

# MacKinnon: Charles focuses on flying low as Edmonton's starting tailback

Upbringing prepared achievement-oriented Eskimo to be ready to perform when opportunities came his way

BY JOHN MACKINNON, EDMONTON JOURNAL    OCTOBER 9, 2012



Edmonton Eskimos defensive back Clint Kent rushes quarterback Kerry Joseph as tailback Hugh Charles, right, looks on during practice at Commonwealth Stadium on Tuesday.

EDMONTON - It took until Week 15 before Edmonton Eskimos head coach Kavis Reed invoked his version of the Clarity Act and announced his quarterback is Kerry Joseph, the go-to receiver is Fred Stamps and the No. 1 tailback is Hugh Charles.

Charles began the season operating under that assumption, of course. But the arrival of Cory Boyd from the Toronto Argonauts, where, for the first third of the season, he was the CFL's leading rusher, and the return of Canadian power back Jerome Messam from an NFL tryout clouded things for a few weeks.

Through it all, Charles kept his focus, no small thing, under the circumstances. And yet, not surprising, either for a quiet, thorough professional like Charles. His upbringing prepared him to be ready to perform when an opportunity presents itself.

He's a young man who was doing ballet at age three, flying a plane at 16 and learning visualization techniques from his mom, Wendi, and his grandmother as a youngster in Keller, Texas. It's clearly no accident he has a positive, achievement-oriented attitude.

"The difference between being able to establish myself from high school to college and to the pros is getting the opportunity," Charles said. "I think this goes for anybody."

Like so many CFL players, Charles was a young superstar, in his case at Keller High School, near Fort Worth, Texas. He was a superstar all over again at the University of Colorado, where he rushed for 2,795 yards and 16 touchdowns during his four-year career with the Buffaloes. He also starred in track and field as a long jumper.

His NFL options didn't pan out, though, and Charles was studying to be an insurance broker when he signed with the Saskatchewan Roughriders in 2008. That was his Plan B.

As it turned out, Charles was Plan B in Regina, too, where he was Wes Cates' understudy for three-and-a-half years, until Edmonton traded a Canadian college draft pick for him in October 2011.

The Eskimos went into training camp and the regular season with the 26-year-old Charles pencilled in as their No. 1 back, something he had not been since university, when he was a backup as a freshman, but the starter his final three seasons. You get the opportunity in pro football, you have to make the most of it, whether you're Charles in Edmonton or Kory Sheets in Saskatchewan.

"Yeah, he has a background in the NFL, sure he was a superstar in his college years (at Purdue), he was able to get up here, in his first year, and be The Guy, know that he is the guy and do the job," Charles said. "And he's getting the job done."

"It's just being able to get that opportunity. He's got that opportunity, it has been right in front of him since Day 1, no ifs, ands or buts. He worked hard in camp and look where he's at now."

Second in the CFL in rushing, is where Sheets is, with 1,035 yards gained on 192 carries, behind the Calgary Stampeders' Jon Cornish, who leads all rushers with 1,188 yards.

Charles is fifth, with 700 yards on 148 carries, a reflection of being part of a three-headed tailback situation in Edmonton for a while. An adept receiver, Charles is fourth in the league in yards from scrimmage, his 1,213 yards placing him behind the B.C. Lions' Andrew Harris (1,544 yards), Sheets (1,484) and Cornish (1,403).

"It's all mental," said the five-foot-eight, 193-pound Charles, whose game is built around speed, smarts and elusiveness. "When you get the opportunity and if you have the drive, then good things are going to happen."

Charles's self-belief is powerful and unwavering, and it was embedded years ago. Consider that as a 16-year-old high school student, Charles passed an airplane flying course that included a solo flight.

"My parents put me in everything and anything they could," Charles said. "I did ballet at three-years-old.

"I did gymnastics (hence the post-touchdown backflips), karate. It was (about) being diverse, being able to figure out what my parents wanted me to do and what I wanted to do.

"I could just as easily have pursued that dream (being a pilot), but my dreams and thoughts were all on football. I was 16 when I did that, playing high school football, wanting to get a scholarship.

"Flying was the last thing on my mind, but it was a great experience, a story I can tell my kids and a great conversation piece.'

Nerve-racking as it was to execute the old touch-and-go in a Cessna as a teenager, Charles reckons he learned a lot from the experience, and not just about flying.

"At that age, I was scared, but I felt fearless, being able to fly," Charles said. "It instilled a lot of confidence in me knowing I could take a plane and go up by myself.

"I've always wanted to do great things and be a positive influence and I think it all started from my younger days, knowing that I had the talent and the will to do anything I want."

Having the opportunity to be the Eskimos feature back, Charles is clear on what his responsibilities are, game-in, game-out, too.

"Just being perfect in what we've prepared for. Making sure the coaches are confident to stick you back out there, right? So, it's pass protection, it's getting yards (rushing), catching the ball."

Being a realist, Charles knows he needs to develop a Plan B for when his career is over, having decided a future in insurance is not for him.

In the meantime, though, all Charles visualizes about is being part of Plan A for the Eskimos, focused on flying low as the club's starting tailback.

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