

# Talks strongly, carries a big stick

Cal rover Donnie McCleskey's words inspire his teammates, and his hits deflate opponents

By KEN GOE  
THE OREGONIAN

BERKELEY, Calif. —

**T**onight, when the California coaches ask players to address the team about Saturday's game with No. 1 USC, expect Donnie McCleskey to bat clean up.

"He'll definitely get you motivated," teammate Harrison Smith said.

Think Mel Gibson in "Braveheart," which is one reason Golden Bears coach Jeff Tedford likes to turn to McCleskey before a big game.

"I just speak from the heart," McCleskey said. "It's just going to come out, and you can take it however you want to take it. You can take it strong or not. But you know what? I'm coming hard."

By the time McCleskey is done, his teammates are coming with him. And once he gets to the field, McCleskey brings more than words. The 5-foot-10, 190-pound senior runs like a Ferrari and hits like a cement truck.

McCleskey starts at rover, which in the Cal system is part safety, part linebacker, part cornerback.

The rover usually lines up near the line of scrimmage, putting him at the point of attack on a running play. When the offense uses multiple wide receivers, McCleskey often gets matched on the slot receiver — against USC, that could be Reggie Bush — when he's not coming off the edge on a blitz.

"I love it to death," McCleskey said. "At rover, you cover it all, 53 yards wide, 100 yards long. It's the whole defense built into one."

The Golden Bears recruited him as a cornerback, but that didn't last past the first week of his first preseason camp. Cal secondary coach J.D. Williams and defensive coordinator Bob Gregory couldn't help but notice the way the new kid flew to the football or his violent impact upon arrival.

Before the first game, McCleskey had settled in at rover. By midseason, he was starting.

McCleskey was a first-team all-Pacific-10 Conference selection as a sophomore, when he set a Cal record for tackles by a defensive back with 102 and had 12 tackles for loss and 5½ sacks.

"Donnie is such a special guy, we can do a lot of different things with him, things a normal rover probably wouldn't be doing," Williams said. "The kid is so football smart and just enjoys playing the game."

For all of his aptitude and attitude, McCleskey is slight to be tangling with pulling guards and tight ends. It caught up with him early last season, when his right shoulder gave way and right knee tendinitis flared.

Williams decided McCleskey should apply for a hardship medical waiver and sit out the rest of the season. But last year's Cal team was special, and McCleskey didn't want to miss it.

He told Williams he would accept a reduced role to keep playing. So Mc-

Cleskey became the nickel back, on the field only when the Bears used five-defensive back sets.

Even with his shoulder strapped in place so he couldn't raise his arm above his head, McCleskey played a valuable role on a team that finished 10-2, the best at Cal since 1991.

"He came in and got us excited and made plays," said Smith, one of Cal's first-string cornerbacks.

"He made it through the whole season and helped us out a lot.

"It shows that he's a leader, because of how unselfish he was. He gave up a year, knowing he wasn't

## Donnie McCleskey

**Team leader:** Senior defensive back Donnie McCleskey has battled back from injury and is California's emotional heart and soul.

**Quote:** "Physically, yeah, he's not a big guy. But he plays like a big guy." — Cal linebacker Ryan Foltz

going to play that much, going to go through all the pain and injuries. He stuck it out. For him to play as well as he did says a lot."

When McCleskey wasn't on the field, he applied himself in other ways. He analyzed Cal's scheme, studied why the coaches used certain coverages in certain situations. He watched individual players, picked up something in technique or preparation from each.

"As I began to notice things, I would study more," he said. "It was a great learning experience. I learned so much about myself and my teammates and about the game itself."

After offseason shoulder surgery, McCleskey trained in martial arts to improve his balance and sharpen his concentration. He took a class in meditation that helped him focus.

"When things are going wrong, you just take a second and breathe," he said. "It pays off."

Held out of spring practice to recover from surgery, McCleskey took a heavy load in the classroom and expects to graduate at the end of the fall semester with a degree in marketing, earned in 3½ academic years.

