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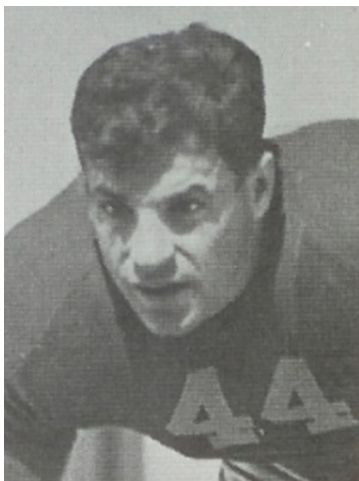
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Lee Artoe

This article was written by Jim Marino.

Lee Artoe played eight years of professional football. He was considered one of the top pre-Second World War two-way tackles, and became one of the cogs of the offensive and defensive lines during the Chicago Bears glory years of the 1940s. Artoe earned the reputation as the toughest and dirtiest member of the first incarnation of the 'Monsters of the Midway.' Artoe's football career consisted of one varsity season of high school football, two seasons at Santa Clara University, two years at the University of California, four years with the Chicago Bears, three years with the U.S. Navy Service Team, and three seasons in the All-American Football Conference. Listed at 6-3, 234, Artoe was the perfect size tackle. His strength, tenacity, and grittiness enabled him to be a three-time All-Pro, and the main enforcer of the Bears.

Leo 'Lee' Robert Reno Artoe was born March 2, 1917 in Tacoma Washington into an Italian-American family. He attended Lincoln High School where Artoe played football, basketball, and track. Artoe's football team finished 5-5, while playing end, halfback, fullback, and tackle. He wore number 32 and was nicknamed 'Chico.'¹ Artoe earned All-City basketball honors at center and led the team in scoring. He graduated in 1935.



Artoe wearing No. 44 at Santa Clara

Recruited to play college football, Artoe attended Santa Clara University for two years. Artoe played on the freshmen squad and earned a varsity letter his sophomore year, playing as a two-way tackle. Artoe played against LSU in the third Sugar Bowl on New Year's Day 1937. The Broncos, a small independent, upset the No. 2 nationally ranked

¹ 1935 Lincoln High School Yearbook, 66.



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Tigers, 21-14. After the game the university discovered that Artoe was married which was against the rules of the Jesuit Institution and was asked to leave.²

After a year off, Artoe transferred to the University of California at Berkley and played two years of football. A two way starter at offensive and defensive right tackle, Artoe also functioned as the kicker. He earned a varsity letter his senior year, and earned the Andy Smith Trophy given to the Golden Bear who had the most playing time in the season.³ Artoe also earned an All-Conference selection despite being too busy working in the oilfields to attend practice.⁴ Artoe graduated in 1940 with a degree in chemistry.

The Bears selected Artoe in round 11 of the NFL Draft held on December 9, 1939, at the Schroeder Hotel in Milwaukee. Prior to the draft Artoe had impressed George Halas, who saw him play in a collegiate all-star game in Chicago.⁵ Artoe emerged from the Bears pre-season practice at St. John's Military Academy in Delafield, Wisconsin, as a rookie backup right tackle. He eventually dislodged Ed Kolman, and started seven games. Chicago's 1940 draft was one of the best in franchise history. The starting lineup included five rookies of the eleven two-way starters: Clyde 'Bulldog' Turner, Ken Kavanaugh, George McAfee, Kolman, and Artoe. "When it comes to rookie production that put a team over the top, the 1940 class merits special mention," expounded sportswriter Mark Potash.⁶

Wearing number 35 as a lineman, both teammates and opponents acknowledged Artoe's offensive skills as a blocker and tackler. "He was a real tough guy, a real hitter," said Ken Kavanaugh, a close friend and teammate who played tight end for the Bears.⁷ "He'd knock down anything that got in his way," Bears halfback Joe Maniaci said. "He was rough. He was a 60-minute man. In my book, I'd say he was better than Stydahar [starting left tackle and Hall of Famer]. But he didn't get the publicity Stydahar got."⁸ Opponents recognized Artoe's skills as well. Bucko Kilroy of the Eagles rated Artoe as "a guy who could wire you real good—block you and stick to you."⁹

² Bashore, Mel. "Lee Robert Reno Artoe." https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/22191606/lee-robert_reno-artoe

³ IBID.

⁴ IBID.

⁵ McCarthy, Brendan. "Lee Artoe, 88." *Chicago Tribune*, April 5, 2005.

