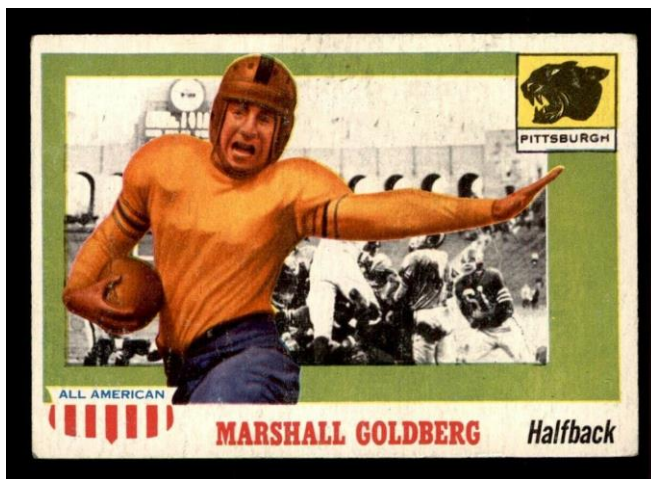


Marshall Goldberg

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

Marshall Goldberg was always a big dreamer. It was not ironic during his playing days that he earned the nickname, “Biggie”.¹ No matter the sport he played or the team he played on, Marshall fit right in with his natural athletic ability. He ascended through the football ranks to star with the NFL's Chicago Cardinals as a fabulous two-way player in the 1940s. His eight year NFL career from 1939 to 1948 was briefly interrupted by a short stint due to service in the US Navy (1944, 1945). During his career, he was arguably the Cardinals' best player, and a top back during the war time era.



Marshall was born to Sol Goldberg and Rebecca Fram in Elkins, West Virginia on October 24, 1917. Both immigrants, his parents worked as entrepreneurs in the clothing business.²³ They worked hard for what they had, and saved all they could. As a result, Marshall's home life was very blue-collar. He learned the values of working for everything – the food he ate, the clothes on his back, and the success he would achieve in life. Among his interests growing up: competitive sports. He stood roughly 5'11” and 190 pounds, an athletic build that allowed him to star at Elkins High School on the football, track, and basketball teams. Goldberg was not only the team captain, but he was also an All-State performer in his senior year.⁴ Marshall's astounding success drew the interest of major college football powerhouses from across the country.

Among those vying for his services were Notre Dame's Elmer Layden and Pittsburgh's Jock Sutherland. The decision on where to play college ball became a turning point in Marshall's life. It was during this time his career really began to take off. Jock Sutherland traveled to Elkins to meet with Sol Goldberg, in a recruiting push to get Marshall to come



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to Pittsburgh. The two spent a considerable time discussing Marshall in private. All the while, Marshall stood waiting. Sol and Dr. Sutherland appeared, told Marshall that he would be attending the University of Pittsburgh to play football.⁵ The University of Pittsburgh Panthers football team was among the nation's elite programs in the 1930s. Two years prior to Goldberg's arrival, the Panthers were National Champions. In their program history, they had been recognized as national champions six times.⁶

Sutherland set him to play running back due to his quickness, elusive ability, and breakaway speed, under his double-wing offense, known as the Sutherland Scythe. Goldberg excelled in the offense, as it required very talented, finesse backs. Goldberg helped run the Panthers to another national championship in 1936, finishing with an 8-1-1 record. The run included wins over #7 Notre Dame, #6 Nebraska, and a tie with powerhouse #5 Fordham. The season was capped off with a 21-0 blanking of Washington in the Rose Bowl, Pitt's first win in the game in four tries.⁷ He also won a national championship the following season in 1937.