This fall, McCleskey has stayed healthy. He has started all nine games, made 49 tackles, five for loss, and has two sacks. His numbers are down from his brilliant sophomore season, and there is a reason for that.

"It's kind of hard blitzing, when you've got the quarterback pointing you out, the center pointing you out, everybody pointing you out," McCleskey said. "Maybe, if I could disguise myself in another jersey — but if they're thinking that much about me, that is going to free up another one of my teammates."

Emotionally, McCleskey still packs a wallop.

"He's got one of those magnetic personalities," Williams said. "People just flock to him. When he was a sophomore, he gave a speech in front of the team. It was real emotional, and it was one of those that got the guys going. From then on, everybody looked to him."

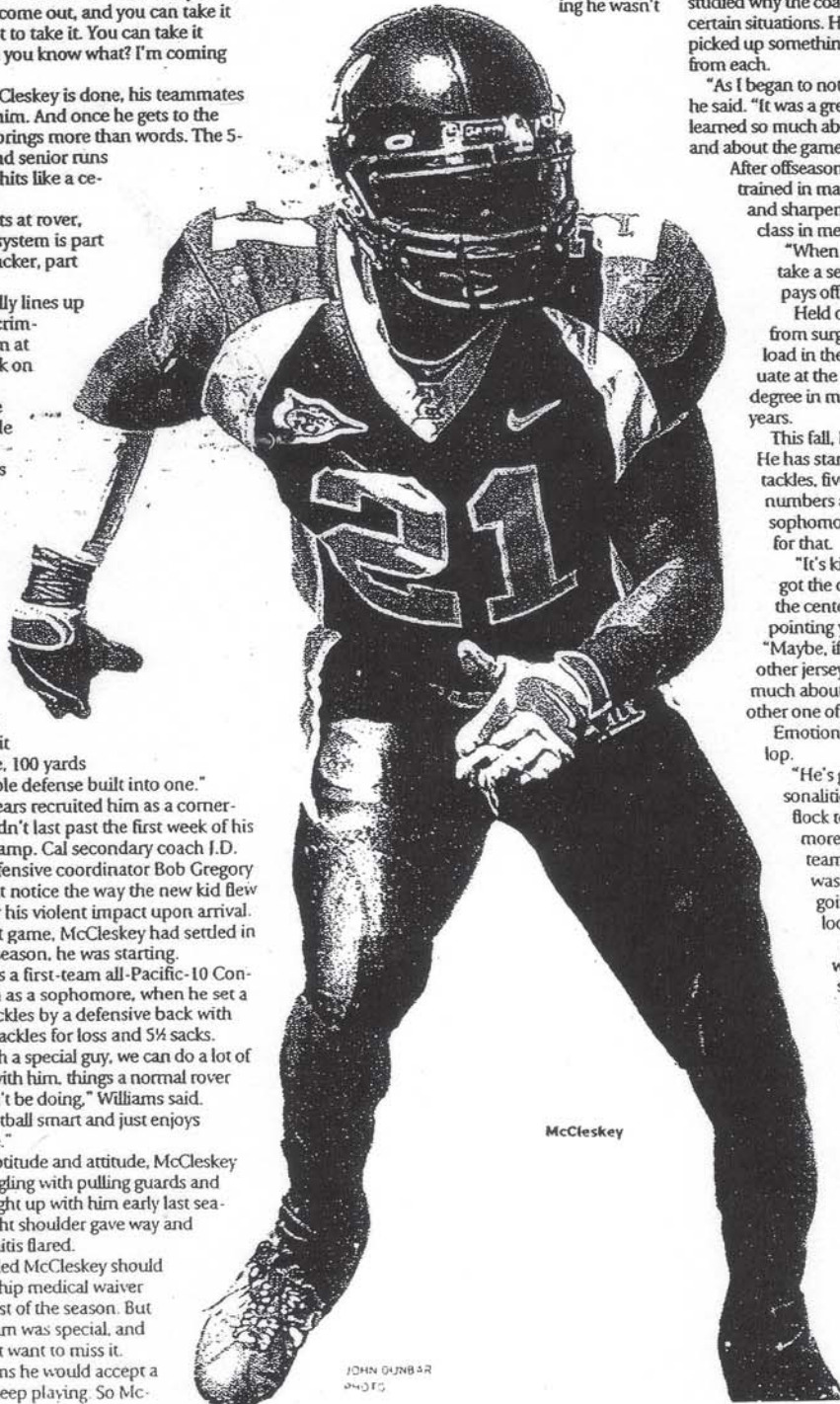
Just as they will be tonight, when Tedford calls up seniors to speak to the team about their final home game, about playing the country's No. 1 college team, on TV, and about their pride in the program.

