

Former MSU / NFL WR

MARK MCGRATH

Speaks His Mind

“I Love To Hire Athletes; They Know How To Take Direction And Work As A Team.”

BY CYNTHIA LOGAN

Things have changed since MSU alumnus Mark McGrath played in the NFL. A wide receiver for the Seattle Seahawks (1980-81) and the Washington Redskins (1983-85), the Bobcat football champion (he and the ‘Cats took the National Championship his freshman year, 1976) isn’t shy about sharing his opinions, from NIL to concussion protocols, social media, money—even the FBI.

We reached him in Florida, his home when not in Colorado Springs. “After many surgeries, my body doesn’t react well to winters there,” he says. He’s had four knee surgeries, as well as four on his right shoulder, and three on his left. One of his hips has been replaced, and he’s had surgery on his face and hand, as well as surgery to repair a hernia. “They’re all football related, other than those from basketball. I broke seven bones in my face my

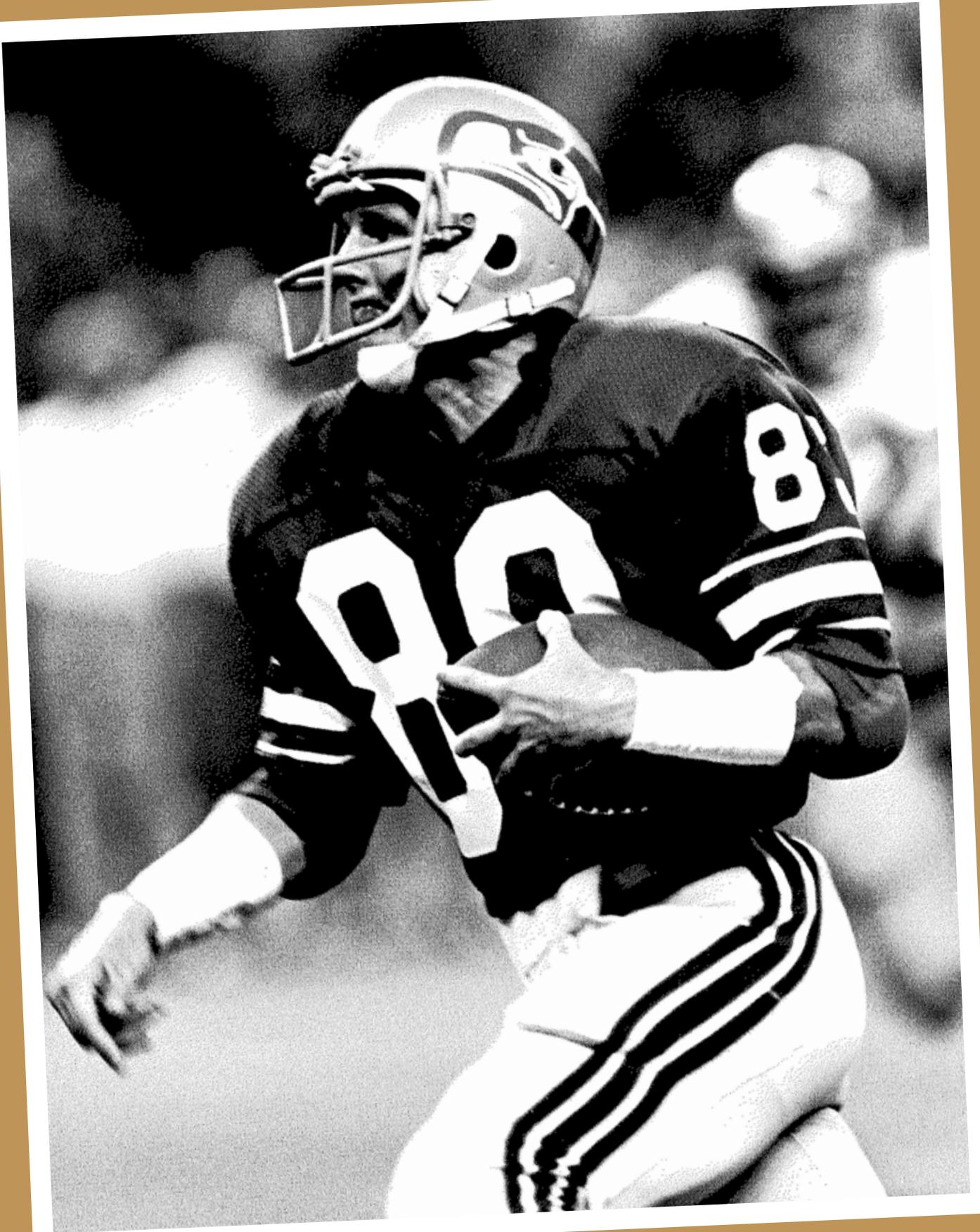
rookie year in the NFL—during the off-season. My coaches thought I’d been in a fight.”

