

JOE SCHMIDT: Detroit's Lion Behind the Line

By Jim Sargent

At the half on Sunday, December 22, 1957, at Kezar Stadium, the San Francisco Forty-Niners led the Detroit Lions, 24-7, in the playoff leading to the National Football League's championship game. Detroit's middle linebacker Joe Schmidt -- who hated losing anything -- hated the score.

At halftime Coach George Wilson, who had delivered many pep talks during the course of the season, decided not to say much. In the quiet locker room, however, the Lion players could hear their happy opponents celebrating beyond the thinly insulated wall which separated both teams.

San Francisco's players were yelling, for example, about playing for the championship next weekend against the Cleveland Browns, and about spending their championship money.

Instead, in the second half Schmidt, the former University of Pittsburgh All-American, helped ignite his teammates to an inspired performance -- one not to be forgotten in Detroit football history. In the end, the Lions pulled out the victory, 31-27.

Also, a week later, on December 29, 1957, Schmidt's stellar performance helped the Lions regain the NFL Championship with a 59-14 trouncing of the Browns. Already recognized as one of the NFL's premier players, the former Pitt star had come a long way since 1946, when, as a 14-year-old tackle, he played sandlot football against grown men.

Starting in Pittsburgh

Born in Pittsburgh on January 18, 1932, the toughest year of the Great Depression, Joe was the youngest in a family with four sons. The Depression hurt the coal mines and the steel mills of Pittsburgh. But the football spirit and tradition of Western Pennsylvania, which helped shape youngsters like Joe Schmidt, could scarcely be diminished by economic adversity.

He didn't naturally become an aggressive athlete, but his brothers gave him little choice. "I had three older brothers, and they all played football," Schmidt recollected in a recent interview. "I was the 'baby' of the family. They knocked me around, so I sort of grew into it. We played all kind of sports, but we grew into football."

Tragedy also shaped the family. In February of 1945, Joe's father died, so the youngest Schmidt decided to continue his education at home. Already Joe's older brother Bill had been killed during world War II action in France, at the Battle of Saint Lo in June 1944. Fifteen years earlier another brother, Robert, died after a fall from a tree in the family's Mount Oliver neighborhood.

Joe attended a junior high which did not have football. But at age fourteen, weighing 175 pounds, he began playing for the semipro St. Clair Veterans. The Veterans were coached by John Schmidt, Joe's brother, who had been a star center for the 1938 Carnegie Tech team which played in the Sugar Bowl.

One Saturday the Veterans traveled by bus to play the team of a local coal-mining town. The opponents included a former college halfback who was about 26 years old. Shortly after the game began, the fearless Schmidt, who ended up on his back, hauled down the star runner to stop a line plunge.

"If you can tackle that guy," John later told Joe, "you'll make a pretty good tackle."

Two years later Joe transferred to Brentwood High and reported for football. Coach Joe Crevar did not want to give the blond haired junior a tryout, especially when Joe said his only experience was sandlot football. Regardless, Schmidt made the team, becoming a regular at fullback and guard.

He remembers seeing the Pitt-Carnegie Tech game in 1938, a season when Pitt compiled an 8-2 record. For Joe, who had the football dream, Pitt fielded the only big-time program in town. So he refused several scholarship offers.

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Entering the University of Pittsburgh in 1949, Schmidt made the team as a single wing blocking quarterback. The next year he played third-string fullback, as Pitt went to the T-formation. But he started at middle linebacker, a position which let Joe maximize his great quickness and shrewd football instincts.

Pitt had no outstanding teams during Schmidt's time, partly because he played under four head coaches in four years. For example, the Panthers produced records of 1-8 in 1950, 3-7 in 1951, and 6-3 in 1952, which included victories over Iowa and Notre Dame -- but a season-ending 16-0 loss to Penn State.

In 1952, despite injuries, Schmidt made some All-American teams. The Pittsburgh Steelers, however, did not draft Schmidt. When he showed up to watch a practice session with ball boy Richie McCabe (who later played in the NFL), owner Art Rooney was heard to say, "Oh, you're the kid who gets hurt all the time."

Schmidt suffered two broken ribs as a Pitt freshman, had his shoulder separated as a sophomore, and wrenched a knee in pre-season training as a junior. As a senior, the seemingly injury-prone linebacker tore a cartilage and, two weeks later against Notre Dame, suffered a concussion and was hospitalized ten days.

As a result, Schmidt did not make the All-Star team for the annual August contest between top college players and the previous season's NFL championship club. But at the Senior Bowl he played a standout game, making several tackles.

On to the Lions

The Detroit Lions, coached by Raymond "Buddy" Parker, had won the 1952 NFL Championship, defeating the Browns, 17-7. Apparently not aware of Schmidt's injury record, the Lions picked the 6'0" 215-pounder (listing him at 6'1") seventh.

