUNT RETURNS=			
				NO	YDS	AVG	T
1940	ChiB	N	10	na	na	na	0
1941	ChiB	N	10	5	158	31.6	1
			1942-44 Military Service				
1945	ChiB	N	3	1	8	8.0	0
1946	ChiB	N	3	1	24	24.0	0
1947	ChiB	N	12	18	261	14.5	0
1948	ChiB	N	12	*30	*417	13.9	1
1949	ChiB	N	12	24	279	11.6	0
1950	ChiB	N	12	*33	284	8.6	0
8 years			74	112	1431	12.8	2