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Leo Nomellini

This article was written by Matthew Keddie.

Leo Nomellini mastered the art of the pin. Not only on the gridiron, where he compiled numerous tackles and pancakes as a member of the San Francisco 49ers (1950 to 1963), but also as a world champion wrestler during off-seasons.¹ He began his wrestling career in 1950, the same year he was drafted by San Francisco. Standing at 6' 3" and nearly 260 pounds, he garnered the nickname "The Lion."² The name fit him perfectly due to his bulky stature, strength and quickness. Teammate and future Hall of Fame running back Joe Perry remarked of his strength, "He was as strong as three bulls. He'd slap you on the back and knock you 20 feet."³ Lions are rather quick on their feet as they can attain a full speed up to 50 miles per hour. Leo may have gotten close, said former defensive teammate Charlie Krueger, "Most people didn't realize how quick Leo was. It wasn't unusual to see him chase down running backs. In a game against the Rams one time, he caught (running back) Ollie Matson from behind. I think Ollie was a little embarrassed."⁴ Leo also possessed an iron man durability. He never missed a game in his professional football career, playing in all 174 regular season contests. Including post-season and pre-season contests, the official count is over 260 games.⁵



Nomellini's play earned him a trip to the NFL Pro Bowl 10 times (1950 to 1953, 1956 to 1961). He earned all-pro honors in seven distinct seasons by at least one major selector – the Associated Press, the UPI, *NY Daily News*, *Newspaper Ent. Association*, etc.⁶ He was chosen as a first-team all-pro in six seasons exclusively by the Associated Press.



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Nomellini was arguably the 49ers strongest defensive player throughout his career, anchoring the defensive line.⁷ He also teamed with fellow all-pro defensive lineman Bob Toneff, Pro Bowler Charlie Krueger and the tenacious Dan Colchico that provided a harassing presence to opposing quarterbacks. Buck Shaw's 49ers teams were not necessarily known for strong defenses, but they were solid. In Nomellini's 14 years, the 49ers ranked as a top five scoring defense five times and inside the top 10 in all but two seasons.⁸ Leo also played offensive tackle for three seasons, blocking for the famed 'Million Dollar Backfield' of Joe Perry, Hugh McElhenny, John Henry Johnson and Y. A. Tittle, in addition to backs Johnny Strzykalski and Norm Standlee.⁹ He also provided pass protection for quarterback Frankie Albert. On playing a variety of positions he said, "I really like to play football. It's tough and it's hard and no pro football owners can pay a player enough for the punishment they take. You just have to like it – and I do."¹⁰

The 49ers were inconsistent after joining the NFL in 1950. They managed six winning seasons for the decade, but just one playoff appearance, a stunning 31-27 defeat to the Detroit Lions in the 1957 Divisional round, after blowing a 17-point lead.¹¹ San Francisco's lack of success can be attributed to a few elements. One was poor management decisions, especially when owner Tony Morabito fired Buck Shaw. Nomellini played for five different head coaches. That speaks to ownership not finding the right fit to lead the club.¹² Management also failed to routinely address defense through the draft. During Nomellini's tenure, they drafted defensive players in the first

- 1 "Leo Nomellini," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [Leo Nomellini Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 2 "Leo Nomellini," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [Leo Nomellini Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 3 Hession, Joe. "75 for 75: Leo the Lion," 49ers.com, November 2, 2021, accessed June 10, 2024, [75 for 75: Leo the Lion \(49ers.com\)](#).
- 4 Hession, Joe. "75 for 75: Leo the Lion," 49ers.com, November 2, 2021, accessed June 10, 2024, [75 for 75: Leo the Lion \(49ers.com\)](#).
- 5 "Leo Nomellini," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [Leo Nomellini Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 6 "Leo Nomellini," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [Leo Nomellini Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 7 "Leo Nomellini," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [Leo Nomellini Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 8 "San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [San Francisco 49ers Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 9 "San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [San Francisco 49ers Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 10 "Leo Nomellini," profootballhof.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [Leo Nomellini | Pro Football Hall of Fame \(profootballhof.com\)](#).
- 11 "San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [San Francisco 49ers Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 12 "San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [San Francisco 49ers Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).



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round just four times in 14 seasons. Only one player (drafted in 1961), Hall of Fame defensive back, Jimmy Johnson, earned consensus first-team all-pro honors.¹³

Nomellini was well liked by his teammates, whom he enjoyed much camaraderie with. His closest personal relationship may have been with tackle Bob St. Clair. St. Clair said of their relationship, “We were close, very close. You know he was born in Lucca, Italy, and raised by his grandmother in Chicago. Every time we'd go play the Bears, we'd go over to the house and they'd stuff us with good Italian food. We'd end up on the living room floor, we were so stuffed.”¹⁴ Nomellini was also close to Gordie Soltau, who he also played with in college at the University of Minnesota. Soltau recalled of him, “He was a great teammate and one of the best linemen we ever had. He loved to play, and he loved people.”¹⁵

