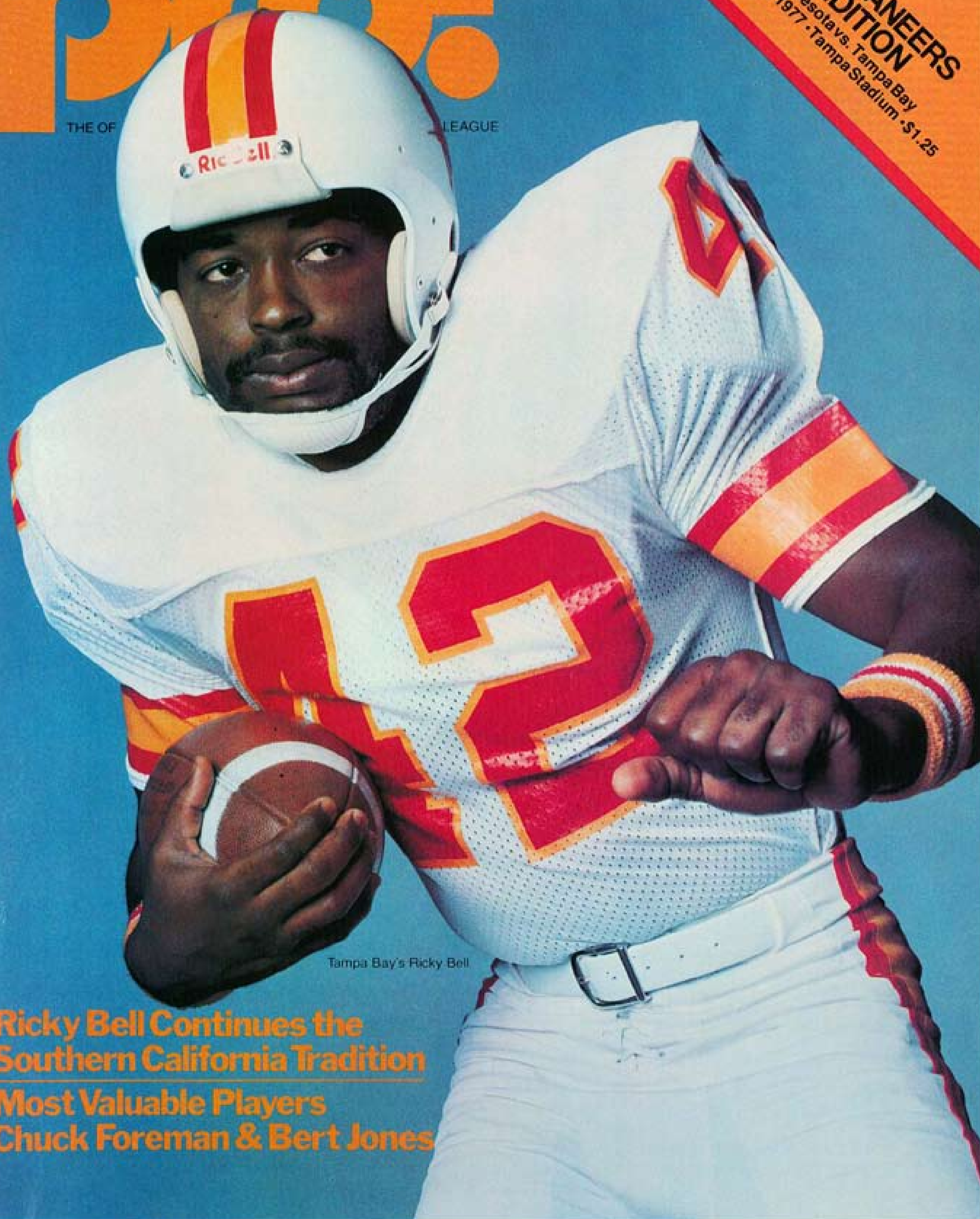


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# Ricky Bell and the Mystique of the USC Tailback

By Dan Berger

Photographs by Peter Read Miller

"Perhaps becoming an SC running back is like playing for the New York Yankees in the great years . . ." Mike Garrett says.

