

EDDIE LEBARON

By Michael Richman
Redskins Insider Correspondent

He was called everything from the "Little General," to the "Little Magician," to simply "Little Man." At 5-foot-7, 165 pounds, Eddie LeBaron was indeed diminutive for an NFL quarterback. But size was no impediment to him rising to great heights in pro football.

LeBaron played 11 seasons in the NFL, his first seven with the Washington Redskins (1952-53, 55-59) and four with the Dallas Cowboys (1960-63). The four-time Pro Bowler completed 50 percent of his passes (898 of 1,796) for 13,400 yards and 104 touchdowns.

"I never had a problem," he told *Redskins Insider*. "I didn't have balls knocked down. I released it high and quick. I went to four Pro Bowls and had a pretty good record throwing the ball."

The average defensive linemen in LeBaron's era were smaller than today. Even so, he wasn't immune from confronting his share of menacing rushers, players like 6-6, 282-pound Gene "Big Daddy" Lipscomb and 6-4, 245-pound Gino Marchetti of the Baltimore Colts, and 6-5, 285-pound Roosevelt Grier of the New York Giants.

But LeBaron knew how to confuse the defense. His ability to hide the ball after the snap was beyond reproach. Albeit not a running quarterback, he evaded the rush with his quick feet and could hit the open man with his rifle arm.

His talents often frustrated opponents. Once, LeBaron threw a touchdown pass to help his East team beat the West in the Pro Bowl in January 1959. Winning players earned \$300 apiece, a lot of money in those days, and Lipscomb of the West team was peeved. After the game, LeBaron was standing outside his locker room when Lipscomb emerged from the opposing dressing room.

"You little s.o.b.," Lipscomb barked. "I'll get you next year."

LeBaron said it was mostly the press that questioned his ability to excel as an NFL quarterback.

"The people I played against never said those things," he said. "It didn't bother me because it didn't come from anyone who I thought knew anything."

LeBaron is uncertain how he'd fare at quarterback today, although he noted that Buffalo's 5-foot-9 quarterback Doug Flutie has done very well in the NFL. But he knows one thing for sure: The fundamentals of most present-day quarterbacks, such as setting up quickly in the pocket, don't measure up to when he played. For example, no quarterback today sets up as well as Colts Hall of Famer Johnny Unitas, he said.

LeBaron, 71, is retired from his long-time career as a lawyer and lives in Sacramento, Calif., where he operates three wine vineyards under the name "LeBaron Ranches." He follows the Redskins and offers the following assessment of the 2000 team, which finished 8-8 and missed the playoffs after once being tagged as a Super Bowl contender:

"They had a lot of people banged up," he said. "You get a few people hurt and you've got real problems. It's also tough when you throw a bunch of guys together to all of a sudden be good the first year. But they'll get better and better."

LeBaron was a great quarterback before playing for the Redskins. A California native, he played at the College of the Pacific in Stockton, Calif. He was unanimously voted to the Little All-America team for three straight years; he was awarded the Pop Warner Trophy as the Pacific Coast's outstanding player in 1949; and he starred in three bowl games, including the East-West Shrine Bowl and the Senior Bowl.

He learned a lot from his first college coach, the legendary Amos Alonzo Stagg. "Eddie is one of the greatest T-formation quarterbacks in America – one of the finest passers I've coached in 60 years," Stagg once said.

A 10th-round draft pick, LeBaron signed with the Redskins in February 1950. He played in two exhibition games but was called to active duty in the Marines after the Korean War began. He participated in some of the war's bloodiest actions and received Purple Hearts, the Bronze Star and a letter of commendation for his heroism.

He returned to the Redskins for the 1952 season and played most of the year, finishing as the league's sixth-leading passer. He was named NFL rookie of the year. But while one great Redskins quarterback was starting his career, another one was ending it. It was the last of 16 seasons for "Slingin'" Sammy Baugh, one of the top passers in league history.

LeBaron said he didn't learn much from Baugh because their quarterbacking styles were so distinct. But "Sam was great to be around," LeBaron said. "He didn't go into long dissertations, but he knew the game and the teams."

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LeBaron didn't get along with Redskins coach Curly Lambeau and, after the 1953 season, defected to the Canadian Football League, where he played for the Calgary Stampeders. He returned to the Redskins in 1955, by which time Joe Kuharich, whom LeBaron liked, coached the team.

The Redskins were 8-4 that year, their best mark in LeBaron's seven seasons in Washington. He also earned his first Pro Bowl appearance. But the Redskins posted only one other winning season in LeBaron's tenure and were otherwise mediocre to bad. He attributed that problem largely to team owner George Preston Marshall not investing the necessary money in good players and a scouting staff. Otherwise, he liked the controversial Redskins boss.

"He was a very interesting guy to be around," LeBaron said. "I was going to law school [at George Washington University] during my last three years with the Redskins, and he invited me to his lunch room, where he'd have senators and admirals and generals. That was one of the most scintillating places in Washington. He was great at getting people around him."

