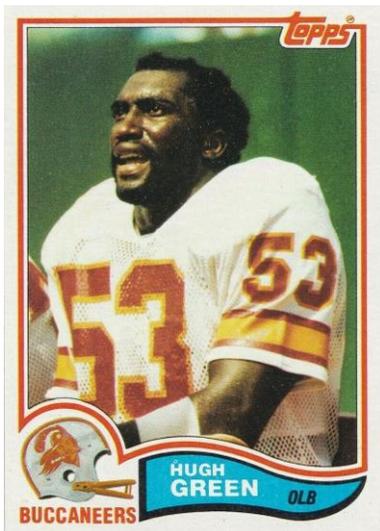




## Hugh Green

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

When Hugh Green took the field, the momentum changed in favor of the defense. Green was, simply put, a relentless defender, utilizing his speed, natural strength, and profound football intelligence to wreak havoc. Green's former college coach Jackie Sherrill described his play as, "Hugh has one speed: full. He's so reckless and so quick. Nobody in college football can block him."<sup>1</sup> Flying sideline-to-sideline, shedding blocks, and harassing the quarterback were among Green's routine duties. He never took a play off during his 11-year NFL career with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Miami Dolphins.



Born on July 27, 1959, in Natchez, Mississippi, Hugh Donnell Green attended North Natchez High School prior to matriculation to the University of Pittsburgh. Raised by his aunt and uncle, Green's father died when he was six, leading him to experience a childhood that caused him to mature rapidly. By his teenage years, he learned the concept of self-sufficiency.<sup>2</sup> Green took up athletics in his free time, discovering his natural abilities in football. As a result, Green was heavily recruited, earning several flashy accolades in Mississippi including Defensive Player of the Year (1976), and All Area & All Big Eight Lineman (1976), his senior season. Green was also inducted into the Mississippi Sports Hall-of-Fame in 2009.<sup>3</sup>

He initially signed a letter to play for Mississippi State, until Jackie Sherrill swayed him to attend Pitt.<sup>4</sup> What sold Green was the fact that the Panthers went 12-0 in 1976 and were the consensus national champions. It was a turning point for Green because his four



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year college career (1977-1980) was remarkable. A key cog to arguably one of the greatest college teams at the time, which was loaded with future NFL talent. Green played alongside future pro football hall-of-famers Russ Grimm, Jimbo Covert, Ricky Jackson, and Dan Marino.<sup>5</sup> By his senior season, he morphed into the college football's premier defensive player. *Sports Illustrated* labeled Green as the "Baddest Cat in the Game" on the preseason ranked number one team in 1980.<sup>6</sup>

Green played an indispensable role on the Pitt defense. He started as a true freshman at defensive end, despite being undersized at 6' 2" and 220 pounds.<sup>7</sup> In his first ever game, against Notre Dame, Green blocked a punt, recorded 11 tackles, and two sacks. His spotlight worthy performance turned heads, and at season's end, earned him a second-team All-American selection.<sup>8</sup> Then Tampa Bay Bucs head coach John McKay said of Green, "Hugh Green is the most productive player at his position I have ever seen in college".<sup>9</sup>

Green followed up his freshman campaign with even more productivity. He was a three-time, first-team All-American, reeling in the awards and accolades: Walter Camp, Maxwell, and Lombardi awards. Green was also a four-time All-East selection, the *Sporting News* Player of the Year (1980), UPI Player of the Year (1980) and Lineman of the Year (1980).<sup>10</sup> Said linebacker teammate Sal Sunseri of Green, "People were petrified of Green. But they couldn't run away from him because we had Rickey Jackson on the other side of the line."<sup>11</sup> Green finished his career totaling 53 sacks, 52 tackles for loss, and 460 total tackles.<sup>12</sup> At halftime during his final home game on November 8, 1980, the Panthers retired his number 99.

