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McCusker Is Bright Spot, Eagles' Line Riddled

PHILADELPHIA, Dec. 20 (UPI) -The Philadelphia Eagles may be hard-pressed for linemen for next Monday's championship game with Green Bay through injuries to key men, but a bright spot up front has been the play of tackle Jim McCusker.

McCusker, former University of Pittsburgh toughie from Jamestown, N.Y., is in his third season in the National Football League and his second with the Eagles. And for the record, all three have been successful.

But even more important, there has been constant improvement in the play of the young giant, with his talents spread not only on the offense, but also on the defense when the Eagles' goal is threatened. He's a member of the "goal line" team rushed in when the pressure mounts inside the 10-yard line.

McCusker, who played in the East-West and the Senior Bowl games after his final year at Pitt, was the second draft choice of the Chicago Cardinals three years back. He was the starting left tackle for the Cards as a rookie, and came to the Eagles in September of 1959 in the Jerry Norton trade. He played every game for the Eagles two seasons ago.

He was involved in the crucial point of the Eagles' championship quest this year when he was one of the linemen who stopped the Giants on the goal line in the first half in New York and prevented the game from getting beyond the reach of the flock.

"If there's such a thing as the most improved linemen of the year, I'd say it is McCusker," Nick Skorich, Eagles line coach said.

Overcame Handicap

"The improvement started at training and it's continued since. You can credit Jim himself for that. He worked very hard to overcome any of his handicaps, and I'd say he did very well."

Skorich rates McCusker as having the promise "of a top offensive tackle."

He's big - 245 pounds - and he's young, 24 - and he combines his size and his speed.

"He moves very well for a big man," Skorich said. "He's always with that second effort down field. He keeps moving into the play to help out, always looking where he can do the most good.

"For instance, he's been instrumental in quite a number of our good runs this year with the added block. Once released at the line, he goes downfield to take out the half back or safety. He was the difference many a time in what might have been a 10-yard gain turning into a 30-yard run."

Oddly enough, Skorich reports, McCusker moved into the pro field highly recommended as a defensive tackle, with the experts "not too enthusiastic" over his offensive ability.

"He could be a good defensive tackle," Skorich said, "But he's a fine offensive tackle, and will be a better one."

Nick ticked off big Jim as young, extremely easy to coach, and eager to learn.

Applies Himself

"What's very important is that he applies himself mentally in preparing for the game that's coming up," Skorich added.

"He devours offensive assignments, studies the personnel opposite him, learns the moves of the defensive team and what to expect. He adjusts himself for the expected and the unexpected."

Offensively and defensively, the aching Eagles will be glad to have Jim around next Monday.