The anxiety had been building for weeks. Ricky Bell knew taking over as the starting tailback at the University of Southern California would not be easy. But he didn't figure it would be this agonizing.

Here it was, the night before the first game of the 1975 season. Bell, closeted in a Los Angeles hotel room for a good night's sleep, was awake, tossing, turning, staring at the ceiling. The game with Duke was only hours away, yet Bell could scarcely remember the plays he was supposed to run, the assignments he'd be called on to carry out.

Instead, Bell thought of Mike Garrett darting past would-be tackles on late Saturday afternoons; of O.J. Simpson sprinting off tackle on a classic 64-yard run to beat UCLA in 1967 en route to a national championship; of Anthony Davis blitzing Notre Dame on three touchdowns on kickoff returns; 100,000 screaming fans.

Visions of the past filled Bell's mind: Would he be able to match that?

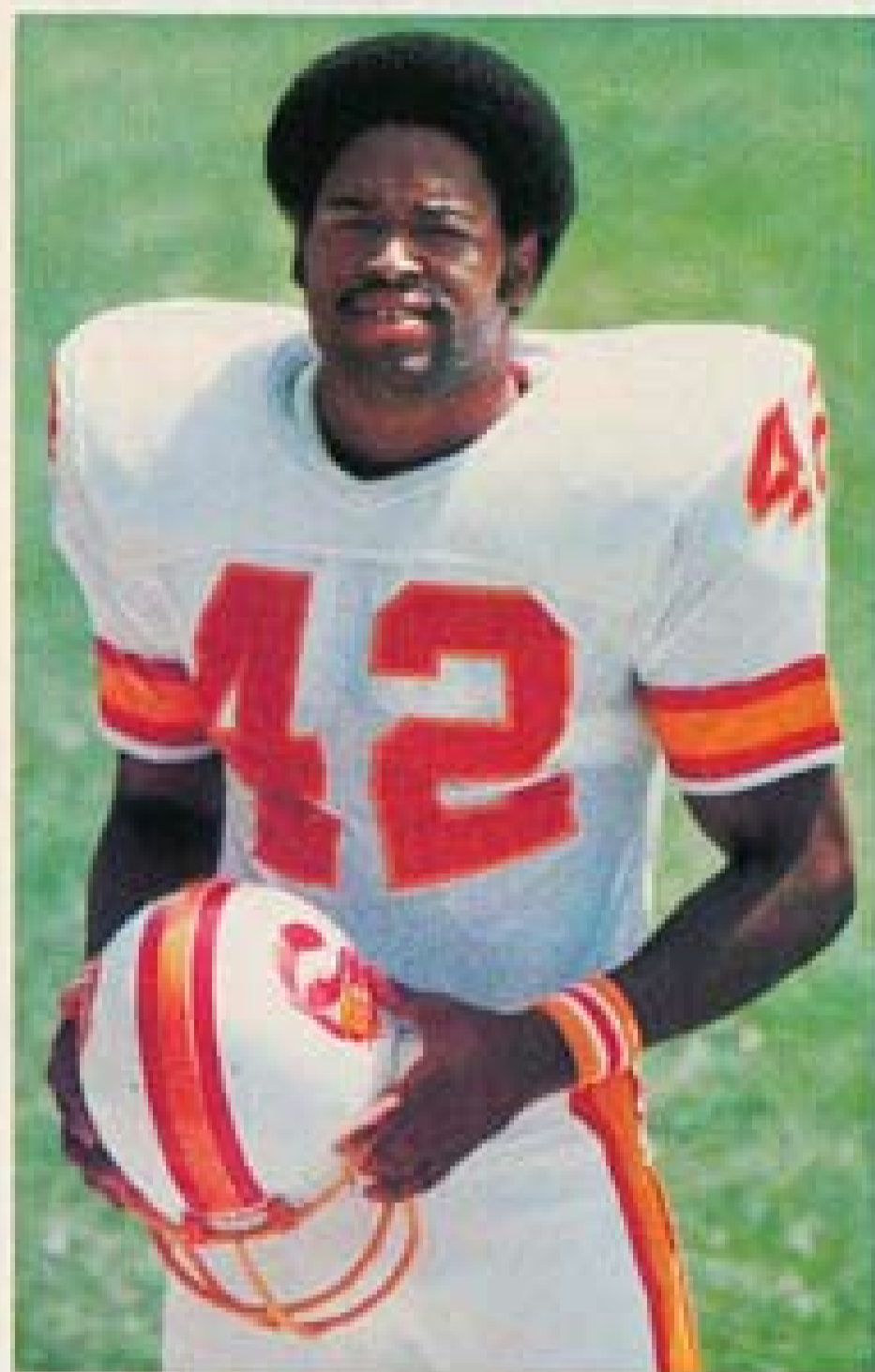
The following day, Bell fought off a queasy stomach as he downed a pregame steak. He joked with teammates; he was affable, smiling; he admitted to being a little nervous.