McCleskey usually goes last, the guy who puts the sweat, the blood, the bruises, the pulled muscles, broken bones, the victories, the defeats, the shared dreams into sharp relief.

When McCleskey pulls it all together, he carries every player in the room along with him.

As Harrison said, "I would follow him anywhere."

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## Former walk-on sets Cal records

### Manderino set to play 49th straight game as first-string fullback

By Dave Newhouse, STAFF WRITER  
Inside Bay Area

BERKELEY — In terms of this Saturday's football rivalries, Cal-Stanford certainly doesn't have the magnitude of Michigan-Ohio State, Auburn-Alabama or Florida-Florida State.

But that doesn't mean the 108th Big Game lacks story lines. And maybe the best story, outside of bowl maneuvering, is Chris Manderino.

If you're not an Old Blue, then it's unlikely you've even heard of Manderino. And that's precisely why he is such a good story.

Manderino is Cal's fullback, No. 27, someone who has been first string all four years as a Golden Bear. Hasn't missed a game. Saturday's Big Game will be his 49th consecutive appearance for the Blue and Gold.

But what really makes his story special is he was a walk-on.

"To go from a walk-on to setting records is ironic more than anything," he said.

As far as records, that may be splitting hairs. Manderino hasn't started the most games in Cal gridiron history, because coach Jeff Tedford sometimes opens the game with three wide receivers, thereby denying Manderino an official start. Offensive tackle Mark Wilson (2000-03) started 48 consecutive games, but Manderino has been first string one game longer. If Cal likely plays in a bowl game, that would give him 50 games as a first-stringer.

Possibly, that would be a Cal record. You see, for the longest time, college freshmen played on the freshman team. And before then, back when the 20th century began, a freshman could play four varsity seasons if he was as good as Cal guard Orval Overall (1900-03).

However, Cal played only 36 games during Overall's career, a number Manderino passed in his junior year. Any way you look at it, he was the unlikelyst of candidates to anticipate setting records at Cal.

"I had my sights set on playing at this level," said the 6-foot-1, 230-pound Manderino, "but (college recruiters) said I was too slow as a tailback and too small as a linebacker."

That was at Newport Beach High. Even though he had 2,200 career rushing yards and 31 touchdowns as a senior, USC, UCLA, Stanford and Cal showed interest, but wouldn't offer him a scholarship.

Cal pursued him the heaviest of the four Pac-10 schools, so he walked on at Berkeley and was shifted to a new position, fullback.

"I didn't think it mattered," he said. "I was a football player, a hard-nosed guy who laid it on the line."

In 2002, Tedford's first year at Cal, he sensed right away Manderino's hard-nosed nature, plus his smartness and reliability, and made him the first-string fullback as a redshirt freshman.

Which meant Manderino's stepping out of the spotlight, because his carries and catches would be few and far between.

"I take my hat off to him," said Cal safety Donnie McCleskey. "He doesn't get many carries, but when he does, it's like the last carry of his life. And with all the great backs we've had, it's Chris Manderino and the offensive line leading them through."

Manderino is a tremendous blocker. Cal has had a 1,000-yard rusher every year with him at fullback: Joe Igber, Adimchinobe Echemandu and J.J. Arrington. Cal could wind up with two 1,000-yarders this fall, as Marshawn Lynch has 929 yards and Justin Forsett 912.

