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Jim Crotty

This article was written by Budd Bailey.

The town of International Falls, Minnesota, is associated with a good-sized list of athletic celebrities, considering it only has about 5,000 residents. While a majority of them are hockey players – not surprising considering the climate so close to the Canadian border – the town has produced three football players. One of them, Bronko Nagurski, is one of the legendary figures in the sport’s history. The other two aren’t as well known, but Jim Crotty and Frank Youso both played in the sport’s highest level. Crotty didn’t have a long career, but he was good enough to play in three different pro football leagues.

Crotty’s story begins not in International Falls, but in Storm Lake, Iowa. James Richard Crotty was born there on March 31, 1938. His parents were Irwin and Ellen, and he was the second of seven children. Storm Lake is located in the northwest portion of Iowa; the city’s biggest celebrity probably is actor Gene Hackman, who went to high school there.



At some point, the Crotty family packed up and moved north to International Falls. The town is close to the “Northwest Angle,” a small bit of land above the 49th parallel that belongs to the United States thanks to a surveying error long ago. International Falls bills itself as “The Icebox of the Nation,” as temperatures can dip as low as minus-55 degrees.

Crotty was a standout athlete during his time at Falls High School, which carried the nickname of “Broncos” after Nagurski. He played football, basketball, baseball and track. Jim was named the Most Valuable Back in a state high school all-star game. Obviously, Crotty was good. That’s why in 2015 he was named to the first class of the International Falls High School Bronco Sports Hall of Fame.



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Among those who noticed how good Crotty was in high school as a football player was Notre Dame University. That's not completely surprising since Jim's father played for Notre Dame in around 1930. (Records from that era are incomplete.) Irwin was a good enough runner to go up against the legendary Jesse Owens in a special race in Storm Lake in 1940.

The junior Crotty opted to follow Dad's footsteps when he graduated from high school in 1956. (Jim's father and mother had been married at Notre Dame.) By the way, that's also the year that the rest of the Crottys packed up their belongings and moved to Riverton in the Seattle area.

Jim was a freshman during the 1956 season, and he probably wondered what had gone wrong with the varsity. Notre Dame gone 33-5-2 in its previous four seasons, but everything fell apart with a dismal 2-8 record. About the only high point was the fact that Paul Hornung somehow won the Heisman Trophy as the nation's best college player. Usually such an honor is reserved for a player from a winning team.

Terry Brennan was still Notre Dame's head coach when the 1957 season began, and the team bounced back. It went 7-3, and recorded one of the most memorable wins in college football history on November 16. The Fighting Irish went to Oklahoma and ended the Sooners' famous 47-game winning streak with a 7-0 victory. ND was ranked 10th in the nation at the end of the season. Crotty was a reserve halfback, and had 14 carries for 47 yards and a touchdown. He backed up a couple of players who had good-sized careers in the NFL, Nick Pietrosante and Dick Lynch. However, Jim started the last two games, and scored a touchdown against Southern California.

Notre Dame slipped a little in Crotty's junior year in 1958. The Irish won its first two games then alternated losses and wins the rest of the way. That added up to a 6-4 season and a No. 17 ranking in the final wire service poll. Crotty's playing time went up that season, as he was listed a No. 1 halfback. Jim carried the ball 67 times for 315 yards. He also caught 13 passes for 137 yards, and returned punts and kickoffs. A highlight came when he was a big part of a 70-yard drive in the third period that sparked the Fighting Irish to a 34-24 win over North Carolina.

That sort of season wasn't good enough for Notre Dame's boosters, and the pressure built on the administration to change coaches. Brennan eventually was fired at the end of the 1958 season, and Joe Kuharich was lured away from the head coaching position of the Washington Redskins to come to South Bend. As for Brennan, he never coached again.

Kuharich and his staff moved Crotty to fullback for the start of the 1959 season, even though Jim was listed at 5-foot-10 and 185 pounds. In Kuharich's first game, Jim scored



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two touchdowns in a 28-8 win over North Carolina. That contest is remembered as the one when Notre Dame switched out of its traditional green uniforms and unveiled blue jerseys with gold shoulder stripes.

