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**O.J. Simpson's  
49er gold rush**

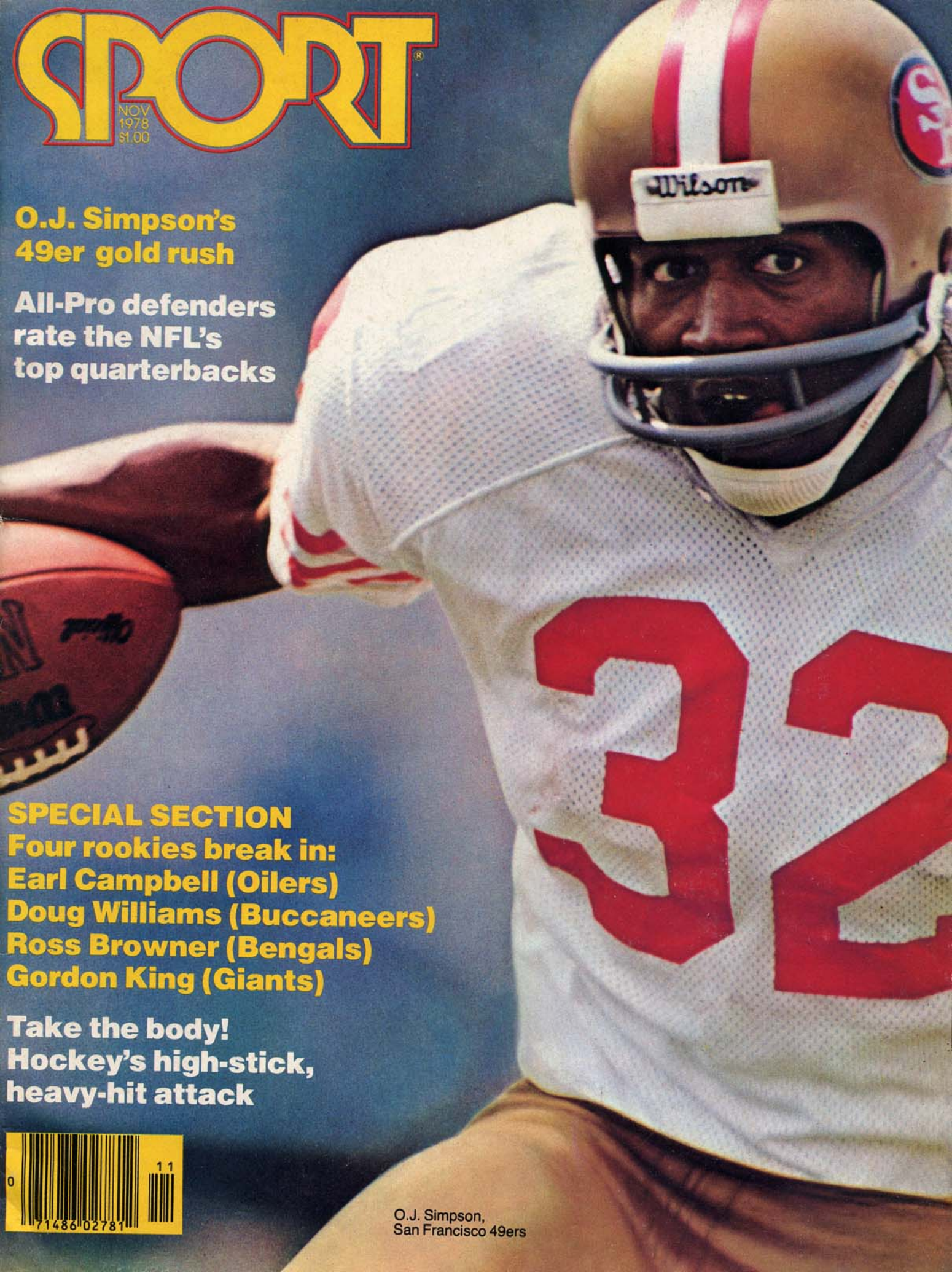
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O.J. Simpson,  
San Francisco 49ers





# O.J.'s 49er gold rush

The Juice viewed his San Francisco homecoming as a chance for the Super Bowl ring he never won in Buffalo, so he quickly began galvanizing the inexperienced 49er line. At 31, and coming off knee surgery, Simpson had no time to lose

By JAY STULLER

**T**hough only midmorning, the stifling July heat threatened rapid cremation of everyone working on the commercial being filmed in the Hertz Rent A Car maintenance lot at the Oakland, Calif., airport. After two hours of shooting, the gnomish director, Jerry Kauffman, was still not pleased. He ordered the Bay Area's newest football hero, O.J. Simpson, back for another sprint between two rows of cars.

This was Simpson's 19th Hertz commercial in a successful ad campaign that had made the San Francisco 49ers superstar runner one of the wealthiest and most recognizable sports celebrities in the country. Simpson, wearing a gray, three-piece business suit and carrying a briefcase and overcoat, jogged about 40 yards toward the camera, with his legs pumping high in an exaggerated motion, and a happy, albeit silly grin on his face. But Kauffman wanted more, and he sent Simpson back for still another run. And another.

After the ninth run Kauffman was at last satisfied. Training camp was still a week away for San Francisco's newest star, but the team's offensive coordinator, Fred O'Connor, would undoubtedly have smiled over the blistering workout O.J. was going through.

Simpson removed his coat and sat down on a red box in the shade of a truck. He was breathing lightly while eyeing a three-foot-high sign which he was scheduled to jump in an upcoming scene. "I wonder if I can make it over the damn thing," he said with a self-deprecating laugh. "A couple of years ago I'd offer to jump over a car, but now that little thing is lookin' high."

