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Richie McCabe

The article was written by Budd Bailey.

Richie McCabe at some point in his life probably thought he'd spend his entire life in Pittsburgh. After all, he was born in Pittsburgh. He went to high school in Pittsburgh. He went to college in Pittsburgh. His first job out of school was in Pittsburgh.

That's when he found out that you'd better have your bags packed if you stay in the football business. That's particularly true for assistant coaches, who usually move to advance up the ladder or are dismissed as a group after a difficult season. Even so, Richie must have loved it – because he was a true football lifer.

Richard Paul McCabe was born on March 12, 1933, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His parents were named Earl and Sophia. While Earl was an office clerk for Allegany Township, Sophia was busy at home. She was *really* busy – according to the 1940 census, they already had seven children. Richie was number five on the list.¹



The family stayed in Pittsburgh, and lived in “The Ward.” That part of town used to be known as Allegany City, but it was annexed by the city of Pittsburgh in a relatively



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controversial move in 1907. Richie followed a typical educational track in that neighborhood on the north side of town – St. Peter’s grade school, followed by North Catholic High School. He became one of the best football players in the high school’s history. (Five have reached the NFL over the years, including Joey Porter Jr. – a second-round pick of the Steelers in 2023.) McCabe played running back and defensive back for the Trojans. Richie’s brother Joe also played on some of those teams.

While McCabe didn’t have any future NFL players as a teammate in that time, he did play with someone who had a large role in football history. Dan Rooney, the son of Steelers’ owner Art and the future chairman of Pittsburgh’s NFL franchise, was on the team. Dan was the quarterback for North in 1949. In fact, Rooney credits McCabe’s brother, “Jumbo,” for setting up his first date with his future wife, Patricia.

The Rooney-McCabe connection may have played a role in Richie’s summer job. He was the Steelers’ water boy during training camp. McCabe also used to take part in workouts with the pros each year before he reported to the Trojans.ⁱⁱ

Dan’s brother, Art Jr., described McCabe in high school this way in a book he wrote about the Rooney family: “There was never a more unlikely looking football player. Tall and thin, he weighed 165 pounds at the most. He wore thick-lensed glasses that seemed to dominate his pale, narrow face. He was the temperamental opposite of the Cowardly Lion.” Rich also was something of a coach on the field, often telling teammates what to do and where to do. Coach Bob Hast encouraged him to do so.ⁱⁱⁱ

After graduating in 1951, McCabe headed off to college at the University of Pittsburgh. He had some choices, as several schools in the region were said to have recruited him, including Columbia, Indiana and Yale. The Panthers had fallen off a cliff in 1950, going from 6-3 to 1-8. That was enough to lead to the departure of head coach Len Casanova. Thomas Hamilton was brought on during McCabe’s freshman year as the Panthers supposedly waited for the chance to hire their preferred candidate, Red Dawson. Hamilton brought an interesting coaching history. He spent five seasons at Navy, but they were split up between 1934-1936 (when he went 19-8) and between 1946 and 1947 (2-15-1). McCabe saw enough action to earn a letter in the 1951 season. Pitt went 3-7, and Hamilton exited ... for a little while.



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Dawson came on as a replacement as the head coach in 1952. He had coached five years at Tulane before World War II, and never had a losing season there. Dawson turned things around that first year with Pitt, as the team went 6-3. A highlight was a 22-19 road win over eighth-ranked Notre Dame. McCabe got off to a slow start, as he hurt his knee on the fourth day of practice and needed minor surgery. He still managed to play in seven games that season – all on defense.

McCabe had a chance to be one of Pittsburgh's top running backs in 1953. He finished with 199 yards on 57 carries, as he was one of seven runners to have at least 100 yards for the season. Richie also caught one pass for 18 yards. The Panthers couldn't repeat their win at Notre Dame in '53, and went 0-3-1 against ranked teams. That led to a 3-5-1 record that included losses to rivals West Virginia and Penn State.

McCabe's senior season started badly. Not only did the Panthers lose their opening three games, but the combined score of the losses was 106-14. Dawson left due to some heart problems, and he was replaced by the man he replaced – Hamilton. The new/old coach turned the team around quite quickly, as Pitt won its next three games with wins over Navy and West Virginia – both of which were in the top 10. As for McCabe, he started the season at defensive back and seemed to be the odd man out. Then Hamilton put him with the offense and started him. Statistics aren't available for that season. Still, the year – indeed, most of his career - wasn't a particularly fulfilling time for McCabe in the football sense. He had little opportunity to show his speed and smarts with the ball.