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2005-04-05-0504050183-story.html>.

⁶ Potash, Mark. "Kansas Comet Flies By All Bears Rookies", *Chicago Sun-Times*. November 2, 2019.

<https://www.pressreader.com/usa/chicago-sun-times/20191102/281509342987995>

⁷ McCarthy.

⁸ Daly, Dan. "The greatest O-line in NFL history." May 14, 2015. <http://profootballdaly.com/the-greatest-o-line-in-nfl-history/>

⁹ Zimmerman, Paul. "A Who's Who Of The Front Wall." *Sports Illustrated*, August 3, 1981, 59.



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Artoe participated in several noteworthy moments in 1940. On October 27, Chicago defeated New York 37-21 at the Polo Grounds in front of 44,219 fans eliminating the Giants from the division race. During the game Artoe kicked a 52-yard field goal in the second quarter. The only field goal he attempted as a rookie. It was two yards short of the then NFL record held by Glenn Presnell of the Detroit Lions against Green Bay in a 3-0 victory, in 1934.

Sportswriter, Arthur Daley of the *New York Times*, wrote about the unusual circumstances of the field goal, “Artoe wore thick-lensed glasses off the field and his vision on the gridiron was exceedingly limited. As he lined up for the field goal, he asked the holder Sid Luckman, ‘Where are the goal posts?’” Luckman replied, “They are over that way” as he steered Artoe into position. Artoe made the field goal “over a crosspiece he never saw.”¹⁰ He held the Chicago Bears record for longest field goal for thirty-five years.

Artoe started at right tackle in the Bears' 73-0 championship win over the Washington Redskins on December 8. He played against Willie Wilkins, a Pro-Bowler. Artoe earned Pro Bowl the recognition at right tackle, but behind first team three-year veteran John Mellus of the New York Giants. As a rookie, Artoe played in his first of three straight championship games. He developed two other reputations that first year.



Artoe as a member of the champion Bears

Artoe earned the trademark as the roughest player in the league. The arch-rival Green Bay Packers crowned him the dirtiest player. According to Packer Clyde Goodnight in an interview, he claimed that many Packers labeled Artoe as dirtiest player.¹¹ Packers running back Tony Canadeo agreed: “You never could turn your back to him. He was a

¹⁰10 Daley, Dan. “Sports of the Times: Alive and Kicking.” *New York Times*, November 10, 1959, 61.



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good football player. He was tough. But no scruples. No scruples.”¹² Artoe claimed nearsightedness as the reason for late hits which prompted Bulldog Turner to quip, “His excuse was that he was blind. I guess he couldn’t hear either.”¹³ Artoe, at age 80, told writer Cliff Christl what mindset he carried onto the gridiron, “When you’re playing that way, you’d hit your own mother if the situation was right. In those days, you could punch because you didn’t have face masks. The first thing you did was punch a guy in the face. ... We played to win. We fought.”¹⁴

Artoe became a regular visitor to the office of Elmer Layden, president of the NFL. His oft-flying fists, and his penchant for expletives aimed at referees, resulted in a number of fines from Layden. A public confrontation with Layden, caused *The Sporting News* scribe, Hugo Autz, to label Artoe “the voice of the players.”¹⁵ Artoe expressed what players said behind closed locker-room doors. He openly criticized the NFL about the controversy of playing the 1942 All-Star game just two days after Christmas which was missed by Sammy Baugh, Artoe said, “Don’t blame Baugh. Blame the league.”¹⁶ Artoe’s self-appointed as players’ representative was a harbinger of a post-career decision.

In his second year, according to *Pro Football Journal*, that Artoe, as a member of the '41 Bears called by many as one of the most dominant pro football teams of all time, had become “a mainstay on the Bears front line.”¹⁷ The Bears and Packers finished the season tied for first with 10-1 records which required a playoff game. That game played exactly one week after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, at Chicago’s Wrigley Field, marked the first playoff game to determine a divisional champion in NFL history.¹⁸ Artoe lined up against Buford “Baby” Ray, a four-year veteran and 1941 Pro-Bowler. The heralded Bears offensive line plowed the Packers for 277 yards on the ground in a 33-14 victory.

