

THE TOUGHEST 49 EVER

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The letter was respectful, but its point was very clear.

How could you possibly have forgotten Hardy Brown?

Rex Berry of Provo, Utah, who wrote the letter, played with Brown for five years on the 49ers of the early 1950s. Berry couldn't see how Sports Illustrated, in a story on pro football's great linebackers, overlooked Brown, who -- legend has it -- knocked out more than 20 opponents in games in 1951.

Phoenix safety Chuck Cecil is seen as the epitome of the NFL's active wild-and-crazy hitters. But when you mention Cecil's name or that of anyone else who has pretended to be The Toughest Man in Football -- the old-timers just smile and shake their heads.

For them, there's no argument. There has never been anyone like, Hardy "The Hatchet" Brown, and there never will be. Four decades after he played, and two years after he died, they haven't come close to forgetting him.

"Pound for pound, inch for inch, he was the toughest football player I ever met," said former 49er teammate and road roommate Y.A. Tittle. "He was so tough he was damned near illegal."

EX-NFL running backs, particularly, have vivid memories of him. They'll tell you, usually with a wince of pain that has never quite gone away, what it was like to be hit by Brown's sledgehammer shoulder.

"I didn't really believe the things I'd heard about him, but then I played against him for the first time at Kezar Stadium in '51," said Joe Geri, then a single-wing tailback for the Pittsburgh Steelers.

"We ran a trap or something and he threw that shoulder into my eye -- we didn't wear face masks in those days -- and put me down on my back. I was lying there groggy but I managed to ask one of my teammates, 'Is it bad?' And he said, 'Well, your eye's out.'"

It was reported that Geri's eye literally was hanging by a tendon, out of the socket.

"I'm not sure about that," Geri said, "but I do know I had to have 13 stitches." "All technique and timing"

Hardy Brown left a trail of broken body parts all over the place in his 10 seasons in pro football, two in the All-American Football Conference, seven in the NFL and one in the AFL (he also played briefly in Canada).

Brown was only 6 feet tall, maybe less, and weighed about 195 pounds when he played for the 49ers from 1951-55. And he wasn't very fast. But size and speed, in his case, meant practically nothing.

The only thing that mattered was that devastating right shoulder, which he used the way a boxer delivers a six-inch knockout punch.

"It was all technique and timing," former teammate Bob St. Clair said. "He would coil like a snake and then explode. In mid-air, he'd extend the shoulder and aim it at your Adam's apple. You either got hit in the chest or the face. He destroyed people with it."

"Guys would get cornered and try to run Hardy over," said Hugh McElhenny, another ex-teammate. "But he'd just get lower and then -- pop! He'd snap up right under a guy's jaw. He ended a lot of careers."

Brown was such a force that some people around the league figured he must have been doing something outside the rules.

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"They thought maybe he was using a steel plate or something," said ex-49er Gordy Soltau. "George Halas, the Bears coach, sent an official into our locker room right before one game. They made Hardy take off his shoulder pads, thinking he had some metal in there. But he didn't."

The story usually went that, Brown learned the shoulder tackle (he rarely used his arms) when he played at Tulsa University. But he only perfected the maneuver there. He learned it from his older brother, Jeff, when they were growing up at a Fort Worth orphanage.

Their father had been shot dead at a neighbor's house in Kirkland, Texas. Hardy, 4 years old at the time, was in the room. Four months later, he was also there when a family friend murdered one of his father's killers.

He was 5 when his mother sent him to the Masonic Home in Fort Worth. He said it was 12 years until he heard from her again, and that only happened because he had to get her permission to enlist in the Marines.

One of the other kids at the orphanage was Dewitt "Tex" Coulter, who would go on to become a fine NFL lineman himself.

"Football gave us self-worth," Coulter said. "When the newspapers came out and wrote stories, they'd refer to us as rag-tag kids and that made us angry. That was pity from above, and we hated it. Football was a way to alleviate that."

Football never quite dispelled the fury that burned behind the baby blue eyes of Hardy Brown, however.

After seeing action in the Pacific as a paratrooper during World War II and then spending three years terrorizing the Missouri Valley Conference as a blocking back and linebacker at Tulsa, he had a long and productive career as a pro.

But the years didn't mellow him much. A couple of Coulter memories confirm that:

"The first time I played against him as a pro, I came out of the huddle at the beginning of the game, and figured I'd say hello. I came up to the line and looked across at his linebacker spot and his eyes looked like they belonged to some cave animal. They were fiery, unfocused. You didn't know if he could see anything or everything. I kept my mouth shut."

Later, at a Los Angeles hotel before a Pro Bowl game, Coulter ran into Brown and Jim Finks, who had been a teammate of Brown's at Tulsa.

