

THE PRESIDENT'S CORNER

By Jack Clary

The spring issue of COFFIN CORNER carried a list of former NFL players who passed away during 1994-95.

There is no doubt that you can meet the most interesting people in the obituary columns -- quite often, too late, and in so doing it is only natural to ask: Who were these men, and what did they do? Certainly, those had to be a couple of questions asked by readers who perused the list.

There were some uncanny connections in death just as there were in life among those former players and coaches. And in one last tribute before their names are consigned to the dusty bin of history, let's look at some:

Phil Bengtson and Lee Roy Caffey: Eleven months to the day after LeeRoy Caffey passed away, so did Phil Bengtson. Bengtson was the defensive coach of the Green Bay Packers throughout Vince Lombardi's historic tenure and Caffey was one of his starting outside linebackers from 1964 through 1969, the year Bengtson became the Packers head coach.

Caffey was a hard-nosed seventh round draft pick of the Philadelphia Eagles in 1963, after achieving All-America honors at Texas A & M. Lombardi, whose Packers failed to win a fourth straight Western Conference title in '63, sought new linebackers. He also discovered that football itself was changing when Jim Ringo, an all-pro center tried a new ploy (in the NFL, at least) in negotiating a contract: He hired an agent.

The story goes that Lombardi listened to the agent's pitch, and then asked him to step out of his office for a few moments. While the man cooled his heels, Lombardi called the Philadelphia Eagles and offered them Ringo, a future Hall of Fame player, and reserve fullback Earl Gros in exchange for a No. 1 draft pick and Caffey. New Eagles coach Joe Kuharich agreed to the trade.

Lombardi then summoned the agent back into his office and told him, "I'm sorry, but you're in the wrong office. Jim Ringo doesn't play here any longer. You'll have to discuss his contract with the Philadelphia Eagles."

Caffey became an integral part of the Packers defense that won the last "old" NFL championship in 1966 and the first two Super Bowl titles with Bengtson as the architect of a defense that was every bit as good as the famed Packers offenses that received so much notoriety. His tip of a Len Dawson pass led to Willie Wood's interception return that set up the game-breaking touchdown for the Packers in the second half of Super Bowl I.

His linebacking mates were Hall of Famer Ray Nitschke and Dave Robinson; and he played with future Hall of Famers Willie Davis, Henry Jordan, Wood and Herb Adderley.

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Jim Lee Howell: He was head coach of the New York Giants from 1954-60, during which time the Giants won the 1956 NFL title; and played for two others in 1958 and 1959 -- the former the famed overtime loss to the Baltimore Colts that was the defining moment in the tremendous growth in popularity of the game.

He passed away in 1994 and so did two players from his teams -- defensive end Jim Katcavage and offensive lineman Jack Stroud.

Howell had been a reluctant candidate to succeed the legendary Steve Owen in 1954, rightly professing that he was neither an offensive nor a defensive coaching specialist. And in truth he never went to a blackboard to draw up any offensive or defensive schemes because, his players said, he would not have been able to fathom the game in such terms.

But he was shrewd enough to know that he had two great future coaches on his staff -- Vince Lombardi and Tom Landry -- who were more than able, and he stepped aside and allowed them to do the creative work. Lombardi ran his offense and Landry taught the Giants a new coordinated defensive scheme later to be refined at Dallas as the Flex Defense.

"They have to tell me what they're doing so I can tell the press after the game," Howell once said. "My job on Sunday is to send in the kickers."

His most famous "kicking" decision occurred in the final game of the 1958 season when he overruled Lombardi's decision to punt late in a game against the Browns, with the score tied, and the Giants needing a victory to tie for the Eastern Conference lead and force a playoff. The ball was on Cleveland's 42-yard line as a howling wind whipped an ever increasing snow fall into the late December darkness when he ordered kicker Pat Summerall, who a few minutes earlier had missed a 36-yard field goal, to kick one of 49 yards.

Suddenly the snow stopped, the wind died down and Summerall kicked one of the most famous field goals in NFL history to key the victory that ultimately set up the famed overtime title game against Baltimore. When he returned to the sidelines following the kick, Howell was busy sending the kickoff team onto the field, but Lombardi walked up to Summerall and said: "You know, you can't kick a football that far."

Jim Lee, a towering six-foot, six inch Arkansan and a former end with the Giants, was the epitome of the charming southern gentleman to those who didn't have to play for him. He also was an ex-Marine who had a lot of drill sergeant in him. He was always firmly in control of the team, first with a Marine boot camp-like pre-season training camp, and second, by always making it known in very certain terms that everything his coaches did in his name, was to be followed.

He retired after the 1960 season and served as the team's player personnel director for 25 years.

