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### John McMullan

This article was written by Jim Marino.

John McMullan played the first two years the New York Titans existed in the American Football League. He was one of the original eleven offensive starters on the field for the first snap ever in the franchise's history. McMullan's football career consisted of three varsity seasons at A.J. Demarest High School in Hoboken, New Jersey, four years at Notre Dame, two years with the U.S. Army Service Team, a year on the taxi squad with the New York Football Giants, two campaigns with the New York Titans, and two years with the Atlantic Coast Football League's Jersey Giants. He was elected to two Hudson County Hall of Fames. McMullan started at right guard in 26 of the Titans first 28 games. John McMullan was the first player of the Titans, later the Jets, to be selected and honored with his own day in 1961. McMullan, whose program size was 6-0, 244, was a solid offensive lineman from the old school single wing.

McMullan was born June 28, 1933, in New York City. John was from an Irish-American family along with one brother and four sisters. The family moved to Hoboken, New Jersey early in his life. John played freshman football at St. Michaels High School of Union City, New Jersey, but transferred to A.J. Demarest High School in Hoboken, [now known as Hoboken High School] in 1950. As a sophomore, McMullan was a two-way starter playing guard and linebacker as a member of the defense called "The Iron Wall."<sup>1</sup> The 1950 team, coached by Joe Marino was known in Hudson County as "The Iron Wall" because they registered seven straight shut outs to open the season and finished 8-1.

In his three-year high school career, McMullan was a member of the All-Met and All-State honorable mention teams for two years, as well as selected all three years on the All-County [Hudson County, New Jersey] team.<sup>2</sup> College scouts were impressed by his size, speed, and general football knowledge and John received scholarship offers from a dozen colleges. Notre Dame had its sights on him and sent a premier recruiter after the lineman. Johnny Druze, assistant coach at Notre Dame who captained Fordham's 'Seven

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<sup>1</sup> Babich, Larry. "Coach's Corner: "Strongest Brick In 'The Wall', *Jersey Journal*, 1-29-97, 13-15.

<sup>2</sup> *The Jersey Journal*, January 30, 1970, 17.



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Blocks of Granite,' said, "McMullan is one of the outstanding line prospects in the east."<sup>3</sup> McMullan selected Notre Dame.

John played football at the University of Notre Dame from 1952 to 1955. He played on the freshmen team because the NCAA did not permit freshmen to play varsity. As a sophomore McMullan saw playing time as a reserve nose tackle during Frank Leahy's last season as head coach. McMullan was part of the defense which stopped Georgia Tech's 31-game winning streak. The team held the number one spot in the polls until the last week losing out to Maryland, despite finishing with a 9-0-1 record better than the Terrapins 10-1 mark.

During McMullan's college career, he played alongside several future NFL players - quarterback Ralph Guglielmi, who became a 7-year veteran with the Redskins, Cardinals, Giants and Eagles; halfback Johnny Lattner, the number one draft pick of the Pittsburgh Steelers; and receiver Joe Heap, drafted #1 by the Giants in 1955. McMullan's most famous teammate was Paul Horning who played quarterback during McMullan's last two years at Notre Dame.

McMullan played his junior and senior years under Terry Brennan's leadership compiling a 17-3 record. Notre Dame finished ranked No.4 and No. 9 in McMullan's final two years. The 1955 Notre Dame Football Review described McMullan as "a stalwart on defense and a good blocker on offense."<sup>4</sup> McMullan earned a varsity letter his senior year playing nose tackle. He recovered three fumbles that season. He graduated in 1956 with a B.A. in communication.<sup>5</sup>

The 1956 National Football League Draft conducted its first three rounds on November 28, 1955, at the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and its final twenty-seven rounds on January 17-18, 1956, at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, California.<sup>6</sup> McMullan was drafted by the New York Giants in the 14<sup>th</sup> round. However, the federal government's draft had a higher priority, and John entered the service in the summer of 1956 for a two-year tour. The Giants placed him on the taxi squad to protect their draft rights.

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<sup>3</sup> "Notre Dame May Get Demarest's McMullan," *Jersey Journal*, 1-23-52, 20.

<sup>4</sup> *1955 Notre Dame Scholastic: Football Review*. December 2, 1955. Volume 97 Issue 8, 40.

<sup>5</sup> Babich, Larry. *Jersey Journal*, April 2, 1994, 27.

<sup>6</sup> "1956 NFL Draft" [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1956\\_NFL\\_Draft](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1956_NFL_Draft).