"Old Hardy liked to drink a little and have a good time," Coulter recalled, "but he was real silent that day. He finally said, 'You know, I hate everybody in this whole goddamned world.' I said, 'Do you hate me?' and he thought awhile and said, 'No, not you, Frazier Mosely and Brownie Lewis' -- two guys who palled around with us at the Masonic Home."

Brown occasionally could be a brawler off the field as well as on, but his 49er teammates recall him as a quiet guy they got along with just fine.

"He kept to himself a lot," Soltau said, "but he was a nice kid, a good teammate."

The 49ers might not have felt that way if Brown had used that vicious shoulder against them in practice, but he didn't get the chance. The coaching staff wouldn't let him play in scrimmages. When the games started, it was a different matter.

"I always thought, 'Boy, I'm glad he's on my team,'" Berry said.

Offering confirmation, longtime 49er executive Lou Spadia remembers one exhibition game in Omaha, against the Chicago Cardinals:

"In those days, you played where you could, and we played on a baseball field where they refused to remove the mound," Spadia said. "Hardy caught Elmer Angsman coming down the mound while he was coming up, and gave him an unbelievable hit. It was like running into a wall."

The 49ers used to watch Brown on game films and marvel.

"We'd cheer and laugh," said St. Clair. "A guy 260 pounds would be running down the field and we'd see Hardy stalking him. Then, bang! He'd turn the guy upside down."

"It got so everybody on our team was looking for Hardy on the films," Berry said. "We probably should have spent more time watching ourselves and the mistakes we made."

Opinions from the men Brown maimed are mixed.

"Chuck Bednarik always said he was the dirtiest SOB he ever played against," Hall of Famer Bill Dudley said. "But even though Hardy would try to knock the hell out of you with that shoulder, I don't think it was a dirty blow. I was a teammate of his in Washington for a while and I thought the world of him, personally."

Glenn "Mr. Outside" Davis, whose career in effect was ended by Brown in a game in which Brown's famed shoulder tackle also destroyed Rams runner Dick Hoerner isn't so charitable.

"I don't hold out any real venom for him, Davis said, "but I think he made a mistake playing the way he did. He would have been a much better player if he had concentrated on making the tackle instead of trying to kill somebody."

Niners coach Buck Shaw frequently got on Brown for missing tackles while he was trying to deliver the shoulder blow.

"But if he hadn't been able to hit like that, he never could have played football," Dudley said. Brown's tactics often made opponents attempt to retaliate, nearly always without success.

"Some teams would put up a little money pool to see who could get Hardy out of the game," St. Clair said. "You'd watch on films, and they'd all be going after him on some plays. But he was cunning and crafty. He almost never took any solid hits."

Even when he did, it didn't seem to matter much.

In 1954, Gil "Wild Horse" Mains of the Detroit Lions, who would become a professional wrestler, came flying aown the field on a kickoff and jumped feet first into Brown, hitting him squarely in the thigh.

"They had to put about 20 stitches in him," Mains said, "but he came out and played the last half, and on one of his first plays, he caught one of our backs, Bullet Bill Bowman, in the face and broke his nose. I couldn't believe Hardy could come back. I always admired him."

In the game in which Brown dislodged Joe Geri's eye, Geri said, "I walked to the sidelines and one of my teammates said, 'Don't worry, Joe. We'll take care of Brown.' But when it was all over, he'd put about three more people besides me out of the game."

Teams always were very much aware of Brown's presence when they played the 49ers.

"When they came up to the line of scrimmage, the first thing they'd do was find out where Hardy was," Soltau said. "The battle cry of the league was, 'Where's Hardy?'"

Brown's style was not without cost. He was one of the first players to wear a face mask, which probably saved his profile, at least.

"But he always had a sore shoulder," Soltau said. "Nobody could have played some days, the beaten up condition he was in. But he played. He was really tough."

In his last years, arthritis in that right shoulder made it tough for Brown to lift his arm to scratch his head. Years of hard drinking took a toll, too, and he was battling both Alzheimer's disease and emphysema when he died, at 67, in a Stockton nursing home in 1991.

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But the way friends and foes will remember him is at his peak, hammering everything and everyone in sight, a once-in-a-lifetime player.

"Everybody feared him," Soltau said. "You whispered 'Hardy Brown' to them, and they began to shiver at the sound. Nobody could hit the way he could. If TV had been in when he played, he'd be immortal."

Tex Coulter, fellow orphan, sees Brown from perhaps the sharpest focus of all.

"I don't think he ever went out to hurt anyone," Coulter said. "When you're doing the hitting, when you stick someone with that shoulder, it's a beautiful feeling. It gives you a sense of power that reaches right to the back of your head."

"To me, he was the most unique player ever. Think of it this way; What Hardy Brown was all about in football wasn't physical. He was a psychic occurrence."