

BIG MAC OF THE BROWNS' ATTACK

By Bob Braunwart and Bob Carroll

To some it might read like a fairy tale. Crippled in childhood by Perthes disease (a bone deficiency disease), Mac Speedie not only overcame what his doctors feared would be a lifelong handicap. He also went on to stardom as a professional athlete and, indeed, as one of the premier ends in pro football history.

But it was not a fairy tale, because there was no magic in it. Medical science with its iron braces and Mac's own iron determination and constant exercise were responsible for the dramatic turnaround. But let Mac tell it:

"I don't suppose I would ever have been ambitious enough to excel at any sport if I hadn't been a cripple as a kid. I spent so much time eating my heart out because I couldn't play normally that when they took the brace off and I found I had legs that matched, it was like turning a frisky colt out to pasture after a year in a box stall. I had such a backlog of athletic ambition that I wanted to play football, basketball, and track all at one time."

The braces remained for four years, the determination for a lifetime.

Mac (his given name, not a nickname) Speedie (his family name, not a professional one) grew up in Utah. By the time he reached high school in Salt Lake City, Mac was already a star athlete. He earned all-city honors as a halfback and also as a basketball center before graduating and moving on to the University of Utah as a geology major.

Mac played football (he was all-conference end in 1939, 1940 and 1941) and basketball with the Redskins, but he was best known for running track. He set or tied conference records in the low and high hurdles. His fastest time in the high hurdles was the day he finished second to Fred Wolcott of Rice -- the day Wolcott set a world's record.

"Hurdling is all speed, balance and perfect timing," Mac later claimed. "I think that helped me more than anything else in becoming successful in football."

After graduation, Mac entered the U.S. Army in 1942. As a private in Texas, he was visited by Fred Mandel, owner of the Detroit Lions.

"Mandell shoved a contract for \$2,800 under my nose and told me that if I signed it I would be the second highest-paid lineman in the National League. That looked like a bale of dough to me and I asked him for a pen. He went right on talking and pretty soon I asked him again for the pen. After a while, I was practically begging him for the pen, but he must have changed his mind. He said we might as well wait till the war was over, and folded the contract and left. I never heard from him again."

If the N.F.L. didn't show a lot of interest in Mac's football ability, the Army did. Mac became a standout with the Ft. Warren service team. It was while he was with Ft. Warren that he first came to the attention of some of the individuals who were to establish the All-America Conference in 1946.

Among Ft. Warren's opponents were the El Toro Marines, one of the stronger West Coast service teams. At the end of the war, virtually the entire team moved into the A.A.F.C. as the ill-fated Chicago Rockets.

"I was a T-quarterback the day we played El Toro," Mac explained. "The way they swarmed over me convinced me that they'd surely be the best in the new league. They wanted me, too, but by that time I was a lieutenant and had a little more money and wasn't so anxious to sign. The way the Rockets turned out, I'm mighty glad I didn't."

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Another of his games that year was against the Great Lakes Navy team, coached by Paul Brown. Great Lakes won easily, but Speedie, this time playing defensive end, caught Brown's eye. Brown didn't forget; when the All-America Conference began play in 1946, Mac Speedie was one of the Cleveland starters.

He caught only 24 passes his first pro season, but among them was one that went for the first touchdown in the A.A.F.C. It was scored on a pass from quarterback Cliff Lewis in a 44-0 victory over the Miami Seahawks that opened the conference's first season. Mac later recalled that "I didn't know whether I was good enough to play with the big boys or not. I've never got over the feeling of happiness that hit me when I found I was."

In the conference championship game in 1946, Mac caught six passes for 71 yards in Cleveland's 14-9 win over the New York Yankees.

The next year his career really skyrocketed. He had the advantage of being teamed with Otto Graham at quarterback and Dante Lavelli at the other end position, but he certainly contributed his share to the Brown's potent passing offense. He led the A.A.F.C. in pass receptions each of the next three years and was named to the official all-conference team each year. His 67 catches in 1947 is still a Brown's team record.

When Coach Brown was asked to compare Speedie and Lavelli in 1949, he understandably hedged. "They've got different styles and different techniques, but each is supreme in his own way. I think Lavelli has the strongest hands I've ever seen. When he goes up for a pass and a defender goes up with him, you can be sure Dante will have the ball when they come down.

"Speedie is perhaps a little more instinctive pass receiver, and a little more deceptive. He's so tall that when he's running at top speed he seems to be gliding easily. His natural ability to change pace and his great speed when he turns it on makes it almost impossible to guard him with less than three men. I believe Lavelli does more conscious thinking about his movements than Mac does. He plans his faking, whereas Speedie seems to do his instinctively. They've got two things in common -- they can catch anything they can touch, and after they've caught it, they both run like halfbacks."

In 1948, Mac made what may have been the most spectacular play of his career when he took a screen pass from Otto Graham and ran 99 yards for a touchdown against the Buffalo Bills.

By the end of the 1949 season he held every A.A.F.C. pass receiving record: most receptions, career (211); most yards, career (3,554); most receptions, season (67, in 1947); most yards, season (1,146, also in 1947); most receptions, game (11, in a 1949 game with the Brooklyn-New York Yankees); most yards, game (228, in the same game); and longest reception (the 99- yarder in 1948). Not bad for someone whose left leg was still shorter and very much thinner than his right!

