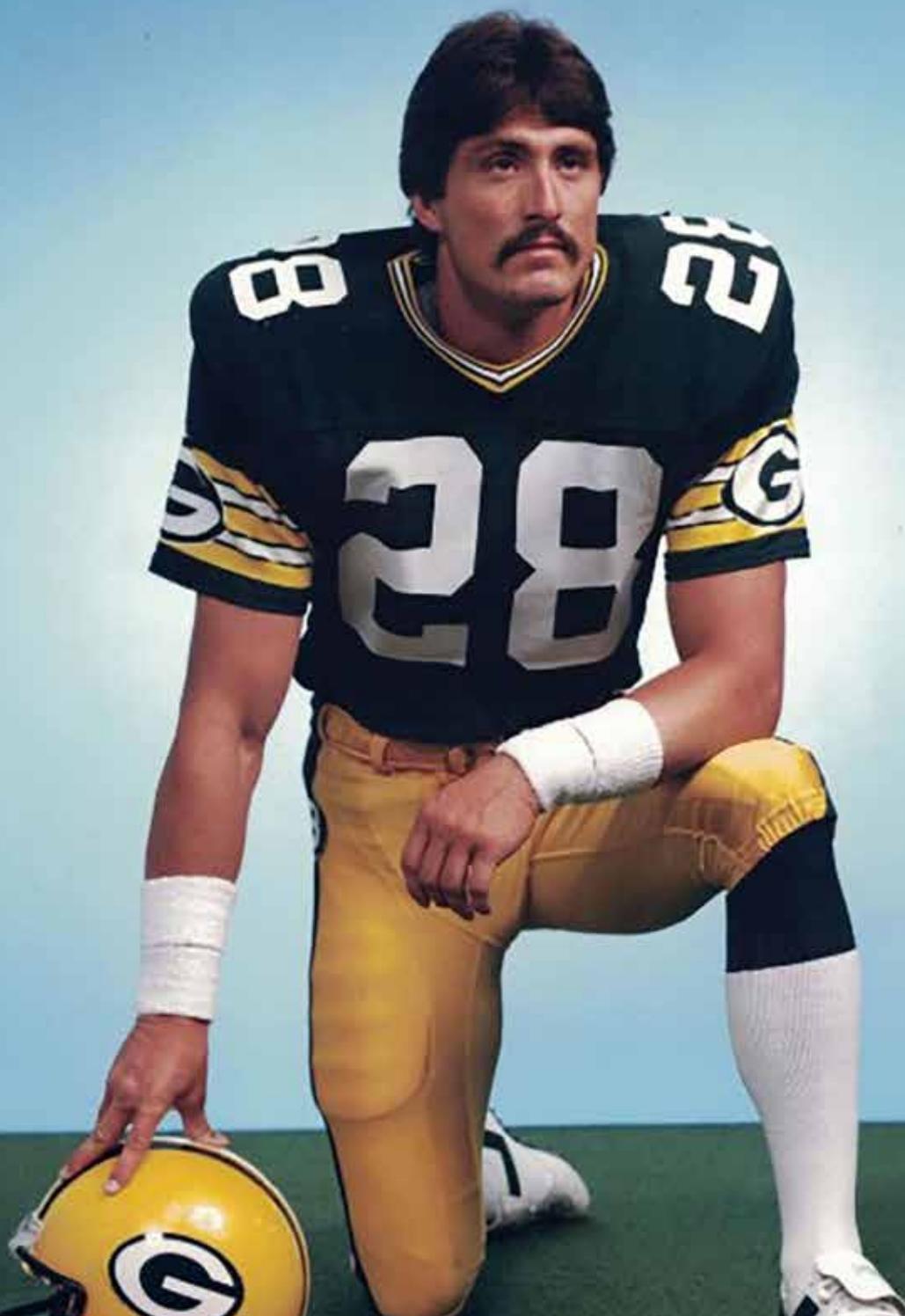


# NO WORRIES

HIGHER CALLING KEEPS MIKE MCLEOD'S MIND AT EASE

*"I really respected those guys on the football team who were Christian."*

BY PAUL BURNS



**M**ike McLeod seems to have taken a page from Mad magazine's Alfred E. Neuman.

Those of a certain generation recall that Alfred E. Neuman was the poster child for gap-toothed smiles in the 1960s, before Michael Strahan was even born. The character's motto: What, me worry?

