

LYNN CHANDNOIS: The Steeler 'Money' Back of the 1950s

By Jim Sargent

Lynn Chandnois may be remembered today mainly by longtime pro football fans. But a look at his career and his stats illustrates that for a few years he was regarded as one of the National Football League's top halfbacks.

Jerry Nuzum, a standout halfback and defensive back for the Steelers during 1948-1951, commented on Chandnois greatness for Jim O'Brien of the Pittsburgh Press at a 1979 old-timers reunion.

"Lynn had everything: size, speed, and shiftiness," Nuzum pointed out. "But Walt Kiesling was our coach, and he didn't know how to deal with players. Those coaches today do a lot of teaching. We were expected to know how to play."

What is Chandnois' story?

After his parents died, Lynn, who was born on February 24, 1925, in Michigan's upper peninsula, moved to Flint to live with an aunt and go to school. He was a talented natural athlete who loved competing in all sports.

At Flint Central High he earned All-State honors in both basketball and football. But after graduating in 1944, he joined the Naval Air Corps and served for two years.

Standing 6'2" and weighing 195 pounds when he entered Michigan State in 1946, the 21-year-old freshman started at forward and won the varsity "S" for basketball. But after one season he got married and concentrated on football. One year later Lynn and Mary, living in a campus apartment, had their first daughter, Lynda, and Suzanne came a few years later.

A Physical Education major, Chandnois became the right halfback for four years, the last three under Coach "Biggie" Munn. In 1947 Munn's team switched to a complex multiple offense, which included the T-formation, and Chandnois usually played the blocking back.

The fastest man on the team, Chandnois could run the 100 yards in uniform in 10 seconds. Often he ran the quick reverse, plus he returned kickoffs and punts. A bruising straight-ahead runner, "Chad" was most dangerous in the open field, where he had an instinctive sense of when to cut, shift speeds, and sprint.

Although Chandnois prefers not to talk about his achievements, his name still graces Michigan State's record book. For example, from 1946 through 1949 Chad averaged 6.52 yards per carry, which ranks second all-time for State. His 1948 average of 7.48 yards per carry tops the all-time single season records, while his 1949 mark of 6.86 yards ranks third.

A "money" player, Chandnois often performed best in clutch situations. His Spartan highlights include:

- * career all-purpose yardage, 3,205, ranks 8th
- * career touchdowns, 31, ranks 3rd
- * career points, 186, ranks 6th
- * career pass interceptions, 20, ranks 1st
- * career pass interception yardage, 384, ranks 1st * Governor's Award as MSC's Most Valuable Player in 1948
- * All-American in 1949
- * State of Michigan's Outstanding Amateur Athlete in 1950

Following his senior season, Chandnois starred in the East- West Shrine game, on New Year's Day, 1950, at San Francisco's Kezar Stadium. Playing for the East squad, which won, 28-6, Chandnois gained 44

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 17, No. 2 (1995)

yards in 6 carries, caught 5 passes for 116 yards, and scored two touchdowns -- after playing the first quarter as a defensive back.

While Eddie LeBaron, the 5'8" quarterback from College of the Pacific, was voted game MVP, Notre Dame Coach Frank Leahy told reporters, "Chandnois was easily the most outstanding player on the field."

Chandnois had already signed to play for the Cleveland Browns of the All-American Football Conference, but the AAFC merged with the NFL in December, 1949. The merger came after Chandnois signed with Cleveland -- one of three AAFC franchises to join the NFL. Commissioner Bert Bell supervised the reorganized NFL's draft, and Pittsburgh took Chandnois first.

"Art Rooney and Bert Bell were buddy-buddy," Chandnois recalled, "and they told me I had to go with Pittsburgh. We didn't have any lawyers or anything like that. So I said, 'If I have to go to Pittsburgh, I want a bonus.'

"They said, 'We just paid to the Cleveland Browns the bonust they paid you.'