Then he got sick.

"I was so nervous I couldn't think straight," he said. "I never felt like that before. All those great tailbacks that had come before—Garrett, Davis, Simpson—all that tradition I had to live up to."

But something must happen to the man called on to carry the ball for USC. In one dizzying, agonizing, ecstatic hour against Duke, Ricky Bell blasted through the Blue Devils for 256 yards and four touchdowns. The mystique of the USC tailback continued. Bell had showed a combination of power and speed rarely seen in college football—even at USC—and he had broken the school's single-game rushing record.

Witnesses were rightfully impressed, but many said that sort of performance



Ricky Bell, number one draft choice, 1977.

could have been predicted. They are the people who feel there are certain certitudes in life—that the Boston Celtics will always be contenders for the pro basketball championship; that Walt Disney will always make family films, and that the USC tailback always will be an All-America candidate.

It's been that way for a long time, but in Bell's case the story is a bit harder to believe. After two seasons, Bell had gained 3,390 yards at tailback and had become another in the long line of great USC tailbacks.

And for such performance, despite not winning the Heisman trophy, Bell was rewarded by becoming the number-one draft pick of pro football, going to Tampa Bay.

Ricky Bell might have become as exciting at another school. He might have achieved the same fame elsewhere. But there is something almost indefinable about being USC's tailback, something that seems to make the man stand taller, play harder, do greater things than he might have done in another situation.

"The USC tailback position is maybe the single most identifiable position in

college football," says John Robinson, the present USC coach and former offensive backfield coach of the Oakland Raiders.

What is this mystique? What instills USC tailbacks with this feeling of omnipotence?

Perhaps it was best explained by Garrett, who was John McKay's first great tailback, the first West Coast running back to win the Heisman trophy (1965), and later a star halfback with the Kansas City Chiefs and the San Diego Chargers.

"I would get in a groove, in a sort of rhythm—almost like I was in a trance," said Garrett, who is a divisional manager for a San Diego department store.

"Before each game I was so conscious of the way in which I had to perform, but then going out on the field and being on that side line with John McKay, that put my mind above a lot of things, such as pain. I got bumped and bruised and cut, but I wouldn't feel the bumps, cuts, and scrapes until Monday.

"I transcended the beating. I always got hyper before games with Kansas City and San Diego, but SC was a different kind of feeling. I got high on the excitement, the thrill.

"I think it can be compared to other sports only in the most abstract ways. Perhaps becoming an SC running back is like playing for the New York Yankees in their great years, with Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Joe DiMaggio, and Mickey Mantle. It's the one chance you get in your lifetime to put your act together, to feel like the chosen one.

"It's a psychological high like I've never known since.

