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Bruiser Kinard

Chris Hanburger

By Mike Richman

Chris Hanburger acted like a loner. He was very moody around the clubhouse and preferred not to socialize with teammates, and he barely uttered a word to reporters, often saying “no comment.”

But Hanburger was more sociable on the field, where he went out of his way to greet ball carriers — however unceremoniously. A featherweight of a linebacker who sometimes played at only 200 pounds, he specialized in brutalizing foes with vicious clothesline tackles. Instead of hitting ball carriers below the waist, textbook-style, the intimidator regularly tackled high, driving his powerful forearms into players to knock them off their feet. He took no mercy, hence his nicknames “The Hammer” and “The Hangman.”

“He would go a whole game and not make a tackle below the jaw line,” NFL Films President Steve Sabol said. “That was a legal move in the late 1960s and early 1970s. We have shots of him decapitating (Cowboys quarterback) Don Meredith. He would come in on a blitz and get you right around the throat. Few players in NFL history are so distinctive that a move or style of tackling is named after them, like Fred ‘The Hammer’ Williamson of the Chiefs.”

Hanburger was one of the top outside linebackers of his era. In 14 seasons, all in Washington, he made the Pro Bowl nine times, the most in Redskins history. Positioned mostly on the weak side, he was a three-time All-NFL and four-time All-NFC player. He intercepted 19 passes, recovered 12 fumbles and scored five touchdowns, two on interception returns and three on fumble recoveries.

For decades, Hanburger’s remarkable accomplishments slipped under the radar of sportswriters tapped to elect players to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. But he received his just rewards this year from the HOF Seniors Committee, earning induction into the hallowed building in Canton, Ohio. He became the 17th person to play primarily for the Redskins to enter the Hall of Fame, and the fifth since 2008, joining wide receiver Art Monk, cornerback

Darrell Green, defensive end Bruce Smith and guard Russ Grimm.

“I am overwhelmed,” the soft-spoken Hanburger said on the NFL Network soon after the announcement in February 2011. “It’s such a tremendous honor to just be nominated, let alone be voted in. You have to think of all the men that played before I did, and all of the men that I played with. It’s just a select few that make it, and I think the only reason it’s happened to me is that I had the fortune to play with a Redskins defense that had some wonderful people over the years that just made it all work for me.”

Hanburger’s teammates and others in the organization were elated with the selection.

“He should have been inducted long before now based on him being named to the Pro Bowl nine times. That’s a significant accomplishment,” said Larry Brown, the Redskins’ third-leading rusher of all time and a teammate of Hanburger for eight seasons.

Brig Owens, a safety who played with Hanburger for 12 seasons, echoed Brown’s thoughts. “It shouldn’t have taken this long,” Owens said. “Chris was one of our great leaders on the team, and one of our captains. He was a great player, very fast, and he was one of those rare linebackers who had a lot of speed. He wasn’t your typical large linebacker, but the way he played the game, you expected him to be there on every play. He was a student of the game, a great teammate and a friend.”

Indeed, Hanburger is widely remembered for his studious and cerebral approach to the game, as well as his brilliant football mind and phenomenal instincts. He called the defensive signals from 1973 to 1977, an era when the Redskins sported one of the league’s top defenses, and was regarded as a quarterback on the field for head coach George Allen, a defensive genius himself. One teammate said observing Hanburger’s decisions during games “was like watching a great chess player making moves to counteract what the offense was doing.”

“Chris Hanburger put us in more correct defenses than you could shake a stick at,” said Dave Butz, a defensive tackle who played with him for four seasons. “He knew 125 different audibles. He knew all the defensive line calls, as well. He was the general.”

“He was at that time the smartest player in the league,” said John Hannah, a Hall of Fame offensive tackle for the New England Patriots who played from 1973 to 1985. “We did everything we could to try to eliminate him from the play. We knew if we didn’t neutralize him, then we had less of a chance of winning.”

The son of a career U.S. Army officer (perhaps the reason for his ornery personality), Hanburger spent two years in the Army himself before starting his college career at North Carolina. He developed into an All-Atlantic Coast Conference linebacker and an honorable mention All-American. With apparently little clue of the huge returns they’d get from him, the Redskins drafted him in the 18th and final round in December 1964. He was the 244th player selected out of 252.

The pick, which would probably be equal to a seventh-round compensatory selection today due to all of the additional teams in the NFL, turned into one of the greatest in Redskins history. Hanburger wasted no time impressing. In 1965 he was touted as one of the best rookie linebackers to join the Redskins since Chuck Drazenovich in 1950. He excelled on special teams and broke into the starting lineup at linebacker in the sixth game of the season. Steve Gilmartin, the Redskins’ radio play-by-play voice at the time, said the hard-hitting Jimmy Carr, then in his ninth season, taught Hanburger how to play weak-side linebacker.

Hanburger made the Pro Bowl for the first time in 1966, followed by appearances in the next three seasons. He was also a perennial All-Pro. It helped that he teamed early in his career with Sam Huff, one of the premier middle linebackers in NFL history. Huff saw greatness in No. 55. “He was so quick off the ball, and he was a great blitzing who would go and get the quarterback,” Huff said. “Nine Pro Bowls tells you that guy could play.”