Although Simpson was coming back



from last season's knee surgery while with the Buffalo Bills, Bay Area fans were expecting their new football hero to do a lot more for the 49ers than jump three-foot signs. The Juice was to become the centerpiece of a 49er team that was being revitalized by vice-president and general manager Joe Thomas, who brought the 31-year-old Simpson to the Bay Area last March for five draft choices. O.J., a native San Franciscan, had come home.

"I'm really excited," Simpson said while unbuttoning his vest. "I've been a 49er fan as long as I can remember. I'll be closer to my wife and three children in Los Angeles. And look at Joe Thomas' record. You know he'll build a contender."

He was not sure what to expect at training camp, but he looked forward to it. "There's a few guys that I've known over the years, like Cedrick Hardman, but I'll probably just be hanging out, getting to know everyone. It's good for

me that the team has so many new guys and a new coach. We'll all be in the same boat."

This is a transition year for the 49ers, who suffered through a 5-9 season in 1977. Thomas traded or released a cadre of veterans—tight end Tom Mitchell, safety Ralph McGill, linebacker Dave Washington, defensive end Tommy Hart, running back Delvin Williams and linebacker Skip Vanderbunt—and the team had been primed to galvanize around the Juice.

Since the acquisition of Simpson, 49er season-ticket sales had increased by 10,000—which more than paid off his whopping \$733,000-plus annual salary. "We really can't lose," Joe Thomas said. "Even if he doesn't play next year, he's brought out the fans this year. If he plays for two years, we'll be very happy."

As running backs go, Simpson is a geezer. At the the start of the season, there were only a handful of running backs in the NFL over 30. And everyone wondered how the cartilage surgery on Simpson's left knee—performed after last season's seventh game—would affect his ball-carrying this season.

"It's a little stiff," Simpson acknowledged while sitting back on his red box. "That just started a few days ago. I'm not worried about it. It's my first knee operation and it's just cartilage, not the more serious ligament repair. I worked on the knee over the summer, running a lot down in the Caribbean while we were filming *Firepower*."

*Firepower* is O.J.'s sixth action-adventure feature film. During the off-season, he habitually moves faster than a neutron in a linear accelerator. He's the spokesman not only for Hertz (at a re-

## O.J.'s gold rush

ported annual fee of \$200,000), but for juice and athletic-shoe companies. He is under a five-year contract to NBC for sports commentary and dramatic acting, and will soon produce films for the network. "He's seen his family for only a couple days this summer and has hardly been in the office," sighed Cathy Randa, Simpson's secretary at O.J. Simpson Enterprises in Los Angeles when asked to set a date for an interview. "I don't see how he can even be around for an hour."

Back in the parking lot between takes, the Juice was saying, "My son won't have to worry about college scholarships. He can step into the business when he's older. Don't get me wrong, it's not just for the kids. I'm making the money for myself, too. I said to myself in Buffalo that if I ever got hot, I wouldn't let it go. I vowed not to pass up any opportunities."

Director Kauffman waved almost imperceptibly and the Juice suddenly sprang up. A wardrobe woman slipped on his coat and daubed on more makeup. The Juice drove up in a car and recited a few words about quick check-in. It filmed well.

Then, back in the shade, Simpson considered what coming to San Francisco meant to him. "This is the first time in several years that I'm looking forward to the start of the season," he admitted. "Going to Buffalo was tough when I left my home and business behind for five months. There were times when I dreaded another season. Don't get me wrong," he said emphatically, "I love Buffalo and the people there and I'll always be a Buffalo Bill, but the social life there. . . it was something I was not accustomed to."

Being a Bill in recent years gnawed at Simpson. From 1972 to '75 the Bills were a team building toward the playoffs. Despite his 2,003 yards rushing in 1973, O.J. said that his and the team's greatest season was 1975. "I had 1,817 yards, caught 28 passes and scored 23 touchdowns, and Jim Braxton had 13 touchdowns. We were *cooking*. Sure we lost games 37 to 35, but we had the best offense in football. We were a few backup players away from being a Super Bowl contender."

But coach Lou Saban and Bills owner Ralph Wilson were not communicating, according to Simpson. "A guy named Ted Cox, who worked for Ralph Wilson, somehow was involved in player moves," O.J. said. "Cox came between Lou and Ralph. Now, the general manager of a football club is as important as a coach. Look at the perennial winners and you see a guy like Joe Thomas, a Don Klosterman, a Don Shula or an Al Davis building them. You can't just hand a guy like Cox a book and tell him to read about football, watch a few games and then put together a team. A football man has to have a feel for talent. A Thomas or a Davis not only get the best players, but they get the *right* players for a team."

"In Buffalo, before the 1976 season, they let defensive end Pat Toomay get away in the expansion draft. We'd already traded [linebacker] Jim Cheyunski to the Colts. They traded [wide receiver] J.D. Hill and [defensive tackle] Earl Edwards and didn't get much in return. [Linebacker] Dave Washington went to the 49ers in 1975 and made the Pro Bowl the following year. They didn't sign a couple of rookies that we needed and when they let [wide receiver] Ahmad Rashad get away—he became a free agent and signed with Seattle—that was the straw that broke the camel's back. People close to me were saying, 'You got to do something, Juice,' but all I could do was try to resituate myself. I knew the team needed bodies and that's when I tried to get myself traded to the Rams, who were offering them."

(When asked about Simpson's charges, Cox said, "I think O.J. has my importance in these trades over-emphasized. I was not in charge of ini-

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