"And I can't say enough about the part John McKay played in building that feeling. He created the Golden Dome effect of South Bend in Southern California out of the residue of his character. He affected the lives of hundreds of football players at USC, and that tradition will be at USC for a very long time."

Being the USC tailback means the athlete must deal with unusual pressures. Such as a demanding, exuberant alumni association that expects nothing less than excellence; a half-century of superb running backs who have performed up to that expectation, and a student body

"I was so nervous I couldn't think straight. I never felt like that before. All those great tailbacks that had come before—Garrett, Davis, Simpson . . ."

that seems certain each step of the USC tailback will result in glory.

The tradition probably started in 1927 with Morley Drury, the "noblest Trojan of them all," as he was called. He gained 1,163 yards in 223 attempts during a nine-game season and was acclaimed a unanimous All-America.

In 1929 came Russ Saunders, a back whose classic visage and body earned him an eminent role in USC history: Saunders posed for the famous bronze statue of Tommy Trojan.

There were other stars. In the early 1930s they were Erny Pinckert, Orv Mohler, and Cotton Warburton. In the 1950s they were Frank Gifford, Jon Arnett, C.R. Roberts, and Don Buford, who later played baseball for the Baltimore Orioles' world champions.

Garrett was McKay's choice. He had grown up in Los Angeles, attended Roosevelt High School, and he knew of the tradition of the USC tailback.

"I was always nervous before games, but especially before that first one in my sophomore year," said Garrett. "But USC had been national champions before, with Pete Beathard at quarterback, and a lot of people were looking to others, not me as much. So the pressures on me weren't as great initially."

Garrett was not big (5 foot 9 inches, 180 pounds), but he was extremely quick and seemingly indestructible. He turned so quickly in midstride, without losing speed, that often he fooled his own blockers, running right past them. And he was the one who gave McKay a new idea for the I formation which McKay used almost exclusively. After Garrett, USC runners were allowed more freedom to choose their holes.

Garrett's three-year rushing total of 3,221 yards is all the more amazing when you consider that in his sophomore year, 1963, he also played defensive back. (The NCAA had not yet approved free substitution.)

Garrett won the Heisman trophy (only the second West Coast player to do so; Oregon State quarterback Terry Baker was the first in 1962), and went on to star with the Chiefs. In 4½ seasons with the Chiefs, Garrett ran for 3,246 yards, a 4.4-yard average. He helped the Chiefs

beat the Minnesota Vikings 23-7 in Super Bowl IV.

Don McCall was the tailback for McKay in 1966. He later played for the New Orleans Saints and Pittsburgh Steelers before injuries shortened his career.

The biggest coup in recruiting in 1966, and one of the major developments in USC's football history, came when junior college star O.J. Simpson chose to attend USC. At City College of San Francisco, Simpson had set national records for rushing, but he had been used mainly as a flanker. He was known for his open-field running, and there was concern whether he would fit in at USC.

When the 6-1, 205-pound Simpson arrived on campus, the coaches were impressed by his physical attributes. But there were question marks. Could he take the pounding the USC tailback position required? Would he be a fumbler, as had been the reports from CCSF? Would he be able to adapt to the I?

A few days after spring practice began, McKay decided to test his prize prospect. He ordered the scrimmage quarterback to hand the ball to Simpson seven consecutive times. Assistant coaches' mouths were agape when they saw the kid get faster and stronger on each carry. McKay just grinned.

A special drill was ordered, however, to make certain O.J. could carry the load. O.J. remembers it:

"Two guys held two big, five-foot-high bags. They gave me a stiff belt as I took off. They gave me another belt as I ran through. Another bag is about two yards away, and you have to be quick to change direction. They throw heavy air bags at your feet. I learned to hit, elude, and make moves."

"Jay was a big man," said McKay. "He was a lot bigger than a lot of people realize. He ran a lot of 9.4s and a 9.3 [100-yard dashes] in college, and he was one of the hardest workers we ever had." Simpson ran on a USC 440-yard relay team that set a world record of 38.6 in 1967 that still stands.