Schmidt more than justified Detroit's confidence in his football ability: the nine-time Pro Bowler (1955-1963) played in Detroit for all of his 13 seasons. He was voted Lions' MVP a then-record four times, and he was captain from 1957 to 1965.

In the beginning, however, Schmidt considered not reporting to the Lions. Figuring he was going to be drafted by Pittsburgh, he once recalled his reaction to being selected:

"I sat down and listened to Joe Tucker on the radio, and he gave a rundown of the draft. I wasn't taken until the seventh round, and then by Detroit. They'd won the championship that season, and I figured I didn't have a snowman's chance in hell of making that team."

When he talked about it to his brother, John replied, "Give it a shot. What can you lose?"

Schmidt drove to Detroit's training camp with Gene Gedman, an outstanding halfback from Duquesne who had played at Indiana University and whom Detroit picked second.

At camp, Nick Kerbawy, Detroit's general manager, welcomed Gedman, and they chatted for about five minutes. Noticing Schmidt, Kerbawy asked Gene if Joe was a fraternity brother!

Still, Schmidt stayed and became a fixture. For the first two seasons he played outside linebacker, along with Jim Martin or LaVern Torgeson. In 1954 he started, usually with Martin. At that time Detroit, like most NFL clubs, was using the five-man line with two outside linebackers. Those two lined up about one yard behind the down linemen, which amounted to a seven-man line. On the defensive front Detroit was solid, if not great. Lion stalwarts included 6'3" 340-pound giant Les "Bingo" Bingaman as the middle guard. Flanking Bingo were Lou Creekmur, Thurman McGraw, Bob Miller, or John Prchlik as tackles, along with Jim Cain, Blaine Earon, or Sonny Gandee as defensive ends.

The backfield included standouts such as Jim David, Jack Christiansen, Yale Lary, Bill Stits, and Carl Karilivacz. Every man in the secondary was a tough tackler with good speed.

Besides Schmidt and Gedman, Detroit signed other talented rookies in 1953, including offensive linemen Harley Sewell, Charlie Ane, and Ollie Spencer. Combined with the core of veterans who won in 1952, the Lions looked to be tougher.

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Directed by Parker, Detroit posted with a 10-2 record, losing to Norm Van Brocklin and the Los Angeles Rams, 31-19 and 37-24.

In the championship match, once more against Otto Graham and Cleveland, Detroit won, 17-16.

Drive for Three

In 1954 Detroit drove toward a third successive championship with virtually the same team. The most publicized stars included Layne, Walker, Bingaman, and "Chris's Crew, named after Jack Christiansen in the secondary. The unpublicized Schmidt quietly led the linebacking corps of himself, Torgeson, and Martin.

After a strong 9-2-1 season, however, the Lions fell flat in the title game against Cleveland. After their 10th straight conference crown, the Browns -- with Otto Graham passing for two touchdowns and running for three himself -- bombed Detroit, 56- 10.

In the offseason the Lions were weakened when Les Bingaman retired, and Bobby Layne fell from a horse and separated his passing shoulder. Partly as a result, Detroit lost the first six games of 1955.

For the new season Parker made changes. He used left tackle Lou Creekmur, the 6'4" 260-pound former William and Mary All American, also at middle guard. But Creekmur could not handle the spot like the huge Bingaman. So Parker shifted Schmidt to middle linebacker. That move gave Detroit a 4-3 defensive scheme, which offered more protection against the pass and also the run.

Schmidt, who had played middle linebacker at Pitt, now became the key to Detroit's defense. In the meantime, led by the New York Giants, most NFL clubs went to a three-linebacker defense.

"When I first came to Detroit, I had to play outside linebacker," Schmidt says. "So it was a transition for me to go from middle to outside linebacker for a couple of years.

"In what we called short yardage situations,' we would go to what we called a 'goal line defense,' which was used from about the 5-yard line to the goal line.

"The goal-line defense had another linebacker. So I moved from the outside to the middle linebacker. That was not a new experience for me. The other guys in the league had to be trained, and moved from one position to another position."

Schmidt also got more recognition: "The whole defensive idea was to keep the middle linebacker from getting blocked. So if the linebacker could run and diagnose plays, he would make a lot of tackles. As a result, you got a lot of publicity."

But in 1955, thanks to the poor start, the Lions dropped to last place in the Western Conference with a 3-9 record.

In 1956, with a healthy Layne directing the offense and Schmidt spearheading the defense, Detroit roared to second place with a 9-3 record, half a game behind the Chicago Bears.

Detroit blasted Chicago, 42-10, in game ten. But on the final day of the season, after Ed Meadows blindsided Bobby Layne and knocked him out, the Bears won, 38-21, topping the conference.