The NFL draft went 30 rounds in those days, and the lack of instant publicity meant it could take a while for someone to find out he had been drafted. In McCabe's case, he lasted until Round 22. That's when the Steelers – of course – took him at No. 258. By the



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way, Richie was the only player taken in that round to even play a single game of pro football.

“I always wanted to play with the Steelers,” he told the United Press in training camp. “I had it in the back of my mind when I went through North Catholic High in Pittsburgh and then when I was at Pitt. But I was afraid that they might be too big.”^{iv}

McCabe beat the odds and moved right into the starting lineup in the Steelers’ secondary after Dewey McConnell was injured in preseason. Rich started 12 games that season and had three interceptions. A highlight came on October 2, when McCabe scooped up a fumble and went 50 yards for what proved to be the winning touchdown against the Los Angeles Rams. As for the rest of the team, Pittsburgh could only go 4-8 that year under coach Walt Kiesling.

McCabe was inducted into the Navy in March of 1956, and missed all of the 1956 season and much of the 1957 campaign because of military service. When he returned in December 1957 he played in two games. For some reason, McCabe announced his retirement in May 1958, saying that he wanted to move on to high school coaching. But that idea didn’t stick, as he was back with the Steelers later that year.

He started in his five games with the Steelers as a strong safety during that season. At the end of the campaign, the relationship between Richie and the city of Pittsburgh ended on a professional level. Something was nagging at McCabe at that point. He told owner Art Rooney Sr. that people thought he was only on the Steelers’ roster because he knew the Rooney family, and he wanted to go elsewhere. Art tried to convince him otherwise, but it didn’t work. Rich was off to Washington to play for the Redskins in June of 1959. The Steelers acquired fullback Bill Hicks in the swap.

McCabe’s new team hadn’t had a winning season since 1955, and was in a slow decline that wouldn’t end until Vince Lombardi coached the team to a 7-5-2 record in 1969. McCabe started four of his 10 games that year, and had one interception. If he couldn’t start for one of the worst teams in the league, his chances of staying in pro football appeared bleak.

But McCabe’s timing was good. The American Football League was starting in 1960, and they had a “help wanted” sign out. Anyone who had played in the National Football League was sure to get a look. Sure enough, McCabe signed with the Buffalo Bills, where old friend and Steelers’ great Jack Butler was on the coaching staff. Secondary coach Harvey Johnson put McCabe in the starting secondary, and Richie had his best season as a pro. He played in all 14 games (13 starts) and had four interceptions. McCabe was named a first-team all-AFL pick during a 5-8-1 season by the Bills. Even so, he



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thought the caliber of play was a huge step down from the NFL, and not that much better than college ball.

The big year earned Richie a second season in Buffalo, but it didn't go quite as well for him personally. McCabe had surgery on his knee in late July. He started the season with the Bills, and played in nine games. But Richie knew that his injury had not completely healed, as his play was compromised. He decided to retire from pro football in early November.

"I know in my heart that I shouldn't have played when I did at the start of the season," McCabe told *The Buffalo News*. "Maybe the feeling was I still could do a better job than anyone else at my position. But I know I hurt myself by playing."^{vi}

Head coach Buster Ramsey said, "I always considered him the leader of the Bills defensive unit and one of the most intelligent players I've ever coached."^{vi}

Meanwhile, the team improved only slightly to 6-8. That was it for Ramsey, who was fired to make room for Lou Saban. Richie defended his ex-coach, saying the team had very little talent and Ramsey shouldn't have been expected to work miracles. "The trouble is all personnel," McCabe said. "Ramsey doesn't have 22 football players. ... Some can't do the job. ... Some of the boys are spoiled by the money they're getting."^{vii}

But Rich's days with a connection to football were hardly finished, although it took some time to develop. McCabe applied for the coaching job at North Catholic in Pittsburgh, but didn't get an answer to his query. In 1964, he took a part-time job as an assistant coach at Carnegie Tech, now known as Carnegie Mellon University.

It was a surprise when Bills' new head coach Joel Collier called out of the blue after the 1965 season. McCabe landed a full-time job with the Bills as secondary coach in January 1966, when the team was coming off two straight AFL championships. Rich spent three years with the Bills, which plunged from AFL East champs in 1966 to a 1-12-1 season in 1968. Along the way he found time to marry Judith Hanlon, a secretary for the team, on October 20, 1968. Rich must be one of the few football coaches ever to get married in the middle of the season. The Bills cleaned house after that, but McCabe survived the purge when he agreed to an offer from new coach John Rauch to stay put. It was said that owner Ralph Wilson had insisted on keeping McCabe, and Rauch went along with it.