"I don't care, I said. 'I want an additional bonus. So they said, 'O.K.,' and I got a bonus, and that's how I ended up with Pittsburgh."

Chandnois made the adjustment, and today he has mostly fond memories of his years with the Steelers.

While he had a good rookie season, Chad was sometimes slowed by injuries, including a twisted knee and a fractured rib cartilage. Pittsburgh, coached by John Michelosen, was the only NFL club still using the single wing offense. But the air attack, paced by triple-threat tailback Joe Geri, a 36 percent passer in 1950, sputtered. The Steelers scored 180 points, lowest in the NFL.

Pittsburgh finished with a 6-6 record, and Chandnois placed third among Steelers in rushing, but he didn't score a touchdown.

Still, he excelled on kickoff returns, where his great broken-field running allowed him to elude defenders. He topped the Steelers, returning 12 kicks for 351 yards, a 29.25 yard average. "Vitamin" Smith of the Rams led the NFL with a 33.7 average, amassing 742 yards, and Chandnois placed third.

In 1951 Chandnois, despite a broken toe, became a mainstay in the Steeler backfield. While Coach Michelosen kept the single wing, the rugged defense held opponents to two TDs or less six times. Tough defenders characterized the team, including linemen such as Ernie Stautner and Bill McPeak, and backs such as Jack Butler and Jerry Shipkey.

Pittsburgh only managed four wins (4-7-1), finishing fourth in the six team American Conference.

A total of 26 interceptions hurt Pittsburgh. Chandnois, for example, completed 16 of 43 passes, throwing two for touchdowns, but he had four picked off. But he placed second on the team in rushing, with 332 yards and grabbed 29 passes, good for 490 yards and 5 touchdowns. In kickoff runbacks, Chandnois led the NFL: he returned 12 kicks for 390 yards, a league-leading average of 32.5 yards.

Pittsburgh's up-and-down 1951 season is best illustrated by a tough loss to the Green Bay Packers on October 7. With three minutes gone in the second quarter, quarterback Tobin Rote plunged one yard for the fourth Packer TD and a 28-0 lead.

Inspired by Chandnois, Pittsburgh caught fire on the damp, chilly day. Chad scored twice within four minutes, first on a touchdown reception covering 34 yards, and again on a two-yard end sweep, which cut the deficit to 28-14. End Charlie Mehelich tackled Green Bay's Jack Cloud for a safety, and Rogel plowed two yards to score, just before halftime.

Early in the third quarter, Pittsburgh moved ahead, 30-28, as halfback Jim Finks returned an interception 50 yards to pay dirt. Minutes later Joe Geri's field goal upped the lead to 33-28.

At that point Pittsburgh had made the greatest comeback in NFL history. The rally was not surpassed until 1980, when San Francisco overcame a 28-point deficit to beat New Orleans in overtime, 38-35.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 17, No. 2 (1995)

But in Milwaukee, with less than five minutes in the game, Tobin Rote drove the Packers to the end zone. He capped a three-pass drive by throwing to end Bob Mann for a 16-yard touchdown, and Green Bay won, 35-33.

The 1952 season looked promising, however, when Art Rooney installed a new head coach, Joe Bach, who had coached the Steelers in 1935-1936. Bach switched to the T-formation and installed Jim Finks as quarterback. While the new system generated more offense and fan excitement, Pittsburgh's record improved only to 5-7, which topped the Cardinals and the Redskins (both 4-8).

Still, Chandnois performed so brilliantly in 1952 that, in addition to being named All-Pro, he became the second Steeler to be voted NFL Player of the Year by the Washington Touchdown Club. Triple-threat halfback Bill Dudley had won the award in 1946.

Chandnois rushed for 298 yards, second on the club. He placed third in pass reception yardage, catching 28 for 370 yards and two touchdowns. In kickoff returns Chad again paced the NFL, gaining 599 yards on 17 runs, a fine 35.2 yard average -- still the greatest single-season average in franchise history. He ran back two kickoffs for touchdowns, the only Steeler ever to accomplish that in one season.