In 1950 the A.A.F.C. was dissolved but the Browns, the Forty-Niners and the Colts were accepted into the N.F.L. Mac moved along with his team and participated in the famous 1950 season-opening game between the N.F.L. champion Philadelphia Eagles and the A.A.F.C. champion Cleveland Browns. Cleveland won 35-10, with Mac scoring on a 13-yard pass play. The A.A.F.C. was vindicated.

He stayed with the Browns through the 1952 season, making the United Press all-league team both in 1950 and in 1952. In the latter year he lead the N.F.L. in receiving with 62 catches. Interestingly, in his seven-year career with the Browns, Mac played in seven league championship games.

In 1953 Mac began play in his third pro league, the Western Interprovincial Football Union in Canada. This year was the beginning of the U.S.-Canadian player "war." Besides Speedie, Heisman trophy winner Billy Vessels, star quarterbacks George Blanda and Frank Albert, and Eagles' end Bud Grant all signed with Canadian teams. All but Blanda ended up playing north of the border.

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MAC SPEEDIE'S CAREER RECEIVING STATISTICS

Year	Team	Lea.	Games	PC	Yards	Ave.	TDs
1946	Clev.	AAFC	14	24	564	23.5	7
1947	Clev.	AAFC	14	67*	1146*	17.1	6
1948	Clev.	AAFC	12	58*	816	14.1	4
1949	Clev.	AAFC	12	62*	1028*	16.6	7
1950	Clev.	NFL	12	42	548	13.0	1
1951	Clev.	NFL	10	34	589	17.3	3
1952	Clev.	NFL	12	62*	911	14.7	5
1953	Sask.	WIFU		57	817	14.3	7**
1954	Sask.	WIFU		36	576	16.0	5
1955	B.C.	WIFU		1	11	11.0	0
AAFC totals			52	211*	3554*	16.3	24
NFL totals			34	138	2048	14.8	9
WIFU totals				94	1404	14.9	12
Pro totals				443	7006	15.8	45

*Led league

**Tied for league lead

Speedie played 1953 and 1954 with the Saskatchewan Roughriders, and then finished up his playing career with the British Columbia Lions in 1955. He was chosen to the Western All-Star team both years he played with Saskatchewan.

After an absence of some years, Mac returned to football in 1960 as end coach with the Houston Oilers of the New American Football League (his fourth league as player or coach). After two years with Houston he moved on to Denver as offensive end coach before the 1962 season. After the fifth week of the 1964 season he was asked to take over the head coaching duties for the Broncos. He remained there until part way through the 1966 season, compiling a total record of 6-19-1.

Who could have predicted such an illustrious athletic career for a youngster who at one time was expected to need a leg brace for life?

SOME OF SPEEDIE'S CONTEMPORARIES

THOMAS FEARS

Born: Los Angeles, Calif. December 3, 1923

Hgt: 6-2 Wgt. 215 College: Santa Clara & U.C.L.A.

Tom Fears was drafted as a defensive specialist, but, after his third season with the Rams, he looked like he would go on to break every pass catching record in the book. In each of his first three years he led the NFL and each time he increased his total catches. His 77 catches in 1949 set a new record. In 1950, he topped that with 84.

On December 3, 1950 -- his 27th birthday -- he set a record that still stands: 18 receptions in one game!

Injuries reduced him to more modest numbers for the remainder of his career. Still, when healthy, he enhanced his reputation as a top clutch performer. His strength and ability to run precise pass patterns made him an ideal short-yardage catcher, especially deadly on "buttonhooks." And, once in a while, he showed dangerous speed. In the 1951 Championship Game, his 73-yard TD reception gave L.A. the winning points for its only NFL title.

PETE LOUIS PIHOS

Born: Orlando, Fla., October 22, 1923

Hgt: 6-1 Wgt. 210 College: Indiana U.

Although Pete Pihos won All-America honors as a quick-thinking, hard-hitting fullback at Indiana U., Philadelphia Eagle coach Greasy Neale turned him into an end when he joined the pros. Pihos quickly became an All-NFL two-way performer on an Eagle team that won back-to-back championships in 1948 and 1949.

Ruggedness, rather than grace, was Pete's forte. He missed only one game in nine years at Philadelphia.

With the coming of platoon football, he concentrated on receiving, but, when the Eagles needed defensive help in 1952, he stopped catching passes and went back to catching passers. At the end of the season, he was named All-Pro on the defense.

From 1953 to 1955, he was back on offense, leading the NFL in pass-catching each year.

PIHOS' RECEIVING RECORD

Year		PC	YDS	AVG	TD
1947	Phila NFL	23	382	16.6	7
1948	Phila NFL	46	766	16.7	11
1949	Phila NFL	34	484	14.7	4
1950	Phila NFL	38	447	11.8	6
1951	Phila NFL	35	536	15.3	5
1952	Phila NFL	12	219	18.3	1
1953	Phila NFL	* 63	*1049	16.7	*10
1954	Phila NFL	* 60	872	14.5	10
1955	Phila NFL	* 62	*864	13.9	7

9 years 373 5619 15.1 61

*-Led league