

'I Played With Jim Thorpe' Football Memories of Guy T. 'Zeke' Roberts (1900-1993)

By Mel Bashore

In midsummer 1993, I was saddened to receive a letter from the son of Guy T. "Zeke" Roberts, informing me of his father's passing. Guy and I had cultivated a friendship through correspondence, beginning with my letter to him in early 1990 asking for his autograph. (He recalled that only once before had someone written to him requesting his autograph – and that was back in 1973! He still had the letter.)

He was initially hesitant and curious about how I had obtained his address in Los Altos, California. However, after I reassured him about my intentions, he graciously shared his memories of playing pro football in the 1920s in a half-dozen letters written to me over the course of a year.

At first I addressed my letters to him as "Mr. Roberts," but he insisted that I call him "Guy." As he explained, he "never felt important enough to be introduced as 'Mr.'" This was standard, vintage Guy Roberts – a humble and self-effacing prince of a man. As his son Tom wrote to me, Guy was "true to form" to the end, wanting "no announcement or fuss made" at his death. At his request, he was cremated and his ashes scattered at sea.

Guy played his college football at Iowa State. He played for three pro teams over the course of two years. In 1926 he played with the Canton Bulldogs in the NFL and the Cleveland Panthers in the AFL. He played the following season with the Pottsville Maroons.

Excerpts from some of his letters to me best tell his story, his memories and experiences:

"I was living in Los Angeles in 1926. In that summer I received word from Pottsville regarding playing with the Maroons. I was surprised that I was contacted but thought it would be fun. On the way East, via a stripped down Model T Ford, I stopped in Cleveland to see a lady friend – later to be my wife. While in Cleveland, I met with the manager of the Panthers as they were just getting organized. They offered me more money (\$150) than I was to get from Pottsville and I accepted.

"Cleveland's first game was with the New York Yankees – Red Grange, No. 77, the Galloping Ghost. Cleveland won 7 to 0. I did not get in that game. The game did draw well but the fans were Ohio State oriented and the attendance at the Panther games gradually decreased. Consequently, after a few games, we came in for practice one afternoon and our lockers were empty.

"Assuming that the show was over for me, I decided to return to California. Again, to my surprise, I got a telephone call from Canton and I gladly accepted their offer. That is how I happened to play with both teams in 1926 ...

"After the 1926 season I returned to Los Angeles. Rather early in 1927, my fiance in Cleveland and I decided to get married. The date was set for October 1, 1927. I arrived there 2 or 3 days before that date and, again to my surprise, there was a telegram waiting for me from Pottsville, to meet them in Chicago. (I never knew how they got my address in Cleveland for sending me the telegram.) Without explanation I wired Pottsville that I couldn't meet them in Chicago but would do so in Pottsville. That I did! (Should have said we.) Physically I had worked rather hard all summer but not the kind to get in shape for football. It took considerable extra practice to get in condition ...

"We used to practice twice daily, except Mondays after a game on Sunday. The practices always included both physical exercises and running play patterns. As for traveling, that was nearly all by train, rather slow but provided time for a little card-playing. Some travel was by bus and was not the most comfortable. Just a matter of getting from one point to another.

Rest days? One stretch at Pottsville we played 4 games in 8 days – Sunday, Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday. (Note: Roberts received \$100 per game.) Usually though it was a game each Sunday, with the following Monday as a rest day.

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“Some of these recollections bring to mind a game we, Pottsville, played against the Providence Steam Roller, in Providence ... While staying at the hotel that night in Providence, Gus Sonnenberg came to our rooms to visit with some of the players that he knew. Before too long a friendly brawl got started, furniture was wrecked and I'm sure it was Sonnenberg who threw a chair through the hotel window.”

Roberts cherished his memories of having been a teammate of Jim Thorpe on the '26 Canton Bulldogs. In fact, he sent me a copy of a portrait sketch that he had drawn of Thorpe. About Thorpe, Roberts wrote:

“He always seemed to me to be a rather quiet self-contained individual but temperamental at times. I recall an incident during a game we had at Pittsburgh against the Hope-Harveys team. We had the ball. Jim was playing right end, I was in the backfield. Jim came back before any signals were called and said 'Let me carry the ball.' I simply changed positions with him and he went into a short punt formation. He took a direct snap back from the center and ran like a wild horse at their defensive end. Jim ran over him like a bowling ball. I learned later that the defensive end had made some kind of a remark that Jim didn't like and (Thorpe) wanted to get even.

