

DR. JOE: THE LAST RENAISSANCE MAN

By Stan Grosshandler

The recent passing of Dr. Joe Kopcha recalled a visit to his home in Gary, Indiana, fifteen years ago. I was composing an article entitled "Guards with Brains" and felt Dr. Joe would be most qualified for inclusion. Both Joe and his delightful wife Bernie treated me as if I was a longtime friend, and I spent the greater part of a day discussing the Bears and NFL of his day.

This visit was to be followed by years of correspondence varying from historical information, to samples of his printing, to an occasional weak pun he thought was worth passing along. The use of his name gained me interviews with George Halas, Red Grange, Johnny Sisk, and other NFL'ers of the day.

A lifetime Hoosier, Dr. Joe was born in Whiting, Indiana, December 23, 1905. A star fullback in high school, he went to the University of Chattanooga (now UT-Chattanooga) where he earned ten letters as a guard-tackle in football, in baseball, basketball, and swimming. He gained honors as football captain, the best athlete in the school, and three times as an All-Southern football pick.

Dr. Joe graduated in 1929 and joined the Bears as a guard-tackle. He enjoyed a good season, but the Bears, in need of rebuilding, didn't. One of Kopcha's most vivid memories was the game in which Ernie Nevers of the Cardinals scored six touchdowns and four PATs for 40 points against the Bears.

"I was playing opposite Duke Slater, one of the best tackles of the day," he recalled, "and I think he held me on every play. Finally I went to the sideline and asked (Coach George) Halas if I could switch to the other side of the line. I broke in and threw Ernie for a loss. In frustration, I hit him in the face.

"Ernie smiled at me and said, 'Don't do that. My face is too pretty to get marked up!'"

After one season, Kopcha left pro football to enter medical school at the University of Alabama. In 1932, he decided he wanted to return to the game and asked Halas for a tryout. Halas was reluctant, figuring Kopcha had been away from football too long. However, Dr. Joe proved he could do it, regaining his position at guard on the Bear team that won the championship from Portsmouth in the famous indoor game on a shortened field.

"I transferred to Rush Medical College in Chicago," Kopcha said, "with the encouragement of George Halas. You might recall several other Bears like Danny Fortmann and Bill McColl were to follow similar routes. If a teacher ever got on my back for missing a class due to football, I would tell Halas who in turn would mention it to the dean of the school. And the problem would cease."

Joe continued with the Bears through 1935. In '33, Chicago won its second straight NFL title in the first official championship game, a 23-21 barn-burner over the Giants. The '34 team went undefeated through the regular season only to lose to the Giants in the famous "Sneakers" championship game.

During this period, Kopcha was named to most of the All-NFL teams.

Of particular interest is the recollection Dr. Joe had of playing in the 1934 ice and tennis shoe title tilt even though all histories and the contemporary news accounts state that both he and Beattie Feathers were injured and did not play. If Kopcha's memory was right, he would have played in the four most famous games of the period: Nevers' 40-pointer, the indoor championship, the first official championship game, and the Sneakers game.

Certainly, if Kopcha could have found a way to play, he would have. In Howard Roberts' history of the Bears, he describes an incident when Kopcha had a cast on his arm. The team was enroute to a game in Detroit, and Dr. Joe was discovered in the train's galley trying to trim the cast with a meat cleaver so he could play.

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"We used to try to go sixty minutes, as it was considered less than manly to ask to come out," Kopcha stated. "To conserve on energy, if the play went the other way, we would just lean on an opponent. Pursuit was unheard of. I must admit today's game is more interesting.

"The money, though nothing by today's standards, came in handy for me as a med student. Also I got twenty bucks a week extra from Halas, as I helped the trainer. None of the other players knew this."

At the beginning of the 1936 season, Joe asked Halas to trade him to Detroit so he might study obstetrics and gynecology at Harper Hospital, one of the most prestigious hospitals in the nation. Halas granted his wish.

"I spent one year with the Lions and helped them beat the Bears, so Halas told me it was one of his worst trades!"

Joe kept up a lifelong correspondence with Halas. Even though Papa Bear would never state which Bear team was his best, it was Kopcha's contention that he favored the '34 club.

Joe Kopcha, M.D., took up practice in Gary, Indiana, and became president of the Lake County Medical Society. Like many physicians of the era, he served as an officer in the army during World War II, seeing duty in the Far East. He specialized in obstetrics, and there's something touching about picturing Kopcha – who's nickname "Big Boy" describes his physique – showing his gentle side with tiny babies.

In later years he moved to Hobart, where he slowed down, limiting his practice to assisting other doctors in surgery.

Slowed down? If you were to visit his home, he'd proudly show you his well-equipped printing shop where he actually did job printing. Many PFRA members have received samples of his work. He also acted in the Little Theatre where he and his wife often had leading roles. He was much sought after as a speaker and Master of Ceremonies. He did all this when he wasn't busy playing handball or accepting honors, such as election to the Indiana Hall of Fame and more civic and humanitarian awards than can be listed here.

PFRA will miss Dr. Joe for his charismatic personality and historical contributions. We have lost another of that fast declining and endangered species, the Renaissance Man.

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Dr. Stan Grosshandler is a regular contributor to THE COFFIN CORNER. Many of his articles have dealt with the numerous pro football personalities he's interviewed during his "second" career.

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Editor's note: On a shelf in my home is a sample of Dr. Joe's printing prowess. It's a lovely book; gold print on the shiny black cover reads, "Highlights in the Sex Life of Bob Carroll, Authentically Described and Accurately Illustrated." It always gets a smile when visitors open it to discover blank pages. Alas! It's classed as non-fiction.