Despite producing a good season in 1956, many Lion players felt bitter about losing to the Bears -- whom the Giants crushed for the NFL Championship, 47-7.

The often-rowdy Lions continued to improve in 1957, even after Coach Parker suddenly resigned before the exhibition season. The club moved assistant George Wilson to head coach, and Wilson directed one of the most memorable seasons in Lions, history.

Already Detroit had traded for Tobin Rote, who had been a stellar quarterback for the weak Green Bay Packers. While neither Layne nor Rote liked the two-quarterback system, it produced a championship after Layne's knee was injured.

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Rote led Detroit to victories in the last two games, which capped an 8-4 record and a tie for first place with the Forty Niners. After Detroit rallied to beat San Francisco, 31-27, the Lions defeated the Browns for the NFL title.

Accolades, Accolades

In the meantime, however, Schmidt was proving to be one of the best linebackers ever. Myron Cope's 1958 Saturday Evening Post article explained Schmidt's excellent skills, including his quickness and his talent for moving quickly in any direction: "It's maneuverability that counts here, and Joe has it -- the fastest reactions, probably, of any linebacker in the business."

Speaking in 1995, rugged defensive end Leo Sugar, who played for Detroit in 1962, after spending most of his eight-year career with the Cardinals, put it this way: "Joe Schmidt was just fantastic. He had the quickness that let him plug the holes all the time. He read the offense very well."

"He's a cat!" Coach Vince Lombardi once said of Schmidt, referring to his quickness. Lombardi added, "He's one of the top linebackers. A great diagnostician, a great tackler, and a strong defensive leader."

In 1958 "Buster" Ramsey, Detroit's defensive coach, told Myron Cope that Schmidt possessed a keen football mind: "Everybody on the team respects him. And he's got to have that. At times he has to get on their tails and ride them, and they won't take it from a man they don't respect."

Close, But No

In any event, after defeating Cleveland for the league championship in 1957, Detroit came close only twice more during Schmidt's career. In 1958, after Layne was traded to the Pittsburgh Steelers, Detroit was crippled by numerous injuries. The Lions sagged to fifth place, posting a 4-7-1 record. In 1959 the Motor City franchise again finished fifth, going 3-8-1.

Detroit rebounded in 1960, adding outstanding rookies such as 6'5" 290-pound tackle Roger Brown. In that season, with the NFL challenged by the new American Football League, Schmidt's partners included Darris McCord and Bill Glass as ends, tough Alex Karras and big Roger Brown at tackles, linebackers Wayne Walker and Carl Brettschneider, along with Yale Lary, Dick LeBeau, Gary Lowe, and "Night Train" Lane in the secondary.

With Jim Ninowski or Earl Morrall calling signals, a speedy backfield which included Howard "Hopalong" Cassaday and Nick Pietrosante, and talented receivers such as Jim Gibbons and Gail Cogdill, George Wilson's Lions won the last four games to rank second in the West with a 7-5 ledger.

During those years Detroit had an outstanding defense, still built around Schmidt. The Lions finished second in 1961 and 1962, with records of 8-5-1 and 11-3, respectively. But Detroit upset Green Bay, handing the Packers their only loss of the season on Thanksgiving Day, 26-14. Schmidt and his crew blitzed Starr all afternoon, while Roger Brown spent time in the backfield, too.

Early in the 1963 season, Look Magazine featured Schmidt as "King of the Red Doggers." The Lions had perfected the "red dog," or blitz. Joe said 75% of Detroit's defensive rushes were some form of blitz, which helped keep offenses off-balance and confused.

As always, Schmidt's keys were the center, the guards, the quarterback, and the fullback. He knew the opposition's play calling habits, the time, the field position, and the personnel. Few defenders in the league were more sure tacklers than Schmidt, who was aggressive, fearless, hard-hitting, and tough.

"If I had to start a team from scratch and had my pick of players, commented Norm Van Brocklin, then coach of the Minnesota Vikings, "I'd select Schmidt as the No. 1 man to form the core of my team."

How good was Schmidt's judgment? According to a Detroit News story of January 3, 1963, assistant coach Don Shula's charts for the 1961 season, for example, showed that Schmidt made only seven errors in judgment on a total of 890 plays run by other teams.

During Schmidt's last three seasons, Detroit finished in the middle of the conference with records of 5-8-1 in 1963, 7-5-2 in 1964, and 6-7-1 in 1965, under new coach Harry Gilmer. Schmidt retired after the '65 season, indicating he no longer had the overwhelming desire to hit offensive players.

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"Joe Schmidt was one of the best linebackers ever to play the game," Lou Creekmur told the author. "All the old-timers thought Buddy Parker was out of his mind when he traded off Dick Flanagan and kept Joe in his rookie year. But he was a hard hitter who was in on almost every tackle. We used to say, 'Joe could smell the ball and the play.' He's also a class person as well as a great football player."

