

Jeff Hostetler

This article was written by Tommy A. Phillips.

Four seconds left, Super Bowl XXV. Bills kicker Scott Norwood's field goal slid wide to the right, and on came Giants quarterback Jeff Hostetler to take a knee. Hostetler went down and paused there for a moment. The feeling was finally sinking in. After years of riding the bench and waiting his turn, his time had come. Jeff Hostetler was a Super Bowl champion starting quarterback.



Long before leading the New York Giants on one of the most magical Super Bowl runs ever, William Jeffrey Hostetler was born on April 22, 1961, and grew up on a Mennonite farm outside of Johnstown, Pennsylvania. His family was a Penn State family through and through; his brothers Ron and Doug each played football for the Nittany Lions. That made it an easy choice for Jeff when Joe Paterno came knocking on his door for recruitment near the end of his time with Conemaugh Township High.ⁱ

But Paterno had other plans for Jeff. Paterno had promised Hostetler that he would be his starting quarterback, but along came Todd Blackledge. Paterno made Blackledge the starting quarterback, and Hostetler was reduced to backup. Paterno had hoped to use the 6'3", 215-pound Hostetler as a linebacker, but Jeff still had designs on starting at quarterback.ⁱⁱ Hostetler did contribute to Penn State's 1980 Fiesta Bowl victory with a



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fake field goal run for 12 yards and a first down, but after that season he chose to transfer to West Virginia.

Under head coach Don Nehlen, Hostetler became the starter for the Mountaineers for two years. Hostetler started his West Virginia career in 1982 with a bang, completing 17 of 37 passes for 321 yards and four touchdowns in a 41-27 upset of # 9 Oklahoma. He followed that with a 19-for-37, 285-yard day against Boomer Esiason's Maryland Terrapins, and the Mountaineers won 19-18.ⁱⁱⁱ

However, the Mountaineers' chances at an unbeaten season ended when #1 Pitt defeated them, 16-13. Hostetler led the Mountaineers into field goal range in the final seconds, but kicker Paul Woodside's 52-yard kick came up a yard short. A few weeks later, Hostetler had his chance at revenge against Penn State, but his 250-yard performance didn't lead to a single point, and the Mountaineers lost, 24-0. Hostetler rebounded and West Virginia won four straight to get into the Gator Bowl, which the Mountaineers lost to Florida State, 31-12.^{iv}

In 1983, "Hoss," as he was called, received nationwide attention as a Heisman Trophy contender. He threw for 218 yards and two touchdowns against Esiason's Terrapins, winning 31-21. Then he led the Mountaineers to their first win over Pitt since 1975 by rushing for a six-yard touchdown on a naked bootleg in the fourth quarter. The 24-21 win put West Virginia at #5 in the polls, the highest ranking in school history.^v

But Hostetler still couldn't get revenge against Penn State, losing 41-23 in the 25th consecutive loss for West Virginia to the Nittany Lions. The Mountaineers then lost 20-3 to Miami, before bouncing back by beating Temple and Rutgers. Hostetler finished his WVU career with a 20-16 win over Kentucky in the Hall of Fame Bowl.^{vi} Named a third-team All-American by Gannett News Service, Hostetler participated in two college all-star games, the Hula Bowl and the Japan Bowl.^{vii}

Hostetler was forever linked to Nehlen, and not just because Nehlen had brought him in from Penn State and coached him for two seasons. He met Nehlen's daughter Vicky while playing for the Mountaineers, and the two of them got married shortly after Hostetler's West Virginia career was over. The two of them had a son, Jason, who suffered through incredibly difficult health issues in his infancy. But like his dad, Jason fought through adversity and survived several health scares.^{viii}

With the 59th pick in the 1984 NFL Draft (the third round), the New York Giants selected Hostetler to compete for the starting quarterback job with Phil Simms. But not only did Hostetler come up short of the starting job, he wasn't even the backup. That was Jeff



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Rutledge, who had come over from the Los Angeles Rams. That led to Hostetler spending a long time warming the bench.

Hostetler's first six years in the NFL were agonizing. He was injured in a relief appearance against San Francisco during the 1986 season, breaking his leg. In an odd irony, Hostetler was out for the season while Simms won Super Bowl XXI. The exact opposite would be the case four years later.

In 1988, Hostetler finally got the chance to start a game with Simms injured. He threw an 85-yard touchdown pass to receiver Stephen Baker against the New Orleans Saints, the longest pass for the Giants since 1972. But after a first half in which the Giants failed to score any other points than that touchdown, head coach Bill Parcells called for Rutledge to replace Hostetler in the second half. Rutledge led the Giants to a victory, but the embarrassment of being benched at halftime led Hostetler to request a trade. Thankfully for the Giants, general manager George Young refused to let him go.

