

CHARLIE TRIPPI: A SUCCESS STORY

By Bob Barnett & Bob Carroll

"I don't want people to accept me as a famous individual," Charlie Trippi says today. "I want them to accept me for what I do day to day. I never felt I was a celebrity. I don't want people to accept me as a good football player, but as a human being."

Still trim and handsome in his 65th year, he confines his athletics to "playing in a lot of golf tournaments" now, but there was a time -- a decade, in fact -- when he was arguably the best football player in the country and certainly the most famous in the South. When Herschel Walker won his Heisman Trophy a few years ago, legions of older Georgia fans insisted the youngster still had a way to go to match Trippi. They have long memories in Georgia.

They called him "Georgia's Golden Boy," despite the fact that he had curly, black hair and the darkly handsome features of an Italian movie star. Nor was he a native Georgian. "The Scintillating Sicilian" was more descriptively accurate.

Charlie grew up the son of an Italian immigrant grocer in the little mining town of Pittston, PA, just south of Scranton. Joseph Trippi, his father, frowned on football; "That's not for my Charlie!" he insisted.

"I used to have to sneak out for football practice," Charlie says. Eventually, as his son's reputation grew, Joseph became less opposed, but he only attended two games during Charlie's long career.

Young Trippi had his heart set on playing for Fordham University, a major football power in the 1930's. But when he applied, he was turned down flat. Fordham Coach Jim Crowley, one of Notre Dame's famed "Four Horsemen," figured the scrawny 160- pounder was too light for big-time football.

"A man named Harold 'War Eagle' Ketron, a former football player and alumnus at Georgia, took an interest in me," Trippi recalls, explaining how a Pennsylvania boy ended up scoring touchdowns down South. "He managed the Coca Cola plant near where I lived. The inducement was that if I went to Georgia I would have a job driving a Coca Cola truck during the summer. I got to Georgia in 1941."

After a year of freshman football and a 20-pound weight gain, Charlie made the varsity as a sophomore. At the time, he was only second banana to the Bulldog's big gun, All-America Frankie Sinkwich, another native Pennsylvanian and a clever triple-threat. Rather than rivals, Trippi and Sinkwich became friends. Georgia won ten of eleven games and was ranked second nationally. At the end of the season, the 'Dogs were invited to play in the Rose Bowl against U.C.L.A.

"My biggest thrill was when I got the opportunity to play in the Rose Bowl," Trippi says. "That was, of course, the biggest thrill anybody could ever have in collegiate football. That's real! When you run on the field and see 100,000 people screaming and hollering, the adrenalin works."

What the modest Trippi doesn't say is that Georgia came into the game with Sinkwich limping on two sprained ankles. Charlie took over, gaining more yards than the entire U.C.L.A. backfield, but the game was still scoreless into the fourth quarter. Then, after Georgia intercepted a pass, a Trippi run put the ball at the Uclan one-yard-line. Into the game came the injured Sinkwich for one play to punch over the touchdown. A safety near the end made the final score 9-0, Georgia. Charlie was voted the game MVP.

By the next football season, Charlie was serving in the Third Air Force, but he was able to keep his hand in playing service ball, a rugged amalgam of college and professional stars. Trippi's Third Air Force team was "ranked pretty high," he remembers, neglecting to mention he was named to the 1944 All- Service team.

He also was able to set an odd record for playing in the College All-Star Game. From 1934 through 1976, this extravaganza kicked off every grid season by pitting the pro champs of the previous season against a team made up of the top college seniors of the year before. The rules were relaxed during World War II to allow undergraduates in the service to play. As a result, Trippi played in four games as a

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 11, No. 1 (1989)

"collegian:" 1943, 1944, 1945, and 1947. He was named the MVP of the '45 game. Dick Barwegan, a rugged guard of the period, also played in four games, but Trippi added a fifth when his pro team, the Cardinals, played in 1948.

When Charlie returned to Georgia in 1945, "everything was a little bit different. The calibre of the athlete picked up dramatically." Not only were former college stars like Trippi returning to complete their eligibility, but also many young men who would have started school during the war years were now entering two and three years more mature. The 1946 college football season undoubtedly had more quality players than any season before.

Things had changed in Georgia, too. While Trippi was in the service, Coach Wally Butts had scrapped his single-wing offense and installed the T-formation. Trippi was placed at left halfback, the key running position. He also handled much of the passing and punting and played safety on defense.

Led by Trippi, their "one-man gang" (as news reports often called him) Georgia had its first undefeated season. Only Alabama held them to a margin of two touchdowns in ten games. Trippi's best day came against traditional rival Georgia Tech when he gained 544 yards running, passing, and returning kicks and scored three touchdowns.

In the Sugar Bowl The Dogs topped North Carolina, 20-10, with a Trippi TD pass putting them ahead to stay. Although they were ranked third nationally, many, including Trippi, figured they deserved better.

