

TUFFY LEEMANS: A REAL TUFFY

By Don Smith
for The Pro Football Hall of Fame

The late Wayne Millner, a Pro Football Hall of Famer who once starred at end for the Washington Redskins, a few years ago wrote to nominate for membership a former foe from the arch-rival New York Giants.

"Tuffy Leemans had it all," Wayne summarized. "He could run, pass and catch and he played truly outstanding defense. He was aggressive, dedicated and gave 100 percent at all times to a game he loved. In my opinion, he ranks among the all-time greats."

Tuffy did do all the things that Millner mentioned, and perhaps a little more, in the eight seasons from 1936 to 1943 that he toiled in New York. Maybe more than any other player, Leemans, who played both left halfback and fullback, was responsible for his team's success at a time when the Giants perennially contended for the NFL crown.

In 1978, the Hall's Board of Selectors indirectly seconded Millner's motion by naming Leemans to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. This long-awaited recognition came a full 34 years after his final NFL game against Washington in 1943. Until Red Badgro, no other player waited so long after his retirement for Hall of Fame election.

As Leemans pointed out, if your name happens to be Alphonse Emil, you'll happily accept any nickname early in life. As it turned out, the moniker "Tuffy" was most appropriate because "tough" is the way he played his football all the way from high school in his native Superior, Wisc., through college at Oregon and George Washington, and on into the National Football League. Probably the most famous grid star the George Washington Colonials ever had, Leemans began his post-graduate football in spectacular fashion by winning Most Valuable Player honors in the 1936 College All-Star game in Chicago.

It took a bit of journalistic skullduggery, however, to make Tuffy's heroics possible. At the time, players named to the All-Star squad were selected by a national fan vote. Sensing that a comparatively unknown ballcarrier from a small football college would have little chance in this kind of election, a Washington *Herald* writer, the late Vincent X. Flaherty, reasoned that the game sponsor, The Chicago *Tribune*, undoubtedly weighed large lots of ballots, rather than counting them one-by-one. So Flaherty had bale of hay, covered on the outside with legitimate ballots, sent to Chicago. To everyone's astonishment except Flaherty's, The *Tribune* announced that Leemans had polled more than half a million votes and had made the All-Star squad.

All-Star team coaches were not impressed by the unknown from the East until a final scrimmage two days before the game. Leemans whipped off two stunning long distance touchdown runs and won a starter's role in the process. Washington-area fans were exhilarated but not surprised, when Leemans paced the All-Stars in a 7-7 deadlock with the NFL champion Detroit Lions. Once the 1936 NFL campaign began, the 6-0, 200 pound Leemans continued his fast pace. He wound up the league's most-used rusher with 206 carries and he led the NFL with 830 yards rushing, one of the finest totals ever up to that time. And as he was destined to do every season, he added big yardage on both his passes and his receptions and played a devastating defensive game.

Tuffy was the only rookie to win all-NFL acclaim in 1936. On that honor eleven were eight stars, including Leemans, who were destined for Pro Football Hall of Fame enshrinement. One was the Redskins' mercury-footed halfback, Cliff Battles.

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"When we'd play the Giants and they needed two or three yards, they almost always would call on Tuffy to smash over tackle," Battles recalled. "But no matter how prepared we were, Tuffy usually would make it. He had great balance and great competitiveness. I never saw a better player than Leemans!"

The Giants, always a contender, won three divisional titles and one NFL crown during Tuffy's tenure. In the 1938 NFL championship game against Green Bay, Leemans' first period touchdown provided New York's margin of victory in a 23-17 win over the Packers. A year later, Tuffy won official all-league designation a second time and once again led his team to the NFL title game.

As often happens with the guy who handles the ball more than any one else, injuries finally began to take their toll on Tuffy and, late in his career, made him more of a passing weapon than a running threat. In 1942, a collision with the Chicago Bears' bruising end, George Wilson, left Tuffy with a brain concussion and permanent left ear damage. Because of this, he was rejected for war service in both the U.S. Army and Navy.

Leemans' career statistics are impressive only when you take into account the era in which he played along with the fact that, through a major part of his career, he saw only limited duty because of the two-platoon system employed by Giants' coach Steve Owen. Owen put together two supposedly equal units and then alternated them from quarter to quarter with each team playing both on offense and defense.

Still, when he retired, Tuffy ranked among the lifetime NFL leaders in several categories. His career ledger showed 3,142 yards rushing, 422 yards on 28 receptions, 120 points on 20 touchdowns and 167 pass completions for 2324 yards and 16 touchdowns. When such records were kept, he averaged almost 14 yards per punt return.

Born November 12, 1912, Leemans, after a brilliant prep career in Wisconsin, was wooed and won by the University of Oregon. But a year later, when the Oregon coach moved across the continent to George Washington, Tuffy went with him for his sophomore season. With the Colonials, Tuffy saw only brief action for several games until he entered the Louisiana State fray late in the first period. Leemans quickly scored a touchdown, completed five straight passes and averaged more than 48 yards per punt. He was a George Washington regular from that day on.

For the next three years, Tuffy was virtually a one-man show, a true running-passing-kicking yriple threat, as the Colonials played competitively against such powerhouses as LSU, Alabama, Rice, Vanderbilt, Tennessee and Oklahoma. As a senior, Leemans was the team captain.

Still it is doubtful that the pros would have been knocking at his door had it not been for a young high school boy on vacation in Washington who caught a terrific Leemans performance against Alabama in 1935. That young man was Wellington Mara, whose father Tim owned the Giants. Young Wellington, who is now the Giants' president, reported back to his father that Tuffy was a prospect the Giants must sign once he was eligible.

"If I am remembered for nothing else, I'd like to be remembered for discovering Tuffy Leemans," Mara once said. "It's a good thing the Redskine didn't move to Washington until 1937 or we could never have gotten Tuffy."

The NFL employed its first college draft in 1936 and Tuffy was the Giants' second-round choice. He was given \$3,500 for his rookie season. In 1943, after attaining super-star status and accepting additional coaching responsibilities, Leemans had a \$12,000 contract, one of the best in the league. In between, there had been no big championship game bonuses. For his three title game appearances, Tuffy earned \$504 in 1938, \$455 in 1939 and only \$288 after a snowy game in Chicago in 1941.

Tuffy, who became a successful businessman in Washington, never complained, nor did he reflect unfavorably on the vastly greater sums being paid pro athletes. "I just loved the game," he insisted. "I know a lot of players back then, and myself included, who would have played for nothing."

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With his Hall of Fame selection Tuffy reached the top of his sport, a celebrity once again after so many years. "I didn't know if I was ever going to make it," he reflected. "It was like I had two yards to go, had used up three downs and had only one more chance to make it."

But make It he did – just as you would predict for a guy who made the big play a way of life during his pro football career.

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