IN THE SAME LEAGUE

By Ernest L. Cuneo
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"Piggy" Simandl came by his nickname honestly. He was a wholesale meat salesman. He was also short and fat, with puffy, red-veined jowls, a low forehead and close-set eyes. People in his hometown of Orange, New Jersey, would have given him the same monicker if he'd sold shoes.

When he wasn't peddling pork chops, Simandl ran the Orange Tornadoes, a professional football team that, in 1929, played its first and final season as a fully franchised member of the National Football League. That was the year I worked for Piggy. I was a football player.

Like most pro teams, we Tornadoes had achieved some distinction in college competition but were mere run-of-the-mill in the league. My pedigree from Columbia included All-Ivy, All-Eastern, and Honorable Mention Associated Press All-America, all of which made me an average pro. At 5'9" and 192 pounds, I was also about average in size for a pro lineman in those days.

The Twenties were the wild frontier days of professional football. NFL franchises were like Homestead claims; anybody with a few dollars could start a club. Most of the "sports" were small-time promoters like Piggy Simandl, driven by the urge to be recognized as prominent in the little worlds in which they lived, striving to achieve local kudos by "putting their city on the map." Whether hobnobbing with local politicos or puffing before their town's newspapermen, they bore an air of great pith and moment, as befits men of great Chamber of Commerce importance.

Piggy was right out of the mold. A complete and voluble extrovert. A "character." He was usually officious and always bursting with his own importance, but he was flamboyantly agreeable, and eveyone – including the team – liked him. This despite the fact that payrolls were often late because cheerful Piggy didn't have any money in the treasury.

How could he? Our gates of 2,500 to 3,000 loyal fans at Knights of Columbus Field were low even for a Depression year.

He wasn't in pro football for the Big Money, of course. And neither were his players. If Piggy didn't always pay me in green, he paid me in full in gold – the gold of memories.

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For example, what price could I place on the chance to tackle Red Grange – or TRY to tackle him? Or Ernie Nevers? For most of us, the reward of playing the game back then – the reward that lasted a lifetime – was to see what we could do against the superstars. The Orange Tornadoes, myself included, weren't great, but we were no slouches either. We were, in the Damon Runyon vernacular, "handy guys."

In our opening league game, we fought the New York Giants to a bloody 0-0 tie. Here I encountered a great -- Benny Friedman of Michigan.

He had perfected the forward pass. Indeed, he was revolutionizing the game even with the old ball which was much fatter than today's trim pigskin and under the old rules. Those rules really handcuffed passers. One said you could only pass from at least five yards behind your line of scrimmage. Another handed out a five-yard penalty if you threw two consecutive incompletes. Worse, if you threw one incomplete into the end zone, the ball was turned over to your opponent at his twenty-yard-line.

Even with all that going against him, plus the fact that few of his receivers were really used to catching the ball, Benny was a wonderful passer. He had a prima donna's ego, and believed he was the greatest football player in the world. Well, he was pretty close to being right.

When Benny passed, he aimed and threw with his body, using the follow-through of a pitcher, with something of a golfer's pivot on his left leg. Throughout his life he swore that his pivot follow-through put him in a position to withstand terrible punishment, that his left leg was as important to him as his right arm.

Benny and I had an unusual relationship. The first time I played against him – when the Tornadoes tied the Giants at Knights of Columbus Field – he pretended he was fading to his right to throw a pass. I faded with him, hoping he'd believe I was leaving a big gap in the line. This is called a "mousetrap" and Benny fell into it. He went for the hole, and I went for him. And got him!

He was stunned for a bit, but thereafter his ego expressed itself. It was incredible to him that a run-of-the-mill player like me could trap him. So he named me on his All-League Team, and I played on his Blue-Gray Bowl team in an exhibition on New Year's Day.

Later that season, the Tornadoes went to the Polo Grounds to play the Giants again. That was where Benny threw the greatest forward pass I ever saw.

It was a snowy, gloomy day. A Giant drive was running out of steam at our 25-yard-line. Everybody knew Benny was going to pass, so we blitzed. I got through along with several others and we tore at Benny. He fell back to the 40-yard-line. Meanwhile, Ray Flaherty, the fine New York end, sneaked across our goal line, slipping in the mud as he did. At 40 yards, in the gathering gloom, with a wet ball, Benny pegged it to Flaherty who caught it while flat on the ground!

We'd tied them at Orange, but they beat us at New York.