Nomellini was drafted ninth overall in the first round of the 1950 NFL Draft by the 49ers. He was the team's first NFL draft pick. He became an instant starter at defensive tackle, making 11 starts as a rookie.¹⁶ He recovered three fumbles on a 3-9 team that earned him Pro Bowl honors. Nomellini switched to right offensive tackle in 1951, playing alongside fellow Italian Bruno Banducci.¹⁷ He stayed there until 1953 when he was moved back to defensive tackle, to make room for rookie Bob St. Clair. Nomellini also played at left offensive tackle in 1955 under head coach Red Strader.¹⁸

Nomellini retired following the 1963 season. Among the numerous accolades he earned were spots on the NFL 1950s All-Decade Team and the NFL 50th Anniversary All-Time Team.¹⁹ In 2009 he was inducted as part of the inaugural class of the 49ers Hall of Fame and had his number 73 retired by the team in 1971. Nomellini is also a member of the Forty-Niner 10-year club for more than 10 years of service to the team.²⁰

1 3 “San Francisco 49ers Draft History,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [San Francisco 49ers All-Time Draft History | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 4 Sullivan, Pat. “Ex-49er Leo 'Lion' Nomellini Dies at 76 / Hall of Famer suffered stroke 3 weeks ago,” sfgate.com, October 18, 2000, accessed June 10, 2024, [Ex-49er Leo `Lion' Nomellini Dies at 76 / Hall of Famer suffered stroke 3 weeks ago \(sfgate.com\)](#).

1 5 Sullivan, Pat. “Ex-49er Leo 'Lion' Nomellini Dies at 76 / Hall of Famer suffered stroke 3 weeks ago,” sfgate.com, October 18, 2000, accessed June 10, 2024, [Ex-49er Leo `Lion' Nomellini Dies at 76 / Hall of Famer suffered stroke 3 weeks ago \(sfgate.com\)](#).

1 6 “Leo Nomellini,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [Leo Nomellini Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 7 “Leo Nomellini,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [Leo Nomellini Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 8 “Leo Nomellini,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [Leo Nomellini Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 9 “Leo Nomellini,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [Leo Nomellini Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

2 0 “Leo Nomellini,” gophersports.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [Leo Nomellini - M Club Hall of Fame - University of Minnesota Athletics \(gophersports.com\)](#).



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Leo Joseph Nomellini was born in Lucca, Tuscany, Italy on June 19, 1924. He emigrated to the United States with his parents, settling in Chicago, Illinois when he was four years old. He attended Crane High School in west Chicago, but never played football in school.²¹ He supported the family by working in a foundry, then joined the U.S. Marine Corps for World War II. He spent multiple tours of duty in the Pacific Ocean, in Okinawa and Saipan, Japan.

Following his time in the service, where he picked up football for roughly a year, Nomellini was offered a scholarship to play college football at the University of Minnesota.²² He played football, ran track and field and wrestled from 1946 through 1949. The football team was led by head coach Bernie Bierman, a highly regarded coach who won five national championships at the school (1934 thru 1936, 1940, 1941).²³ He won 93 games over 16 seasons at the university and was inducted to the College Football Hall of Fame in 1955.

The Golden Gophers were competitive in both the 1946 and 1947 seasons, finishing in the middle of the Big Nine (now Big Ten) Conference standings.²⁴ The 1948 club pitched three shutouts and finished third in the conference standings with a 7-2 overall record and number 16 national ranking.²⁵ Nomellini was a two-time consensus All-American (1948, 1949) and earned All-Conference honors three times (1947 to 1949). The Gophers' only losses in 1948 were to eventual Rose Bowl champion Northwestern University (19-16) and eventual national champion and top-ranked Michigan (27-14).²⁶ Minnesota followed up with another solid season in 1949, repeating third place in the conference with another 7-2 record. The Gophers finished the season ranked number eight in the Associated Press poll.²⁷ Former college teammate and Pro Football Hall of Fame head coach, Bud Grant,

2 1 Sullivan, Pat. "Ex-49er Leo 'Lion' Nomellini Dies at 76 / Hall of Famer suffered stroke 3 weeks ago," sfgate.com, October 18, 2000, accessed June 10, 2024, [Ex-49er Leo 'Lion' Nomellini Dies at 76 / Hall of Famer suffered stroke 3 weeks ago \(sfgate.com\)](#).

2 2 "Leo Nomellini," gophersports.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [Leo Nomellini - M Club Hall of Fame - University of Minnesota Athletics \(gophersports.com\)](#).

2 3 "Minnesota Golden Gophers School History," sports-reference.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [Minnesota Golden Gophers College Football History, Stats, Records | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).



