

THE LADS OF LEAHY

By Mark Latterman

In 1947, the Notre Dame National Team sent forty-two players into professional football; fifty-five years later, this team, is alive and well (with additional honorary members from other teams). Originally called the Frank Leahy Memorial Fund, it was founded as a non-profit organization in 1994 after the legendary Notre Dame coach Frank Leahy, whose Fighting Irish won four National Championships with six unbeaten and untied teams.

Statistics alone do not begin to reflect the impact Leahy had on his lads, who he typically addressed as "Mister....". The devotion and sacrifice he demanded and received from his players is still evident today. Vince Lombardi said, to Jerry Groom in the St. Louis, Missouri airport about thirty years ago, that Leahy, his line coach at Fordham, was the single most important influence in his football career. To perpetuate this influence, a sculpture of Frank Leahy stands on the east side of the Notre Dame stadium provided by the Frank Leahy Memorial Fund.

This group of former players has been renamed "Leahy's Lads" after Jack Connor's recent book with that same title. In this book, Connor, who played on the undefeated 1946-1949 Notre Dame teams, recounts the Notre Dame teams of the 1940's and 1950's. Jack is the brother of George Connor, thought by many to be Notre Dame's most outstanding lineman. George Connor was the first ever recipient of the Outland Trophy for being the best interior lineman in the country. However, it is as a professional football player that George is remembered best. Even though he only played eight years with the Chicago Bears, he was named all-pro for three different positions: offensive tackle, defensive back and linebacker. In 1952 and 1953, he was named all-league at both the offensive and defensive teams in different wire services.

While Connor leads the list of Notre Dame stars of that era that went on to have a successful professional football careers, this list also includes John Lujack, Leon Hart, Bill Fischer, Jim Martin, Jerry Groom, Frank Tripuka, Elmer Angsman, Bill Walsh, Angelo Bertelli, Bob Dove, Bob Williams and John Lattner and other.

I recently had the distinct pleasure of attending one of the Leahy's Lads reunions in Chicago, Illinois. I felt so much at home when I was warmly greeted by the evening host, Jerry Groom, that I thought Aunt Bea was going to be serving her famous chicken dinner. This gracious hospitality continued throughout the meeting.

After several hours of introductions and conversation with the heroes of my childhood, I was struck by several characteristics of this group. First, the modesty of the players. Although they laughed about humorous moments of their playing days, they never commented on great plays or any of their numerous honors and awards. Second, I was impressed by the manner and the depth with which they got along and supported each other. This characteristic appears to be non-existent in today's sports world. Third, and probably most important, is the group's primary purpose and this is to assist others less fortunate than themselves. For example, they have already raised over \$1 million for scholarships to Notre Dame.

Certainly, if the athletes of today could even have some of the attributes of these great players from sixty years ago, the contribution of sports to society would have a much more positive impact. Obviously, the Leahy's Lads would never have to attend the mandatory NFL "rookie symposium," a \$750,000 attempt to make the rookies aware of the pitfalls of sudden wealth, opportunistic people, and increased media scrutiny. Instead, the "Lads" could teach this course.

The primary source of this article was *Leahy's Lads* written by Jack Connor and published by Diamond Communications, Inc., P.O. Box 8, South Bend, Indiana, 46624-0088. Jack is presently finalizing a book on his brother, George Connor. A secondary source was *Total Football II*.