Over the years, Benny and I would telephone each other occasionally. I always greeted him with a "Benny, how's that old leg?" and he'd invariably and enthusiastically recite the protection given by his follow-through leg pivot.

The last time I called him, in 1981, he stunned me by saying, "Ernie, haven't you heard? I lost my leg; they amputated it." Shortly thereafter, he killed himself. Handgun.

Benny was surely the greatest passer of the decade. But, in a way, he never grew up. He stuck around pro ball, coached, ran quarterback camps, and was as immersed in football at seventy-five as was when he was pegging for the Giants.

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Football is a tough game to play; it's even harder to get over. For many players, perhaps most, the withdrawal pains approached paranoia. Many settled into a morbid conviction that because the "world" was no longer cheering them, it was against them.

Apparently, the huge salaries today are no recompense for the shock of sudden anonymity. Recently I asked a retired Washington Redskin of more than modest, football-earned fortune if he missed the roar of the stadium.

His eyes blazed. "Miss it? I'm going to write a book about it!"

"What are you going to say?" I asked. "I don't know yet," he flared. "But I've got the title: DEATH AFTER LIFE!"

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One fellow who never found anonymity was THE player of the Twenties. There was "Babe" Ruth on the baseball diamond, Jack Dempsey in the ring, and "Red" Grange on the football field. Even today his name conjures a vision of a comet twisting across the gridiron in one of his superhuman dashes.

He's an American legend, combining the simplicity of Johnny Appleseed, the magic of Houdini, and gridiron accomplishments of Paul Bunyan proportions. As a sophomore halfback at Illinois, he ripped through mighty Michigan for four long touchdowns the first four times he handled the ball. The public took him to its heart and flocked to see him through three All-American seasons. He seldom failed to thrill his adoring fans with a brilliant long run.

When the Redhead turned pro in 1925, he put pro football on the map. Up until then, the professional game was pretty small potatoes. Grange's first game at the Polo Grounds drew 73,000 people!

The game I remember best was in 1930. The Tornadoes had closed up shop after their one season, and I caught on with the Brooklyn Dodgers. For our first game we went to Chicago to play Red Grange and the Chicago Bears.

Nearly sixty years later, I'm still puzzled by the plays on which I missed tackling Grange. The Dodgers held the Bears to a 0-0 tie, but that was no fault of mine. We nearly lost because I tried a Fancy Dan maneuver.

The Bears were on their own 25-yard-line, third down and fifteen. Grange moved out of tailback to the Number Two position. We all knew that to stay with the Bears we had to play Grange first and the Bears second, but I assumed he wouldn't carry the ball on this play. With so far to go for a first down, Chicago would have to throw a "Hail Mary" pass.

So, instead of rushing the passer, my ordinary assignment, I wheeled out of the line and sprinted in the opposite direction. I figured I would snare the upcoming pass, turn around and make for their goal line. Be a hero.

A hell of a roar went up from the stands. I put on more speed. The roar deepened. I thought the passer might have been cornered and turned around. To my horror, Grange was right behind me, carrying the ball, and using ME for interference!

Our safety backs caught him on our ten and the Dodgers held. "Swede" Hagberg, our big center from West Virginia, was furious. "Ernie," he sneered, "you've got the greatest RECEDING charge in the league."

Grange was fast, but his greatest asset was that he'd reversed one of the axioms of the game. According to standard wisdom, a runner could feint with his arms, legs, and eyes, but not with his belly button. Thus, in bringing down a runner in an open field, it was rudimentary that a tackler "home in on his belt buckle."

Grange was the only exception. He would lope along at three-quarter speed. Then as the instant of tackling arrived, with a shoulder pad only a few inches from his middle, that belt buckle would maddenly disappear, and the tackler would lunge into empty space.

I had first-hand experience. Once, as I closed on him, I thought I was going to get in a hard tackle. He was waterbugging downfield, at half speed, dodging gracefully and obliquely moving toward the left side of the field – and me. Pro forma, I fixed my eye on his belt buckle. I had my feet under me; I was up on my toes, poised. The precise moment arrived. His buckle wasn't a foot from my face. I drove at him with maximum force, fiercely tackled an armful of air, and landed hard on my nose.

I jumped up, swept with rage. I still had time. I sprinted downfield. Now he was drifting to the right. He turned toward me. Once again I homed in on his belt buckle. Once again I closed for the kill.

Once again I landed on my face.

I still can't figure how he did it. My only consolation is that there were a lot of other guys who, like me, missed him TWICE on the same play.