Turns out he’d been accidentally hit in the face by someone’s head while playing basketball with some Seahawks buddies before one of many epic parties: “We’d have 350 people, seven kegs, and 35 liters of wine. We were all ready to go at noon,” he recounts. “This particular afternoon, we decided we’d go play basketball so we wouldn’t start drinking that early.” Hence, the exuberant facial injury. While he still loves college basketball, McGrath is no longer an enamored NBA fan. “I was, but the politics turned me off,” he says when asked about this season’s extraordinary Final Four.

Though born in San Diego, McGrath considered Seattle home. During his sophomore year in high school, McGrath was living in Italy with his mom and stepdad, but found it less than stimulating. “There was

no football, no sports, and only two girls in my sophomore class, which was held in Benito Mussolini’s old horse stable, so I saved my allowance and ran away,” says the athlete, who flew back to the States, called his biological father and said, “I’m coming home.” McGrath played throughout his junior and senior years in high school, along with Marc Wilson, who became a stellar QB at BYU, and later played for the Raiders. “Every scout in the world was looking at him,” recalls McGrath. He was throwing to someone, and that was me.” I was a little guy, but Montana State and some other smaller schools recruited me.”

At MSU, McGrath majored in criminology. “I wanted to go into the FBI,” he notes. “I’m not being sexist or racist but, in 1980, if you weren’t a minority female with a disability, you couldn’t get into the FBI.” Not even his connections helped. Though the head of the Montana division of the FBI was his teammate’s father, McGrath wasn’t considered. “I missed being home in Seattle (he refers to it as ‘Mayberry, RFD with skyscrapers’), but the greatest thing I did was stay in Montana and learn a different way of life. I once went





to Butte for St. Patrick's Day; that's a scary place," he laughs. "At Montana State, we didn't throw much, but I returned 150 punts and kicks, which got me noticed and into the NFL—after which I never returned a punt or a kick! I was, however, on lots of special teams."

Filmmaker Kevin Donovan, whose commercials and music videos have garnered international recognition, was one of McGrath's college roommates; the two share an ongoing friendship today. "My lasting college vision of Mark is in the Cat- Grizzlies game of 1979," recalls Donovan. "It's 4th down and 8 for the Bobcats at the Griz 30; the Bobcats set for a field goal. The ball is snapped; as the holder, Mark places the ball down to be kicked. But at the very last second, as Jeff Muri kicks, Mark retracts the ball, spins over his hip and, having fooled the entire Griz defense, sprints toward the goal line. It's the best fake field goal I have ever witnessed."

When McGrath moved back to

Seattle and bought a house there his rookie year in the NFL, Donovan moved there as well, heading back to Art school after a stint at Boeing. While Donovan found success in the film industry, producing and directing four Superbowl commercials, as well as a movie (with another in the works), Mark spent 13 years in the restaurant business, then worked in sales as a Senior VP for a radiology company, which took him to Japan, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, Austria, England, Switzerland, and Croatia. Though after retiring from the NFL he wanted "the same job every Monday," he moved nine times over the next nine years, and is currently VP of Sales for a Diabetes company. "You still don't necessarily have the same job every Monday morning if you don't perform well in the sales world," he cracks.