Hostetler replaced Simms early in a 1989 Monday Night Football game against the Minnesota Vikings, and he threw a touchdown pass while leading the Giants to a 24-14 victory. The next week, Hostetler started against the Phoenix Cardinals and guided New York to a 20-13 triumph. Simms came back the following week, but Hostetler had some valuable experience heading into the next year.

The Giants started out 10-0 under Simms in 1990. But in December against the Buffalo Bills of all teams, Simms broke his foot and was gone for the season. Hostetler took the controls, leading the Giants to road victories over the Cardinals and Patriots, and the NFC East champion Giants finished the season 13-3 with the #2 seed in the newly expanded NFL playoffs.

Thanks to the new playoff format, the Giants had a first-round bye before taking on the NFC Central champion Chicago Bears. Converting on four fourth-down gambles, the Giants overwhelmed the Bears, 31-3, with Hostetler throwing a pair of touchdown passes and also sneaking one in. The Giants headed to San Francisco for the NFC Championship Game. The two-time defending Super Bowl champion 49ers had defeated Simms' Giants 7-3 earlier in the season.

As in the previous 49ers game under Simms, the Giants did not score a touchdown at Candlestick Park. During the game, former Giant defensive tackle Jim Burt laid a questionable hit into Hostetler's knee to temporarily knock the quarterback out of the game. But Hostetler came back in, trailing 14-12. With just over two minutes left, Hostetler led the Giants from their own 40 into field goal range. Kicker Matt Bahr, who had made four field goals already, nailed a 42-yard kick with no time left to send the



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Giants to the Super Bowl. As former Giants kicker and CBS announcer Pat Summerall famously said, “There will be no three-peat!”

The Giants took on the high-flying Buffalo Bills in Super Bowl XXV with the nation under extreme tension due to the Gulf War. Parcells entrusted Hostetler with his ball-control offense with one directive: eat up as much time as possible. The goal was to keep the fast-paced Bills on the sideline so much that it would kill their no-huddle offense. It worked.

After Buffalo opened the game with a punt, Hostetler led the Giants on a six-minute drive to set up Bahr for a field goal for the early lead. Later in the first half, now trailing 10-3, a holding penalty pushed the Giants back near their own goal line. Bills defensive end Bruce Smith came crashing in on Hostetler in his own end zone, hitting him and going for the ball. Hostetler somehow managed to hang onto the ball amidst a hard hit, taking a safety but avoiding giving up a touchdown.

The Giants trailed 12-3 when Hostetler came back on the field, trying to become only the second team in Super Bowl history to overcome a nine-point-or-greater deficit to win (Washington had done so three years earlier). Having been hit so hard, Hostetler was barely lucid, but he pushed to come back into the game even with third-string quarterback Matt Cavanaugh warming up on the sideline. Hostetler led an 88-yard drive that ate up eight minutes, capping it off with a 14-yard touchdown pass to Baker right before halftime to make it 12-10.

To start out the second half, Hostetler marched the Giants 75 yards in a Super Bowl record-long nine-and-a-half minutes. Eventual Super Bowl MVP Ottis Anderson ended the drive with a touchdown run to put New York up 17-12. But the Bills took the lead back at the very beginning of the fourth quarter on a Thurman Thomas touchdown run, going up 19-17.

Hostetler yet again led the Giants on another long, bruising drive, going 74 yards in seven-and-a-half minutes to set up Bahr for a chip shot field goal to take a 20-19 lead. After a Buffalo punt, Hostetler’s offense chewed up some more time before punting it back to the Bills with just over two minutes to go. Of course, the game ended with

ⁱ Jeff Hostetler and Ed Fitzgerald, *One Giant Leap*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991, 21-44.

ⁱⁱ Hostetler and Fitzgerald, *One Giant Leap*, 44-48.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hostetler and Fitzgerald, *One Giant Leap*, 60-63.

^{iv} Hostetler and Fitzgerald, *One Giant Leap*, 64-72.

^v Hostetler and Fitzgerald, *One Giant Leap*, 87-90.

^{vi} Hostetler and Fitzgerald, *One Giant Leap*, 92-94.

^{vii} Joel S. Buchsbaum, “Young, Not Rozier Deserves Trophy,” *Pensacola News Journal*, Nov. 29, 1983, 11.