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While in the Army, McMullan played service ball for two years at Fort Dix in New Jersey. He earned All-Team honors both years. Once he was voted “Athlete of the Week” at Fort Dix. McMullan earned the honor with his performance in the Fort Dix 19-0 victory against Fort Belvior. His game highlights included: setting up a Ft. Dix touchdown with a “devastating block that sent two enemy players sprawling,” and he had an interception return for a score, the first in his football career.<sup>7</sup>

McMullan completed his armed-services duty in the summer of 1958 in time for the Giants pre-season practices. He tried to make the team during Vince Lombardi’s last year as offensive coordinator. The New York line coach was Johnny Dell Isola, an old Giants lineman from 1934-1940. He played in three championship games and coached the Giants linemen from 1957 to 1959. McMullan had a hot temper and it did not mix well with Lombardi’s temperament. Bob Mischak, a future Titans teammate, was also trying out for the Giants. Mischak recalled McMullan’s demeanor, “John was hyper-emotional. Most players accepted the coach as a dominant figure. John would up to a point. Then he would get anxious about what was happening and might bark at the coach.”<sup>8</sup>

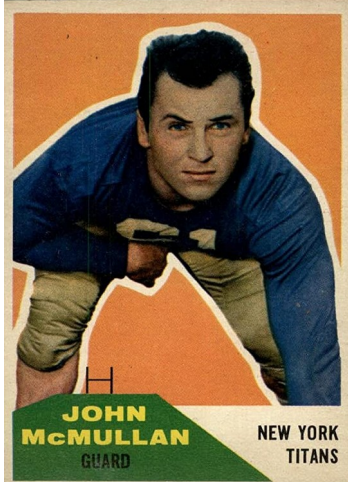
The intense pre-season drills and play repetition resulted in a blowup between McMullan and Lombardi. Bob Ryczek in his book *Crash Of The Titans* described the confrontation, “McMullan was having a bad day and the Giants assistant, Vince Lombardi, was riding him hard, calling him a big Mick, or something to that effect. McMullan shot back a few epithets concerning Lombardi’s heritage, and that was the end of McMullan’s career with the Giants.”

McMullan had tryouts with the Philadelphia Eagles and the Baltimore Colts which did not pan out. John enrolled back at Notre Dame to get his master’s degree. Lamar Hunt’s crazy idea and Harry Wismer’s dream salvaged McMullan’s pro career. Wismer, owner of the New York Titans, wanted to put fans in the stands. He believed a famous player as head coach would help. Wismer convinced Sammy Baugh to coach the Titans. He allowed Baugh to select his own staff. Baugh selected, as defensive coordinator, one of his friends Johnny Dell Isola. It was Dell Isola who suggested to Baugh to invite John McMullan and Bob Mischak to try out as guards. McMullan had made an impression on Isola. Despite Lombardi having cut McMullan, Isola thought he could play in the new league.

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<sup>7</sup> “McMullan Voted ‘Athlete of Week’ At Fort Dix”. *The Jersey Journal*. November 11, 1957, 29.

<sup>8</sup> Ryczek, Bill. *Crash Of The Titans*. 115.



1960 Fler football card. Note Topps used college photos for this series of cards for the AFL teams. He is wearing the Notre Dame uniform with #61. The colors fit for the New York Titans and maybe the only card that is accurate for the AFL uniforms.

In early July, close to 100 players arrived at the first Titan pre-season camp at the University of New Hampshire in Durham. The team's first scrimmage occurred on Monday, July 11. McMullan was part of the offensive line's first unit. Howard Tuckner, assigned by the *New York Times* to cover the scrimmage declared in the paper, "The big tough first line which consisted of Mischak, McMullan, Cockrill, and Owens, was the outstanding unit in the scrimmage."<sup>9</sup>

By August 1, 40 players remained to fit onto the 35 man roster. The first of five pre-season games, all on the road, was played in the Los Angeles Coliseum against the Los Angeles Chargers. The Titans lost 27-7. McMullan maintained his starting status, made a good impression on the staff and especially with Baugh. Baugh rated McMullan better in the running game, strong, but heavy-legged not as quick as Mischak.<sup>10</sup> The Titans lost the next three, but finished with a win against the Buffalo Bills at Civic Stadium on September 4. McMullan made the final cut and was ready to suit up as a starter in the home opener against the Bills.

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<sup>9</sup> Tuckner, Howard. "First Scrimmage For The Titans," *New York Times*. July 13, 1960, 42.

<sup>10</sup> Ryczek, Page 114-115.