McGrath still travels a lot for work and has been in every state and at least 10 countries. "You'll notice that the deep South is very diabetes-dense—

they drink Tang and sweet tea; their diets are corn-starch rich; those things are cheaper than eating well. The typical person in the deep South is making less money than elsewhere in the country, and carbs fill you up." Diabetes doesn't discriminate, though. When he was in the league, McGrath recalls a 26 year-old Redskins' tight end suffered a Type II diabetes onset. "He was in great shape, but would have to run to the bathroom and was dropping the ball," says McGrath. "Those two things are the number one precursor to diabetes. Your eyesight declines, and you can't make it through a two-hour practice without going to the bathroom."

When it comes to the 'concussion discussion,' McGrath is brutally frank: "The NFL couldn't give a crap about former players. Once you're out of the league, they have no use for you. The movie Concussion with Will Smith is right on." (The film chronicles Nigerian doctor Bennet Omalu's discovery of CTE.) "Until just about five years

ago, notes McGrath, “the NFL’s head of TBI was a rheumatologist.” He finds the book, *League of Denial* real and detailed. “During the 1970s-80s, a VHS tape, “Biggest Hits of the NFL,” a tape of guys getting knocked out, made big money for the league,” he mentions. “That’s clamped down, because the media and the public put it in their face. Now, when a guy gets hit, he goes into the blue tent five times a game. It used to be you’d be woozy and stumble off; the trainer would give you enough smelling salts to wake an elephant, put on the big #1 foam fingers and ask you how many fingers he had up. It was always one. Then you would go back in. That’s the way they treated head trauma back then.”

McGrath waxes on football compensation: “My rookie year, I made 30K; in my fifth year, I finally cracked 100K. A star player was making 300K / year... today, a walk-on rookie is paid \$750,000. It’s different from 1980. The minimum for today’s fifth-year player is a million dollars. Part of me wishes I had been in the right era. Now you have QBs making 30 million per year.” At least they didn’t have camera phones back then—I wouldn’t have wanted anybody following me around at twenty-something, taking pictures of the stupid stuff I was doing.” In McGrath’s opinion, social media is the bane of our society—“an athlete’s whole life is wrapped up around what people are saying about them... if I had a bad game, I knew I had a bad game and didn’t need anybody to tell me; my coach would let me know.”

McGrath does give props to the NFL for its sponsorship of a two-and-a-half day visit former players receive every five years at Tulane Medical Center with

Dr. Gregory Stewart, director of the Sports Concussion Management Program and team physician at Tulane University. “He has a discussion with you,” says McGrath. “He asks everyone, ‘After all you know, would you do it all over again?’” Ninety-seven percent of NFL players say the same thing: Yes. “Football becomes your identity,” states McGrath, adding, “I love to hire athletes; they know how to take direction and work as a team. I’m looking for those traits.”

When asked about NIL (Name, Image, Likeness) rules, McGrath is ambivalent. “I’m old school. I’m not really in agreement with it at all. I do think players need more than what colleges give them today. I had a scholarship and \$200 per semester for books and meals. There’s no way you can hold a job during the collegiate experience. But should they make a million?” His biggest beef, though, is with

the NCAA providing players with the transfer portal. “Your coach yells at you and you go to the portal,” he starts. “When I played, if you wanted to change schools, you lost a year of eligibility. Today, some kids make this decision two or three times, just because they couldn’t get along with people. It’s a bit of the millennial mindset.”

One thing McGrath has no complaints about is his Alma Mater: “I loved my time at Montana State, and I follow Bobcat games, though I don’t know a lot of the players. I do watch the Cat-Griz game every year. After having been in the business world, I realize that you don’t see genuine people like you do in Bozeman. They are what they are, and that’s a beautiful thing. I owe my NFL career to my time at Montana State.”



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