“Among other minor items, I remember standing in the end zone doing practice punting. I could not punt the ball as far as Jim did but tried to tell myself that maybe there were times when I placed my kicks better. No doubt it was just wishful thinking.”

In responding to a question about the protective equipment worn, Roberts remarked: “I can remember seeing Jim Thorpe at Chicago against the Bears stuffing some kind of rigid material under his sweater to protect his ribs.”

Another of his favorite teammates was Wilbur “Fats” Henry: “Mr. Wilbur Henry was ‘Pete’ Henry to me. He had about as nice a personality as anyone could have. Although we played together at Canton in '26, I never got to know him until we were together at Pottsville in '27. Each of us had gotten married just before going to Pottsville – Pete just 2 weeks ahead of me, and we wound up sharing an apartment. Never a dull moment ... For his size and build Pete was more agile than one would suspect. As a defensive lineman it seemed that he could smell the play that was coming. On the offense Pete was a good dropkicker – a forgotten play in today's game.”

He also wrote of an encounter that he had in a 1927 game with Hall of Famer Cal Hubbard: “We, the Maroons, were playing the N.Y. Giants in the Polo Grounds in New York. Things had not gone well with us. Our first string center was taken out with a leg injury and soon after that our substitute center was carried off. I don't know whether Frankie Racis had had any previous experience or not at the center position but he was moved over from his tackle (position). We had to resort to a punt and I went back to do the kicking. Frankie snapped the ball clear over my head and naturally I scrambled back to get it. By the time I recovered the ball and was about to go somewhere with it I got clobbered by the biggest person I'd ever seen. It was Cal Hubbard, the Giants' tackle ... as for Frankie Racis, he was a rugged coal miner and an exceptionally good tackle.”

Another player who made a lasting impression on Roberts was Al Nesser, “a rough-and-tumble linebacker. On every defensive play his purpose seemed to be to try and take the ball carrier apart. I don't remember that Al ever bothered to wear a head gear. I don't know whether it bothered his hearing, vision or was just too hot. Anyway he didn't seem to need one.”

I was interested in the use of false names by college football players who wanted to pick up some spending money by playing on weekends for pro teams. I asked him about this and he responded with some firsthand information:

“I will admit to using a false name only once. Following our final game of the 1924 season, in school, 2 or 3 of us were asked to play a post season game for which we would be paid. That was a heinous crime! But as that game progressed we found that some of our opponents were from Iowa U. doing the same thing – getting a little hamburger money. At that time my only concern was that I still had one year of eligibility in basketball and was fearful of being caught.” (Roberts played four years at Iowa State, but did not graduate.)

I asked him about racism against black players in football and he said he “was never able to understand the adversity to the blacks.” At that time, Iowa State had a fine black tackle on its team – Jack Trice. Roberts wrote about the way Trice was treated on road trips with the football team: “I was puzzled when

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Jack had his meals served to him alone in the hotel room. Jack was not only a fine athlete and gentleman but was a brilliant student as well."

Trice met a tragic end on the football field. Roberts wrote: "One of the very dark moments during my football days occurred while still at Iowa State in the fall of 1923. We were playing the U. of Minnesota in Minneapolis. One of our tackles, Jack Trice, was black. There were rather few black players in those days, at least in our part of the country. It was one of Jack's first major college games. He was a terrific player and in my estimation could have made any college team. He was also as much a gentleman as he was a player. I can't believe that it was intentional but to contain Trice during the game, I think the Minnesota linemen had to gang up on him and he was severely injured. Jack died the next day. Some years later when Iowa State built a new stadium they honored him by naming it 'Jack Trice Field.'"

Although I didn't get to "meet" Guy Roberts through our correspondence until he was ninety years old, he was ever gracious in encouraging me to write to him. He enjoyed reviving old memories and veering "off down memory lane" – as did I. In one of his letters to me, Roberts wrote of Jim Thorpe and Ernie Nevers that "it pleases me just to have known them." I feel the same way about Guy Roberts – it pleases me just to have known him.