One kickoff Chandnois returned twice for a touchdown. On November 30 at Forbes Field against the New York Giants, Chad, despite falling snow and frigid temperatures, ran back Ray Poole's opening kick to the end zone. But an offside violation nullified the score. After a five-yard penalty, Chandnois returned the second kick 91 yards for a touchdown.

The inspired Steelers turned the game into a rout, winning 62-7. It was the most points scored by a Pittsburgh eleven to date, and the worst defeat suffered by the Giants. The home club's nine touchdowns included a five-yard sweep of left end by Chad for the second TD. Back-up quarterback Tom Landry ran a trick pass play which led to New York's TD, but the Giants netted only 15 yards rushing.

Said Art Rooney, also owner of the Shamrock Stables, about the scoring return by Chandnois: "If my horses could go that fast I'd be a wealthy man!"

Walt Kiesling, the assistant coach since 1949, wasn't overly impressed by Chandnois, double-touchdown effort.

Chandnois: "Art Rooney always used to have a story. He said, 'Lynn, I know Walt Kiesling didn't like you,' and I told Art that was O.K. because I didn't like Kiesling either. See, I was the Steelers' representative to the NFL Pension Plan. I used to give Walt a bad time. I would say, 'We want this, and we want that.'

"But Art's story was about the game against the New York Giants in 1952. I took the opening kickoff back for a touchdown. But one of our guys was offside, so the play was called back. They kicked it again, and I ran it back again for a touchdown.

"Walt Kiesling told Art Rooney after the game, 'Isn't Chandnois the luckiest guy you ever saw in your life?'

"That was one of Art Rooney's favorite stories about me."

Chandnois, other touchdown runback covered 93 yards -- then a new team record -- against the Philadelphia Eagles at Shibe Park on October 12, 1952. He made the run in the second quarter, cutting the Eagles, lead to 10-7. Film highlights show a dazzling play: the long-legged Chad caught Chuck Bednarik's kick on the 7-yard line, angled right, then left. Behind good blocking, he turned up the speed near the 30, cut right near the 45, and sprinted past the remaining Eagles into the right corner of the end zone.

Jim Finks threw two touchdown passes, giving his club a 21-13 lead midway through the last quarter. At that point reserve quarterback Fred Enke connected with end Harry "Bud" Grant for a 17-yard score, reducing the Eagle deficit to 21-20. Although the Steeler defense twice stopped long drives, Bob Walston kicked two field goals for a 26-21 Eagle victory.

Chandnois produced another fine season in 1953, but the Steelers finished fourth with a 6-6 record. The break-even point came with wins in the last two games, 21-17 over the Cardinals and 14-13 over the Redskins. Once more the Steeler defense proved more consistent than the offense. Chandnois tied Fran

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 17, No. 2 (1995)

Rogel for club rushing honors with a 3.8 yard average. He gained 470 yards and scored three touchdowns. He also hauled in 42 passes for 412 yards, but none went for Tds.

On kickoff returns, Chandnois amassed his greatest yardage, totaling 610 on 21 returns for a 29 yard average, which ranked first in the Eastern Conference and second overall. Joe Arenas of San Francisco led the NFL, returning 16 kicks 551 yards, a 34.4 average.

Chandnois scored on a return for the third time in his career to help Pittsburgh topple the Giants, 24-14, on October 3, 1953. New York scored at 3:22 of the first period when Charley Conerly tossed to Randy Clay for a 2-yard touchdown.

Chandnois evened the score, reported the New York Times, with a brilliant 93-yard return of the ensuing kickoff. Early in the fourth quarter, a Finks-to-Nickel 7-yarder gave Pittsburgh enough points to win.

