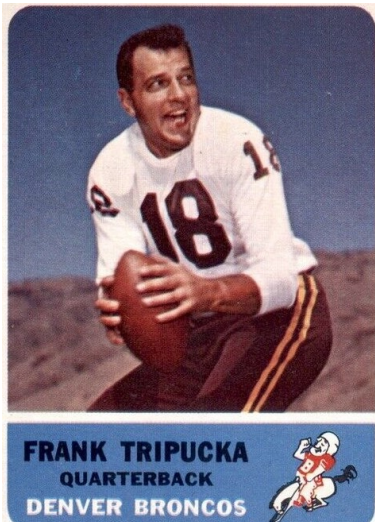


Frank Tripucka

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

John Elway holds nearly every Denver Broncos passing record, but Frank Tripucka created his own lore in team history. He tossed the first touchdown pass in AFL history on September 9, 1960 in Denver's 13-10 victory over the Boston Patriots.¹ Most known for his time in Denver during the AFL days, Tripucka also had stints with the Detroit Lions, Chicago Cardinals, and Dallas Texans in the NFL and played in the Canadian Football League.



Tripucka was an original Bronco, having played on the team for four seasons (1960-1963) where he led the AFL twice in passing (1960 and 1962), amassing 3,038 and 2,917 yards, respectively.² He was a second team all-AFL choice in 1962 by the UPI, also earning AFL All-Star honors that year. The 1962 club, behind a record-setting season by Tripucka and receiver Lionel Taylor, anchored the AFL's top ranked passing attack, but finished with only a 7-7 record.

Denver did not field very talented teams during Tripucka's tenure, however he worked hard to win in spite of it. He earned praise from the organization for his play. "He is proudly remembered as one of professional football's first great drop-back quarterbacks. Frank will always hold a very special place in Broncos history for what he meant to this organization and community,"³ the Broncos said in a statement upon his death.

Tripucka's relationship with Frank Filchock, who first met Tripucka in 1953 with the Saskatchewan Roughriders, eventually brought the duo to the AFL. Filchock was hired to



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coach the Broncos, taking Tripucka with him as an assistant coach. At halftime during a preseason game in 1960 he recalled, “We were playing a pre-season game and both our quarterbacks couldn't hit the side of a barn. So at halftime, Filchok says to me 'Trip, you know the plays, you're in shape, your arm is okay, so how about going in and giving the fans their money's worth?' I went in the second half, got the team moving and ended up playing four seasons.”⁴

Tripucka's favorite target was receiver Lionel Taylor, who tore up opposing AFL secondaries. Taylor led the AFL in receptions in five of the first six years of the league's existence. His 100 receptions in 1961 ranks second in league history for a single-season. Taylor was also a first-team all-AFL selection four times (1960-1962; 1965).⁵ Tripucka's greatest statistical output was on September 15, 1962 against the Buffalo Bills when he racked up 447 passing yards and two touchdowns on 29 of 56 passing. He connected with Taylor nine times for 133 yards.⁶ Ironically Taylor's best game occurred on November 27 of that year also against Buffalo. The game ended in a 38-38 tie, but the Broncos rallied from a 38-7 deficit, scoring the game's final 31 points. Taylor hauled in three consecutive scores from Tripucka, finishing with 199 receiving yards on nine receptions.⁷

Following the 1963 season he was released by Denver. Tripucka held nearly every franchise passing record – passing yards, attempts, completions, touchdowns, and interceptions. They would later be broken by John Elway. In 1965, Tripucka was the first Broncos player to have his number (18) retired.⁸ Later in 1986, he was inducted as one of three members in the third class of the Denver Broncos Ring of Fame.

Perhaps there was not a moment of greater special significance for Tripucka than in 2012 when he was approached by Indianapolis Colts and Broncos superstar quarterback Peyton

- 1 Lattimore-Volkman, Laurie. “Tripucka had just one request for Manning to wear No. 18 – a Super Bowl win,” milehighreport.com, March 7, 2016, <https://www.milehighreport.com/2016/3/7/11171742/peyton-manning-frank-tripucka-denver-broncos-No-18>.
- 2 “Frank Tripucka,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed November 28, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/T/TripFr00.htm>.
- 3 “Frank Tripucka dies at age 85,” ESPN.com, September 12, 2013, https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/9665954/frank-tripucka-denver-broncos-inaugural-qb-dies-85.
- 4 Jerzy, Buck. “Frank Tripucka,” polishsportshof.com, June 12, 1997, https://www.polishsportshof.com/portfolio_page/frank-tripucka/.
- 5 “Lionel Taylor,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed November 28, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/T/TayLi00.htm>.
- 6 “Denver Broncos at Buffalo Bills – September 15th, 1962,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed November 28, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/196209150buf.htm>.
- 7 “Buffalo Bills at Denver Broncos – November 27th, 1960,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed November 28, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/196011270den.htm>.
- 8 Lynch, Tim. “MHR's Forgotten Broncos – Frank “The Trip” Tripucka,” milehighreport.com, June 3, 2008, <https://www.milehighreport.com/2008/6/3/509703/mhr-s-forgotten-broncos-fr>.



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Manning about wearing the number 18. Having worn number 18 his entire career, Manning stated he would not wear it when he signed with the Broncos in 2012.⁹ Upon hearing of Manning's reticence to wear the jersey number, Tripucka reached out to the star quarterback and told him, "I'd be honored. You're my kind of quarterback, and I insist you wear it."¹⁰ He continued with, "Yeah, go out and win a Super Bowl for me."¹¹ Manning's Broncos defeated the Carolina Panthers to claim Super Bowl 50 on February 7, 2016, Denver's first championship in 16 years.