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Grange was a real gentleman both on and off the field. But there were some who weren't. We called them "God-damners." Very rough, they often triggered very rough games.

"Wild Bill" Kelly was a God-damner if there ever was one. He's been called the "greatest player ever to come out of Montana." I don't know if that's true or not. He was a good runner and passer but not a superstar. One thing about Bill, he could take it as well as dish it out.

One day while playing for Brooklyn, he refused to leave the game after a severe concussion. We knew he was unconscious on his feet, but he played on. Then a second concussion put him in the hospital for a week.

He was never the same. That was his last season as a player, and a couple of years later while scouting at the Polo Grounds, he just keeled over. He was dead, the doctors said, before he crumpled to the concrete.

The "code of pro football" probably contributed to his death. The code was the same as the "tradition" in boxing that a champion had a "right" to fight until he was knocked out. We were 60 minute players. We joked that we never left a game unless a bone was showing, but maybe that was an exaggeration; there were plenty of times another player and I helped a woozy teammate to the sidelines. A couple of times I was the one being helped.

It was more than pride. Players were paid by the game. A man too injured to play simply wasn't paid, and on payday he was "awarded his injuries."

The size of our pay brings gasps today in an era of multi-bucks contracts. The Tornadoes paid from 50 to 75 dollars per game. That was 75 for a win, 60 for a tie, and 50 for a loss. A few stars on other teams got a hundred dollars or more per game. Ernie Nevers was said to get $15,000 for the season. If so, he was worth every cent of it.

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Ernie was the fullback for the Chicago Cardinals, the same franchise that is now located in St. Louis. Except for Ernie, the Cardinals weren't a very good team, but he always made them dangerous. In one game against the Bears, he scored 40 points all by himself. When he was at Stanford, his coach, Pop Warner, called him the greatest player he'd ever seen, and, remember, Warner coached Jim Thorpe when he was at his best.

Nevers was a towheaded, 6', 200-pound triple threat. He was an excellent kicker and only Friedman was a better passer. But his greatest forte was that, when speeding across the field like an antelope, he could suddenly wheel and hit the line like a stampeded buffalo.

I had several cracks at him on a day when he could not have been at peak; before the game he'd received a telegram that his father had died.

One unforgettable play proved to me his magnificent power. He was rolling out to his right as if to throw a pass when he suddenly wheeled to hit the line. I was expecting it. He charged me. I charged him. By every count, the advantage was mine. I was lower; I could tackle; he had to protect the ball. We met head on. I've never collided with a runaway horse, but I know what it must feel like. We both went down, but the first thing that hit the ground was the back of my head. Though I tackled him, he threw ME for a two yard loss! Nevers beat us 22-0.

What a fullback!

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Most of the linemen in my day went around 200 pounds. We were just no match for a guy like Nevers, but we were the right size for the game we played then. Since we had to go 60 minutes on both offense and

defense, linemen had to be "square-riggers" – the "Hercules" type. We were all stocky, quick, and able to absorb terrific punishment.

The two-platoon system changed all that. It put a premium on big men who could use their weight to advantage in short spurts of playing. If some of those monsters on today's pro lines had to hang in there for offense, defense, punts,and kick-offs, they'd be carting them off the field before the half. It's a different game today.

As much as I hate to admit it, few of the linemen of the Twenties could make a pro roster today. We just weren't big enough. It's axiomatic that a good big man will beat a good little man every time, and the fellows I played with and against would have to give up 50 or 60 pounds per man to the behemoths of today. That's just too much weight to try to push around for an afternoon.

At a 50th Reunion, I told my conclusions to Tom Kerrigan, my teammate-tackle at both Columbia and Orange. Tom was one of the strongest men I ever knew, about 6'2" and 198. He went on from football to become a distinguished lawyer, famous for his terse observations.

"Tom," I said, "I've seen these new teams. They're four touchdowns better than we were."

Tom sniffed. "Four touchdowns – every quarter!"

"Today, Tom," I said, "they wouldn't offer us a uniform."

"And we'd be damn fools to accept if they did. Look at the weight lists!" The figures sustain him. Our old Orange line combined weighed about 1,400 pounds. Today's Washington Redskins can put a line of about 1,850 pounds in front of their fullback George Rogers – who is ALSO bigger than any man we had. Well, of course, you could stop Man-o-War if you were willing to throw yourself across his pounding knees. But you couldn't do it for 60 minutes. Maybe we would have lasted through the first quarter, but about that time there would be the clang of the ambulance bell and a paramedic asking about next of kin.