"He's a very tough person," Cal's All-America center, Marvin Philip, said of Manderino. "He split his jaw down the middle in spring practice and made it back to (fall) camp. He's a leader. He's deserving (of records). He's worked for it."

Manderino broke his jaw in the spring when hit by Cal linebacker Worrell Williams. Manderino was restrained from returning to practice immediately.

"He's a tough, tough guy," said Bears linebacker Ryan Foltz. "That's a milestone, to be ready week in and week out at his position, where he takes on linebackers and strong safeties."

Records? Milestones? One thing's for sure: Manderino, the walk-on's walk-on, is always there.

## Smith home on stage or field

### Cal tackle's role playing ranges from football to theater and charity work

By Dave Newhouse, STAFF WRITER  
Inside Bay Area

BERKELEY — There is considerable depth of talent in Cal football as befitting a top-10 team. But the talent goes beyond the abundant athletic ability.

Scott Smith is a perfect example, and possibly the best example, of a well-rounded Golden Bear. He has taken over at offensive left tackle now that Andrew Cameron won't play again this season.

But if not for Cameron's knee injury, we might not know the full scope of Smith's multi-dimensional personality and his admirable character.

It's not certain if Smith is the next Anthony Muoz or Anthony Hopkins. His minor at Cal is theater, and when he isn't blocking in the fall, he's acting in the spring.

"I love being on stage," he said Wednesday. "I love performing."

His next stage will be on national television Saturday when Cal (5-0), ranked in the top 10 of all three polls, faces UCLA (4-0) in Pasadena. And Smith shows no signs of stage fright.

"I've been here four years," he said, "and I've practiced the (offensive) look so much that the games are the fun part. I can see every possible look the defense can present me. I try to stay composed and calm."

Smith, a redshirt junior, shows that same demeanor in the theater. He is most adept at doing serious comedy — Neil Simon over Mel Brooks.

He has performed Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream." He appeared in "The Crucible" and "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." And he reprised Robert Redford's role in "Barefoot in the Park."

He has had leading roles in Theater for Charity, a Cal campus organization that stages student-written productions. At 6-foot-4, 278 pounds, Smith could be typecast, but that isn't the case. "My theater instructors completely challenge me," he said. "I've played a submissive role to a brother ... to better understand the craft."

He is majoring in English, but he prefers his minor.

"I could write, but I do feel comfortable on the stage," he said. "People do great things on film, but it's not my cup of tea."

So what would he value more, a Rose Bowl victory or a Tony? "That's a trick question," he said, grinning. "I won't answer it."

There is so much more to Smith even beyond his theatrical pursuits. Through Theater for Charity, Smith and his girlfriend, Erin Overweg, there is a group effort on the Cal campus to help impoverished children in Ghana.

Overweg, who rowed on Cal's national championship crew last spring, is studying in Ghana. She e-mailed Smith, asking if there was Cal athletic equipment that could be sent to Ghana. Smith went to his teammates and the football staff. Thus boxes of clothing, football cleats, pens, pencils, notebooks, color markers, sidewalk chalk, etc., were sent to kids in Ghana.

"Erin inspires me. She's amazing. Her heart is completely there to help those people," Smith said. "And it's great knowing my team is going to have a big impact on a group of people in a completely different country."

It won't be a surprise to those who know Smith that he purchased some of those items himself. After all, he bought individual bibles for his Cal teammates, their names embossed, with his summer job money.

"Character-wise, you can't find anyone better than Scott," Cal offensive line coach Jim Michalczyk said. "He's a good student with a big heart. ..."

"Tackle is a new position for him. He was a backup center, but we moved him to tackle in the spring to get him more playing time. He's picked it up really well."

When Smith graduates, he may do missionary work with Overweg in Ghana. "The sky's the limit on where my life is going," he said. "I hate to restrict myself on what I might do."

If not a Tony, then perhaps a humanitarian award.