The 1980 Heisman trophy voting was hotly contested between Green and South Carolina running back George Rogers. Green finished in second place finish, which was the highest ever by a defensive player.<sup>13</sup> Green had the last laugh during his final collegiate game, the 1980 Gator Bowl. The Panthers took it to the South Carolina Gamecocks, 37-9. Led by Green, the Pitt defense contained Rogers as Pittsburgh outrushed South Carolina, 165 to 116.<sup>14</sup>

Green's legacy left him in the minds of football fans as one of the greatest of all-time. Former Pitt assistant coach, and Miami Hurricanes and Dallas Cowboys head coach Jimmy Johnson said regarding Green, "Whatever you ask him to do on the football field, he'll do it better than anybody has ever done it before. You can build your entire defense around him. Heck, you can build your entire team around him. If Hugh Green is on your team, you're automatically one of the finest in the country."<sup>15</sup> He is arguably the greatest defensive player in college football history. As a result, Green was inducted into the College Football Hall-of-Fame in 1996. Green's success in college primed him for a solid NFL career.



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Drafted seventh overall in the 1981 NFL draft by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, he set out to repeat his success, with the struggling Bucs. Tampa Bay's head coach, John McKay was extremely high on Green's abilities. McKay converted him to outside linebacker from his defensive end role in college. Starting in all 16 games as a rookie, Green joined the linebacker corps of Andy Hawkins, Cecil Johnson, and Richard Wood in Tampa's 3-4 defense. The defense was young, no starter over the age of 29.<sup>16</sup> The lack of experience did not show, as the Bucs were fourth in points allowed, leading to a 9-7 record, and playoff appearance.<sup>17</sup> Green accounted for three total turnovers: recovering a fumble, and nabbing two interceptions.

The strike-shortened 1982 season saw the Bucs' defense rank third in yards allowed, producing a 5-4 record and playoff appearance.<sup>18</sup> Green was an All-Conference choice, earning a Pro Bowl selection, and honors to several all-pro teams. He saved his best performance of the year for the playoffs, in the wild card round against the Dallas Cowboys, when he returned a sack fumble of quarterback Danny White, 60-yards for a touchdown.<sup>19</sup>

The Bucs regressed to marks of 2-14 and 6-10 in 1983 and 1984, respectively, but Green continued to produce. He was the top defensive performer on the team in 1983, as he was selected to the Pro Bowl for consecutive seasons. Green was also recognized as an All-Conference player by *Pro Football Weekly* and the UPI and a first-team all-pro by the *Sporting News*.<sup>20</sup> His best game in 1983 was on October 16 in a 34-27 loss to the St. Louis Cardinals. Green recorded one-and-a-half sacks of Cardinals' QB Neil Lomax, and picked off one of his passes, which he returned 33-yards for a score.<sup>21</sup>

Midway through the 1984 season, Green was injured in a car accident. After sustaining a skull fracture and thigh injury, he missed the remaining eight games of the season.<sup>22</sup> The injury marked a turning point in his NFL career. Just five games into the 1985 season, Green was traded to the Miami Dolphins for first and second round draft choices in the 1986 NFL draft. The trade was considered by many as a blockbuster deal. No doubt it was the largest in Dolphin's history at the time. Miami was consistently on the cusp of contending for the playoffs. They felt adding Green was a move that could take them to the playoffs.<sup>23</sup> Immediately, the move paid off as Green finished the season with 7.5 sacks, and Miami went 8-3, leading to a 12-4 mark and AFC East division title.

Green once again fought with injuries the next two seasons, playing in just four games. He rebounded to play in all 16 games each year from 1988-1990, and retired following the 1991 season. For his career, he appeared in 136 career games, starting in 119. He recorded a career 34.5 sacks, hauled in six interceptions, and tallied two defensive scores.<sup>24</sup>



Following his playing career, Green returned to his home state of Mississippi. He dabbled a bit in coaching professionally with several teams, and has made several media appearances for his alma mater. With his success at the collegiate and professional levels, no doubt Green is a football legend, and a once-in-a-generation type of player.

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