I remember when the super heavyweights entered the league.

A number of Catholic players bowed their heads in silent prayer and crossed themselves before a game, but there was this one guy on the Tornadoes who prayed aloud, supplicating the Virgin Mary as if the 20th Century Ltd. was about to run over him. It gave me the willies.

This ritual was preceded by his selection of a scapular, a picture of a saint which he hung around his neck. This was a most careful process to which he gave much serious thought. Naturally, it became a source of team banter; somebody would always ask him, "Hey, Andy, what saint are you starting today?"

We were playing the Spartans at Portsmouth, Ohio, and before the game Jack Depler, our coach, showed me their lineup. I whistled; their backfield alone had two 225-pounders.

I took the weight list over to Andy and interrupted his prayers. I asked him what saint he'd start against THAT lineup. His eyes widened as he ticked off their poundage. "Holy Smoke! I'll have to start the Twelve Apostles!"

It didn't help. We lost 12-0 – and we left four of our guys in the hospital.

Many of the few survivors of those bygone days are thrown into the quivering rage of old men at the mere suggestion that we, in our prime, weren't the equal of today's players. That's nonsense. Magically returned to our primes, nine-tenths of us – at least the linemen – wouldn’t be in the league.

On the other hand, where the weight differential is not so extreme, and where speed and agility are at a premium, the outstanding men of yore would still be outstanding. Maybe we linemen wouldn't stand a chance, but I believe you could win a Super Bowl with an average modern line and a backfield composed of Red Grange, Benny Friedman, Ernie Nevers, and Ken Strong.

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Was ever a football player better named than Ken Strong? Handsome as a Greek god, he was an All-American at N.Y.U. and played professionally with the Staten Island Stapletons and then for a long time with the New York Giants. According to many of his contemporaries, he was the best all-around back of his time.

Like Nevers, he was a power runner. I tackled him many times, and every one of them gave me a double-vision jolt. He could also pass while on the dead run, and he had a terrific arm.

But, above all, he was a kicker. Some of his punts were all but superhuman. He swung his magnificent leg like a lumber boom, yet with a curious beauty not unlike that of a ballerina. The ball soared and soared to the top of the biggest stadium, finally ending its arc in a perpendicular drop, spinning like a top. When we tried to block his punts, we crossed our arms over our faces; we had the feeling that if the ball hit our unprotected heads, it would explode our skulls.

Strong was a perfectionist. As he ran, he bitched at his interference, and he could yell like an Irish banshee, raging for a touchdown on every play. But after the game, he was the most pleasant and affable fellow you'd ever want to meet.

As great as he was, Strong never captured the public's imagination the way Grange did. Nevertheless, he had his loyal following. One day at Staten Island, Ray Flaherty of the Giants tackled him near the sideline and they both slid into the crowd ringing the field. Ken started to get up but found Flaherty holding him fast.

"Leggo!" yelled Strong, his face pressed in the dirt.

"I'll let go when you stop belting me!" hollered Flaherty.

It turned out that Flaherty was being smacked by a little old lady with an umbrella, outraged at what that mean New Yorker had done to her Ken.

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I started the 1931 season with the Dodgers, but it was really time to get on with my "life's work," as Pittsburgh Steeler coach Chuck Noll puts it. Pro football then offered no career. Many of us were in professional schools – six in law, two in medicine, one in dentistry. Nearly all did well. Two became jurists of distinction, one a surgeon of national reputation. I went into law and never regretted it.

But sometimes I still remember how it was when pro football was only a game. We played because we couldn't help it. It was "in our blood" – that surge of adrenalin under the incense of applause that infects addicts with an irresistible urge to sprint down a sparkling green playing field and knock their fellow man on his derriere.

Teams were much closer. There was a tremendous carry-over of blind loyalty from college days. In today's Darwinian economic world, our all-for-the-team training may be something of a mis-education. But we were brought up in this tradition and a decade later nearly all of my ex-teammates volunteered for World War II service. Twenty-eight former pro football players were killed in action.

Nothing so demonstrates how far pro football has come in the public consciousness than the recognition it rates from the White House. The winner of the Super Bowl receives a congratulatory, locker room call from the President. Can you imagine Piggy Simandl getting such a call?

When Red Grange was the toast of pro football, he was presented to President Coolidge at the White House. "Mr. President," said his proud Senatorial escort, "may I present Red Grange of the Chicago Bears."

"How do you do, Mr. Grange," said Coolidge. "I am delighted to meet you. I've always liked animal acts."