You won't see McLeod worry these days. Yeah, he's got a rare form of blood cancer which makes him take nasty oral chemotherapy on a regular basis. And he recently celebrated his 65th birthday, making him a member of the Medicare club, which is elbow-to-elbow with senior citizens. But McLeod has a thriving family, and he's been married to Vicki for over 45 years. And if that's not enough, McLeod has God on his side, and with God there's hope.

McLeod needs hope because his cancer, essential thrombocythemia, is producing too many platelets. Chances are he won't die from the cancer, but the complications from having too many platelets can lead to blood clots and strokes. And that can be deadly. "We're all terminal, it's so refreshing to me that there's hope," he says. "It's not all about this life. If I go down in a plane crash or I have a heart attack or a stroke, that's OK. Having a cancer diagnosis is a huge blessing. It helps you put things in a proper perspective to realize this life isn't all there is. There is an eternity to look forward to." For McLeod and his family, there's a place called Heaven.

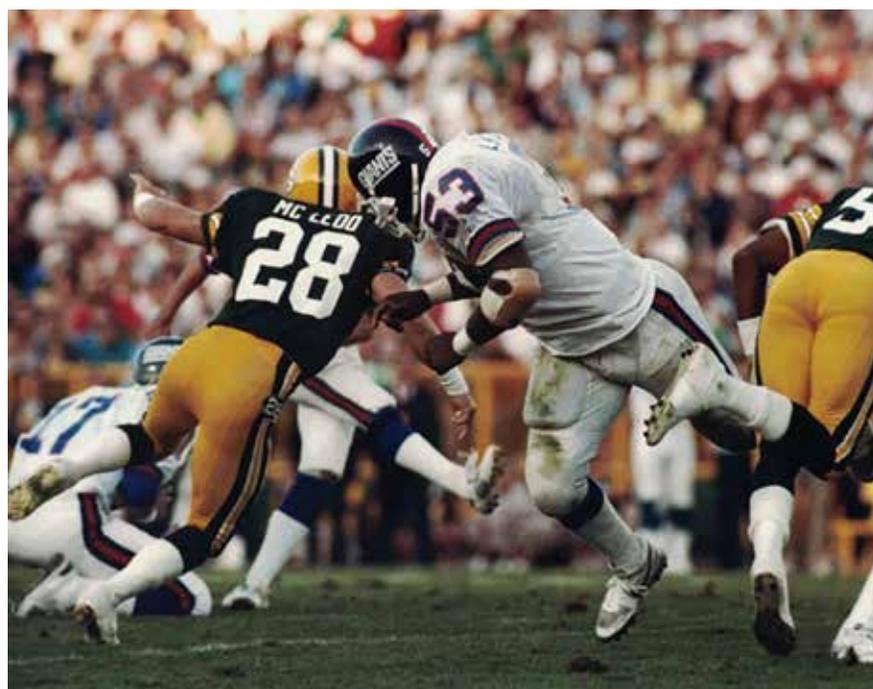
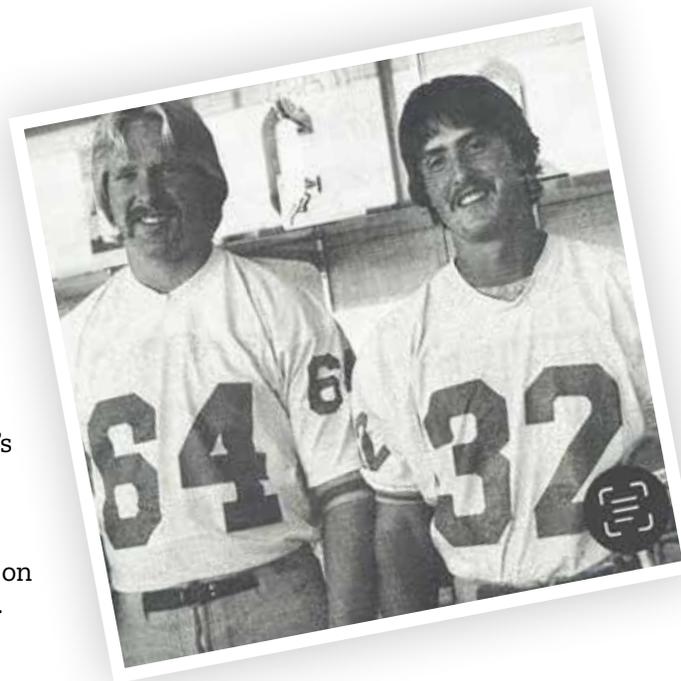
It wasn't always that way. Born in Bozeman and raised in Cheyenne, McLeod was a gifted athlete at East High. He was bound and determined to play college football, and he had his eyes on Wyoming and Colorado State. By his own admission, and the veiled accounts of others who were around the