But stats do not measure the value of Chandnois to the Steelers, because numbers cannot show big plays. As Pittsburgh sportswriter Pat Livingston observed in 1953, "It's in the clutch that the long-legged, 205-pound Chandnois is most likely to come through.

"In the matter of kickoff returns," Livingston wrote, "Chandnois has no peer." Chad finished second as a rookie, led the NFL in his second and third seasons, and during four years averaged 30 yards while the average NFL return was 22 yards.

Livingston reiterated Chandnois, value in 1954, comparing him to former Steeler legend Bill Dudley and Steve Van Buren, the Eagle great. In combined yardage, whether by rushing, returns, receiving, passing, or interceptions, Van Buren totaled 9,651 yards in eight years; Dudley, 8,849 yards in eight 1/2 years; and Chandnois, 5,268 yards in four seasons.

For a yearly average, however, Chandnois had gained 1,317, Van Buren 1,206, and Dudley 1,054. Van Buren was selected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1965, and Dudley in 1966.

Although Chandnois was Canton-bound by 1954, he never completed as many fine seasons as most Hall of Famers. He performed brilliantly during his first four seasons, but injuries hindered him thereafter.

Coach Joe Bach resigned due to health reasons after the 1953 season, and Rooney promoted Walt Kiesling to head coach, a job Walt had filled during 1939-1940 and 1941-1944. But Kiesling never did gain the rapport with players Bach had enjoyed.

In 1954, however, Pittsburgh got off to a great 4-1 start, highlighted by a 55-27 drubbing of Cleveland. While the tough defense, led by Ernie Stautner, Dale Dodrill, and Jack Butler, played aggressively all season, the offense faltered, and the Steelers ended in fourth place with a 5-7 ledger.

Problems began during training camp when Kiesling, who evidently saw Chandnois as fun-loving and temperamental, began platooning him with Notre Dame All-American Johnny Lattner, Pittsburgh's top draft pick, at right half. The demotion upset Chandnois, who believed Lattner should have to win the job.

While Chad later won his starting job, he suffered broken ribs at mid-season in a 30-6 loss to the Giants. Ironically, it was covering Lattner's fumble which led to the injury.

"The Giants were going to punt to us," Chandnois recalls, "and Johnny Lattner and I were back on the 5-yard line. They punted, and I hollered, 'Let it go, let it go.' He tried to fair-catch it, but fumbled, and the ball bounced into the end zone. I fell on the ball, and Bill Austin and some other Giants came in and fell on me, jumped on me, really, and broke my ribs. I was out for two-three games."

By then, however, the Steelers were disorganized. Among other results, the offensive blocking suffered. The club's only other victory came in a 17-14 squeaker over the Cardinals. The 1954 season is one reason Chandnois says that the Steelers had "great personnel but lousy coaching."

Chandnois carried the ball only 45 times from scrimmage. He returned 13 kickoffs for 256 yards, an average of 19.6, well below his usual standard. The rookie Lattner led the team in kickoff runbacks with 16 for 413 yards, a 25.8 mark -- less than Chad's average during his first four years.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 17, No. 2 (1995)

A tougher Chandnois came back strong in 1955, determined to improve upon his worst season. By late August he was working hard and running well in training camp and exhibition games.

Kiesling was impressed. "That boy really turns it on when he wants to," the coach told reporters. "I don't know what was biting him a year ago, but he has certainly shown me a lot of football this year."

Kiesling, with Ted Marchibroda backing up Jim Finks, had some rookie quarterbacks in training camp, including Vic Eaton of Missouri and John Unitas, of Louisville. Evidently Kiesling's mind was made up, as Unitas was cut without even playing in an exhibition game.

But Pittsburgh's offense struggled all year, scoring 195 points, the NFL's lowest total. The Steelers scored more than 20 points in only three games. Finks threw 26 interceptions, second high to Y.A. Tittle of San Francisco.