When Joe Schmidt was operating at middle linebacker, his club usually fielded a defense that was second to none. After the 1957 season, Schmidt won his third award as Detroit's MVP. In the final analysis, such recognition deservedly carried the King Lion to enshrinement in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton.

1953 CHAMPIONSHIP GAME: Lions 17 - Browns 16

On the first series, with second down at his 24-yard line, Graham dropped back to pass. Schmidt, rushing hard from the outside, hit Graham's hand and caused a fumble, which Les Bingaman recovered at the 13-yard marker. Six plays later Doak Walker scored from one yard away, which, after his conversion, gave Detroit a 7-0 lead.

In the second quarter the teams exchanged field goals. Early on Lou "The Toe" Groza kicked a 13-yarder, and Walker hit a 23- yarder near the end of the half.

Cleveland tied it at 10-all in the third quarter, starting when Ken Gorgal intercepted Bobby Layne. The Browns covered 51 yards in eight plays, with Harry Jagade scoring from the nine.

Cleveland went ahead, 13-10, on Groza's 15-yard field goal early in the fourth quarter. Near the close of another defense- dominated period, Groza kicked his third three-pointer.

At that point Bobby Layne showed why he was a great clutch quarterback, leading his club on an 80-yard touchdown drive. After he ran for a first down on the Browns' 33, Layne connected with end Jim Doran, who carried it over for the winning TD.

Graham had only two minutes to engineer a final drive. But the Hall of Famer had his first pass intercepted, and the Lions clinched a second straight NFL crown.

1954 CHAMPIONSHIP GAME: Browns 56 - Lions 10

Early in the first quarter, Detroit's Bill Bowman broke away for a 50-yard gain, but he fumbled and Cleveland recovered. Schmidt then intercepted Graham, which led to a 36-yard Doak Walker field goal and a 3-0 Detroit lead.

Cleveland roared back with a 46-yard kickoff return. When Detroit roughed the kicker on fourth down, Graham got another chance and hit Ray Renfro for a TD and a 7-3 lead. On the next series, Don Paul intercepted Layne and returned it 33 yards to Detroit's eight. Graham then found Darrell Brewster for a score, putting Cleveland on top, 14-3.

After a Graham sneak for the third Cleveland TD, Detroit scored on a 5-yard Bowman run. But the Browns scored twice more in the period, with Brewster grabbing another Graham pass, and Otto scoring himself, for a 35-10 halftime lead.

The second half was almost all Cleveland: Graham threw for three more touchdowns, while the Browns, defense stifled the Lions. After the first quarter, Detroit was hardly in the game.

1957 CHAMPIONSHIP GAME: Lions 59 - Browns 14

Detroit's biggest highlight during Schmidt's era came with the championship victory over Cleveland on December 29, 1957. The city and the Lion fans were wild about the game for days ahead of time, lining up for tickets at a big-league cost of \$10.

Detroit is a great sports town, and Detroit fans love an underdog. On paper the Lions appeared no match for the Browns. Driven by the rushes of rookie Jim Brown, Cleveland had paced the East easily with a 9-2-1 mark.

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Despite having Bobby Layne sidelined three weeks earlier by a broken ankle, and with tackle Charlie Ane out with a bad knee, most of the 55,263 fans at Briggs Stadium were deliriously happy by halftime, when Detroit held a 31-7 lead. The quietly competent Texan, Tobin Rote, passed for four touchdowns and scored another, and Schmidt spurred the defense. When the cheering finally ended, the Lions owned the NFL crown by a 59-14 score.

Defense, as was true throughout Schmidt's years, fueled the offense. The first Lion drive led to a Jim Martin field goal from the Browns' 31-yard line. On Cleveland's next possession, Bob Long intercepted a Tommy O'Connell pass and returned it to Cleveland's 19.

Faking a pass, Rote, on a quarterback draw, ran to the one yard line. on the next play he scored, and Martin converted for a 10-0 edge. Three minutes later, following a Cleveland fumble and a Detroit recovery, Gene Gedman scored from one yard out.

Jim Brown raced 29 yards for Cleveland's first TD early in the second quarter, but Rote brought Detroit back on a 66-yard march. Stalled with fourth-and-eleven on the 28 yard line, Rote called a fake field goal in the huddle -- although Wilson wanted the kick.

Rote got the snap, placed the ball, got up and rolled right, and passed to wide-open rookie Steve Junker, who scored from the five. on the next series halfback Terry Barr picked off a Browns' aerial, and Barr returned it 19 yards for a score. After Martin added the extra point, Detroit had a commanding lead.

With Detroit's defense, led by Schmidt, dominating the Browns in the second half, the Lions won another NFL Championship--the franchise's third league title (and fourth overall) in the 1950s.