As a running back he had no peer. His punishing, pounding runs simply wore teams out. In two seasons, Simp-

son gained 3,423 yards. He won the Heisman trophy in his senior year, when he scored 23 of the Trojans' 24 rushing touchdowns. His recent contributions for the Buffalo Bills have been well documented. He gained 2,003 yards in 1973 for an all-time NFL single-season rushing record; he ran for 273 yards last November 25 against Detroit for the single game record.

McKay's next recruit for the tailback position was a tough kid from Washington High School in Los Angeles who had gone to East Los Angeles College for his first two seasons. There, Clarence Davis broke all of Simpson's national junior college rushing records, even though he was only 5-10, 190 pounds.

Still, it was an unenviable position, taking over at USC from O.J. Simpson.

"SC had a lot of other talented people," Davis recalled, "and I never expected to be another Garrett or Simpson. But I was really nervous my first start. I gained eighty yards and I was very happy—and happy it was over."

Davis played with an assortment of injuries, yet in two seasons he gained 2,323 yards. "I was very disappointed I was only drafted on the fourth round by Oakland," he said. "I thought I was better than that." In the years since, he has proved he was.

The 1977 season is his seventh with the powerful Raiders and last year he climaxed the season by rushing for 137 yards as the Raiders defeated Minnesota in Super Bowl XI.

McKay had problems when injuries struck Lou Harris and Rod McNeill in 1971, so he switched junior Sam Cunningham from fullback to tailback. Cunningham, who was built for the job at 6-3, 225 pounds, filled in at tailback for a year, until freshman Anthony Davis could graduate to the varsity (freshman were not eligible at that time).

Cunningham made the switch back to fullback in 1972. Now Cunningham is the leading rusher for the New England Patriots, a team that won 11 games in

*Former USC backfield stars (left to right) Clarence Davis, Sam Cunningham, Bell, O.J. Simpson, and Anthony Davis.*



"Taking over the tailback position made me more of a man," said Ricky. "Really, I'm better able to cope with . . . well, life in general."

1976. Sam averaged 4.8 yards per carry.

Rod McNeill, a blythe spirit tailback with great potential, started the first seven games of 1972 when Anthony Davis didn't develop as quickly as his San Fernando High School reputation indicated he would.

Late in the season, however, in the traditional game against Notre Dame, Davis returned kickoffs 97 and 96 yards for touchdowns and scored four more touchdowns as the Trojans blasted the Irish 45-23. Two years later, the Trojans trailed Notre Dame 24-6 at halftime when A.D., as he had come to be called, did his thing.

He ran back the second-half kickoff 102 yards for a touchdown, wound up scoring four touchdowns, and his running helped produce a stunning 55-24 victory over the Irish.

Davis was a brash collegian. He often predicted how he would do. "He was kind of confusing to evaluate," said John Robinson, who at that time was an assistant coach at USC. "Off the field he was a bit of a hot dog when he came here from San Fernando, but on the field he was one of the hardest workers we ever had."

"My style is to scratch and claw for every yard," said Davis. "And if two yards are there, I'll take them and try for a couple more."

At his best, the 5-9, 183-pound Davis made the best use of the "run to daylight" aspects of the I formation. His career rushing total of 3,724 yards is tops in USC history. In addition, he had six kickoff return touchdowns, an NCAA record, and his 52 career touchdowns were only four short of the NCAA record set by Steve Owens of Oklahoma in 1967-69.

Davis played one season with the Southern California Sun of the defunct World Football League, where he rushed for 1,200 yards, caught 40 passes for 381 yards, and scored 16 touchdowns. In 1976, Davis played for the Toronto Argonauts of the Canadian Football League, where he rushed for 417 yards and a 4.0 average, caught 37 passes for 408 yards, and returned 27 kickoffs for a Toronto record 701 yards. His combined yardage total was 1,622 yards in

13 games, an average of 125 yards.