Marshall joined Dick Cassiano, John Chickerno and Curly Stebbins to form the Dream Backfield. The quartet often draws high praise as the greatest backfield of all-time. Stebbins recalls, "The thing about everybody in that backfield is they all worked pretty hard. Just like today, you don't try to judge anyone until you see how hard they work. I'd say a pretty good friendship developed between the four of us."⁸ Goldberg was a two-time consensus All-American in 1937 and 1938. He ran for a total of 1,957 yards in his Pitt career. It was the school record, which stood for near thirty years, until it was surpassed in 1974. His performances led him to a third-place finish in Heisman Trophy voting in 1937, and was the runner up in 1938.⁹

After quite a successful collegiate career, Goldberg was chosen twelfth overall in the 1939 NFL draft by the Chicago Cardinals. Completely unknown to the team, Goldberg stepped right in, playing two-ways, defensive back on defense, and halfback on offense.¹⁰ The Cardinals were mired in a rut of losing, only two winning seasons since 1926. Marshall's impact was immediate. He was the team's leading rusher as a rookie, starting at fullback, joining former college teammate Frank Patrick in the Chicago backfield.¹¹ However, Chicago's offense struggled mightily, earning just over 2,000 total yards in 11 games, for a 1-10 record.¹²

Goldberg continued to pace the Chicago offense in 1940, 1941, and 1942 on the ground. His best statistical season was 1941, when he rushed for 427 yards, three touchdowns, earning a Pro Bowl selection. He was also named a second-team all-pro by the Chicago Herald American, Collyer's Eye Magazine, and the UPI.¹³ Goldberg also hauled in 16 passes for 313 yards, and a receiving score. On defense, he nabbed a league high seven interceptions. He recalls about playing on defense, "I liked it. I was a rover. Moved



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around anywhere. I guess you could say I was the first free safety.”¹⁴ Goldberg also returned kicks and punts. He led the league with 290 yards on 12 kick returns, and 1,236 all-purpose yards. Despite a 3-7-1 mark, the Cardinals played some of the league's best teams very tough. They lost two games to NFL runner up Green Bay by a combined eight points. They also recorded wins over the New York Giants, who finished 8-3, and the 7-4 Brooklyn Dodgers.¹⁵ In 1943, he appeared in just one game, after being called to duty. Goldberg served in the U.S. Navy thru 1945 as a Navy SEAL. He was stationed in the South Pacific during WWII. His hard work carried over from the gridiron, leading him to reach the rank of lieutenant.¹⁶

Following the war time, Goldberg returned to football in 1946. The Cardinals earned their first winning season since 1935, finishing at 6-5. They boasted the third ranked offense, ending the season on a high note, defeating the eventual NFL champion Chicago Bears, 35-28.¹⁷ This would set the stage for the following season, what would be the greatest season, to date, in franchise history.

Goldberg teamed with backs Elmer Angsman, Pat Harder, Charley Trippi, and quarterback Paul Christman, to create a formidable quintet, labeled the “Million Dollar Backfield”.¹⁸ The Cardinals won seven of their first eight contests, then lost back-to-back games against the Redskins and Giants. They prevailed in their season finale against the crosstown rival Bears, 30-21, sending them to the NFL title game against the Eagles. The Million Dollar Backfield ran all over Philadelphia, for 282 yards on 39 attempts, in a 28-21 triumph for Chicago. Goldberg sealed the game with an interception.¹⁹ His stellar season earned him a first-team all-pro selection by the Chicago Herald American. Goldberg then retired following the 1948 season.

After football he got into entrepreneurship and the insurance industry in the Chicagoland area. He was selected to the 1930s College Football Team of the Decade by Sports Illustrated, and inducted to the College Football Hall of Fame in 1958. Goldberg was also enshrined into other halls, such as the city of Pittsburgh's, the West Virginia Sports Writer's Hall of Fame, and the National Jewish Sports Hall of Fame.²⁰ Despite his success in the NFL, Goldberg has not become a member of the pro football hall of fame.

In 2006, Goldberg was a member of the inaugural class of the Cardinals Ring of Honor. Throughout his career he sustained a good number of big hits and concussions. As a result, during his years after football he dealt with memory loss and brain trauma. He passed away on April 3, 2006, at the age of 88. He was survived by his spouse, Rita Goldberg, son Marshall Goldberg, and daughter Ellen Tullos. In his name, the Marshall Goldberg Traumatic Brain Injury Fund was established at the University of Illinois-Chicago. Goldberg's number 42 in college was retired by the University of Pittsburgh in 1997.²¹



End Notes:

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- ¹ 4 Wallace, William N. “Pitt 'Dream' in '37 didn't need roses,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 6, 1994, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1994-11-06-9411060238-story.html>.
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