However, when March 1 – the expiration of his old deal – arrived, McCabe resigned to take an assistant coaching job with the Oakland Raiders. "It came as news to us, as I had been told by Richie on Jan. 28 that he wanted to remain with the Bills," owner Ralph Wilson said to the *Courier-Express*. "Coach Rauch then hired Richie as a member of his



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staff.” McCabe was said to have felt a little guilty that Rauch received some pressure to keep McCabe on his staff. ^{viii}

McCabe – working for head coach John Madden - was part of the Raiders team that reached the AFL championship game at the end of the 1969 season, as it lost to the Kansas City Chiefs. Oakland again won its division in 1970, but lost in the conference final to Baltimore. Along the way, the relationship between McCabe and Raiders owner Al Davis became frayed.

“I can’t take him (Davis),” McCabe told old friend Rooney, according to Dan’s autobiography. “I just can’t stand it. He’d send a play down and say, ‘Run this defense on the third or second down.’ I didn’t think he knew what he was doing. It wasn’t a question of being dumb or not knowing football. Maybe he wasn’t paying attention.”^{ix}

From there it was on to Cleveland, where McCabe coached defensive backs for three years under head coach Nick Skorich. The two men had a Pittsburgh connection; when McCabe had played high school ball at North Catholic, Skorich was coaching the Central Catholic squad nearby. “As an assistant you have to grow and mature,” McCabe said. “I thought the Browns were a good fit for this.”^x

Richie received a promotion from Skorich in 1974, moving up to defensive coordinator. That lasted for two losing seasons, even though Forrest Gregg became the Browns’ head coach for the 1975 season. McCabe still had a year to go on his contract, and Browns’ owner Art Modell wanted to keep him on the staff. Gregg survived a 3-11 season that year, but McCabe didn’t as he resigned a month into 1976.

He landed on his feet, as he was hired by Buffalo head coach Lou Saban as his defensive coordinator. Richie’s timing could have been better, as the Bills were about to collapse. Saban and the Buffalo squad went 2-3, and then Lou resigned his job. Jim Ringo took over, and he went 0-9 to make it a dreary 2-12 season. It was only a little better for Ringo and McCabe in 1977, as the team went 3-11. The Bills needed to do something dramatic, so they hired Chuck Knox from the Los Angeles Rams. He wanted his own staff, and McCabe was a casualty of the housecleaning.

McCabe wasn’t done with pro football yet. He landed in Denver as the coach of the defensive backs for the Broncos, under head coach Red Miller. By the way, one of the other assistants on that staff was a young coach named Bill Belichick, who was just getting started in his career. Since McCabe’s family hadn’t moved to Denver yet, he and Belichick became quite close in that first year. Rich joined a team that was coming off a loss to the Super Bowl. They were still good for the next few years but couldn’t reach the



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championship game again. Dan Reeves replaced Miller in 1981, and McCabe was his secondary coach for two seasons.

But by the 1982 season, McCabe was a very sick man. He first thought that his poor feelings were a result of the labor and management strife that cost the league some games of that season. An examination proved otherwise. He battled abdominal cancer for much of that year, and was hospitalized twice (once for an operation). “I’ve got a battle and I won’t tell you I don’t,” McCabe told the *Rocky Mountain News* in December. “As far as I know, I’m not terminal, but they won’t promise me anything over 10 years.”^{xi}

Near the end, Richie started calling all of his friends to say good-bye. When he got to Art Rooney Jr., he told him about how Art’s mother offered to buy McCabe a movie ticket or a snack as she knew he couldn’t afford much. Rich had always refused because he was afraid that the other kids would make fun of him. So, Mrs. Rooney eventually told him that it would be their little secret. “I loved your mother very much,” McCabe told Art in that last conversation.^{xii}

Rich only lived two days after the end of the 1982 season. McCabe died on January 4, 1983, at the age of 49. He was survived by wife Judith and two daughters. Richie was buried in Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver.

“It is a great loss to the Denver Broncos and to football,” said Broncos public relations director Charlie Lee. “Richie was an outstanding person. That is what set him apart as a great coach. Richie loved everybody and everyone respected him.”^{xiii}

When the Broncos opened their 1983 season in Pittsburgh in September, they wore patches on their uniforms to honor him and dedicated the game to his memory. The defense came up with three interceptions and fumble recoveries in an unlikely 14-10 win. The game was played in Three Rivers Stadium, which had been McCabe’s old neighborhood. In fact, Dan Rooney of the Steelers believed that McCabe’s house was located where the 50-yard line of the stadium stood.

McCabe is still remembered in Pittsburgh, and will be as long as Allegheny Commons Park is open. That’s where “Richie McCabe Field” is located. It’s the site of baseball, football and soccer games.



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