"We didn't have the national exposure in the South," Trippi recalls. "Now there is an opportunity for people to see them play by way of television; there is a different opinion of southern football. When I was playing, all the exposure was on Notre Dame, Army, and Navy. The New York papers blew them up. All the southern teams were lucky to get two inches of type telling who won the game. I was well known, but as a team we didn't get the national exposure we deserved."

The Heisman Trophy that year went to Army's Glenn Davis, but Trippi was awarded both the Maxwell and the Walter Camp Trophies. He was easily the best college football player available to pro football in 1947. However, there were two question marks.

The first was whether Charlie would ultimately settle on a pro football or baseball career. He'd been an All-America college shortstop at Georgia, and he thought about playing both sports. In the summer of '47 until it was time to report for his fourth College All-Star Game, he played for the Atlanta team of the Southern Association (Class AA) and hit .334, but "I found out that doing both sports was too hard. I felt tired in the middle of the football season and didn't have the energy I should have. I decided on football."

But with what team? That was the second question. The National Football League was embroiled in a "war" with the year-old All-America Football Conference. Both leagues wanted Trippi. The AAFC's New York Yankees, one of that league's strongest franchises, chose Charlie on the first round in a draft held right after the '46 season and before the bowl games. The Chicago Cardinals, traditional losers in the NFL, had drafted Charlie clear back in 1945, when his original Georgia class graduated. Despite the Cardinals' headstart, most observers expected Trippi to end up in New York.

At a dinner celebrating Georgia's Sugar Bowl win, Charlie looked up to find he was being "shadowed" by Dan Topping the Yankees' owner and Phil Handler, an assistant coach with the Cardinals. Charlie turned to his wife: "Let's go home, Honey, so they can go home."

When a Yankee representative telephoned Trippi a few days later, Charlie handed the phone to his lawyer, who then got an earful of the advantages of playing in New York. What Charlie hadn't explained was that his lawyer was Charles Bidwill, the owner of the NFL Chicago Cardinals.

Trippi says today, "I signed with the NFL because I needed the money." But the fact is that his three-year \$100,000 contract was less than the offer from the AAFC Yankees. Bidwill's Cardinals had been badly hurt in the "war" with the AAFC, but Trippi gave them a sure-fire box office attraction.

Bidwill couldn't resist twitting his rivals. At his urging, Trippi announced he was heading for New York to discuss his future. That made headlines in the Big Apple, but on the day the Yankees made preparation to welcome Charlie to the fold, he was in Chicago signing his Cardinal contract.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 11, No. 1 (1989)

As the Cards' Vice President handed Trippi a pen, Bidwill asked, "Aren't you going to have your lawyer look at the contract?"

"You are my lawyer," Charlie said.

"I'll have to have a retainer," Bidwill shot back.

Trippi was the capstone of what was quickly labeled the Cardinals' "Dream Backfield." Quarterback Paul Christman, halfback Marshall Goldberg, and fullback Pat Harder had all been All-Americans and were also established pro stars. The dream remained intact when Goldberg became a defensive specialist and was replaced by Elmer Angsman, another outstanding runner.

Tragically, Bidwill never got to see his creation in action. He died in April of '47, only a few months after signing Trippi. But his "Dream Backfield" brought a championship to Chicago. The Cardinals won the NFL Western Division and defeated the Philadelphia Eagles, 28-21, in the 1947 Championship Game on a frozen field at Comiskey Park. Trippi scored one touchdown a 44-yard run from scrimmage and another on a 75-yard punt return.

In 1948, with Charlie earning All-Pro honors, the Cardinals lost only one game during the season, that to the Bears. On the last day of the regular season, they knocked off the Bears to again win the Western Division. The Championship Game, a rematch with the Eagles, was held in Philadelphia during one of the worst snowstorms the city had ever seen.

"I'll never understand why the Commissioner let the game go on," Charlie says. "It was an injustice to both teams to work so hard all season and then play under those conditions. We couldn't see the chalk marks on the field, so the referees improvised the game as we went along. It just wasn't a championship caliber game."

In the fourth quarter, the Eagles recovered a Cardinal fumble near the goal line and managed to slam over the only score of the game. "The Eagles were an extremely good football team," Charlie admits, but he'll always wish his Cardinals had been able to play them under normal conditions.

His first two seasons were the high points of Trippi's pro career. He remained a great player, but age and injuries destroyed the team around him. By the 1950's the Cards were back to their traditional role of chronic losers.

Trippi did what he could. He was the team's best runner, but he could also pass. In 1951, the Cardinals needed a quarterback. Charlie had never played that position, but the team was desperate. Often the Cardinals simply put him back as a shotgun tailback and let him be their whole offense.

In his quarterback role, Trippi would win no more All-Pro honors, but Hall of Fame tackle George Connor, who played for the Bears at the time, recalls: "He was at his best when all the other Big Names were gone and he was standing back there all by himself. Charlie had tremendous courage and a lot of dignity. He never felt sorry for himself, the way some backs do when they aren't getting a lot of help."

