

The Unique Career of “Greasy” Neale

By Alan Mann

Here is a man born, raised and buried in a small town in West Virginia who never forgot his roots, but through a combination of athletic prowess, intelligence, toughness and thrift achieved national recognition and spent most of the last years of his life dividing his time between New York City and Florida and concentrating on his golf game, at which he was very good. He also outlived two wives (no small accomplishment in itself) and married for a third time at the age of 77.

Along the way, Alfred Earle “Greasy” Neale would become the only man in the history of American sports to play in the World Series, coach a football team in the Rose Bowl and coach a team in two NFL Championships! He is, in fact, the only coach in the history of the Philadelphia Eagles to win two NFL championships, back to back or otherwise, and is not only in the Pro Football Hall of Fame but the National Football Foundation (College) Football Hall of Fame as well.

The nickname was not, as some have been led to believe, because he was an elusive runner with a football, though he must have been. The nickname came about when, as a young man, he was working in a steel mill and called a fellow worker “dirty” since he was covered with dirt. Later on, as Earle was eating a sandwich, he had mayonnaise on his face. This fellow, whose name was Rittenhouse, retaliated by saying, “Well, you are greasy.” The name stuck and Earle would answer to the name Greasy the rest of his life.

His career started at Parkersburg High School, virtually across the street from the house where he grew up. He was outstanding at football, basketball and baseball. According to an article in The New York Times of November 4, 1973, Neale was quoted in Collier’s Magazine in 1954 as saying, “My first love was baseball and my consuming ambition was to be a big leaguer.” Though he would realize that ambition, he would devote most of his adult life to football.

Young Earle started at end for Parkersburg H.S. as a sophomore in 1909, the team posting a record of 5 and 1. His leadership qualities must have been apparent, even then, because as a junior he was named player-coach, leading the team to a 5-2-1 mark. The school hired a coach for 1911 and Neale, concentrating on playing, led the team to a 10-0 record.

West Virginia Wesleyan coach Harry Stansbury recruited Neale and his presence had an immediate impact. He caught the winning touchdown as W. Va. Wesleyan upset West Va. U. 19-14 in 1912. The following year, he grabbed two touchdown passes and ran 40 yards with an interception as W. Va. Wesleyan beat W. Va. U. 21-0. During his college days, he played professional football for the Canton Bulldogs under an assumed name for \$75 per game. In 1912, he played professional baseball in London, Ontario, Canada. Skipping the 1914 football season because of baseball, he played basketball for West Va. Wesleyan and made third team All American. Assumed names and different amateur rules than later on made this possible. Being a student athlete struggling financially made it necessary.

After one more year of minor league baseball in 1915, “Greasy” Neale made it to the Major Leagues in 1916 with the Cincinnati Reds. His playing career in the National League would encompass 768 games over an 8 year period. Five of those years he would be a regular in the outfield and would average 25 stolen bases a year from 1916 through 1920. His lifetime batting average would be .259, his best year being 1917 when he hit .294. It was in the 1919 World Series, however, that he led the Reds in hitting by getting 10 hits in 28 trips to the plate for an average of .357. Though some considered this accomplishment tainted since the White Sox were later found to have conspired to throw the series, Neale was quoted in an article in the Miami Herald as saying, “Dickie Kerr wasn’t fixed and I got three hits off him in the sixth game include a triple.” It is also obvious to anyone who looks at the composite box score that no one else on the Reds hit

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for anything near .357, no matter what the White Sox were trying to do. In any case, this fleeting fame was to be surpassed by his accomplishment as a football coach that would eventually cause him to become a legend in the City of Philadelphia.

This story would not be possible today because the baseball season runs well into football, but in the early 20th century that was not the case. Baseball ended sooner and football started later. During the baseball off seasons from 1916 to 1918, Neale returned to West Virginia Wesleyan where he coached football and basketball. After the 1919 World Series, "Greasy" was asked to coach the Marietta College football team which had lost its first game 54-0 to W.V.U. and which had only 18 players. He agreed and won every game the rest of the season. The next year his Marietta team lost only one game and that was to Boston College. Because of his success at Marietta, he was offered the job at Washington and Jefferson College in Washington, Pa., where he would take the next step towards greatness in 1921. In the opener, with his former teammate at West Virginia Wesleyan and assistant "Honest" John Kellison coaching the line, coach Neale's W. & J. Presidents beat a Bethany team which in 1920 and 21 had victories over teams such as Detroit, Carnegie Tech, and Rutgers. A strong Bucknell team was defeated next, then West Virginia Wesleyan fell 54-0. Lehigh proved a tough team, losing to W. & J. 14 to 7. Playing at Syracuse, a team that lost only one other game all season, W. & J. came away with a 17 to 10 victory, scoring the winning touchdown on an interception with one minute left to play. Westminster fell 47-0 and powerhouse Pitt, coached by the legendary Pop Warner, was the next opponent. Pitt had been national champions in 1915, '16, '17, and '19 and had won 32 straight games from 1914 to 1918. This Pitt team had beaten Syracuse 15-0. After three quarters, the score was 0-0, but W. & J. scored the game's only touchdown on a pass play and West Virginia U. remained as the last obstacle to an unbeaten season. W. & J. won 13-0, but there was one other unbeaten team in the east, Detroit, and the W. & J. faculty manger arranged a special game with them even though W. & J. had already been invited to play in the Rose Bowl. Thus, the pressure was on "Greasy" Neale's Presidents to stay unbeaten, which they did with a 14 to 2 win over Detroit.