^{viii} Hostetler and Fitzgerald, *One Giant Leap*, 94-95, 113-122.



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Norwood pushing his game-winning field goal attempt wide to the right, and Hostetler kneeled out the clock on the Giants' second Super Bowl victory in franchise history.

If Hostetler's career had ended right there, he wouldn't have anything to complain about, and it'd be considered a success. But there was still a second half of his career to go, starting in 1991 when Parcells took some time off from coaching, and Ray Handley took over. Handley gave Hostetler the opportunity to compete for the starting job with Simms, who was coming back from injury. Perhaps a bit surprisingly, Handley chose Hostetler over Simms after the preseason.

Hostetler had an up-and-down 1991 season, throwing for over 2,000 yards but only five touchdowns before injuring his back in a late-season game against Tampa Bay. The Giants went 7-5 in Hostetler's 12 starts, including a three-game winning streak at which point Hostetler was injured. Simms took over and lost three consecutive games, and the Giants dropped out of playoff contention and finished 8-8.^{ix} Incidentally, Hostetler's five losses this season marked the first time in his career that the Giants had lost a game that he started.^x

Simms won back the starting job in 1992, and Hostetler was back to the bench. That didn't last long, though, as Simms blew out his elbow in a Week 4 loss to the Los Angeles Raiders, which caused Handley to put Hostetler back at the controls again. Hostetler threw for 1,225 yards and a career-high eight touchdowns in nine starts, winning five of them. A concussion cost him three games the rest of the way, which were started by Kent Graham as the Giants spiraled down a five-game losing streak. The Giants finished 6-10, and it was time for a fresh start for Hostetler.^{xi}

In 1993, Hostetler signed a three-year, \$8 million contract with the Los Angeles Raiders.^{xii} There he played the best ball of his career, starting with a 3,200-yard, 14-touchdown season, both numbers blowing his previous best numbers out of the water. Hostetler led the Raiders to a wild card playoff berth at 10-6. He started every game in 1993 except for a 24-9 loss to Kansas City early in the season. The Raiders earned the top wild card berth and the #4 seed in the AFC, enabling them to host a playoff game.

Hostetler played perhaps his best game of the season against the #5 Denver Broncos at Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. With the game temporarily interrupted by "Fan Man" James Miller, who flew over the stadium with his paramotor, Hoss threw for 294 yards

^{ix} "1991 New York Giants Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," Pro-Football-Reference.com, Accessed July 17, 2025, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/nyg/1991.htm>.

^x Hostetler and Fitzgerald, *One Giant Leap*, 144.

^{xi} "1992 New York Giants Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," Pro-Football-Reference.com, Accessed July 17, 2025, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/nyg/1992.htm>.

^{xii} Dave Klein, "NFL's Cry: Get the QB!," *Star-Ledger*, Mar. 26, 1993, 91.



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and three touchdowns on just 19 pass attempts.^{xiii} “The guy is just great,” eventual Pro Football Hall of Fame receiver Tim Brown said. “He finds a way to make a positive play. If he gets flushed out of the pocket, he’ll run for two yards or throw the ball up the field for five or six yards.”^{xiv} The Raiders won easily, 42-24.

But Hostetler’s perfect playoff career (4-0) came to an end the following week in the AFC divisional round at Buffalo. Hoss fired an 86-yard touchdown pass to Brown, the longest in Raiders playoff history, but the Raiders froze up in the second half in zero-degree temperatures. Nine penalties for 77 yards cost Los Angeles a chance at winning, as the Bills defeated Los Angeles, 29-23.^{xv} How fitting was it for Hostetler’s only playoff loss to come to the team he beat in the Super Bowl!

Hoss’s best statistical season came in 1994, when he completed 263 of 455 pass attempts for 3,334 yards and 20 touchdowns. All but the touchdowns number held up as his most in a single season by the time he retired. Hostetler was named to his one and only Pro Bowl, though there was certainly a strong case that he should have been in Honolulu a year before.

For the only time in his career, Hostetler started all 16 games. Despite a 2-4 start to the season, Hoss got his team close to a playoff berth. The Raiders won four of five games at midseason, then three in a row late in the year, setting up a win-and-in game at home against the Kansas City Chiefs. With the #6 seed on the line, Chiefs quarterback Joe Montana outdueled Hostetler in a 19-9 Kansas City victory. Perhaps this was fitting, too, since it was Hostetler’s team who ended Montana’s career as starter for the 49ers with that 15-13 win in the 1990 NFC Championship Game.