Jim Katcavage: He was the left end on Howell's great defensive unit that keyed those championship games--and three others in the sixties. Led by such future Hall of Famers as Landry, defensive end Andy Robustelli, linebacker Sam Huff and defensive back Emlen Tunnell, the unit was the precursor of such great future defensive teams of the '60s as Los Angeles (the Rams' Fearsome Foursome got its nickname from Rosey Grier who took the name from New York to Los Angeles when he was traded); the Detroit Lions; Dallas Cowboys; and San Diego Chargers.

For the first time ever, it made that part of the game a new -- and publicly popular -- dimension, beginning in 1956 when it manhandled the Chicago Bears 47-7 for the NFL championship; and later inspired tens of thousands in Yankee Stadium to begin a new cheer . . . DEEEE-FENSE! DEEEE-FENSE! . . . week after week as it consistently stopped opposing offenses, particularly the Cleveland Browns great attack that was led by running back Jim Brown. Those cheers soon were heard in stadiums and arenas around the nation.

In fact, the Giants defense became more popular than its offense, even with Lombardi, Frank Gifford, Kyle Rote, Alex Webster and Charley Conerly as its stars. It was not unusual for Katcavage, Huff or one of the other members of the defense to admonish the offense running onto the field after being given the ball in good field position: "Hold 'em and we'll be right back."

Katcavage, a 6-4, 240-pound unsung college player from the University of Dayton, was hard-nosed and disciplined, an ideal player for Landry's defensive concepts that first shut down the running game, and then unleashed a powerful pass rush on long yardage passing situations. Katcavage was a powerful pass rusher from the left; Robustelli, who was incredibly tough and quick, pinched from the right side; while the tackles, 300-pound Roosevelt Grier and Dick Modzelewski, crushed the middle of the passing pocket.

The NFL didn't keep sack totals at that time, but some have estimated that this unit accumulated more than 80 during each of their peak seasons in the late 50s when the league played a 12- game schedule. The current listed record is 72 by the Chicago Bears in 1984, a decade after the NFL began compiling figures.

Kat also was the team's "money" conscience during playoff runs because his messages on the locker room blackboard carried his admonition of precisely how much was at stake with every game. They always began: "Kat says ... "

Jack Stroud: He was a fine lineman for Gen. Bob Neyland's single wing teams at Tennessee in the late 40s and early 50s. He played both guard and tackle for the Giants. He was among the first players who embarked upon a pre-season weight training regimen and no one on the Giants -- or in the NFL -- was physically stronger.

He certainly was not big by today's standards -- 6-1, 235 pounds -- but he was the offensive "enforcer" who stepped into the skirmishes of those times and very powerfully separated opposing players from his own. He and Detroit defensive end Darris McCord, a teammate at Tennessee, had one of the most heated physical rivalries in the NFL, and

though the teams played only infrequently, when they met it was guaranteed that Stroud and McCord would get into a brawl.

In those times of 33-man rosters, Stroud also was a defensive "specialist" -- he and offensive tackle Roosevelt Brown became part of the team's goal line, or short-yardage, defensive unit. The team took out two of its defensive backs and Stroud and Brown were used as defensive linemen. They were key producers in an incredible number of goal line stands that only served to heighten the popularity of the Giants defense.

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That obituary listing also carried the names of Steve Myhra, Bill Pellington and Art Spinney, who were entwined with Howell, Katcavage and Stroud because they were members of the Baltimore Colts team that defeated the Giants in that famed overtime NFL championship game.

Steve Myhra: He was a guard-linebacker but he is best remembered for kicking the 20-yard field goal with seven seconds to play that sent the game into overtime. It was no cinch kick because he had made only four of ten field goals that season and he was nearly exhausted from having to play on the defensive team that day. As it was, the kick barely skimmed inside the right upright (some claimed he missed) to climax a John Unitas-led 88-yard drive in the final 2:25.

Bill Pellington: Even with such grizzled veterans as Gino Marchetti and Art Donovan, Pellington was reputed to be the toughest of all the Colts of that championship era. "His credo was pain," Donovan once said. "After a game, Pellington's breath smelled like quarterback." He was a middle linebacker, and a ferocious player who delighted in inflicting as much pain as he could on opposing players; and then was seemingly oblivious to pain that was inflicted on him. Once, after knocking out halfback Tom Tracy of Detroit with a blow to the head, he returned to the huddle and complained that his arm hurt. He played five more plays before discovering that the bone was broken in two. "Snapped like a twig," Donovan said.

Art Spinney: He was a starting guard on those great Colts teams, and he had been a Boston College teammate of two future NFL Hall of Famers, Donovan and Ernie Stautner. Spinney was drafted by the Cleveland Browns as an end, but he was released and joined the Colts in 1951 where he was switched to offensive guard. He was offensive line coach of the Boston Patriots for several seasons during the 60s.