

# A great quarterback leaves a sore-loser city

By William C. Kashatus

**T**he Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier wrote: "For of all sad words of tongue or pen, The saddest are these: 'It might have been!'" Whittier's 19th-century sentiment applies to the sad departure this week of Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb, who was traded to the Washington Redskins for two draft picks.

For eleven seasons, McNabb was excoriated by the Philadelphia media and fans. Still, he leaves the city as the most accomplished quarterback in the modern history of the Eagles franchise, as well as a rare professional athlete who took his responsibility as a role model seriously.

The media's intense scrutiny and the fans' unreasonable expectations make Philadelphia an extremely difficult place for any pro athlete. They've given the city a sore-loser reputation for functioning in a black-and-white world of heroes and bums.

Win a championship, and all will be forgiven. But lose a Super Bowl by three points — as McNabb did to the New England Patriots in 2005 — and your leadership is suspect, because you "choked" when it mattered most. As the Eagles failed to return to the Super Bowl in each subsequent season, the criticism became louder, the doubts about an aging quarterback greater.

Truth is, McNabb was never appreciated by Philadelphia. Drafted second overall by the Eagles in 1999, the then-Syracuse quarterback was booed by fans who wanted the Eagles to draft running back Ricky Williams, who went fifth overall to the New Orleans Saints.

A year later, McNabb became the Eagles' starting quarterback and led the team to an 11-5 record as well as its first playoff appearance since 1996. It would be one of eight playoff appearances in McNabb's eleven seasons with the Birds.

That wasn't enough, though. The media and the fans tended to focus on the four NFC championship games the Eagles lost during McNabb's tenure — three as the favorite — and of course the 24-21 loss to the Patriots in Super Bowl XXXIX.

But let's not forget the 92 regular-season

and nine playoff games McNabb won with his powerful arms and legs; the six division titles he captured; his mentoring of less experienced teammates; the sheer courage he demonstrated by playing one game with a broken ankle and completing his famous pass on fourth and 26; and the franchise records he set for completions (2,801), completion percentage (.590), yards (32,873), and touchdown passes (216). Those records rank him among the best quarterbacks in NFL history.

As important was the character McNabb displayed under constant adversity and a series of public slights:

In 2003, then-ESPN commentator Rush Limbaugh discounted the star quarterback's ability, charging that his success was due to the NFL's "social concern" and the media's desire "that a black quarterback do well."

In the fall of 2005, wide receiver Terrell Owens antagonized McNabb on the sidelines and later said on ESPN that the Eagles would be "better with Brett Favre at quarterback."

In November 2008, coach Andy Reid benched McNabb for backup quarterback Kevin Kolb at halftime of a 36-7 loss at Baltimore.

In each case, McNabb handled himself with dignity, avoiding any public comment that might have inflamed the situation.

At a time when NFL stars seem to have embraced the role of antihero, McNabb has been a gentleman on and off the field, careful never to embarrass himself or the Eagles organization.

Instead, he has used his star power to spotlight charitable causes. Serving as spokesman for the American Diabetes Association, McNabb contributed significant time and money to finding a cure for the disease, which is one of the leading killers of African Americans.

He also created a scholarship for students who maintain at least a 2.5 grade point average at Mount Carmel High School in Chicago, his alma mater.

Sometimes the fans and the media don't fully appreciate what they have until it's gone. In Donovan McNabb, Philadelphia had something pretty special.

William C. Kashatus is a writer and historian. He can be reached at [bill@historylive.net](mailto:bill@historylive.net).