Washington and Jefferson was to play the U. of California in the Rose Bowl. California had not lost a game in 1920 or 1921 and would not lose a regular season game until 1925. Cal was the heavy favorite and many on the west coast expected a rout, but Washington and Jefferson had other ideas. The game would end in a 0 to 0 tie, but the Presidents set at least four records. They held Cal to two first downs, fewest allowed in the Rose Bowl, gave up no completed passes, played the entire game with same 11 men and permitted only 49 yards rushing. Allowing no points, of course, is a record that can be tied but never broken. Washington and Jefferson gained 130 yards rushing. If ever there was a moral victory, this was it.

In 1922, W. & J. went unbeaten with one tie in its first seven games to compile a streak of 18 straight without a loss for "Greasy" Neale. Pitt, Detroit and W. V. U. proved too tough for them at the end of the season, but Coach Neale would move on.

Neale's next stop was at Virginia U. where in six seasons, from 1923 through 1928, he compiled a record of 28 wins, 22 losses and 5 ties. In 1930, he was playing manager of Clarksburg in the Middle Atlantic Baseball League, hitting .332 at the age of 38. He coached a professional football team called the Ironton Tanks during the fall of that year. From 1931 through 1933, he coached at West Virginia U. going 12-16-3, the only time he was unable to compile a winning record, but three of his players went on to become pros and a 155 pound center named Floyd Schwartzwalder would become an outstanding coach at Syracuse University. In 1934, Coach Neale went to Yale as assistant to Coach "Ducky" Pond. While there, "Greasy" originated the 5 man defensive line which he later used successfully in the pros.

Nick Scala, Parkersburg Sentinal sportswriter, in his October 8, 1969 column, quotes author Bernard Allen's book, Parkersburg: A Bicentennial History in which Allen relates the following story: "While Neale was at Yale, an attempt was made to list Neale's name in publicity releases as Alfred as opposed to Greasy. Neale objected. He said that he had been Greasy for as long as he remembered and that if Yale didn't want to refer to him as

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Greasy they would have to get another coach.”

Prior to the 1941 season, Philadelphia Eagle owner Alexis Thompson, a Yale graduate, hired Neale to coach the National Football League team. The first few years were difficult, but in 1943, Neale, Thompson and General Manager Harry Thayer developed an elaborate scouting system to acquire extensive information on all college football players. When they took 68 books into the draft meeting that year, they were laughed at. According to Greasy, “They stopped after we got players like Steve Van Buren and Joe Muha.

According to nephew Thomas Neale, “Greasy” usually didn’t draft players who had great college careers, but took men in whom he saw potential and then taught them his way. Perhaps the best example of this was end Jack Ferrante who never went to college at all.

“Greasy” now got to put into practice some of his ideas on the pro level such as the man-to-man defense, fake reverse, triple reverse, nine man goal line defense, and the five man defensive line. Obviously, as an innovator, Neale changed the game, as all of these things were copied by others.

By 1944, the former doormat Eagles had climbed to second place in the NFL Eastern Division, a finish they repeated in 1945 and 1946. Neale won his first division title with the Eagles in 1947. Finishing in a tie with Pittsburgh with an 8 and 4 record, the Eagles took the Eastern Division Title with a 21-0 win in a play-off game. In the NFL championship game, however, the Eagles lost to the Chicago Cardinals by a score of 28 to 21. But the next two years would be different.

Actually, the 1948 season got off to an inauspicious start with a 21-14 loss to the Chicago Cardinals in which the Eagles battled back from a 0-14 deficit to tie the game at 14-14, only to lose it on a trick pass play by the Cardinals with 4 minutes to play. What must have been equally galling was a 28 to 28 tie with the Los Angeles Rams, for the Eagles had led the game 28-0 in the third quarter, but the Rams came roaring back and tied the game with only 32 seconds left to play. Coach Neale must have blistered the locker room walls after that one.

The next two weeks saw the Eagles romp to identical 45-0 victories, first over the New York Giants, then the Washington Redskins. Shutting out the Redskins, who featured the great Sammy Baugh at quarterback, was quite an accomplishment for the defense.