The Raiders moved to Oakland the following season, but under Hostetler’s steady arm, the team remained relevant in the playoff race. Hostetler led the Raiders to an 8-2 start in 1995, starting all but one of those victories. However, in a Week 12 loss to the eventual Super Bowl champion Dallas Cowboys, Hoss reagravated an injury to his left shoulder and was knocked out of the game.^{xvi} He wouldn’t play again that season, and the Raiders went from 8-2 to 8-8 and out of the playoffs.

Hostetler’s Raiders had an up-and-down season in 1996, going on a pair of three-game winning streaks and four streaks of two losses or more. Hostetler threw for over 2,500

^{xiii} Steve Springer, “Raiders’ First-Round KO Sends Broncos Home,” *South Florida Sun Sentinel*, Jan. 10, 1994, 17, 26.

^{xiv} Fred Mitchell, “Hostetler (294 Yards) Makes Bid for Respect,” *South Florida Sun Sentinel*, Jan. 10, 1994, 26.

^{xv} Jim Short, “Mistakes, Penalties Haunt L.A.,” *Ventura County Star*, Jan. 17, 1994, 15.

^{xvi} Jerry McDonald, “Raiders Hold Their Breath Over Hoss,” *Oakland Tribune*, Nov. 20, 1995, 17.



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yards and a career-high 23 touchdowns, while winning seven of his 13 starts. However, the Raiders lost all three games he didn't play in, and Oakland finished 7-9 and missed the playoffs yet again.

With Oakland choosing to move on in 1997, the 36-year-old Hostetler signed with the Washington Redskins to be a backup to Gus Frerotte. Hostetler played in one of the most bizarre games in NFL history, a 7-7 tie in Week 13 against the New York Giants, his former team. Frerotte knocked himself out of the game by headbutting a wall after scoring a touchdown, leading to Hostetler having to finish the game. He couldn't lead the 'Skins to any points, resulting in the tie.

Frerotte played the following game against St. Louis, but head coach Norv Turner inserted Hostetler for the final three games. Very much like the previous three seasons, Hostetler's team was right on the fringe of the playoff race, and yet again came up short. While Hoss won two of the final three games he started, the Giants beat the Redskins 30-10 in Week 16 to keep Washington out of the playoffs. Again, very fittingly, the Giants ended up being the very last team to defeat Hostetler in his career; he finished the 1997 season by throwing for 160 yards and a touchdown in a 35-32 win over Philadelphia. In 1998, Hostetler was demoted to third string, and this time he wasn't going to stay and wait out his turn. He cleaned out his locker and left, only to find out that the Redskins didn't oblige to release him, forcing him to come back. But then in an early-season game against the Seahawks, Hostetler injured his ankle while on the sideline, taking a hit from a player's helmet. That ankle had already been hurt, and as a result, Hostetler had to have surgery, and his season was over.^{xvii}

The following season, Hostetler was completely healed from the injury, and four different teams had designs on signing him to be their backup. But Hostetler's youngest son, eight-year-old Tyler, was injured in a sports recreation vehicle accident and was paralyzed from the neck down after breaking several vertebrae. With that, Hoss decided to call it a career. "I'm concentrating only on him right now," he said. "I have my priorities in the right spot. The focus is not on football. It's on my son. That is all that matters and nothing else."^{xviii}

Tyler is one of Jeff's three sons, the others being the aforementioned Jason, and Justin. Jeff himself is one of seven children of Norm and Dolly Hostetler, with sisters Gloria, Cheryl, and Lori, and brothers Ron, Doug, and Todd. A devout Christian, Jeff now runs the Hoss Foundation with his wife Vicky, a charity that helps families of children facing severe hardships, whether they be physical or financial.

^{xvii} Associated Press, "Redskins' Hostetler Cleans Out Locker," *Sentinel*, Sept. 24, 1998, 26.

^{xviii} "Quarterback's Goals Shift After Paralysis of His Son," *New York Times*, July 25, 1999, 39.



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Hostetler's career was one of perseverance, persistence, and refusal to give up. Whether it was avoiding a fumble in the end zone, or leading the longest-lasting drive in Super Bowl history, or outdueling John Elway at the Coliseum, or staying by the side of his three sons, Hoss never quit on any of his dreams. As he most eloquently puts it on his website: "The Super Bowl victory is a good beginning on the list of what I hope to accomplish."^{xix}

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End Notes:

^{xix} "About Us – Hoss Foundation," Hoss Foundation, Accessed July 17, 2025, <https://hossfoundation.org/about-us/>.