

FRANKIE ALBERT: "MR. 49ER"

By Joseph Hession

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He was called "the T-Formation Wizard" and for good reason. Frankie Albert threw 88 touchdown passes in four years of All-America Football Conference play, the league record.

Other than Otto Graham, a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, no one came close to that. Remember, that was the era of three yards and a cloud of dust, a time when throwing the football was akin to witchcraft. And maybe that's why Frankie Albert was called the wizard. He certainly could throw a football.

In 1948, he led the wildest offense in the nation, throwing 29 touchdown passes in 14 games. That was a 49er single season record that stood until 1965 when John Brodie threw for 30, the current record.

At 5-9 and 170 pounds, the southpaw from Stanford didn't look like a football player. But on the field his wide array of talents took over. He could run, throw, kick and handle the ball like a magician. With Albert in control, the ball disappeared more times than a rabbit in a vaudeville show – now you see it, now you don't.

"I guess my ability to handle the ball made me effective," he said modestly. "I was pretty good on a bootleg. I could hide the ball and run it if I had to."

But running the football wasn't what made Albert one of the highest paid players in the old league. It was tossing the pigskin. He credits Alyn Beals, a Santa Clara graduate, for helping him set the record for touchdown passes in a season. Beals caught 14 scoring passes in 1948, the AAFC record. The next year he caught 12 touchdown passes. Gene Washington and Dave Parks share the "official" 49er single season record set in the NFL with 12 touchdown catches.

"Beals was my main receiver," said Albert. "Boy, did he have some great moves! He was a good faker. I can remember several times setting up to pass and watching the defensive back fall down after Alyn put a fake on him. The back would trip over his own feet. I'd look at the defensive man lying on his butt while Alyn was wide open."

Albert was not just an offensive whiz; he mixed it up on defense as well. Against the Cleveland and Otto Graham you could generally find Albert in the defensive secondary.

"I enjoyed playing defense," he said. "I didn't do it as often as I would have liked. I played back there in some of the important games like against the Browns."

Cleveland became the 49ers first great rival. In the AAFC every game against them was important. Four times between 1946 and 1949, the 49ers finished second to the Browns. In the 1949 AAFC Championship Game, Cleveland beat San Francisco 21-7.

"When we played Cleveland it was like the Stanford-Cal game here," Albert said. "It was a real big rivalry. Whenever we beat them it was a big thrill for me."

Albert had one of the best games of his career against the Browns. The year was 1949. San Francisco was on a roll. They had won four of their first five games and averaged 35 points per contest. When the 49ers battled Cleveland at Kezar that day, Albert could do no wrong. He threw five touchdown passes as the 49ers whipped the Browns 56-28.

In 1951, San Francisco acquired Y.A. Tittle from Baltimore. The two quarterbacks alternated for two years before Albert decided to retire in 1952.

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"When he arrived there was quite a rivalry for the quarterback position," he said. "Of course, he was already an established star. I guess you could say there was a quarterback controversy. Whenever I see him now, I tell him he sent me to Canada."

Within a year after retiring from the 49ers, Albert went back to work for the Calgary Stampeders of the Canadian Football League.

"I was just getting into the car business," said Albert, "and it was a little slow at first. The Stampeders offered me more money than I ever made in the NFL, so I went up there for a year. We played two games a week, one on a Saturday and one on Monday. That was because the farmers would come to town on the weekends. They'd get drunk, go to the games and raise hell."

Albert returned to the states and was made an assistant coach of the 49ers in 1955 under head coach Red Strader. The team floundered under Strader, and Albert was thrown into the fire the next year when he was made the head coach.

"I liked certain aspects of coaching," he said impassively. "I enjoyed teaching the kids."

Albert lasted three years as the 49ers' head coach. His overall record was 19-17-1. In 1957, he guided the team to an 8-4 season and a playoff against Detroit. But that game ended in another agonizing loss when the Lions rallied from a 27-7 deficit, to beat the 49ers 31-27.

"I still can't believe that game," he said in disgust. "We were ahead and started playing conservative. That's what killed us. They scored once, then they scored twice, and the next thing you know they were ahead. It was embarrassing. It just goes to show you how quickly things can happen on a football field."

Although the 49ers came close to winning a championship several times with Albert at the helm, either as a quarterback or a coach, they never quite made it. That frustration is offset by the camaraderie and friendships Albert established as one of the original 49ers.

"There were some real characters on those teams," he said. "Bob St. Clair was one of them. He used to eat raw meat. We'd go to a nice restaurant and he liked beef so he'd order a steak or something. He'd tell the waiter to just have the chef heat the meat. He didn't want it cooked, just warmed up. A few minutes later the chef would look out from the kitchen to see who was ordering their meat like that.

"He's one of the few guys from the old teams that could be playing today. He was that good. And he had the size (6-9, 265). Besides Bob, Leo Nomellini was a good one on the line. In his later years he played only defense, but he was a pretty good offensive lineman too.

Behind those 49er lines were two of the most explosive running backs to ever strap on shoulder pads. Albert cultivated a reputation as an unpredictable gambler on the football field, but he admits that with Hugh McElhenny and Joe Perry in the backfield it was much easier to do the unexpected.

"I had good players to gamble with," he said. "You can't compare many backfields with Mac and Joe Perry. Mac was the best open field runner from the T that ever played. Perry was a different runner. He was good straight ahead. Mac was always zigging and zagging around the field."

Albert played alongside some of the NFL's biggest stars. Several teammates and opponents are in the Hall of Fame. When he watches the current 49er team he is reminded of the great quarterbacks of football's past.

"I wasn't bad as a scrambler or ball-handler, but after watching Montana play I don't think I could carry that guy's helmet," said Albert. "I've seen some great quarterbacks, Otto Graham, Bob Waterfield, Norm Van Brocklin and I'd say Montana ranks with the top two or three to ever play the game. When things break down and people start to scatter, he's at his best. He can get out of trouble and do things no other quarterback can do. He makes plays out of nothing. That's a gift."

