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John Chickerneo

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John “Chick” Louis Chickerneo was part of a dream, literally speaking. A member of the famed “dream backfield” at the University of Pittsburgh, he won back-to-back National titles and Eastern championships in 1936 and 1937.¹ Chickerneo was then drafted in the third round of the 1939 NFL Draft by the New York Giants.² Like many of his peers, his career was interrupted by military service, which delayed his entry into the league. Chickerneo earned the rank of second lieutenant in the U. S. Army, serving in both World War II and in the Korean War.³

As a member of Steve Owen's Giants, he played in four games during the 1942 season. It would be the only NFL season he played in. Chickerneo teamed with future Hall-of-Famer Tuffy Leemans and other stars including back Ward Cuff and end Jim Lee Howell. Chickerneo made one career interception and punted eight times, averaging 37.8 yards per kick.⁴ The Giants were a middle-of-the-road team in 1942, averaging 14.1 points per game (5th of 10 teams) and allowed 12.6 points per contest (4th of 10 teams). They finished at 5-5-1, their first non-winning season since 1936, after having made an NFL Championship Game appearance in 1941, a 37-9 loss to the Chicago Bears.⁵ The Giants did not qualify for the postseason, finishing in third place in the NFL Eastern Division.

In 1949 Chickerneo began a foray into coaching, where he would spend the vast majority of his football career. He made a return to the University of Pittsburgh as an assistant coach through 1952.⁶ Since his departure as a player in 1938, the team declined in performance, largely as a result of the departure of head coach Jock Sutherland and the school's deemphasis of athletics. From 1939-48, the Panthers recorded just two winning seasons. The 1949 Panthers recorded a 6-3 mark that included a thrilling 22-21 victory over the ninth ranked University of Pennsylvania Quakers and victories over rivals West Virginia University and Penn State University.⁷ Against the Quakers, Pittsburgh recorded a safety on a blocked punt with 35 seconds remaining to take the 22-21 win. Chickerneo

1 “John Chickerneo,” hphs.dist113.org, accessed December 1, 2025, [Wayback Machine](#).

2 “John Chickerneo,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed December 1, 2025, [John Chickerneo Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

3 “John Louis Chickerneo,” findagrave.com, accessed December 1, 2025, [John Louis Chickerneo \(1917-1995\) - Find a Grave Memorial](#).

4 “John Chickerneo,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed December 1, 2025, [John Chickerneo Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

5 “New York Giants Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed December 1, 2025, [New York Giants Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).



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developed the backfield, as the Panthers had three backs drafted in the 1950 NFL Draft: Jimmy Joe Robinson (third round), Lou Cecconi (13th round) and Carl DePasqua (29th round).⁸ Chickerno moved to coach the freshman team in 1950 and the Panthers' head coach Mike Milligan resigned. Len Casanova was hired to coach the team and there was regression to a 1-8 mark. The only victory was a mid-season 21-7 win over rival West Virginia.⁹ The next season was not much better with a 3-7 mark, which was a season of streaks. Pitt lost its first seven games, but ended the year on a three-game winning streak, taking down West Virginia, Penn State and the Miami Hurricanes.¹⁰

In 1952, Chickerno accepted a new coaching position in the high school ranks at Sharon High School as the head football coach, where he stayed until 1959. The Tigers football team enjoyed three conference titles and one undefeated season (1956).¹¹ He also taught mathematics at the school from 1955-58. In 1959, he moved to Highland Park, Illinois, where he accepted a similar situation, working as the high school's head football coach and teaching mathematics, a position he held for 25 years, stepping down in 1984.¹² Chickerno's run included the 1964 Suburban League Football Championship.¹³

John Chickerno was born on March 13, 1917 in Gary, Indiana. He attended Warren G. Harding High School in Warren, Ohio, where he was an outstanding athlete, starring in football, basketball, baseball and track & field.¹⁴ His high level of athleticism drew attention from University of Pittsburgh football coach Jock Sutherland. Chickerno played football at Pitt from 1935-38. He played on the freshman team in 1935, then starred on the varsity squad.¹⁵ At the time, the Panthers were a national power. From 1927-32 they made three appearances in the Rose Bowl (1927, 1929, 1932) and were crowned national champion twice (1929, 1931) by college football historian Parke Davis.¹⁶ Chickerno teamed with Marshall Goldberg, Harold "Curly" Stebbins and Dick Cassiano to anchor an outstanding backfield in Sutherland's single-wing offense.¹⁷ The

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7 "1949 Pitt Panthers Schedule and Results," sports-reference.com, accessed December 1, 2025, [1949 Pitt Panthers Schedule and Results | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).

8 "1950 NFL Draft," ProFootballReference.com, accessed December 1, 2025, [1950 NFL Draft Listing | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

9 "1950 Pitt Panthers Schedule and Results," sports-reference.com, accessed December 1, 2025, [1950 Pitt Panthers Schedule and Results | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).