¹¹ Christl, Cliff. “Clyde Goodnight, Hutson's successor, calls him 'greatest of all-time.'” September 14, 2017. <https://www.packers.com/news/clyde-goodnight-hutson-s-successor-calls-him-greatest-of-all-time-19372545>

¹² Larkin, Will. “Ranking the 100 Best Bears Ever: No. 87, Lee Artoe.” *Chicago Tribune*, June 11, 2019. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/bears/history/ct-spt-bears-best-players-lee-artoe-20190611-story.html>

¹³ IBID.

¹⁴ Christl.

¹⁵ Autz, Hugo. “Post-Season Huddle.” *The Sporting News*, January 14, 1943, 13.

¹⁶ IBID.

¹⁷ Willis, Chris. “The NFL’s Top Pre-WWII Tackles” July 17, 2019.

<https://nflfootballjournal.blogspot.com/2019/07/the-nfls-top-pre-wwii-tackles.html>

¹⁸ Sportslifer, “Bears-Packers Last Playoff—One Week After Pearl Harbor.” January 17, 2011.

<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/576118-bears-packers-last-playoff-one-week-after-pearl-harbor>



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The Bears returned to the championship game and played the Eastern Division champion New York Giants in Wrigley Field. Artoe faced Mellus, the season's AP first team All-Pro left tackle, and the player who beat Artoe out the prior year as first team All-Pro right tackle. The Bears front line racked up 389 total offensive yards. Chicago scored 28 points in the second half to gain back-to-back Ed Thorp Memorial trophies. Artoe pocketed \$431 for the winner's share and a championship gold fob.

The 1942 Bears sought their third consecutive NFL championship as well as becoming the first team to post a perfect season. The Bears outscored the opposition 376 points to 84, in compiling an 11-0 record. Artoe earned his first All-Pro first team selection from the Associated Press and by NFL players. Against the Chicago Cardinals in a game Halas called "one of the most brutal football games ever seen," he also recalled, "It was the game where tackle Lee Artoe first drew recognition as football's big, bad Bear, and had a smashed nose, black eyes, and broken teeth to prove it."¹⁹

For their third championship game in a row, the Bears faced the Redskins. Artoe again faced Wilbur Wilkins. He recorded his only career touchdown when he scooped up a fumble by halfback Dick Todd, and rumbled 50 yards for the Bears first score in the second quarter. Unfortunately, it was the only offense for Chicago as the Redskins defeated the high-powered Bears 14-6. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* headlines blared, "Bears' Vaunted Line Outplayed."²⁰ Artoe would not get a chance for revenge because he enlisted in the United States Navy after the season.

He played in the Pro Bowl before reporting to the Navy. During the game he was involved in two altercations which ended with punches being exchanged. Maybe residue feelings from the loss to Washington led to a brawl between Artoe and Fred Davis, a tackle on the Redskins. In the same game Artoe and Chet Adams, the left tackle of the Cleveland Rams mistakenly exchanged punches because they were in rival uniforms, but on the same West All-Star team.²¹ *The New York Times*' headline proclaimed, "Artoe's Field Goal Decides Game, 17-14."²²

Artoe entered the Navy as an ensign, in 1943, and served as a lieutenant in the Pacific Theater on a UDT (Underwater Demolition Team) unit. When he completed the course for the UDT detachment, ensign Artoe had to fill out a form. On the form, where it asked for assignment preference, he wrote, "sea duty" and under the reason for his choice he wrote, "because I can fight like the blazes."²³

¹⁹ " '41 Class Best, In Halas' Book." *The Sporting News*, December 8, 1948, 62.

²⁰ UPI. "Redskins Capture Pro Football Title, 14-6." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. December 14, 1942, 18.

²¹ "Sports Of The Times: About Nothing In Particular." *New York Times*. December 30, 1942, 26 & January 10, 1943, 52.

²² Effrat, Louis. "

²³ "Sports Of The Times: About Nothing In Particular." *New York Times*. December 10, 1943, 29.



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The league suffered during the war because teams had less players available to play. The NFL contemplated reducing the 1943 roster from 33 to 25. Artoe stationed near Washington, DC offered to play for the Redskins, but only if the Bears granted permission.²⁴ Halas denied the proposal. He had other ideas for Artoe.

Artoe stayed in shape playing for the USNATB Amphibs service football team. Wearing number 18, he played two seasons, 1943-44, at tackle as a player-coach.²⁵ In early 1945, Artoe's UDT unit was shipped to the Pacific in preparations for the eventual invasion of Japan. Like many, Artoe was spared that task with the war ending on September 3, V-J Day.