With these two wins begins an era which is undeniably the high water mark of the entire history of the Philadelphia Eagles, for they will win 20 regular season games out of 22 over the rest of 1948 and the 1949 season and Neale’s 5-4 defense would shut out the Cardinals in the 1948 championship game and the Rams in the 1949 championship game.

The Eagles beat the Chicago Cards 7-0 at Shibe Park on December 19, 1948 as Steve Van Buren scored the game’s only touchdown early in the 4th quarter. On December 18, 1949, the Eagles won their second straight championship 14-0 over the Los Angeles Rams. Although Van Buren didn’t score, he gained 196 yards on 31 carries; prompting Coach Neale to comment, “Best I ever saw a man run.”

Among the all time great players on these teams were Hall of Famers running back Steve Van Buren, center Alex Wojciechowicz and Chuck Bednarik, and end Pete Pihos. Bednarik was a rookie on the 1949 team. Wojciechowicz, by the way, a fierce competitor on the football field, had an unusual hobby. He liked to crochet. I doubt if anyone ever teased him about it.

Some of the most memorable Eagles names included end “Black Jack” Ferrante, (Ferrante, who never went to college, was plucked off the Philadelphia sandlots by Coach Neale), tackles Al Wistert, Vic Sears and George Savitsky, (Savitsky, like Bednarik, had been an All-American while playing for the University of Pennsylvania), and guards Mike Mandarino, “Bucko” Kilroy and Cliff Patton. Patton was an excellent

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place-kicker; Kilroy was a native Philadelphian; Mandarino would go on to become a noted orthopedic surgeon in the Philadelphia area.

Among the notable backfield performers was QB Tommy Thompson who did a more than capable job despite being blind in one eye. Halfback Bosh Pritchard averaged 6 yards per carry in 1949, 5th best in the league. Fullback Joe Muha was not only an outstanding blocker, and capable ball carrier but an outstanding punter. Russ Craft was an excellent defensive back.

According to nephew Tom Neale, when the team was winning, Coach Neale was inclined to be a bit superstitious. His brother Raymond scouted for him which meant he was usually elsewhere when the Eagles played. One day, when he had no scouting assignment, he sat on the Eagles bench. When they lost, Greasy decreed that brother Ray was no longer allowed to sit on the bench. Unknown to Coach Neale, Ray would sometimes sneak into the stands to watch, but never again sat on the bench.

Maybe that helped, but a few great players, a lot of good players and solid coaching were the real reasons for three division championships and two NFL championships and "Greasy" Neale was named NFL Coach of the Year in both 1948 and 1949. There was every reason to believe that the Eagles would be contenders for a third championship in 1950. Neale had even said to Philadelphia sportswriter Stan Baumgartner "I don't see why our boys can't do it again. Who is there to beat us?"

Although the season started out with a loss to the Cleveland Browns 35-10, the Eagles ran off five straight victories. It seemed as though they had a good chance for another title. The only luck they had after that, however, was bad. Bosh Pritchard went down with an injury before the season. Clyde Scott, his replacement, was then injured. Van Buren was hampered by a bone spur on his heel. Tackle Al Wistert was injured. With that the offense just about disappeared. Their only subsequent victory was a 33-0 rout of the Washington Redskins. Other teams were able to concentrate on stopping the Eagles passing game because they had no running game. The heartbreaking thing about it was that the Eagles defense was still excellent. Every loss was close. The Giants beat them twice (7-3 and 9-7), the Browns (13-7), the Steelers once (9-7) and the Cards once (14-10).

After the first loss to the Giants, new owner Jim Clark came into the locker room and criticized Greasy in front of the team, prompting a shouting match between the two. Although the rift was supposedly patched up, Clark, perhaps not having expected Neale to stand up to him, probably nursed a damaged ego. After the Eagles ended up in third place with a 6 and 6 record, he waited until February 6, 1951 and fired Coach Neale by telegram while the coach was vacationing in Lake Worth, Florida.

According to Coach Neale, "The problem was that Jim Clark --- didn't know anything about football. He wanted to trim expenses by doing away with my scouts. He thought we were spending too much money for information on football players. That scouting system won us championships. But I was wasting my time telling Clark that. He paid no attention to it."

After his unfair and unfortunate firing and the death of his first wife in 1951, Neale retired from coaching and resided in New York until 1965 when he moved back to his native Parkersburg, West Virginia. He did act as consultant to New York Giants coach Allie Sherman who had been a backup QB for his Eagles.

Neale passed away on November 2, 1973 in West Palm Beach, Florida at the age of 81. He was buried in Parkersburg, in a cemetery within view of his boyhood home and near the high school football stadium. Tom Neale said Greasy chose to be buried there instead of the family plot. When asked why he said that he wanted to be able to watch the house and see what was going on at the stadium. Now, nearby, there is a street named after him. At the dedication ceremony, nephew Tom commented that now Greasy has three things to watch.