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## A broken promise changed Cal back's life

### Shunned by Irish, Forsett finds better fit at Cal

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By GERRY FRALEY / The Dallas Morning News

BERKELEY, Calif. – There is an ugly side to college football's recruiting process. Promises are broken.

Not promises for free cars or doctored grades. The promises adults make to teenagers.

Justin Forsett, of Arlington Grace Prep, has been there. That he is the ninth-ranked rusher in Division I-A for 18th-ranked Cal says as much about his perseverance as his ability.

"I believe that everything happens for a reason," Forsett recently said. "One door closed, but another door opened. I'm blessed that I got this opportunity."

Forsett took the long way to find the open door.

As signing day 2004 approached, Forsett expected to go to Notre Dame. The Irish staff had assured Forsett there was a spot for a small but gifted running back.

Shortly before signing day, the sweet talk from Notre Dame stopped. Then-coach Tyrone Willingham received commitments from two other running backs higher on the Irish list: Darius Walker of Lawrenceville, Ga., and Justin Hoskins of Grand Rapids, Mich.

There was no scholarship for Forsett. He had been an insurance policy. Thanks, but no thanks was the explanation.

It happens to high school players every year. That does not lessen the sting.

Forsett lost in the game of musical chairs. Other schools had signed players, leaving him stranded. It stayed that way through the spring and into the summer.

"It was depressing, not knowing if I was going to get a chance," Forsett said.

He got it because of Grace Prep coach Mike Barber.

An NFL tight end for 10 seasons, Barber tirelessly called on his many contacts. That included former NFL running back Chuck Muncie, who had kept his connection to Cal.

Muncie gave the Cal coaching staff a video of Forsett. The staff was stunned.



MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ/AP

Notre Dame lost interest, but Justin Forsett (left) has hit the ground running at Cal. The sophomore from Arlington Grace Prep is the Golden Bears' leading rusher.

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How could a kid this good be unsigned?

"I thought, 'There has to be something wrong here,'" Cal coach Jeff Tedford said. "There just had to be something we were missing."

Tedford ordered running backs coach Ron Gould to "find out what this kid is all about." The report: Justin Forsett is a great kid who was caught in a bad situation that was not his doing.

Cal brought in Forsett and his family for a rare June visit. He quickly won over the staff and received a scholarship less than two months before practice opened. Had Cal not offered a scholarship, Forsett probably was headed to Division I-AA South Carolina State.

"He's really a diamond in the rough, a kid who slipped through the cracks," Tedford said. "We're very fortunate that he's here. He's an unbelievably great person."

As a freshman, Forsett received little playing time as a backup to NFL-bound tailback J.J. Arrington. Forsett, however, has risen in his second season.

He has 738 yards on only 85 carries and ranks ninth nationally with a per-game average of 123 yards. Notre Dame's Walker is 17th with 105.6 yards per game, while Hoskins is buried on the Irish depth chart.

With four runs of at least 35 yards, Forsett has averaged 8.68 yards per carry. Among the national top 50 in rushing, only two backs have a higher per-carry average: Texas' Jamaal Charles at 8.8 and Arkansas State's Antonio Warren at 8.73.

Forsett has a dazzling running style that features his speed and extraordinary balance. Forsett is only 5-8 and 180 pounds. He makes his yards by spinning and darting without losing stride.

"We're not surprised by what he's done," Cal offensive tackle Sean O'Callaghan said. "We see him do it all the time in practice."

As with the rest of Forsett's story, there is an unusual aspect to his performance: He is not the starter.

Cal lists Marshawn Lynch as the starter. Lynch is the prototypical running back: three inches taller and 35 pounds heavier than Forsett.

Lynch has missed three starts this season: two because of an injury and one because of a violation of team rules. Despite Forsett's production, Tedford does not plan on changing the arrangement.

That is fine with Forsett, who has developed a good relationship with Lynch. And Forsett appreciates Tedford's honesty.

In Cal's second game, Forsett ran into the coach who misled him. Willingham now coaches Washington. Forsett had 11 carries for 77 yards in the win over the Huskies but insisted he was not carrying out a vendetta.