Bobcats at the time, he was a "goofball" in those days, which is probably why those programs never came calling. Sonny Holland came calling, though. The legendary coach needed no introduction, having been roommates at Montana State with McLeod's dad, Jim, and having been the best man in the elder McLeods' wedding. Holland was willing to take a chance on the goofball, baggage and all.

It was spring of 1976 when Holland and McLeod hooked up. That fall, as Bobcat fans everywhere know, Holland coached MSU to a national championship with McLeod, a true freshman, making a small contribution to the team's success. "I would probably be either dead—because you name it, in high school I did it—or I would be going on my fifth or sixth or seventh marriage, or I'd have a family that was a mess," McLeod says of the days before he found religion. "Not that my family is perfect; we're all sinners,

every one of us on this earth."

McLeod came to Bozeman thinking he would be a wide receiver, only to be given the gift of being shifted to the defensive side of the ball, where Sonny Lubick coached. That meant a whole lot more playing time, as there are four defensive backs versus only two wide receivers. "It wasn't anything I was excited about, but it turned out to be a really good decision," he says. "Plus, we never threw the ball."



McLeod morphed into a rarely challenged defensive back. He didn't get a lot of publicity, but that's because teams didn't throw his way. He was a shutdown pass defender and a capable run stopper. That's how he made it to the MSU Hall of Fame as an individual. The 1976 team was inducted into the hall of fame in 1988, but that success came mostly on the shoulders of Paul Dennehy and Ron McCullough on offense, and Les Leininger and Rick VanCleeve on defense. McLeod's stellar career at MSU led to him acquiring a jewelry case to hold all the glitzy hardware he received. The first ring came as a member of that 1976 team; the fifth one, the one for the thumb, came when he entered the MSU Hall of Fame in 2005. In between, he earned rings as a member of the Edmonton Eskimos of the Canadian Football League, winning three Grey Cups, the CFL's Super Bowl.

In his MSU career, McLeod earned post season honors and came up with five interceptions. Of those five, one remains etched



in Bobcat lore. It came during his senior season, at Idaho State. The Bengals, behind quarterback Dirk Koetter, were marching on the Bobcats. Koetter, who later coached Tampa Bay in the NFL, made the regrettable decision of throwing the ball McLeod's way. McLeod didn't receive a lot of publicity because most teams decided not to challenge him. What he got was respect, and this particular day was typical. McLeod stepped in front of Koetter's pass and started upfield, picking up blockers as he went. Zig-zagging his way down the field, 89 yards later, McLeod was in the end zone.

That became the new Bobcat record; it stood until Joe Roberts' unforgettable 97-yard return in the 1984 playoffs, which led to another MSU national championship. The record that McLeod broke? None other than an 82-yard return in 1959 by his dad Jim, who, like Holland, was an All-American for the Bobcats. As important as that pick-six was for McLeod, it was some four weeks later that same season when he got his life in order. "Life was all about me; it was my world, and you're living in it," he recalls. He couldn't shake his wild days in Cheyenne. "As a high school kid, I did some really dumb things. I never got caught or was held accountable for it because no one knew about it, but I knew about it." Which allowed him the excuse to continue some of that less-than-desirable behavior while at MSU.