Sammy Baugh directing the offense at practice in the Polo Grounds. Right guard John McMullan (center of photo) is pulling left in the direction that Baugh is pointing

The Titans played the franchise's first regular season game in the Polo Grounds on September 11. New York wore its home uniforms for the first time. The Titans' uniform colors were from the school Wismer revered, Notre Dame's blue and gold.<sup>11</sup> The navy blue jerseys had old gold numerals while the gold pants had two parallel blue stripes on each side, and topped with navy blue helmets with a single gold stripe but no decals. The offensive line was one of the club's strengths. McMullan started at right guard and was the first Titan to wear number 68. The line dominated the Bills as the Titans racked up 20 first downs, 164 yards on the ground and 340 total yards in New York's 27-3 victory.

The most unusual game of the season was the fourth game which Bill Ryczek called the "presage of the Heidi game."<sup>12</sup> McMullan played a crucial role in saving the victory. This presage Heidi game was played in the Cotton Bowl, in Dallas Texas with 37,000 fans. The Dallas Texans and Titans played a wild seesaw game with 72 points scored. Since it was an away game, it was broadcast in the New York City area on WABC. The Texans came back twice from a 13-point deficit. Dallas scored a late fourth quarter touchdown to trail by only two points with 2:30 left. The Titans needed at least one or two first downs to seal the game. Dallas lined up to kick off.

New York fans watching on television were prevented from seeing the nerve-wracking suspenseful ending. "WABC cut off the telecast at precisely 6:30 pm with the score 37-

<sup>11</sup> Sahadi, Lou. *The Long Pass*, 51.

<sup>12</sup> Ryczek, 134.



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35 and the Titans ready to receive the kickoff. A Walt Disney special featuring Davey Crockett was scheduled, and ABC executives wanted to be certain the New York City audience would not miss a single minute of the special.”<sup>13</sup>

The Titans with less than 2:25 left drove for a first down, making it on a crucial third down running play. The Titans still needed to run out the clock. With less than 15 seconds left and at their own twelve, New York ran one more play. Dewey Bohling carried, was hit, and fumbled the ball. The ball rolled to the Titans’ goal line and McMullan outwrestled a Texan for the ball, as time ran out.

The Titan fans back in New York never saw the end nor who won. According to the *New York Times* in Monday’s paper, “Plaintive cries of about 500 callers jammed the WABC switchboard after the game was cut off when it reached the three hour time at 6:30.” “The switch board lit up like a Christmas tree seconds after the game went off,” said a network executive.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless an exciting win for the Titans, saved by the play of McMullan.

In a tale of two seasons, New York opened with a 4-2 record in the first six games, 2-4 in the next six while splitting the final two. The offensive line of McMullan, Mischak, left guard, Jack Klotz, left tackle, Mike Hudock, center, and Gene Cockrell at right tackle carried the offense. The team lead the league in scoring, lead the league in first downs, tied for first for total touchdowns and finished second in total yards.

McMullan played in the first Mayor’s Trophy Game between the Dallas Texans and the New York Titans on November 24. It was the first Thanksgiving game played in New York City in 24 years.<sup>15</sup> Wismer came up with the idea for an annual tradition intended as a way to increase attendance. The Titans won all three Mayor’s Trophy games during Wismer’s ownership.

General manager Steve Sabo, and Baugh were extremely satisfied with McMullan’s first year in the trenches. Sabo declared, “When you have a player like John you just know the job will be done every day. You never worry about him.”<sup>16</sup> Baugh professed, “In John McMullan and Bob Mischak we have the two best guards in the league. Both of them have size and are experienced. And they have the speed which is a prerequisite of a major

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<sup>13</sup> Ryczek, 134.

<sup>14</sup> Ryczek, 134.

<sup>15</sup> Ryczek, 159.

<sup>16</sup> Rakowski, Cas. “McMullan Has Found A Home With The Titans,” *Jersey Journal*, August 22, 1961, 17.



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league pro football player.”<sup>17</sup> McMullan signed another one year contract in June. He was defined as “one of the outstanding attacking lineman of the year” in the new league.<sup>18</sup>

As the second pre-season rolled around, McMullan worked to keep his status as the starting right guard. The second Titan camp opened at Bear Mountain in upstate New York. McMullan did not take anything for granted. “After practice at pre-season camp, John is still on the field working on technique,” commented Sabo as he noticed the extra work McMullan put in, “That’s the type of player he is. He works for perfection.”<sup>19</sup> The 1961 roster was completed in the first week of September, and McMullan kept his starting position.