"It didn't make any difference to me as long as I helped the team," Charlie insists. "Of course, I liked running the ball best. I really wasn't a good quarterback. I didn't have the background in the techniques it takes to be a good quarterback."

All he had was natural talent and a load of toughness. One day Bears defensive end Ed Sprinkle, once called 'The Meanest Man in Football,' jumped offside and came at him. "The whistle blew but he just kept coming. I had the ball in my hand so I just threw it and hit him square in the face."

Trippi didn't back off from anyone. After a game with the Eagles, he and legendary tough guy 'Bucko' Kilroy got into a fight in a tunnel under Comiskey Park. Kilroy outweighed him by 80 pounds, but "I got so mad I took off my helmet and started beating him with it."

But his personal victories were small consolation for the beatings the Cards took year in and year out. They never had enough Trippi's. When they finally got a real quarterback, they needed him on defense. Nevertheless, for all his moving around, when he retired as a player after the 1955 season, he held 15 different Cardinal records.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 11, No. 1 (1989)

"It wasn't difficult to retire," he says. "I was fortunate to play so long, and I was ready to make the transition to something else. I was still involved in coaching, so it wasn't a complete exodus." He coached for ten years, two with the Cardinals, three as backfield coach at Georgia, and then three more back with the Cards, by then relocated in St. Louis.

"Then I got out of it. I got involved in real estate in 1948 in Athens (GA). I develop commercial properties and lease them." Trippi has done extremely well. He no longer `needs the money.' "It's been very good to me," he says.

In 1968, Charlie was named to both the National Football College Hall of Fame and to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. His wife Virginia, with whom he had three children, passed away in 1971. In 1977, he remarried and now resides in Athens. "I'm semi-retired now. I'm doing what I want to do rather than what I'm compelled to do.

"My life after sports has been very enjoyable," he says. "I've adjusted. I enjoyed competing in business just as I did in football. I compete hard, and people respect you for that."

CHARLIE TRIPPI - Charles Louis HB-QB-DB

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Georgia 1941-42, 45-46

Born 12/14/1922 Pittston, PA

YEAR	TEAM	LG	GM	RUSHING				RECEIVING			
				ATT	YDS	AVG	TD	PC	YDS	AVG	TD
1947	ChiC	N	11	83	401	4.8	2	23	240	10.4	0
1948	ChiC	N	12	128	690	*5.4	6	22	228	10.4	2
1949	ChiC	N	12	112	553	4.9	2	34	412	12.1	6
1950	ChiC	N	12	99	426	4.3	3	32	270	8.4	1
1951	ChiC	N	12	78	501	6.4	4	-	-	-	-
1952	ChiC	N	12	72	350	4.9	4	5	66	13.2	0
1953	ChiC	N	12	97	433	4.5	0	11	87	7.9	2
1954	ChiC	N	12	18	152	8.4	1	3	18	6.0	0
1955	ChiC	N	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
9 years			100	687	3506	5.1	22	130	1321	10.2	11

YEAR	TEAM	L	PASSING				TD	TD%	IN	IN%	RATE	
			ATT	COM	PCT.	YARD						
1947	ChiC	N	2	1	50.0	49	24.50	0	0.0	1	50.0	0.0
1948	ChiC	N	8	4	50.0	118	14.75	1	12.5	0	0.0	146.9
1949	ChiC	N	2	0	0.0	0	0.00	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
1950	ChiC	N	3	1	33.3	19	0.00	0	0.0	0	0.0	56.3
1951	ChiC	N	191	88	46.1	1191	6.24	8	4.2	13	6.8	52.1
1952	ChiC	N	181	84	46.4	890	4.92	5	2.8	13	7.2	40.5
1953	ChiC	N	34	20	58.8	195	5.74	2	5.9	1	2.9	82.4
1954	ChiC	N	13	7	53.8	85	6.54	0	0.0	3	23.1	0.0
1955	ChiC	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
9 years			434	205	47.2	2547	5.87	16	3.7	31	7.1	48.4

YEAR	TEAM	L	PUNT RETURNS				KO RETURNS				PUNTING		SCO
			NO	YDS	AVG	T	NO	YDS	AVG	T	NO	AVG	
1947	ChiC	N	8	141	17.6	0	15	321	21.4	0	-	-	18
1948	ChiC	N	11	213	19.4	2	16	354	22.1	0	13	43.4	60
1949	ChiC	N	10	160	16.0	0	18	427	23.7	0	8	36.5	54
1950	ChiC	N	7	54	7.7	0	8	139	17.4	0	2	47.0	24
1951	ChiC	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	12	37.2	24
1952	ChiC	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	16	36.8	24
1953	ChiC	N	21	239	11.4	0	8	199	24.9	0	54	42.9	12
1954	ChiC	N	6	57	9.5	0	1	17	17.0	0	59	39.1	6
1955	ChiC	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	32	40.7	0
9 years			63	864	13.7	2	66	1457	22.1	0	196	40.4	222

* - Led NFL

Intercepted one pass for 59 yards (TD) in 1947, and three passes for 34 yards in 1954.