Crotty was injured early in the season and missed five games. Upon returning, Jim moved back to halfback and still wound up second among backs and receivers with 70 snaps for the season. He ran 62 times for 184 yards and three touchdowns, and caught eight passes for 104 yards. Crotty also played right cornerback on defense, where he performed well after his return from injury.

Brennan's record didn't look so bad at the end of 1959. Notre Dame needed an upset win over No. 7 USC in the year's final game to finish at 5-5; Kuharich only stayed four years in South Bend and never had a winning record there before returning to the pros. By the way, Jim's brother Mike – 12 years his junior – eventually played college football at Notre Dame as well.

Once the season ended, Crotty had a decision to make. He was taken in the 12th round of the National Football League draft by the Washington Redskins (No. 136 overall). Crotty also was taken by the Dallas Texans of the AFL. He chose to sign a contract with the more established NFL team, signing a deal about a week after the draft.

There was an opportunity to make the Washington roster. The Redskins were coming off a 3-9 season, Mike Nixon's first as a head coach there after Kuharich left for Notre Dame. What he might not have known at the time was that he'd have to make the team as a defensive back/linebacker. College players usually were on both the offensive and defensive units in that era,

No matter where Crotty played that season, it didn't help. The Redskins were awful in 1960. They finished with a 1-9-2 record, with the only win coming in the season's second game against the brand-new Dallas Cowboys. Washington finished with eight straight losses. Since Crotty missed the first win, due to an injury, he did not play for the team in a victory that season. Jim played in nine games with five starts, and had an interception along the way.

Coaches tend to get fired when they win one game in a season, and Nixon was no exception. He was replaced by Bill McPeak, who did even worse than his predecessor with a 1-12-1 record. The only times that Washington didn't lose was when they played the second-year Cowboys. Crotty played in five games for the Redskins, starting one of them. Then he was released by Washington on November 9. The team's record was 0-8, and the Redskins' front office no doubt needed to show it was trying to change the situation.



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Jim waited for the phone to ring, and sure enough it rang almost immediately. The Buffalo Bills were interested in him. He was immediately signed by the AFL team, and was rushed into the lineup for a November 12 game against the Dallas Texans. Crotty actually made a good contribution in helping the Bills end a three-game losing streak. Crotty hadn't even practiced with Buffalo, but played well – and was involved in his first win after 16 straight losses as a pro. “We should get a player a week from Washington and we'd never lose,” said new teammate and former Redskin Ralph Felton. “A player coming from the Redskins hasn't won in so long, he'll die just for the smell of victory.”

The Bills won again a week later in Denver, and Crotty had two interceptions to help his new team. It was the first time in Bills' history that Buffalo had played a game in freezing temperatures. Maybe Jim felt at home, considering his time in “the Icebox of the Nation.” Crotty went on to play five games for the Bills that season, starting three of them. He finished with the two interceptions. The Bills ended up 6-8 for the 1961 season. That wasn't good enough for owner Ralph Wilson, who fired coach Buster Ramsey and replaced him with Lou Saban.

According to the Bills' yearbook of 1962, Crotty's 1961 contract allowed him to become a free agent when that season ended. He decided he'd give the Bills another chance, and signed a new deal in May. He played in three games for the Bills in the month of September, starting one. Crotty was released by the team on September 28. A leg injury in training camp that sidelined him for a couple of weeks probably didn't help his chances of sticking around.

For someone who had lived near the Canadian border for much of his life, Crotty figured to look to the North for his next job in football. Sure enough, he found employment there in 1963. Crotty was a defensive back and a punt returner in seven games for the Calgary Stampeders. He had one interception on defense, and seven returns for 48 yards on special teams. However, injuries again were a problem. At least Crotty's final season as a pro featured plenty of wins, as Calgary went 10-4-2.

With football out of the picture, it was time for Jim to get on with the rest of his life. He joined his parents in Seattle, and married Karrie (Kerola) there in 1969. They had four children. One of them, Keth, played football for Kennedy Catholic High School in Burien.

Crotty died on November 20, 2021 in Burien, Washington, at the age of 83. Karrie had died in 2017. An unnamed family member summed up Jim's personality this was in a newspaper obituary: “Jim was known for his generous and humble nature, kind heart,



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foul mouth and strong Catholic faith. He was wickedly funny with an inappropriate sense of humor. His limericks were legendary but not suitable to print here.”

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