McMullan faced a patchwork quilt of defensive left tackles which made up the first two years of the American Football League. He faced All-Pros Chuck McMurtry of the Buffalo Bills and Paul Rochester of the Dallas Texans, as well as 7-year NFL veteran Volney Peters (Chicago Cardinals, Washington Redskins, and Philadelphia Eagles) of the Oakland Raiders, 5-year Los Angeles Rams veteran Bud McFadin who played with the Denver Broncos and 3-year NFL player Dick Klein (Chicago Bears, and Dallas Cowboys) who lined up for the Boston Patriots. Even a 1-year NFLer, Harry Jagielski, came out of a four-year retirement to play for Boston during the first year. The remaining starters were just out of college but had survived the pre-season, and earned starting positions with their teams. Bill Hudson of the San Diego Chargers earned All-Pro honors in his first year, 1961. McMullan took them all on in the two seasons he played. McMullan’s intensity was apparent before games, similar to Fred Biletnikoff of the Oakland Raiders, when John vomited before almost every game.<sup>20</sup>

McMullan was the first player of the New York franchise to be honored with a day. John McMullan Day occurred on December 3, 1961 at the Polo Grounds against the Dallas Texans. As an attempt to raise attendance, McMullan was recognized by the team, and Hoboken as the first AFL player from Hoboken. Two days prior to the game John was also honored at the Union Club in Hoboken that had been organized by the Hoboken Lions, Rotary, Kiwanis, and Chamber of Commerce and attended by the stars of the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> “McMullan Inks Titan Contract For ’61 Season”. *The Bergen Record* June 30, 1961, 38.

<sup>19</sup> Rakowski, 17.

<sup>20</sup> Ryczek, 115.

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team: Baugh, Mischak, Sid Youngelman, Don Maynard, and Art Powell. More than 2,000 fans from McMullan's hometown of Hoboken celebrated his day. Also, in attendance were McMullan's family, his high school coach, Joe Marino, and Chairman of the McMullan Day festivities Charles Buoncoure, secretary of the International Longshoremens' Association.

The teams of the young league worked hard to connect with the local community. The Titans sent their players out to speak to the fans. McMullan was one of the hardest workers in community contact since he lived in New Jersey. The first season he lived in Fort Lee and the second in Bergenfield. McMullan spoke to 130 children and 50 parents at the Holy Name Society of St. John's Roman Catholic Church in Bergenfield. McMullan told them, "The rules of the game must be observed whether it is on the football field, baseball diamond, or in life itself. It is necessary for persons to be good citizens and observe the rules of life."<sup>21</sup>

At a meeting of the Kiwanis Club in Teaneck New Jersey, McMullan gave a rather interesting speech on the condition of the AFL. He described the league's condition and projected it into the future. He was accurate on some aspects and off target on others. McMullan said, "There is only a three-year difference played in the AFL and NFL." And then McMullan predicted, "When the better players are obtained by the AFL [through the draft] everything will balance out." The draft did provide Namath, Fred Biletnikoff, Aaron Brown, Bob Griese, and many others with opportunity and by 1969, the two leagues were even. McMullan finished saying, "The AFL owners can stand financial reverses for at least three years or perhaps longer."<sup>22</sup> He was wrong with Wismer, but the NBC contract helped save the rest.

In 1962, despite signing a new contract on June 17, changes in the coaching staff were a harbinger of disappointment for McMullan. After Wismer and Baugh had a falling out, Wismer removed Baugh, and Sabo, who championed McMullan. Wismer brought in Clyde "Bulldog" Turner as head coach, and George Sauer, Sr. as general manager. Turner, who last coached in 1958, told the press at the Titans' first pre-season practice at East Stroudsburg State College in Pennsylvania, "Size is generally over emphasized in

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<sup>21</sup> "Titans Guard Tells Cubs To Observe Life's Rules," *The Bergen Record* February 2, 1962, 8.

<sup>22</sup> "McMullan Tells Chances Of New Football League," *The Bergen Record* November 15, 1961, 24.

<sup>22</sup> Teague, Robert, "First Day Of Practice. 63 Stars Packed With Desire", *New York Times*. July 14, 1962, 35.





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pro football. I would gladly sacrifice weight for added speed and maneuverability.”<sup>23</sup> The hand writing was on the wall for McMullan who was viewed as heavy-footed and slower than Mischak.

Throughout the summer, Turner continued to preach speed. “I rate speed second only to desire in the qualifications a man has to have to play for me,” said Turner. “Size and ability are third and fourth. If I have two players trying for the one position, I’ll go with the one’s whose fastest even if he happens to be the smaller and even has a little less ability than the other.”<sup>24</sup> Despite McMullan’s experience and size, his competition became Mischak. Mischak had been All-Pro guard both years. Turner switched Mischak to right guard after the Titans traded for left guard Sid Fournet from the Dallas Texans. Fournet was older and had started only three games for Dallas. By the time of the first intra squad game, McMullan was listed as the backup right guard.

