

Shoulder *to* Shoulder

By Jim Arehart
Referee associate editor

One of two pairs of officiating brothers in the NFL, Mike and Don Carey have come down the officiating highway in two completely different lanes.

They occupy the same football fields August through January, but they're never on the same field at the same time. One's an NFL referee — a crew chief — complete with the microphone and all the TV face time. The other is an NFL back judge, the deepest official on the field; no other position on the field is farther away from the referee.

"I'm a process man — rules and mechanics," says Don Carey, the back judge.

"And I'm a feel person — What does it feel like? Where is the restriction?" says Mike Carey, the referee.

Mike and Don Carey are brothers and they're as close as family usually gets. They both live in their hometown of San Diego and they frequently socialize with each other. And while both men eventually made their way into the NFL officiating ranks (Perry and Carl R. Paganelli are the other set of NFL brothers), they got there on different roads.

They are the same in many ways — each man is highly driven and the most visible sign of success for both comes from their NFL affiliation. They are the same, only different. It's easy to lump them together as the Carey brothers, but it's their differences that make them unique.

Don works for the government and used to manage major weapons systems. "He blows things up," chuckles Mike.

Mike and his wife own their own business, producing sporting accessories.

"He's a voracious reader and I'm a listener," says Mike.

"Michael is always a leader. My leadership skills came later," says Don.

Born two years apart — Don in 1947 and Mike in 1949 —

NAME: DON CAREY
AGE: 53
POSITION: BACK JUDGE
EXPERIENCE: NFL
OFFICIAL SINCE 1995



the Carey brothers have traditionally taken different paths. Along with their two younger sisters, Mike and Don were brought up in a strong Catholic home. Their father was a doctor and their mother, who passed away when the brothers were in grade school, was a nurse.

"We went to different high schools because my father thought the other high school would be a better experience for

me," says Mike. "There were two Catholic boys' high schools in the city, and Don's high school, St. Augustin, was the powerhouse of the city in every sport, and every athlete wanted to go there — it was like the Notre Dame of high schools. That's where I wanted to go from the time I was in third grade. But then University High School came along, and it had a stronger academic side to it and a freshness that appealed to my dad. He had this great foresight because I went there kicking and screaming, but it was really the best experience I had."

During those high school years Mike dabbled in some youth officiating, working football and basketball. But it wasn't until after graduating from college in 1971 that he got serious.

After establishing himself on the San Diego football officiating scene for a few years, Mike persuaded his older brother to try on the striped shirt in 1975 shortly after Don moved back to his hometown after living in nearby Riverside, Calif., for several years. "I didn't compete with him," says Don, adding that being a "rookie" in an arena in which his younger brother was well-versed was never an issue.

While the brothers didn't work together often in those early years — Mike was already on an established crew — Don could have joined Mike at the NCAA Division I level in the Western Athletic Conference (WAC) in 1987. Mike had been there since 1985.

"We had an opportunity to work together in the WAC and Don decided to go to the Big West Conference instead, which was not as high a caliber of football as the WAC was," says Mike, still obviously not satisfied with that decision.

"Yeah, he wanted me to go in the WAC," Don interrupts. "But it was a goal that I had to be a referee, a crew chief, at the Division I level, and I knew that would never happen in the WAC because of how I perceived the hierarchy there at the time. I felt the Big West could offer me that opportunity. I think subconsciously I might have wanted to go someplace else and be my own person. I wanted to succeed or fail on my own. It wasn't one of those things that we talked about, though."

Don eventually made it to the referee position in the Big West in 1991, before switching to the Pac-10 — the conference to which he always aspired — and the back judge position the following year. Meanwhile, Mike, who had applied to the NFL in 1985, his first year of Division I officiating, moved up to that league as a side judge in 1990.

Don applied to the NFL in 1989, but says the two brothers rarely talked about moving to the pro game. "I never thought it was important for me to be in the NFL to be successful to be happy and satisfied," Don explains.



NAME: MIKE CAREY
AGE: 51
POSITION: REFEREE
EXPERIENCE: NFL
OFFICIAL SINCE 1990



JOHN DERBETAS

Don Carey, seen here in 1996, has always been a back judge in the NFL. In 1998 the league changed the designation of the official working the position deep in the defensive backfield in the middle of the field from field judge to back judge.

"My goal was to be on a high school crew when I started officiating. Every time I got to a new level I liked doing it, and I liked to referee, but I would have been happy being a high school crew chief. Some of my best experiences were there. If Michael were a successful official in the NFL before I got there, it wouldn't have made any difference to me if I did not make it. I really didn't think about it." The NFL hired Don in 1994.

Typically, the brothers' reactions to making it to the NFL staff vary:

"You're elated when it happens," says Mike. "Your feet don't touch the ground for awhile."

"I was obviously very pleased," says Don. "I had a difficult time making the transition to the NFL. It was much more difficult than I ever imagined it would be."

That difficulty hit hard a few years ago when Don learned he was "on the bubble" with the NFL staff and he needed to bear down and focus on his job or he would be gone.

"That was a very tough period," Don concedes. "It was probably the toughest challenge I've ever had in my life. I've been highly successful in everything I've done. I didn't have anywhere near that same level of success in the NFL."

Don's perceived lack of success at the pro level coupled with his strong belief that Mike is a premier official ("I will tell you without equivocation that Michael is the best and most gifted official I know," he says) made him hesitant to participate in this story.

"I have reservations because I think in order to appear in a magazine like *Referee* you have to be experiencing some level of success — not just a little bit," he says. "I don't think it's enough for us just to be brothers to write an article on us. Michael is highly successful. I'm not quite so."