Apparently there is no formula to playing tailback at USC. Cunningham and Bell were big; Anthony Davis and Garrett were comparatively small; Clarence Davis was simply tough. Simpson had everything—speed, power, stamina, and heart.

And all were able to adapt to the I formation, which remains unchanged under John Robinson.

"I think a coach has to have a great deal of confidence in his system and keep refining it," said McKay. "And I had confidence in the I. It was very versatile. We would shift out of it a lot; we used motion before motion was very popular. I think too many coaches try one system and if it doesn't seem to work they switch to another right away. I stayed with the power I because I knew it could work, and I knew the players could adapt to it."

Dave Levy, an assistant coach under McKay and now assistant athletic director at USC, said, "The things we looked for are the same things any coach looks for in any back—speed, power, and balance."

But McKay said he was concerned with character, too: "In our discussions with a kid when we were recruiting him, we tried to tell him what it would be like, what it would take, to be the USC tailback. We didn't want him if he wouldn't work hard enough to earn the position. He had to understand that that's what it's all about—hard work."

"The guy who fills that spot knows he has to work to keep it, because usually there's somebody right there trying to take it away," said Robinson. "He knows also that he's going to carry the ball a lot, and that he's going to take quite a beating because he's a marked man."

If anything ties all the great USC running backs together over the last 15 years it's "that they all were willing to learn the system. They were flexible. They were team-oriented," said Robinson.

Some called the I formation unspectacular, but McKay defends it. "It's not necessary to run a sweep to score a touchdown," he said. "On a sweep, all you get is more people involved in pursuit.

And if they're good people, they'll gang tackle. In the theory of the I, the defense is a wall. If you can crack a small hole in the wall, you have the straightest path to the goal line."

Garrett feels he may have helped McKay utilize the I to its greatest potential.

"In the I," said Garrett, "you're standing up and you can see more of the defense, what they're doing. In my sophomore season, I was hitting all the designated holes—most of them were off tackle—and after a while I felt I was restricting myself because I could see holes where I should have been running. So I began to run for those holes and McKay was amazed at how quickly I changed my mind and went somewhere else. I think the ability to freelance is found in every great back, and after I did a lot of it, I think McKay realized the potential for 'running to daylight' in the I."

Of course, the system wouldn't work without great linemen.

"And we've had them," said Levy. "We went out to recruit good linemen almost as hard as the tailbacks and quarterbacks. I think every strongside tackle, and every tight end, we've had here in the last fifteen years has made it in pro ball."

Another trait that runs through all is courage.

"We became interested in Clarence Davis after we heard about his statistics at East L.A.," Levy said. "But then I heard that in a JC playoff game he got four teeth knocked loose and finished the game. And another time I heard he sprained a wrist and didn't leave the game."

"Garrett was one of the toughest guys we ever had," said Levy. "He'd play forever and never take himself out of the game. And O.J. once suffered a bad sprained ankle, but he ran for 188 yards against Oregon on a muddy field. And Ricky suffered a partial shoulder separation that would have sidelined most players, but he played the whole game."

"We never ask a kid to play injured, but some of them demand to be in there, even though we know they're hurting."

Bell's first game may have been as

# The Number One Who Might Have Been

By Jay Stuller

"Joe Roths don't come along very often," sighed Rams' general manager Don Klosterman. "He had all the ingredients of a great leader who could only improve a franchise. In fact, with his personality along with those God-given talents, he could actually make a franchise. We had him rated as high as Namath."

Indeed, the 6-foot 4-inch, 205-pound University of California senior with the strong arm and feather touch could have been built in a laboratory that patented the perfect professional quarterback. The 1977 draft no doubt would have been different if Joe Roth, 21, had not died of melanoma, a virulent form of cancer.

"I'd rather not talk about the cancer stuff," said Roth, shortly after the 1976 collegiate season ended. "I'm trying to work on my studies and there are these bowl games I'd like to play in. Besides, I think it's coming back and publicizing it would only upset people."

