

## Johnny Strzykalski

This article was written by Matthew Keddie.

The early San Francisco 49ers teams were built around stars in Frankie Albert, Norm Standlee, Alyn Beals, and future Hall of Famer Joe Perry. However, when the club needed a big play, it had to dig deep. On the ground or through the air it turned to its potentially best kept secret, Johnny Strzykalski.<sup>1</sup> Johnny demonstrated a style of play and attitude that separated him from his peers. Former teammate Paul Salata said of him, “He was a great team player. He didn't mind blocking for Joe [Perry]. He just wanted to play football.”<sup>2</sup> Those who packed Kezar Stadium seemed to agree, according to former *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Ron Fimrite, who wrote, “The fans loved the way he ran. He didn't have blinding speed, but he was hard to knock off his feet, even if you did knock him off his feet.”<sup>3</sup> San Francisco leaned on Strzykalski's quickness as a runner on offense. He led the AAFC twice (1947, 1948) in yards per rush at 6.3 and 6.5, respectively, and ran for over 900 yards both seasons.<sup>4</sup> In his era, 900 yards rushing in a season was considered an outstanding feat.



Strzykalski pointed out a unique rule at the time which he used to his advantage saying, “In those days you could get up and run after you were tackled. The tackler had to hold you down until the ref blew the whistle. If he didn't blow it, I was up and running and I



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was pretty good at that.”<sup>5</sup> In all, Strzykalski was named an all-league player in three of his seven seasons (1946 to 1952), all of which he played in San Francisco. In 1947, he was a second-team all-AAFC selection by the league media; in 1948 he earned consensus all-AAFC honors from the Associated Press, the *New York Daily News*, and the UPI.<sup>6</sup> In his first NFL season in 1950, Strzykalski earned second-team All-Pro honors as chosen by the Associated Press, and was named to the NFL's Pro Bowl.<sup>7</sup>

What may have earned him the accolades was his ability to instantaneously change the game in favor of the 49ers. For example, Strzykalski scored 31 career touchdowns in 29 career games. In those contests, the 49ers' record was an astounding 25-2-2.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, the team was 30-30-1 when he did not score a touchdown. “Johnny Strike,” as he was referred to by his teammates, was a gamechanger. In nine of the 29 games where he scored, Strzykalski's touchdown broke a tie, and in seven of them, the 49ers went on to victory.<sup>9</sup> In five contests that he scored a touchdown while the team trailed, San Francisco came back to win or tie in four.<sup>10</sup> Part of it, according to his roommate Gordie Soltau was that he never quit or gave up on a play, “He had no fear. One frozen day in Green Bay, he caught a pass, was hit from the back and went down. We didn't have nose guards in those days and his nose was splattered all over his face. There was a lot of blood in the snow, but John just got up and kept on playing.”<sup>11</sup> Lou Spadia agreed by saying, “The only thing tougher than Strzykalski was spelling his name.”

- 1 “Johnny Strzykalski,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 11, 2024, [Johnny Strzykalski Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 2 Bush, David. “Original 49er knew how to put the strike in Strzykalski,” sfgate.com, July 10, 2002, [Original 49er knew how to put the strike in Strzykalski \(sfgate.com\)](#).
- 3 Bush, David. “Original 49er knew how to put the strike in Strzykalski,” sfgate.com, July 10, 2002, [Original 49er knew how to put the strike in Strzykalski \(sfgate.com\)](#).
- 4 “Johnny Strzykalski,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 11, 2024, [Johnny Strzykalski Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 5 Hession, Joe. “75 for 75: Power Ball,” 49ers.com, December 20, 2021, [75 for 75: Power Ball \(49ers.com\)](#).
- 6 “Johnny Strzykalski,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 11, 2024, [Johnny Strzykalski Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 7 “Johnny Strzykalski,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 11, 2024, [Johnny Strzykalski Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 8 “Johnny Strzykalski, 31 Regular Season Touchdowns,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 11, 2024, [Johnny Strzykalski Career Touchdown Log | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 9 “Johnny Strzykalski, 31 Regular Season Touchdowns,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 11, 2024, [Johnny Strzykalski Career Touchdown Log | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 10 “Johnny Strzykalski, 31 Regular Season Touchdowns,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 11, 2024, [Johnny Strzykalski Career Touchdown Log | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 11 Bush, David. “Original 49er knew how to put the strike in Strzykalski,” sfgate.com, July 10, 2002, [Original 49er knew how to put the strike in Strzykalski \(sfgate.com\)](#).