By the time his senior season was winding down, he was ready for a change. Enter Stuart Dodds, a fellow senior. In 1979, Dodds, who hailed from Spokane, had a pretty remarkable season. Here's a short list of his accomplishments that season: All-American at safety, All-Big Sky as a safety and punter, six interceptions, and an average of 45.6 yards per punt. Anyone who performs like that



usually gets drafted, and the San Diego Chargers took Dodds in the seventh round the following spring.

Things didn't work out for Dodds, but he wasn't sweating it. He had a higher calling, as McLeod had learned a few months earlier. Dodds followed his brothers Vince and Steve, All-Big Sky players in their own right, to MSU. All three brought their religion with them, but Dodds probably had the most impact on those around him. Ever since things didn't work out in the NFL, Dodds has been a missionary of sorts. Instead of football, Dodds caught on with Campus Crusades, now called Cru, and started spreading the gospel. He's been doing it ever since.

"When you have success on the field, your platform for being able to talk about your faith gets bigger; you have more of an opportunity, because athletes like to hear from people who have had success on the field," Dodds says. And McLeod was all ears. Sure, both were having outstanding seasons, but Dodds' was a notch above almost everyone on the 1979 Bobcats. He was not yet a polished advocate of the Bible, but players and others naturally gravitated to him. Late in the season, McLeod could not resist the pull. "I really respected those guys on the football team who were Christian," McLeod says. Dodds was the team leader

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of the Christian core, leading the Bobcats in pre- and post-game prayers. It was fate, or God's way, that brought the two together.

For road games, the players usually had the same roommate all season. For whatever reason—no one seems to remember the circumstances—at the 1979 game at Northern Arizona, McLeod and Dodds were paired up, the only time they shared a hotel room during their years together at MSU. In the game, Dodds did everything but walk on water. He punted 10 times, averaging over 52 yards a kick. He made tackle after tackle, including a quarterback sack. And his interception late in the game sealed the 10-7 victory. He certainly earned the right to lead the team in post-game devotions. And this time McLeod was listening.

"I had an amazing night," Dodds says of his game, "and little did I know that the most important thing that night was my conversation with Mike McLeod in the hotel room." The team took a bus to Phoenix, where they spent the night before getting on a flight to Bozeman the next morning. In the hotel as first-time roommates, McLeod asked Dodds to share some scripture readings. "It literally transformed my life," McLeod says. "I can see how God orchestrated the whole thing."

And that's how McLeod, the insecure football player with a wild streak, became McLeod the

football player who now had a quiet confidence. "Stuart told me it's not about what you've done, it's about what He's done," McLeod recalls. "Regardless of who you are or what you did, whoever receives Him has hope."

"Hope is not based on performance; it's not based on our wisdom; it's not based on our athletic talent; it's not based on how many (pass) breakups you have, or how many national championships you win. It's based on what you did, and that's just so refreshing. It's gratitude for what He's done for us. It's motivated by love."

With his mind at ease, McLeod agreed to an offer to play for Edmonton up north. He was fortunate to land on a very good team. The Eskimos, with future hall-of-famer Warren Moon under center, were coming off two straight Grey Cups. With McLeod anchoring the defensive backfield, they would win three more rings, giving him one for each finger.

Eventually, many of the Eskimos, now called the Elks, followed Moon south of the border to play in the NFL. McLeod had contacts with the Green Bay Packers, and he played for them two more years before suffering broken ribs and a lacerated kidney at a practice, which ultimately ended his playing days. Once again, no big deal. During his time in Alberta, McLeod, a political science major at MSU, went to the University of Alberta and earned a law degree. Following his playing days in Green Bay, he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin for one more year to complete the necessary courses to have his law degree recognized in this country.