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recalled of their playing days, “We would pull him, we were running the single wing then, and when he'd come around the corner, he would just roar. His blocking technique wasn't so great, but he'd just run you over like a truck.”²⁸

Nomellini was also a world champion wrestler, starting his career in 1950, in off-seasons from football. He mainly wrestled in both San Francisco and Minnesota, where he participated in their local National Wrestling Alliance's (NWA). He won numerous wrestling titles including the world singles and world tag-team championship.²⁹ For instance, in 1961 he teamed with Wilbur Snyder to capture the American Wrestling Association (AWA) World Tag Team Championship in Minneapolis. Nomellini was also a promoter of wrestling in the Bay Area.³⁰ He was inducted to the National Wrestling Hall of Fame in 2008. Bob St. Clair remembers the world title bout against Lou Thesz, “It was something else. I was in his corner. Thesz won because he was the only one left standing.”³¹ Former 49ers broadcaster Bob Fouts recalled, “Leo once was asked what sport was harder, football or wrestling. He said wrestling was harder because you had to drive to Stockton, Modesto and Fresno.”³²

Outside of football and wrestling he worked in the insurance business for roughly three decades. In the Bay Area, he worked for the Northwestern Title Company. He died on October 17, 2000 as a result of a stroke.³³ He was survived by his daughter Lane and son

- 2 4 “Minnesota Golden Gophers School History,” sports-reference.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [Minnesota Golden Gophers College Football History, Stats, Records | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).
- 2 5 “1948 Minnesota Golden Gophers Schedule and Results,” sports-reference.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [1948 Minnesota Golden Gophers Schedule and Results | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).
- 2 6 “1948 Minnesota Golden Gophers Schedule and Results,” sports-reference.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [1948 Minnesota Golden Gophers Schedule and Results | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).
- 2 7 “1949 Minnesota Golden Gophers Schedule and Results,” sports-reference.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [1949 Minnesota Golden Gophers Schedule and Results | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](#).
- 2 8 Hession, Joe. “75 for 75: Leo the Lion,” 49ers.com, November 2, 2021, accessed June 10, 2024, [75 for 75: Leo the Lion \(49ers.com\)](#).
- 2 9 “Leo Nomellini,” nwhof.org, accessed June 10, 2024, [Leo Nomellini \(nwhof.org\)](#).
- 3 0 Hoops, Brian. “On this day in pro wrestling history (May 23): Antonio Inoki vs. Hulk Hogan, Andre vs. Sakaguchi, Frank Gotch in 57-minute match,” f4wonline.com, May 23, 2015, accessed June 10, 2024, [On this day in pro wrestling history \(May 23\): Antonio Inoki vs. Hulk Hogan, Andre vs. Sakaguchi, Frank Gotch in 57-minute match \(f4wonline.com\)](#).
- 3 1 Sullivan, Pat. “Ex-49er Leo 'Lion' Nomellini Dies at 76 / Hall of Famer suffered stroke 3 weeks ago,” sfgate.com, October 18, 2000, accessed June 10, 2024, [Ex-49er Leo 'Lion' Nomellini Dies at 76 / Hall of Famer suffered stroke 3 weeks ago \(sfgate.com\)](#).
- 3 2 Sullivan, Pat. “Ex-49er Leo 'Lion' Nomellini Dies at 76 / Hall of Famer suffered stroke 3 weeks ago,” sfgate.com, October 18, 2000, accessed June 10, 2024, [Ex-49er Leo 'Lion' Nomellini Dies at 76 / Hall of Famer suffered stroke 3 weeks ago \(sfgate.com\)](#).



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Drew, sister Leona Carlson and four grandchildren. Nomellini garnered much camaraderie among his teammates and the fans.³⁴ Former teammate Y. A. Tittle said, “Let's just put it this way: Leo was one of the kindest, gentlest, biggest tough men you'd ever want to meet. He was big and strong, a weightlifter. ... More than that though, he was just a great human being. He never had any bad things to say about anyone. He was a gossiper. ... He was a guy you could poke fun at, and he'd poke fun at you. He's a friend I hate to see go.”³⁵ Bob Fouts recalled, “Leo loved mingling with people. He'd sign autographs for hours and talk to people he never met like they were his best friends.”³⁶

In addition to the National Wrestling Hall of Fame, he was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1977, to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1969 and to the University of Minnesota's M Club Hall of Fame in 1993.³⁷

3 3 “Leo Nomellini,” footballfoundation.org, accessed June 10, 2024, [Leo Nomellini \(1977\) - Hall of Fame - National Football Foundation](#).

3 4 Sullivan, Pat. “Ex-49er Leo 'Lion' Nomellini Dies at 76 / Hall of Famer suffered stroke 3 weeks ago,” sfgate.com, October 18, 2000, accessed June 10, 2024, [Ex-49er Leo `Lion' Nomellini Dies at 76 / Hall of Famer suffered stroke 3 weeks ago \(sfgate.com\)](#).

3 5 Sullivan, Pat. “Ex-49er Leo 'Lion' Nomellini Dies at 76 / Hall of Famer suffered stroke 3 weeks ago,” sfgate.com, October 18, 2000, accessed June 10, 2024, [Ex-49er Leo `Lion' Nomellini Dies at 76 / Hall of Famer suffered stroke 3 weeks ago \(sfgate.com\)](#).

3 6 Hession, Joe. “75 for 75: Leo the Lion,” 49ers.com, November 2, 2021, accessed June 10, 2024, [75 for 75: Leo the Lion \(49ers.com\)](#).

3 7 “Leo Nomellini,” gophersports.com, accessed June 10, 2024, [Leo Nomellini - M Club Hall of Fame - University of Minnesota Athletics \(gophersports.com\)](#).