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Strzykalski also saw time on defense, playing as a defensive back. From 1946 to 1948, he picked off eight passes as a regular starter.<sup>12</sup> He also was utilized by head coach Buck Shaw on special teams as a return specialist. Strzykalski averaged over 12 yards per punt return and 21.2 yards per kick return for his career.<sup>13</sup>

The 49ers were among the best teams in the AAFC (1946 to 1949), compiling a 39-15-2 record that included four second place finishes, second to only the Cleveland Browns, who won all four league titles. San Francisco went 2-7 head-to-head with Cleveland, including a title game defeat in 1949.<sup>14</sup> In 1948 and 1949, the 49ers boasted the AAFC's top ranked offense, scoring roughly 35 points per game.<sup>15</sup> Strzykalski led the team with 1,400 yards from scrimmage in 1948, and was second on the team in rushing during 1949, trailing only Joe Perry.<sup>16</sup> On the talent of the Browns he said, "Cleveland was easily the toughest team back then, although the New York Yankees were good too. Marion Motley was the best back I ever saw. He was powerful and he was fast. He could also catch the pass. I played man-to-man on Dante Lavelli and Mac Speedie. I'll probably put those guys in the Hall of Fame, they caught so many passes over me."<sup>17</sup>

In their transition year to the NFL in 1950, San Francisco struggled to a 3-9 mark. It took the club six weeks (0-5 start) prior to earning its first NFL win, a narrow 28-27 victory over the Detroit Lions.<sup>18</sup> San Francisco only had three Pro Bowl players: quarterback Frankie Albert, linebacker Norm Standlee, and Strzykalski. Over the next few seasons, the team adjusted to the league's playing style, winning seven games three times, and nine games in 1953.<sup>19</sup>

Strzykalski retired following the 1952 season. He played in 81 NFL games, making 62 starts. He averaged 5.2 yards per rush and totaled 4,633 yards from scrimmage for his career.<sup>20</sup> The reason he provided for his retirement was the emergence of running back

1 2 "Johnny Strzykalski," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 11, 2024, [Johnny Strzykalski Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/players/player.aspx?id=112000).

1 3 "Johnny Strzykalski," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 11, 2024, [Johnny Strzykalski Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/players/player.aspx?id=112000).

1 4 "San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 11, 2024, [San Francisco 49ers Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/franchise-encyclopedia/san-francisco-49ers/).

1 5 "San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 11, 2024, [San Francisco 49ers Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/franchise-encyclopedia/san-francisco-49ers/).

1 6 "Johnny Strzykalski," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 11, 2024, [Johnny Strzykalski Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/players/player.aspx?id=112000).

1 7 Hession, Joe. *Forty Niners: Looking back* (San Francisco, CA: Foghorn Press, 1985), 19-20.

1 8 "1950 San Francisco 49ers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 11, 2024, [1950 San Francisco 49ers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/rosters/1950-san-francisco-49ers/).

1 9 "San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 11, 2024, [San Francisco 49ers Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/franchise-encyclopedia/san-francisco-49ers/).