LeBaron made the Pro Bowl again in 1957 and 1958. By then, he was the league's best quarterback, at least in Kuharich's view, bettering outstanding quarterbacks like Unitas, Cleveland's Milt Plum, Pittsburgh's Bobby Layne and Billy Wade of Los Angeles.

"There are others who might be able to pass better than Eddie, others who can run better, others who can kick better," Kuharich wrote in a guest column in *The Atlanta Journal*. "But there is no one who can do ALL of those things as well as LeBaron. And nobody executes a play better or analyzes a situation anywhere near as well as the Redskins No. 14."

LeBaron played one more year in Washington before retiring. He planned to work for a law firm in Dallas when he received a call from Tex Schramm, general manager of the NFL's expansion franchise in Dallas. Schramm wanted him to play for the Cowboys and made a trade to the Redskins to acquire his rights. LeBaron agreed to play for the Cowboys and because he could also establish a law career in Dallas.

Like the Redskins, the Cowboys were bad in LeBaron's four seasons there. He alternated with Don Meredith at quarterback for part of the time and made the Pro Bowl in 1962. He retired for good after the 1963 season and, later that decade, joined another expansion team, the Atlanta Falcons, as general manager. His only other pro football stint was in 1987 when he served as outside counsel to the NFL during the player's strike.

Today, the NFL has a completely different flavor to it than when he played, LeBaron said.

"It's a big business," he said. "In the old days, most of the owners who came into the league started with very little money. They built the team up. The franchises were worth very little comparatively. You're getting people in the game now who don't really have a football background like most of them did in the early days, people like [George] Halas and Lambeau. Television's changed everything. It's become a huge sport and people are making a lot of money. It's just different."

LeBaron's nifty ball-handling had Marshall beaming after his college all-star team topped the defending champion Eagles, 17-7.

"It looks like we've come up with the greatest find since Sammy Baugh," Marshall once said. "And we can't wait until he returns from Korea. Eddie's only 20, you know. Imagine what he'll be in two or three years."

Ricca on "Eddie LeBaron. I had one of his receivers live with me for a couple of years, Johnny Carson, who I thought should have made it. Johnny used to say that the big problem with Eddie was that when you looked back for the pass you couldn't see him, he was so short. The big linemen would be up and all of a sudden the ball would come out. Eddie was a magician with the ball. You never knew who had the ball, he was so slick. That was his big claim to fame – his ball handling, faking to the different backs. I remember we scrimmaged some time and three (defensive guys) on the line got crushed and all of a sudden Eddie's standing down in the end zone with the ball. He rolled out and had the ball on his hip, and he was gone. He was elusive and tricky with the ball. He was so short that people couldn't really see him."

DeMao on LeBaron: He was short, but "Maybe that was to his advantage. He hid the ball. You didn't know whether he was handing it off, coming back in the line, or what he was going to do. He'd turn his back to the defense and nobody could see over the lineman on offense and defense so they had to hold up a fraction of a second to see where the ball was."

"The Redskins had the answer to one important question today, namely that little Eddie LeBaron can take a pounding from the pro bruisers and come up smiling and in one piece," Lewis F. Atchison wrote in *The Evening Star* on Aug. 7, 1952.

"I only wish I was young enough to play another year, because I think we have the makings of another great Redskin team now, and I'd love to play with them," Baugh said at the end of the 1952 season. "But I'll tell you one thing: That little LeBaron is going to be one of the game's great stars, and he'll do all the leading the Redskins need to win."

"Eddie LeBaron stands out as one of the greatest ball handlers of all time," Steve Sabol said. "He was really a magician. As little as he was and had these little hands, the way he could run the play action and fake, he was one of the most deft ball handlers in NFL history."

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LeBaron, Edward Wayne Jr.
 5-9, 168 U. of Pacific HS: Oakdale [CA]
B: 1 / 7 / 1930, San Rafael, CA
 Drafted: 1950 Round 10 Was

Pro Bowl (4) Was 1956, 1958-59; Dal 1963
 Citizens Savings Hall of Fame
 National Football Foundation Hall of Fame 1980

		PASSING								
Year	Team	G	ATT	COM	PCT	YDS	AVG	TD	INT	RATE
1952	Was	12	194	95	49.0	1420	7.32	14	15	65.7
1953	Was	12	149	62	41.6	874	5.87	3	17	28.3
1954					CFL					
1955	Was	12	178	79	44.4	1270	7.13	9	15	50.5
1956	Was	10	98	47	48.0	554	5.65	3	10	36.2
1957	Was	12	167	99	59.3	1508	9.03	11	10	86.1
1958	Was	12	145	79	54.5	1365	9.41	11	10	83.3
1959	Was	12	173	77	44.5	1077	6.23	8	11	54.0
1960	Dal	11	225	111	49.3	1736	7.72	12	25	53.5
1961	Dal	14	236	120	50.8	1741	7.38	14	16	66.7
1962	Dal	14	166	95	57.2	1436	8.65	16	9	95.4
1963	Dal	13	65	33	50.8	418	7.46	3	3	67.3
11 Yrs		134	1796	897	49.9	13399	7.46	104	141	61.4