

THE CHRIS CREW

By Stan Grosshandler

One of the first of the glamorously named defensive units was the Detroit Lions' "Chris Crew" of the 1950s. From 1951 through 1958 this group was instrumental in winning three league and four divisional titles.

"We were not ahead of our time in the mechanism of defense," stated Hall of Famer Jack Christiansen, the man for whom the crew was named. It was a mere matter of personnel. Detroit was the first club to put their best players on defense. Prior to that, most teams used offensive rejects on defense. We got the best players available and placed them on the defensive unit. I am certain many could have been fine offensive players if placed on that unit."

In Jack's rookie season (1951), he set a record by twice taking two punts back for TD's. He went 69 and 47 yards against the Rams and on Thanksgiving Day hit the Packers with 71 and 89 yard returns.

"My first season," Jack recalled, "we had Don Doll at left safety, Jim Smith right half, Clarence Self and Dorne Dibble, an offensive end, at right half, and I played the right safety. We used either the Eagle Seven man line or the Giant Umbrella defenses.

In 1953 Chris moved to left safety, the position he was to earn Hall of Fame honors at.

"I played left safety the rest of my career and ran back both punts and kickoff. I usually covered the tight end as we played man-to-man about 80%. The rest of the time was either zone or an occasional strong-side zone."

Yale Lary joined the Lions' defense in 1952. A second Chris Crew member to make the Hall of Fame, he recalled: "Most of our success lay in good communications. Other than the two years I spent in service we played as a unit and were fairly injury free."

The Crew was multi-talented. Chris led the NFL in interceptions in '53 and '57 and holds records for punt returns.

Lary has the second highest career punting average. He led the league in punting in '59, '61, and '63. Playing through 1964, he had a total of 50 pass interceptions including two for touchdowns. He scored three times on punt returns. And, in his spare time, he played minor league baseball. He was later to become part of another great Lion defensive backfield with Dick LeBeau, Night Train Lane, and Gary Lowe.

Smith was the team's punter prior to Lary and holds the record of one of the longest interception returns: 102 yards in 1949.

Several players better known for their offense filled in from time to time. Clyde "Smackover" Scott played one season, and one year Doak Walker filled in. Terry Barr was later to gain greater fame as a Lion flanker.

The Crew had a unique place in history as they were one of the very first to gain fame with a "catchy" name, were an example of the gradual realization that the best athletes might be used on defense, and were one of the last units to show the great versatility that was necessary in the days of 33-man squads.

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THE CREW: YEAR-BY-YEAR

LS Doll LH Self & Dibble		1951 RS Christiansen RH Smith
	also Hill	
LS Doll LH David		1952 RS Christiansen RH Smith & Lary
	also Hill & Scott	
LS Christiansen LH David		1953 RS Lary RH Smith
	also Karilivacz	
LS Christiansen LH Davld		1954 RS Karilivacz RH Stits
	also Kircher	
LS Christiansen LH David		1955 RS Karilivacz RH Stits
	also Riley, Fucci, Walker & Woit	
LS Christiansen LH David		1956 RS Lary RH Karilivacz
LS Christiansen LH David		1957 RS Lary RH Karilivacz
	also Barr & Lowe	
LS Christiansen LH David		1958 RS Lary RH Lowe
	also Barr & Whitsell	

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THE BOX SCORE

<u>Name</u>	<u>College</u>	<u>Crew</u>		
		<u>Yrs</u>	<u>INT</u>	<u>TD</u>
Jack Christiansen	Colo A&M	8	46	3
Jim David	Colo A&M	7	34	0
Yale Lary	Texas A&M	5	22	1
Bob Smith	Iowa	3	15	1
Carl Karilivacz	Syracuse	5	10	1
Billy Stits	UCLA	3	10	1
Terry Barr	Michigan	2	4	0
Don Doll	USC	2	3	0
Gary Lowe	Michigan State	2	3	0
Jim Hill	Tennessee	2	1	0
Leon Riley	Detroit U.	1	2	0
Dave Whitsell	Indiana	1	1	0
Doak Walker	SMU	1	1	0

Clarence Self (Wisconsin), Dick Karcher (Tulsa), Dom Fucci (Kentucky), Dick Voit (Ark. St.), and Clyde Scott (Ark. & Navy) all spent one year in the Crew with no interceptions.