While it's true that Mike has had more big games than his brother — working playoff games in four of his first five years in the league as a back judge and another playoff game as a referee in the 1998 season — there are signs that may be changing.

Don is quick to credit the guidance of other NFL officials, and especially Mike, for helping him through that period, to "be more confident about what was happening on the field, be better prepared and to understand about how the NFL wants the game officiated," he explains.

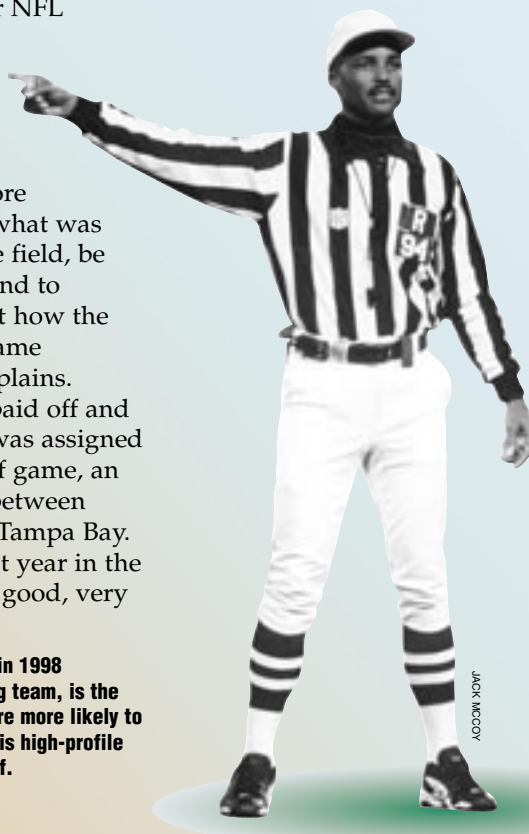
The support paid off and last season Don was assigned to his first playoff game, an NFC Divisional between Washington and Tampa Bay.

"I had my best year in the NFL. It was very good, very

satisfying," says Don.

On the other side of the coin, Mike, who had not yet hit any bumps on the NFL road, did not receive a playoff assignment. "It was difficult to deal with," Mike admits. "When you feel you've worked the best that you've worked and to not earn a position on the field ..." he trails off. "That's the way things go, though. This is an objective profession and sometimes things don't go the way you think they should. This year I'll put a better season in and get a better position."

Throughout the interview, Don is deferential to Mike. "We're talking about the NFL, and I'm in the presence of somebody who knows a lot more about it than I and has a higher success level than I do. Outside of this environment I'm a very domineering person. Outside of this environment I've been a leader. I think that's what has



JACK MCCOY

Mike Carey, seen here in 1998 indicating the offending team, is the Carey brother that you're more likely to see on TV because of his high-profile position as a crew chief.

been difficult. I'm probably a late bloomer in everything that I've ever done whether we're talking about my personal life, family life or whatever, but I get to a place where my success level is superior, and the NFL didn't go that way. It didn't go on that pace, and I don't know that it ever will. Michael said something to me when we got in. He said, 'It's the first time in your life — you're 48 years old and you're a rookie.'"

Mike entered the NFL as a side judge and never worked the referee position at the Division I level, but the NFL quickly identified him as someone who could become a crew chief. "I never thought of it when I went into the league," he says. "After awhile it became evident that I had an opportunity to be one of the few that they'd choose among." After his fifth season Mike was chosen to referee his own crew in 1995.

Interestingly, it was Don of the two brothers who had aspirations to the referee position earlier in their careers. He accomplished a personal goal when he spent a season as a referee in the Big West Conference, but when he was hired by the NFL in 1995, he went in as a back judge.

"In high school I was a referee before Don was," says Mike, "but he was *the* referee in San Diego at that time. And he was going to be a referee no matter where he went, because he really is a better referee than he is a back judge. If I were to have come after him, there's no way that I'd be the referee. He would have been. That's what he is."

Asked if he has aspirations to work the referee position in the NFL, and if it is a position he has an affinity for, Don quickly replies, "I *had* an affinity for it. In the NFL and in life in general, you have to recognize when circumstances change and you need to be a little more flexible, malleable, adaptable to the environment that you're in. I'm struggling to be a good NFL back judge, so refereeing does not interest me at all. My focus is elsewhere. If I'm honest with myself and I evaluate where I am — age, peer group, skill level, etc. — I'm not going to be a referee in the NFL."



Mike Carey (right), the younger of the brothers, was the first to start officiating and he convinced Don to try it. Both brothers are driven to succeed and ultimately they both made it to the top level of football officiating.

REFEREE

They're brothers, self-described best friends. Mike and Don Carey have followed similar patterns and moved in similar circles. But make no mistake, when you see one of them on TV it will be Mike — forceful, dominant, explaining a call with the microphone turned on. Somewhere, in a different city, on a different field will be Don, the back judge, deeper than the rest.

"People find me more remote than Michael," says Don.

"I'm serious when I have to be serious but I like to have a good time," says Mike.

"He is more like my father

than I am," says Don. "I'm more like my mother. My father was very charismatic, very successful, driven, principled. I see that reflection in Michael."

"Mom was a real activist," says Mike. "Whether it was in the house, the community or the garden. She was involved, educated, dynamic."

"Michael was always a leader, charismatic, a lot of social skills," says Don.

"He's intense and I'm the goof off," says Mike.

Lump them together as the Carey brothers — the same, only different. □