Frank Varrichione, a Steeler rookie in 1955 who became an All-Pro tackle, explained how "old-school" coaching hurt Pittsburgh. Walt Kiesling believed in hard work and good conditioning, including two-hour daily scrimmages for the two months of training camp. In those years NFL teams played six exhibition games and 12 regular season games.

Pittsburgh would be in great shape when the season began, and usually started strong. "But by the time cool weather came, we were worn down," Varrichione recollected. "We left our game on the practice field."

The Steelers finished last in the Eastern Conference with a 4-8 record. An injury, which happened during the kind of heartbreaking loss all too common for Pittsburgh, cut short Chandnois' season. At home against the Detroit Lions on November 13, the Steelers trailed after three quarters, 24-7. Dale Dodrill had recovered a second quarter fumble, and Jim Finks connected on four straight passes for the first touchdown. Thereafter, the Lions dominated.

Chandnois ignited a fourth period rally, scoring on a one-yard run. Within eight minutes Ted Marchibroda led his team to two more touchdowns, the first on his own 8-yard run and the second on a 46-yard scoring strike to Ray Mathews. But Bill Stits intercepted a pass and returned it for a touchdown, giving Detroit the final edge, 31-28. On the ensuing kickoff Chandnois was downed with a knee injury.

Talking about the injury, Chandnois later said: "I had my knee operated on for cartilage in December, 1955, after a game with the Detroit Lions. I was carrying back a kickoff, and I got hit by several players." For Chad it was another tough break.

Throughout his seven-year NFL career, Chandnois was the Steeler back most likely to make the big play, catch a crucial pass, or spark the offense with a fine runback. When that threat was removed, however, Pittsburgh's offense often misfired.

"Chandnois' value was never more apparent," wrote Pat Livingston on December 6, 1955, as the former All-American was awaiting knee surgery, "than in the last two games when, playing without him, the Steelers were unable to get any kind of a running attack going."

Pittsburgh dropped the last four games, two to Cleveland, 41-14 and 30-7, and two to Washington, 23-14 and 28-17.

In 1956 Pittsburgh broke in several first or second-year rookies on the defensive team, including Joe Krupa and Gary Glick, the new place-kicker. On offense the Steelers started tackles Frank Varrichione (again) and speedy end Lowell Perry. But Perry fractured his pelvis at mid-season, while Pittsburgh limped to a 5-7 record.

With his knee fully recovered before the 1956 training camp, Chad, now 31, played as superbly as the Chandnois of old.

Consider these 1956 highlights:

* Against Washington in the Forbes Field opener on September 30, before 27,718 happy fans, Chandnois scored twice on short runs, caught a 17-yard pass from Ted Marchibroda for a third touchdown, returned a kickoff 91 yards to set up the fourth score, and Pittsburgh won, 30-13.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 17, No. 2 (1995)

* At home against Cleveland on Saturday, October 6, Chad scored the lone Steeler touchdown with a one-yard plunge in the second quarter. The Browns finally won, 14-10, but only after a last-second Marchibroda pass from the four-yard line was batted down in the end zone.

* After being hampered by a twisted knee during two defeats, Chandnois scored one of three Steeler touchdowns against Cleveland on a dive play. But he was helped from the field in the final minutes with "a possible right shoulder separation."

In fact, Chandnois had suffered a fractured shoulder. After five games, his season, actually his career, was over. In those games Chad had rushed for 118 yards (44 carries, 2.7 average) and scored four times -- figures which his replacement, halfback Sid Watson, only matched during an entire season.

Before he left football in 1957, Chandnois switched from his off-season insurance business to a brokerage firm, owned by himself and Pirate pitcher Bob Friend. Two years later he sold out to Friend and entered the steel business. He also moved his family back to Flint, and in 1960 he was divorced.

Despite his injuries and some tough times, Chandnois enjoyed an impressive career with Pittsburgh.