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and explosive talent, Hugh McElhenny. Strzykalski said, “McElhenny was just too good. He stepped right in and took my place. I knew then it was time to go.”<sup>21</sup>

Reflecting on his playing days he said, “In those days we were like one big family. Money didn't mean that much to us. We just wanted to play the game. To be a good football player back then, more than anything you needed guts and heart. And you had to love the game. We had guys playing with the worst injuries. If you had a broken nose you suited up.”<sup>22</sup> He also was extremely versatile in all facets of the game saying, “Back then we all played 60 minutes. We were young and healthy. After 60 minutes we still felt fresh.”<sup>23</sup>

Strzykalski was drafted in the first round by the Green Bay Packers in the 1946 NFL Draft. Being a hometown star growing up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, it was nearly a foregone conclusion he would play for the Packers.<sup>24</sup> However, Paul Brown of the AAFC's Cleveland Browns signed him to a one year contract worth roughly \$8,000.<sup>25</sup> Upon showing up to play, he realized the Browns were loaded in the offensive backfield with future stars in Marion Motley, Edgar Jones, Dante Lavelli, and Mac Speedie, and as a result the time he would see the field would be few and far between.<sup>26</sup> Brown sent him on to San Francisco, where he came in touch with 49ers head coach Buck Shaw. In a game against the Browns, Lou Spadia recalls, “I think he was knocked down five times, but they couldn't stop him. He was like the kids' toy that keeps bouncing up.”<sup>27</sup>

He was born on December 14, 1921 in Milwaukee and attended South Division High School. Strzykalski stayed local, playing college football for the Marquette University Hilltoppers (now Golden Eagles).<sup>28</sup> The school disbanded its football program in 1960. In 1942, his lone season of college football, Marquette enjoyed one of its most successful seasons in school history.<sup>29</sup> The Hilltoppers turned in a 7-2 record. Its only defeats were to the Great Lakes Navy (24-0) and to in-state foe, the Wisconsin Badgers (35-7). Marquette's schedule included road victories over regional foes in the Michigan State

2 0 “Johnny Strzykalski,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 11, 2024, [Johnny Strzykalski Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

2 1 Hession, Joe. *Forty Niners: Looking back* (San Francisco, CA: Foghorn Press, 1985), 19-20.

2 2 Hession, Joe. *Forty Niners: Looking back* (San Francisco, CA: Foghorn Press, 1985), 19-20.

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2 4 “Johnny Strzykalski,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 11, 2024, [Johnny Strzykalski Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

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2 6 “1946 Cleveland Browns Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 11, 2024, [1946 Cleveland Browns Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

2 7 Bush, David. “Original 49er knew how to put the strike in Strzykalski,” sfgate.com, July 10, 2002, [Original 49er knew how to put the strike in Strzykalski \(sfgate.com\)](#).



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Spartans, Kansas Jayhawks, and Iowa State Cyclones.<sup>30</sup> The season marked the final time any Marquette football team would win seven or more games in a season.

Following college and prior to his time in professional football, Strzykalski served in the United States Air Force, also playing football for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> division teams.<sup>31</sup> During the off seasons in San Francisco, he worked as a car salesman, and was a big advocate of community service. Former teammate Gordie Soltau said, “He would spend hours teaching kids with physical problems how to swim. He was very good about charity work.”<sup>32</sup>

Strzykalski passed away on June 19, 2002 in Hendersonville, North Carolina at the age of 80. He was survived by his wife of 56 years, Betty, two daughters, four grandchildren, as well as a brother and sister.<sup>33</sup>

End Notes:

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- 2 8 Adams, Robin M. “The Five Best Packers Who Never Played for Green Bay,” wissportsheroics.com, April 4, 2020, [The Best Packers Who Never Played For Green Bay \(wissportsheroics.com\)](https://www.wissportsheroics.com/the-five-best-packers-who-never-played-for-green-bay/).
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  - 3 0 “1942 Marquette Golden Eagles Schedule and Results,” sports-reference.com, accessed February 11, 2024, [1942 Marquette Golden Eagles Schedule and Results | College Football at Sports-Reference.com](https://www.sports-reference.com/college-football/schedule/1942-marquette-golden-eagles/).
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