Early in Hanburger’s career, the Redskins showcased electrifying offenses led by

quarterback Sonny Jurgensen and wideouts Charley Taylor and Bobby Mitchell, all current Hall of Famers, plus gifted tight end Jerry Smith. Those teams were prolific at scoring points and piling up yards. But the defenses were adequate at best, and the Redskins had losing records in three of Hanburger’s first four years. They finished at .500 in 1966.

But defense became the Redskins’ primary focus upon George Allen’s arrival in January 1971. Allen, who previously coached such defensive superstars as Deacon Jones and Merlin Olsen during a successful stint with the Los Angeles Rams, wheeled and dealt on the trade market to obtain aging talent, mostly on defense. The Redskins thus became known as “The Over the Hill Gang.”

Hanburger, still in his prime, benefited from a wealth of new, skilled players. In 1971 he teamed with Jack Pardee and Myron Pottios — both of whom Allen had acquired from the Rams — to form the starting linebacker trio. They contributed to a tenacious, ball-hawking defense that led the Redskins to a 5-0 start, a 9-4-1 record and their first postseason appearance since 1945. Hanburger helped to jumpstart the historic season by returning a fumble 16 yards for a touchdown in a 24-17 season-opening win over the St. Louis Cardinals.

For the first time, the wily linebacker was playing with many other defenders who were similar to him in football savvy.

“The players under Allen were extremely intelligent,” Hanburger said. “They understood all of his defenses. Everybody on defense virtually knew what everybody else was doing in any of the defenses. You had to take care of your responsibility first and, once that’s done, help out any way you can.”

Already one of the league’s top linebackers, Hanburger rose to elite status in 1972, when he was named NFC Defensive Player of the Year and a unanimous All-Pro, and made the Pro Bowl for the first time since 1969. He intercepted four passes, scored one touchdown and helped to anchor a defense that powered the Redskins to an 11-3 mark and an NFC East title. In the playoffs, the defense sucked the life out of the Packers and Cowboys in 16-3 and 26-3 wins, respectively, at RFK Stadium.

The NFC championship game victory over Dallas punched the Redskins' ticket to their first Super Bowl appearance, Super Bowl VII against the undefeated Dolphins in Allen's old stomping ground, the Los Angeles Coliseum, on Jan. 14, 1973. But Washington was flat that day on both sides of the ball and fell 14-7 to Miami, which finished 17-0 and remains the only NFL team to finish a regular season, plus playoffs, undefeated and untied.

"We played a great football team," Hanburger said. "Granted, we didn't play that well offensively or defensively, yet we had a chance to win that football game and just couldn't do it. They were by far the best team that day and throughout the season."

When Pardee retired after the 1972 season, Hanburger began calling defensive signals. He made a seamless transition to that role and came to remind his teammates of Charles Bronson, the legendary actor with dark hair, bangs, a tough-guy image and a cool, confident demeanor, characteristics that No. 55 also possessed.

"He was in charge of calling signals. He was our defensive general," said Diron Talbert, a defensive tackle who played for the Redskins from 1971 to 1980. "He liked the job of being the general. He had an intelligence for the game. When George Allen came to Washington, it was the perfect setup for Chris Hanburger. Chris kind of waited his turn for Jack Pardee to retire and took over the whole huddle, the whole defense."

With Allen at the helm, the Redskins qualified for the playoffs in 1973, 1974 and 1976 as a wild card team but lost each year in the first round. Hanburger, meanwhile, was rugged and durable. Beginning in 1968, he started 135 straight games, an amazing stretch that ended in 1977 when he had an appendicitis operation. He compensated for his lack of size — the Redskins listed him at 218, but he dropped to as low as 200 at times — with quickness and agility. He specialized in blitzing because he was so fast at darting past offensive linemen and blocking backs, often leaving them flat-footed. One of his teammates called him "quick as a cat." In the 1977 season finale against the Rams, a 17-14 Redskins win, he posted three solo sacks.

"Opponents never knew what he was going to do, where he was coming from," Owens said. "But they knew if he was coming, he was coming fast. Chris was very strong for his size. He could beat you with finesse or power, or he could throw you off-balance or roll back over you."

Hanburger's jarring clothesline hits long remained in his arsenal, but he denied being especially ferocious.

"I don't know that it was ferocity," he said. "If you can eliminate the guy and do it legally, then your day should be easier because whoever replaces him shouldn't be as good as he is. It was easier for me to come into somebody high because I had a little more leverage. My philosophy was if you don't hit anybody, you can play forever because you're never going to get hurt. I just tried to take ankles away from people, and I didn't get nailed head-on if I could avoid it."

A teammate of his for six seasons in the 1970s, All-Pro safety Kenny Houston, also took the opportunity to intimidate opponents with high hits around the jaw line. Houston, who entered the Hall of Fame in 1986, was excited to hear that Hanburger would be joining him in Canton.

"You take a guy that has been to nine Pro Bowls, waited all those years, and there have been opportunities which have past for him to be here," Houston said. "It's the best thing that has ever happened. It's good for the Redskins, but also great for him and the guys who played with him. So I would say, 'Welcome, Chris.' Every moment was a great moment with Chris. He had such a command for the game, really heady, but he also had a very dry sense of humor. I think everybody looked forward to seeing that, especially the humor he had for George Allen. He was just a great guy to play with."

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