According to Gary D'Amato and Cliff Christl, in their book *Mudbaths and Bloodbaths-The Inside Story of the Bears-Packers Rivalry*, the Bears pulled some strings to get Artoe an early furlough to return to the U.S. in time for the Bears' game in Green Bay on September 30. Artoe wore number 1 that season. All of Halas' scheming ended when Artoe was ejected from the game on the very first kickoff for punching Larry Craig in the mouth after Craig hit Artoe with a blindside block.

During the season's rematch in Chicago, the Packers' Ken Keuper gave Artoe a forearm to the face, breaking his nose, and the lower and upper jaws while knocking out 11 teeth.²⁶ The Bears finished fourth with a 3-7 record.

The All American Football Conference arrived after World War II. The pre-1946 off season saw conflict between the upstart league and the established NFL regarding contracts. One of the focal points was Artoe. The tug of war between the Los Angeles Dons and the Bears resulted with Artoe becoming the first established NFL star to jump to the rival AAFC. He signed with the Dons on January 4, 1946 for \$15,000.²⁷ Halas convinced Artoe to accept the offer from the Dons telling him, "It's to your advantage to take the offer, since you are not worth that kind of money to a ball club that must pay players' salaries out of the money it takes in at the gate."²⁸ Besides the large paycheck, Artoe was listed as an official of the Dons, as an assistant manager.

²⁴ "Sports Of The Times: Here, There, and Everywhere." *New York Times*, August 9, 1943, 29.

²⁵ USNATB souvenir program. Genky.kentonlibrary.org/pdf/rmc/kcpl046005012.pdf

²⁶ Larkin, Will. "Ranking the 100 Best Bears Ever: No. 87, Lee Artoe." *Chicago Tribune*, June 11, 2019. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/bears/history/ct-spt-bears-best-players-lee-artoe-20190611-story.html>

²⁷ Bashore, Mel. "Lee Robert Reno Artoe." https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/22191606/lee-robert_reno-artoe

²⁸ Prell, Ed. "Five Players On Bears Roster Jump Fence." *The Sporting News*, January 10, 1946, 19.



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The Dons, “a high-talented crew,”²⁹ filled their roster with twenty-one players with NFL experience as well as “name” players.³⁰ Artoe chose his college number, 44, to wear in the AAFC. *The New York Times* identified Artoe as “one of the biggest and most experienced players on the field” for the new league.³¹ He played right tackle and earned second team All-AAFC. He continued to kick when needed and played on special teams, recording a kickoff return for 13 yards.

Under Dud DeGroot, the Dons went 7-5-2. Los Angeles was a fine offensive club, third in scoring with 307 points, but allowed almost as many, 290. Artoe faced three former NFL All-Pros in the new league. He again banged heads with Bruiser Kinard formerly of the Brooklyn Dodgers, now with the New York Yankees, John Mellus previously of the New York Giants now playing on the San Francisco 49ers, and Willie Wilken hitherto on Washington now on the Chicago Rockets. It was in the opening season that Artoe underwent a sense of Karma.

At the beginning of the 1946 season, on August 30 in Los Angeles the Dons played a pre-season game against the New York Yankees. Early in the first quarter Artoe broke through and sacked Spec Sanders attempting to pass. Arthur Daley of the *New York Times* explained what happened next, “Artoe smothered Sanders. He rolled over Spec and rested. His forearm rested across Sander’s face and he began to grind Spec’s face. Sanders bit him, a rather ravenous bite. Artoe yowled and leaped to his feet.”³²

In 1947, the Dons finished third with a 7-7 record. Artoe announced his retirement at the end of the season. The Baltimore Colts general manager, Walter Driskill, convinced Artoe to come out of retirement and play for the Colts. He signed as a free agent for the 1948 season. The official 1948 Baltimore Press and Radio described Artoe as, “Big, powerful, rough, and a veteran of major league pro football. Artoe is considered one of the Colts’ prize catches of the season... a top-draw lineman.”³³ He played in all 14 games, starting in eight of them. Artoe pass blocked for rookie Y.A. Tittle. He now played alongside, former opponent John Mellus.

Baltimore and the Buffalo Bills tied for first place with identical records. The Colts and Bills played for the division championship, and the right to meet the Cleveland Browns for the 1948 AAFC Championship. It’s a little known Baltimore football fact that the

²⁹ King, Joe. “Rams-49ers Feud Landmark In Growth of NFL.” *The Sporting News*, November 20, 1965, 35.