Roth, who carried a 3.1 grade-point-average as a physical education major, wanted his degree. He also wanted a pro career; after that he planned to teach and coach in high school. His reluctance to talk about his illness was not an air, for he planned to give a talk to a group of terminal patients about the effects of their condition on psyches, relating what he had learned, and felt.

"If this happened to some guy down the street," he said, "no one but the guy's friends and family would care. Just because I play football doesn't make me all that special."

People did care about the smiling kid from San Diego, and it had been known that a few years before, doctors cut dark pigmented cancerous moles from behind his ear. Roth did not let the disease over-occupy his thoughts, but he did know that melanoma is tricky. A victim could live to be 90, or the



Joe Roth of California in 1976.

cancer could return and kill quickly.

If Roth had lived, would he have been the number-one draft choice? It must be assumed Tampa Bay and coach John McKay would have held to their USC connection, and still would have picked Ricky Bell. But some experts question that.

"I don't see how they could have passed Joe up," says Dick Steinberg, director of college scouting for the Rams. "They need a quarterback and a guy with Joe's ability comes along only every three years or so. Roth was big, smart, disciplined, everything needed for a pro. He was a leader, too. Not the stern, lieutenant-to-his-men type, but popular. You could build around him."

John Thompson, general manager of the Seattle Seahawks, also thinks Roth would have gone to Tampa Bay. "But for argument's sake, let's just say he'd be available

so he played briefly at fullback. He gained 299 yards that season, but the coaches said his blocking wasn't as good as it should have been.

Then Davis graduated and the tailback spot was wide open. Bell thought he was the man for the job.

"I had bought a pair of Army combat boots and went out into the sand at the beach to run all summer, morning and night," he said. "I lifted weights. I worked in a meat packing plant. I worked out in a park with [quarterback] Vince Evans, to get my timing down."

But when spring practice rolled around, Ricky thought others were get-

ting the first chances to show what they could do. In retrospect, it appears McKay was only saving the best for last.

"We could see Ricky wanted to play tailback," Levy said. "He was very dedicated."

"In that first game," Bell recalled, "I just tried to run over people. I was very nervous. Maybe that helped, too."

Bell was one of the strongest backs ever to play at USC. His three-year totals of 3,689 yards, achieved with bullish blasts off quick starts, came within 35 yards of Anthony Davis's career record at the school.

But he was a different body type: 6-2

to us," said Thompson, who originally had the second pick in the draft and made a trade for draft choices that allowed Dallas to choose Pittsburgh running back Tony Dorsett.

"Forget all the speculation," says Thompson. "We had only six offers for the pick, and three were worth considering. Dallas's was far and away the best. If Roth had been available, you can bet we'd have had a lot more serious and substantial overtures."

A graduate of Granite High in San Diego, Roth went to Grossmont Junior College, and was an All-America and most valuable player in his conference. At Cal, he took over in the third game of his junior season and led the Golden Bears to eight victories in their next nine games. He passed for 3,669 yards, 21 touchdowns, with a 53.7 completion percentage in two years.

"He was one of the best prospects in the last five years," says Jack White, San Francisco's director of player personnel. "He was in the mold of Jim Plunkett, Bert Jones, and Steve Bartkowski. Most of the top quarterbacks coming out now are back-up types. Roth was a sure front-liner. And since he'd probably have gone to a poor club, he would have to have stood up to a couple years of punishment. But he was the type who could take it."

"Roth's only negative was his speed," says Steinberg. "He would not be a good runner or scrambler, but that is no real problem in the pros."

"Joe was something special. I felt this way from the first time I saw him. He was a great human being with courage and character that would go off the board in any rating system."

Jay Stuller is a free-lance writer who lives in the San Francisco Bay area.

nerve-wracking as it was because he had such a rude introduction to USC football. He started as a linebacker.