"I don't hold grudges," Forsett said. "But I'd be lying if I said what happened doesn't drive me. People said I can't play at this level because of my size or whatever. I want to prove them wrong."



## CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Posted on Fri, Oct. 07, 2005

## Mebane is Bears' menacing man up front

By Jay Heater  
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

UCLA coach Karl Dorrell was asked about his impression of Cal defensive tackle Brandon Mebane, whom Dorrell's team faces Saturday at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena.

"Mebane? Pain," said Dorrell, who chuckled after noticing he did a bit of rhyming.

"Yeah, Mebane can be a pain."

Indeed, Mebane has been dishing out pain to opposing offensive linemen and coaches who have to scheme around him.

"He does a great job in raising some issues inside," Dorrell said. "He has a good pad level and he has been doing good things for a while. You notice him from the pack."

Arizona coach Mike Stoops just had to face Cal and Mebane. "I've been impressed with him all season," Stoops said. "He is a very gifted player and very disruptive. He gets pressure constantly and he plays very hard."

Gaining notoriety as a defensive tackle at Cal can be tough. Defensive coordinator Bob Gregory asks his interior linemen to occupy offensive linemen and keep them off the linebackers. For the defensive tackles in the system, that often means few tackles and even less glory.

Despite that fact, Mebane has found a way to not only accomplish the main task of occupying bodies but to make big plays as well.

Mebane, a 6-foot-3, 300-pounder out of Crenshaw High School in Los Angeles, has 15 tackles, including four sacks. If Cal's defense is a buzz saw, Mebane is the blade, ripping holes in opponent's blocking schemes.

"I would suspect that our opponents try to think of things they can do to control Brandon," Bears coach Jeff Tedford said.

So far, those strategies haven't worked. "It's pretty much pure domination when I watch Brandon," said Cal senior linebacker Ryan Foltz. "He is a great force. He definitely is able to shut down his area of the line. He weighs 300 pounds and moves like he is 250."

That domination of the middle gives Gregory and Tedford some options. "Anytime you are talking about schemes, you look at your personnel," Tedford said. "Do I trust what this person can do? We look at Brandon and try to think of ways we can create one-on-one matchups for him. Do we blitz a guy there?"

Tedford said that former USC defensive tackle Mike Patterson, who was a senior in 2004, was the kind of player who could shut down the inside. Although Patterson might not have gained the notoriety among fans that some of his more celebrated teammates attained, he was deemed important by those who count.

"Mike Patterson was drafted in the first round," Tedford said. "That kind of guy can make a major difference inside."

Tedford said Mebane is that kind of player.

"He is an animal," said Cal quarterback Joe Ayoob. "I'm glad we aren't going against him. Every day in practice he is in there messing things up. I know even our offensive linemen don't like to block him. If our offensive linemen fear this guy, that speaks for itself."

Only a junior, Mebane already is attracting inquiries from sports agents who would like to see him turn pro after this season. "My goal is to come back to Cal," Mebane said. "I want to get my degree. My parents and I already have

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discussed it. I want to graduate."

Besides getting a degree, Mebane has some lofty goals. One is to earn All-America status.

If Cal continues to win, Mebane could use that spotlight to gain national attention. He will get some of that attention Saturday at the Rose Bowl.

"Growing up in Los Angeles, UCLA always was a top team," Mebane said. "But the team I followed most was Florida State."

He said UCLA and USC offered him scholarships, but he chose Cal.

He arrived at Cal in 2003 and immediately started playing as a freshman. Last season, he was an All-Pac-10 honorable mention. He has taken huge steps forward each season.

"I recognize plays better now," he said. "I recognize when the guard is pulling and I can read the offense better. I'm still not that good at it. (Fellow defensive tackle) Matt Malele calls plays out for me. He is real smart."

As he continues to learn, Mebane expects to make even more plays. "I just give thanks to God," he said. "And I thank my teammates for pushing me so hard every day."

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