"Pittsburgh is a great sports-minded town, long before they won the Super Bowls in the 1970s. I can remember the day we beat the New York Giants, 63-7. We had about three inches of snow which fell the night before the game. When the game started, we had only about 5,000 fans. But at halftime, we had 25,000 or 30,000 in the stands. They heard it on the radio, and they came out to the ballpark.

"Also, Art Rooney was just a wonderful president. He always called me 'star.'"

The personable and witty Chandnois, now living in Flint with his wife Paulette, is surprised by the current interest in football cards from the 1950s. He receives 10-12 letters a month, usually with cards or pictures, which he autographs for fans.

He laughs when telling about his grandson, who once came out of a card shop and announced, "Grandfather, look! I just bought your card for 50 cents!"

Chandnois still holds several all-time Steeler records. His 29.57 yard career kickoff return average ranks first for Pittsburgh, and second in NFL history to Gale Sayers, at 30.56. His 35.2 return mark for 1952 is the highest for any Steeler, while his 32.5 average for 1951 ranks second. His career kickoff return yardage of 2,720 is third for Steelers, his three career touchdown returns rank first, and two TDs on returns in 1952 is the single-season Pittsburgh record.

"Football has been terrific for me, and Mr. Rooney and Pittsburgh were always kind," Chandnois reflected in 1995. "Steeler fans always treated me extremely well and I was really pulling for them to go all the way to the Super Bowl and win it. Art Rooney and Biggie Munn are the two men I admire most. They were great to me."

"If Chuck Noll had coached Chandnois," former Steeler Jerry Nuzum once observed, "he'd be in the Hall of Fame."

Notre Dame All-American Frank Varrichione, who was All-Pro five times in his 11-year NFL career, spoke of Chad's remarkable ability in a 1994 interview: "Here is the point I emphasize about Lynn Chandnois: not only was he an exceptional athlete, one of the best of his era, but he was always a real gentleman, too."

LYNN EVERETT CHANDNOIS

HB-DB 6-02 198

Michigan State

Central High School, Flint, MI

Born: 02/24/25, Flint, MI

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 17, No. 2 (1995)

		RUSHING-----					PASS RECEIVING--				SCO
		GM	ATT	YDS	AVG	TD	NO	YDS	AVG	TD	PTS
1950	Pit N	12	71	216	3.0	0	7	158	22.6	0	0
1951	Pit N	12	108	332	3.1	2	29	490	16.9	5	42
1952	Pit N	12	97	298	3.1	1	28	370	13.2	2	30
1953	Pit N	12	123	470	3.8	3	43	412	9.6	0	24
1954	Pit N	11	45	147	3.3	1	22	176	8.0	0	6
1955	Pit N	8	105	353	3.4	5	27	385	14.3	0	30
1956	Pit N	5	44	118	2.7	4	7	71	10.1	1	30
		--	----	----	----	--	--	----	----	--	----
7 years		72	593	1934	3.3	16	163	2062	12.7	8	162

		PUNT RETURNS-----				PASSING-----					KICKOFF RETURNS-			
		NO	YDS	AVG	TD	AT	CO	YDS	TD	IN	NO	YDS	AVG	TD
1950	Pit N	3	33	11.0	0	6	1	5	0	2	12	351	29.3	0
1951	Pit N	12	55	4.6	0	43	16	256	2	4	12	390	*32.5	0
1952	Pit N	17	111	6.5	0	2	0	0	0	0	17	599	*35.2	*2
1953	Pit N	26	101	3.9	0	3	1	11	0	0	21	610	29.0	*1
1954	Pit N	8	12	1.5	0	3	1	13	0	0	13	256	19.7	0
1955	Pit N	-	-	-	-	1	0	0	0	1	9	223	24.8	0
1956	Pit N	-	-	-	-	1	0	0	0	0	8	291	36.4	0
		--	----	----	--	--	--	----	--	--	--	----	----	--
7 years		66	312	4.7	0	59	19	285	2	7	92	2720	29.6	3