Bell was an all-city halfback at Fremont High School, and he enrolled at USC when Anthony Davis was still making history. But Bell's desire to play was great, and he decided that one way to play was to try defense. The coaches felt linebacker a good spot.

"Playing linebacker helped me later on," Bell said. "I knew what some of the linebackers would do in certain situations."

In 1973, A.D. was still around, but Bell showed a desire to switch to offense,

"If I had to use one word to describe Ricky," said John Robinson, "I guess it would have to be 'intensity.' That or maybe 'determination.'"

and 220 pounds; faster than Cunningham; stronger than Simpson or Clarence Davis, almost as shifty as Garrett.

Of all the great USC backs, Bell is probably the quietest. He dresses casually, preferring T-shirts, jeans, jogging shoes, and no jewelry.

His lunchtime favorite is a hamburger, even when a gourmet feast is on the menu and someone else is picking up the tab. He drinks lots of orange juice, disdaining liquor.

"Taking over the tailback position made me more of a man," he says. "Really, I'm better able to cope with . . . well, life in general. To have that kind of pressure on me wasn't easy. I still get butterflies in my stomach before a game, and I'm sure that feeling won't go away in the pros.

"When I came to SC, nobody knew me, really. I wasn't highly touted out of high school. I wasn't expected to be a star. Now things will be a little different because in Tampa Bay they'll expect me to do a lot. But moving into the tailback spot helped me become more mature, and I think that'll help me adjust to the pros."

But didn't the fame he gained in 1975 result in reporters seeking him out, interrupting his studies?

"Yes, there were a lot of interviews and that did slow down my studying, but I never went into hiding from reporters. I'll always be able to face them. No matter what situation arises, I think I'll be able to face it. I'll just have to deal with it. Sure, it's been hard answering the same questions over and over again, but I have to realize that this is what I wanted—to be a super football player, right? Well, I guess that's the penalty you pay. In order to achieve something like this, I had to give something up in return. I had to give up some of my privacy. I had to give up some of my friends. I can't see them as often as I would have liked—because of the interviews and the picture-taking sessions. I had to give up a lot, but in order to get something you have to be willing to give something up, too. You can't have them both."

Bell now plays racquetball three or four times a week to stay in shape during the off-season. "It helps me improve

my reaction time and my quickness," he said. And he declines to predict how he'll do with the Buccaneers.

"I still have a lot to learn," he said. "For example, as an open-field runner, looking for daylight more. And there won't be any running over people any more, because I think those days are in the past. Back in college, maybe, but not in the pros.

"And I'm glad Tampa Bay will be using the I formation some this year. I'm familiar with it, and that'll help."

McKay had his choice when the 1977 draft opened: Take Bell, whom he knew, or Tony Dorsett, the Heisman trophy winner from Pittsburgh. McKay chose Bell for a number of reasons: durability, power, and the fact that he already had a potential speed back in Anthony Davis, who signed with Tampa Bay after buying his contract from the Argonauts.

One asset Bell brings to the Buccaneers is singlemindedness.

"If I had to use one word to describe Ricky," said John Robinson, "I guess it would have to be 'intensity.' That or maybe 'determination.' He's so consistently intense about what he does. He put so much into his two years here that maybe so much intensity was a problem for him. Perhaps he doesn't relax enough. He's so focused on one thing, so dogged, that it's scary."

McKay said Bell was "very physical, but he has excellent speed and balance. He's not as big as some fellows, but he gets the job done more efficiently." Meaning he goes by the most direct path, straight ahead.

Having Bell and Anthony Davis in the same backfield gives McKay more chance to use the I formation, with two of the same people at the skill positions who worked it for him at USC.

"The power I is still an important formation, and we'll use it occasionally this year," said McKay.

To his credit, Bell doesn't look for the NFL to be any picnic. He knows he'll be hit hard; he knows the price backs have to pay. He's prepared.

"Nobody ever said life was going to be handed to you on a silver platter," he said. "So you gotta hang in there. You gotta make your own breaks."!

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