He landed a job in Madison that turned out to be pretty unpleasant. As the low man on the company



totem pole, he was assigned the cases no one wanted: messy divorces between a wife and husband who now hated each other, getting unruly college students out of jail for some goofball action they may or may not have committed, representing fraternities and sororities which for one reason or another neglected to pay their utility bills or taxes. It was not what he'd signed up for. So McLeod called Holland, who by now was an unofficial ambassador for MSU, and asked The Chief, as his players called him, if he knew of any opportunities in Bozeman. A few months later, the McLeods, with two boys born in Canada, were back in Bozeman, where he worked in the finance and insurance business and Vicki, who hailed from Anaconda, used her nursing degree. A daughter joined the team a few years later.

These days, as his working years come to an end, McLeod teaches Sunday school at Grace Bible Church in Bozeman. He reads the Bible. And he thanks the Lord for making him who is. "I am not a perfect man—anyone who claims they are is lying," he says. Then adds with a smile, "That's a sin, by the way."



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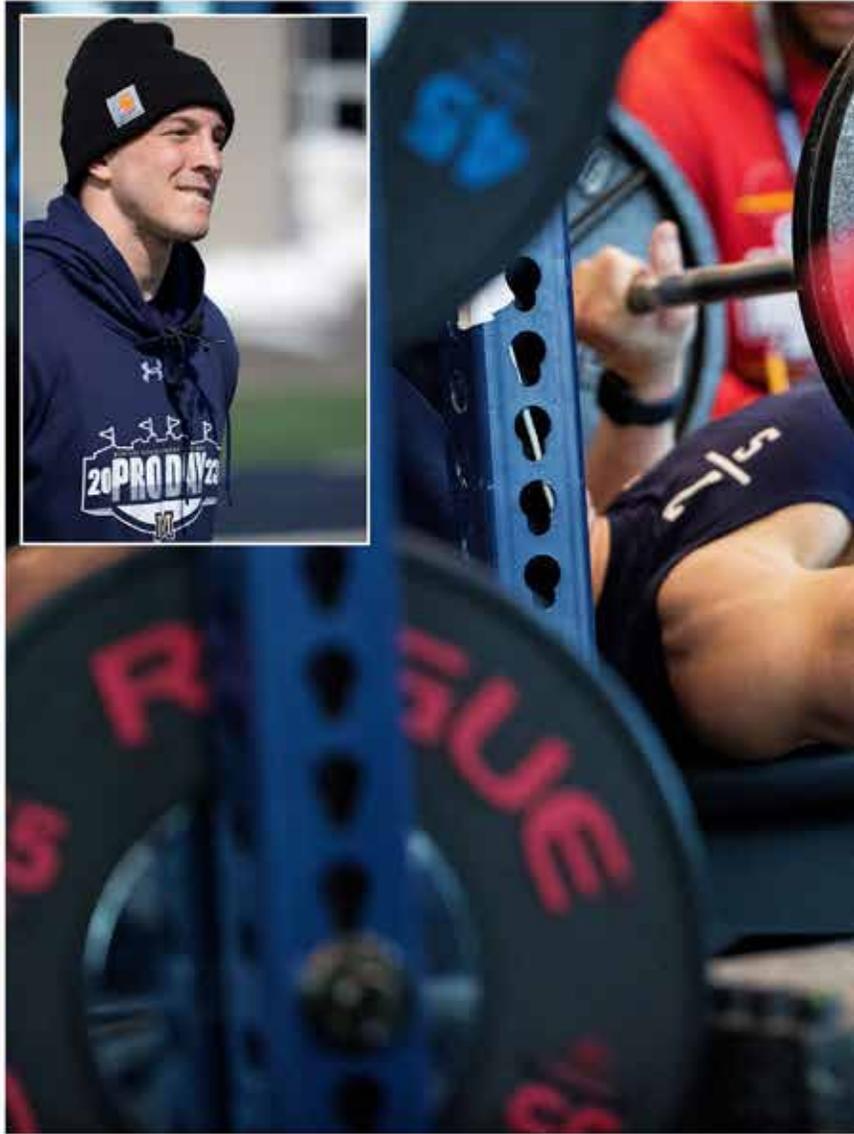
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