³⁰ King, Joe. “Grid Loops Will Trigger Bidding Binge.” *The Sporting News*, November 11, 1959, 28.

³¹ “Sports of the Times: A Momentous Bite” *New York Times*, November 16, 1947, S2.

³² Daley, Arthur. “A Momentous Bite,” *New York Times*, November 16, 1947, S2.

³³ “1948 Baltimore Colts Press and Radio Guide.” Page 14.

<https://res.cloudinary.com/nflclubs/image/upload/colts/ssgpevzyfkmkbyh5unbp8.pdf>



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playoff game against the Bills was Baltimore's first ever professional post-season game.³⁴ Artoe did not start but saw action during the game. The teams saw 27,327 enthusiastic fans enjoy a close fought battle which the Colts led 17-7 going into the fourth quarter. Three Buffalo touchdowns in the final period disappointed the Baltimore fans. The playoff game was Artoe's last pro football game. He retired for a second time and meant it.

Paul Mazzoleni opened a gas station in Green Bay in 1949 which became a popular gathering place for many Packers players over the years. Mazzoleni explained, "One day Packers fullback Ted Fritsch stopped in. A bunch of us are standing around talking about dirty players. Fritsch jumps into the discussion and says, "'What goes on in that pile-up, you'll never believe. They twisted your leg. They tried to gouge your eyes out. They pulled on your ears.' He said, 'If you don't want to believe it,' then he pulled his pants down and said, 'If you want to know about a dirty player. That (blank) Artoe. I've still got the teeth marks in my (butt).'"³⁵

Following football, Artoe spent his career as a chemical engineer in Chicago and eventually went into business selling carbon arc lighting, used in projectors, to movie theaters.³⁶ Artoe helped form the NFL Alumni Association.³⁷ In 1962, Lee Artoe was a one of several candidates at the tackle position for the first pro players to be enshrined into the new Pro Football Hall of Fame.³⁸ He did not make the cut. In 1984, Artoe was inducted into the Santa Clara University Hall of Fame.³⁹ He suffered through eight hip surgeries from the ravages of his career. "He was very determined, very stubborn," said his wife, Elaine, "Football took a toll on him."⁴⁰ In 2019 Will Larkin of the *Chicago Tribune* ranked the best 100 Chicago Bears all-time players; he ranked Artoe number 87.⁴¹ In 2021 the University of California released its' "Best 15 Golden Bears In NFL Draft History Outside the Top 2 Rounds," Artoe was ranked number 6 on the list.⁴²

³⁴ Backert, Kurt. "Old School: A Look Back To Baltimore's Controversial Playoff Game." *Russell Street Report*. October 23, 2010. <https://russellstreetreport.com/2010/10/23/street-talk/old-school-a-look-back-to-baltimore-controversial-first-playoff-game/>

³⁵ Christl, Cliff. "Packers Fan Reminisces About Early Years of Packers-Bears Rivalry." October 20, 2016. <https://www.packers.com/news/packers-fan-reminisces-about-early-years-of-packers-bears-rivalry-17922028>

³⁶ McCarty.

³⁷ Larkin.

³⁸ Broeg, Bob. "14 Electors Face Tough Sifting Task." *The Sporting News*, September 1, 1962, 19.

³⁹ "Lee Artoe '40" Bronco Bench Foundation Santa Clara University. <https://www.scu.edu/athletics/bruncobench/hall-of-fame/hall-of-fame-inductees/artoe-lee/artoe-40.html>

⁴⁰ McCarty.

⁴¹ Larkin.

⁴² Farauo, Jeff. "Cal Football: The Best 15 Golden Bear Values In NFL Draft History: Cal Players Taken Outside the Top 2 Rounds Have Launched Successful NFL Careers."

<https://www.si.com/college/cal/news/top-cal-draft-values>



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He died April 1, 2005 in Wilmette, Illinois and was entombed at Memorial Park Cemetery in Skokie, Illinois. Besides his wife, Elaine Strauschild Artoe, he was survived by a son, Robert; two stepchildren, William Blatt, and Beth Blatt; and a granddaughter and three step-grandchildren. Lee Artoe, a 6-foot-3, 235-pound offensive and defensive tackle was “a one-of-a-kind character.”⁴³

Additional resources:

Pro Football Reference. www.pro-football-reference.com

“1947 LA Dons AAFC Season Highlights.” Produced by Television Art Enterprises. www.youtube.com/watch?v=uUf99rter70_

⁴³ Larkin.