Veteran sports writer John Drebinger seemed to miss the personnel changes Turner formulated. Drebinger wrote in his column *Sports of The Times* that “among the linemen are four blocks of granite, Jack Klotz, Bud Cockrell, John McMullan and Bob Mischak. These four weigh, respectively, 260, 247, 244, and 240. Anyone slamming into this awesome foursome does so at his own peril.”<sup>25</sup> The roster, reduced from seventy-five to fifty-seven by August 2, was mainly smaller faster players. McMullan remained on the roster and he played in all the remaining pre-season games. The final roster had to be reported to the league offices five days before the opener. Turner cut McMullan on September 5 in the last cut made before the season opener.

Following his dismissal McMullan devoted his time working for the Navajo Trucking company. But a another business twist afforded McMullan one more chance with the AFL.

Wisner sold the Titans to a group led by Sonny Werblin on March 28, 1963. The team became the Jets and Weeb Ewbank the new coach. Ewbank began to rebuild the organization and player roster. Hoping to utilize players with pro experience Ewbank invited a few former Titan players to the Jets 1963 pre-season camp. McMullan was one of them. He arrived along with 61 other players for the first practice at the Peekskill Military Academy in Peekskill, New York on July 11. McMullan pulled a leg muscle in

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<sup>23</sup> Teague, Robert. “Titan Eleven Is Planning To Emphasize Speed,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1962, 121.

<sup>24</sup> Drebinger, John. “Sports Of The Times: The Zealous Titans,” *New York Times*, August 3, 1962, 16.

<sup>25</sup> Drebinger, John. 16.



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the second week and missed the first exhibition game. He made the first cut. McMullan saw his first action in a scrimmage against Buffalo, playing on the second team.

By September 1, McMullan, still on the roster, was relegated to second team guard, and played on special team kickoff and kickoff return units. The Jets last pre-season game was against the Boston Patriots at Rutgers Stadium, in New Brunswick, NJ. McMullan played only on special teams as the Jets won 22-20. On Tuesday September 3, McMullan received the news that he had not made the opening day roster. He was beaten out at backup guard by Ben Butler and Roger Ellis who both would play in only one game for the Jets that season. Of the original 1960 Titans offensive line, only Jack Klotz and Mike Hudock remained.

McMullan's football career did not end yet. Dell Isola intervened again and contacted McMullan to play for him. Isola was the head coach of the Atlantic Coast Football League's Jersey Giants. The Jersey Giants, located in Jersey City, New Jersey, was a high minor league football team. McMullan signed with Jersey. Isola told reporters, "McMullan has the speed and strength to be one of the top linemen in the Atlantic Coast Football League."<sup>26</sup> McMullan played offensive right guard as the team finished tied for third with an 8-4 record. The next year, he became a player-coach under the leadership of Nick Cutro. The Giants finished in second place with an 11-3 record.

Jersey folded before the start of the 1965 season. John became a fulltime account manager and salesman with the national trucking company Navajo Trucking. John remained living in New Jersey. McMullan's wife Dolores was killed in a car accident in 1971 and he raised his three sons and two daughters by himself. He switched to the restaurant business because of the more flexible hours to spend more time at home with the children.<sup>27</sup> In September 1992 McMullan was one of 16 Demarest/Hoboken high school athletes inducted as charter members in the school's sports Hall of Fame.

John McMullan died April 1, 1994 at the age of 60. He was survived by his three sons, John III, Christopher, Kevin, one daughter Patricia, and five grandchildren. Hudson County inducted McMullan posthumously into its Athletic Hall of Fame on January 30, 1997. Joe Marino who coached at Demarest for 13 years and Essex Catholic High School in Newark, New Jersey for 10 years, called McMullan "the greatest lineman he ever coached."<sup>28</sup> Larry Babich, long time Hudson County sportswriter, called McMullan,

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<sup>26</sup> "McMullan Signs With The J.C. Giants" *The Jersey Journal*. September 11, 1963, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Ryczek, 314.

<sup>28</sup> Interview by Jim Marino in 1984.



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“One of Hoboken’s greatest football heroes”<sup>29</sup> and “An outstanding lineman with the New York Titans in the fledgling American Football League.”<sup>30</sup>

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*The Jersey Journal*. January 30, 1970. Page 17.

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<sup>29</sup> Babich, Larry. “Hoboken Grid Great McMullan, 60, Dies” *Jersey Journal* April 2, 1994, 27-28.

<sup>30</sup> Babich, Larry. “Coach’s Corner: “Strongest Brick In ‘The Wall’”, *Jersey Journal*, 1-29-97,13-15.