10 "1951 Pitt Panthers Schedule and Results," sports-reference.com, accessed December 1, 2025, [1951 Pitt Panthers Schedule and Results | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).

11 "John Chickerno," hphs.dist113.org, accessed December 1, 2025, [Wayback Machine](#).

12 "John Chickerno," hphs.dist113.org, accessed December 1, 2025, [Wayback Machine](#).

13 "John Chickerno," hphs.dist113.org, accessed December 1, 2025, [Wayback Machine](#).



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quartet is regarded as one of the greatest backfields in college football history, some believe equal to Notre Dame's famed "Four Horsemen."

Using Sutherland's variation of the single-wing offense, the Panthers scored 83 points in their first three contests in 1936, all victories.¹⁸ They suffered an incomprehensible, 7-0, setback in their fourth game against the local rival Duquesne Dukes. Duquesne's George Matsik scored the game's only points on a 72-yard touchdown dash in the second quarter.¹⁹ It marked the only loss on the season for the Panthers, as they rebounded to throttle Notre Dame, 26-0, in the next game, sending the Irish to its worst defeat in over a decade. The Panthers suffered another setback, tying the Fordham Rams in New York, 0-0, after squandering multiple opportunities. They rebounded to finish the regular season strong, winning their final three contests, en route to the school's first Rose Bowl Game victory.²⁰ The Panthers shut out the Huskies of the University of Washington, 21-0, in front of nearly 88,000 fans in Pasadena, California.²¹ The win capped a season where Pittsburgh shut out six opponents, earned a national championship by several selectors and were crowned Eastern champions while compiling an 8-1-1 record. Goldberg led the team in scoring with 36 points on six touchdowns, while Stebbins was third on the club with 24 points (four touchdowns).²²

In 1937, Chickerno mostly saw time as a reserve player. Meanwhile, the Panthers continued dominating the opponents on their schedule. Pittsburgh started the season shutting out its first five opponents by a combined score of 97-0.²³ After dispatching local rival Carnegie Tech, the Panthers defeated consecutive ranked opponents: winning in South Bend, Indiana against twelfth ranked Notre Dame and defeating the Nebraska Cornhuskers, 13-7 at Pitt Stadium. Heading into the Nebraska game, the Panthers had

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16 "Pitt Panthers School History," sports-reference.com, accessed December 1, 2025, [Pitt Panthers College Football History, Stats, Records | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).

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18 "1936 Pitt Panthers Schedule and Results," sports-reference.com, accessed December 1, 2025, [1936 Pitt Panthers Schedule and Results | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).

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20 "1936 Pitt Panthers Schedule and Results," sports-reference.com, accessed December 1, 2025, [1936 Pitt Panthers Schedule and Results | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).

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22 "1936 Pitt Panthers Schedule and Results," sports-reference.com, accessed December 1, 2025, [1936 Pitt Panthers Schedule and Results | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).

23 "1937 Pitt Panthers Schedule and Results," sports-reference.com, accessed December 1, 2025, [1937 Pitt Panthers Schedule and Results | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).



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earned the nation's number one ranking. Following that big victory Pitt finished the season with two more victories to cap off an undefeated 9-0-1 campaign.²⁴ The dream backfield accounted for 96 of the team's 203 points scored on the season. The team repeated as Eastern champions, earning the Lambert Trophy, and was named consensus National Champions by most NCAA selectors, including the Associated Press. The team declined an invitation to the Rose Bowl.²⁵

During his senior campaign in 1938, Chickerno made several starts and became one of the go-to players on offense. In a 34-7 victory over Southern Methodist University, he hauled in a 30-yard touchdown pass to open the scoring for the Panthers.²⁶ He was also highly regarded by Fordham head coach, Jim Crowley, who when asked about the Panthers' backfield stated, "I really expect there will be some scoring this time. Our problem is to be sure that we have a team composed of sure hard-hitting tacklers in the game. Pitt has the kind of backs which must be hit hard to be stopped. Shoddy tackling won't stop the fellows like Goldberg, Stebbins, Cassiano and Chickerno."²⁷ The Panthers prevailed, 24-13. Pittsburgh finished the season at a disappointing 8-2. Their two losses were shocking, as they fell to local rival Carnegie Tech, 20-10, and the regular season finale at Duke University, 7-0.²⁸

Chickerno garnered several awards following the season. He was also one of eight Panthers selected in the 1939 NFL Draft, including three of the "Dream Backfield" backs.²⁹ He was selected in the third round, the 25th overall pick. Chickerno also participated in the North-South All-Star Game in Montgomery, Alabama and the East-West Shrine Game at Kezar Stadium in San Francisco³⁰ He graduated from Pitt with a degree in engineering.

Chickerno passed away on October 3, 1995 at the age of 78, in Deerfield, Illinois.

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