Tripucka passed away on September 12, 2013, so he did not see Manning win the Super Bowl for Denver. His son, Chris recalled, "My dad would have loved that game. Peyton knew the strength of his team and he knew it wasn't him. It was a team win, and my dad was always about the team."¹² Commenting about his father allowing Manning to wear his number 18 he said, "My dad was a quarterback fan, especially for quarterbacks like him. My dad would have loved Peyton going out on top. He made exactly the right decision."¹³ At first, Manning was hesitant. He said, "It really goes against everything I believe in being a guy who appreciates the history of football and I believe when a number is retired it should stay retired; but in talking to Frank Tripucka, I feel he really wants me to wear his number, being another quarterback for the Denver Broncos as Mr. Tripucka was back years ago as the first quarterback to play here. It truly is an honor for me and I'm really following his wishes to wear it because that's what he wants me to do and I'm honored to do that."¹⁴ Tripucka's number 18 returned to retirement on March 7, 2016 after Manning announced his retirement.

9 Lattimore-Volkman, Laurie. "Tripucka had just one request for Manning to wear No. 18 – a Super Bowl win," milehighreport.com, March 7, 2016, <https://www.milehighreport.com/2016/3/7/11171742/peyton-manning-frank-tripucka-denver-broncos-No-18>.

1 0 Lattimore-Volkman, Laurie. "Tripucka had just one request for Manning to wear No. 18 – a Super Bowl win," milehighreport.com, March 7, 2016, <https://www.milehighreport.com/2016/3/7/11171742/peyton-manning-frank-tripucka-denver-broncos-No-18>.

1 1 Lattimore-Volkman, Laurie. "Tripucka had just one request for Manning to wear No. 18 – a Super Bowl win," milehighreport.com, March 7, 2016, <https://www.milehighreport.com/2016/3/7/11171742/peyton-manning-frank-tripucka-denver-broncos-No-18>.

1 2 Lattimore-Volkman, Laurie. "Tripucka had just one request for Manning to wear No. 18 – a Super Bowl win," milehighreport.com, March 7, 2016, <https://www.milehighreport.com/2016/3/7/11171742/peyton-manning-frank-tripucka-denver-broncos-No-18>.

1 3 Lattimore-Volkman, Laurie. "Tripucka had just one request for Manning to wear No. 18 – a Super Bowl win," milehighreport.com, March 7, 2016, <https://www.milehighreport.com/2016/3/7/11171742/peyton-manning-frank-tripucka-denver-broncos-No-18>.

1 4 Lynch, Tim. "MHR's Forgotten Broncos – Frank "The Trip" Tripucka," milehighreport.com, June 3, 2008, <https://www.milehighreport.com/2008/6/3/509703/mhr-s-forgotten-broncos-fr>.



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In Tripucka's four seasons with Denver, he totaled a 13-26-1 record as a starter, 7,676 passing yards, and 51 touchdowns against 85 interceptions.¹⁵

Francis Joseph Tripucka was born in Bloomfield, New Jersey on December 8, 1927. A star athlete growing up, he was the captain of the Bloomfield High School baseball, basketball, and football teams. He led the football team to a state championship as a senior in 1944, racking up 29 total touchdowns.¹⁶

Tripucka chose to attend the University of Notre Dame beginning in 1945. He started on the freshman team, then backed up Heisman Trophy winning quarterback Johnny Lujack in 1946 and 1947, thus seeing limited playing time. In his senior year in 1948, he was the undisputed starter, taking advantage of the opportunity.¹⁹ Tripucka threw for 660 yards and a school record 11 touchdown passes. Meanwhile, the Irish were at the pinnacle of college football, winning back-to-back national championships in 1946 and 1947 under the legendary Frank Leahy.²⁰ In Week 3 of the 1948 season, Notre Dame was ranked number 1 in the polls. The Irish would not be ranked lower than second for the remainder of the season. However, in its season finale against the University of Southern California, they played to a 14-14 tie that denied a perfect season and cost them a shot at the national championship. Notre Dame and Michigan were tied atop the rankings at the end of the regular season. As a result, a special vote by the Associated Press was held to determine the national champion. Michigan was selected as national champion by a margin of 226 to 119.²¹ In response, Leahy said, "I just wish we had the opportunity to beat Michigan. We'd be happy to play them any time, on any Saturday, during the fall."²² In Tripucka's three seasons on the varsity squad, Notre Dame never lost a game, finishing 26-0-2. Following his senior season, he played in the College All-Star Game.

Tripucka was drafted ninth overall in the 1949 NFL draft by the Philadelphia Eagles.²³ He was claimed off waivers by the Detroit Lions, beginning his professional career. He saw

- 1 5 "Frank Tripucka dies at age 85," ESPN.com, September 12, 2013, https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/9665954/frank-tripucka-denver-broncos-inaugural-qb-dies-85.
- 1 6 "New Jersey Sports Legend Frank Tripucka, An Avid Golfer, Passes Away," NJSGA.org, September 20, 2013, <https://www.njsga.org/news/post/new-jersey-sports-legend-frank-tripucka-an-avid-golfer-passes-away>.
- 1 9 "Notre Dame Football: Irish legend Frank Tripucka dies," SouthBendTribune.com, September 12, 2013, <https://www.southbendtribune.com/story/sports/college/2013/09/12/otre-dame-football-irish-legend-frank-tripucka-dies/45843467/>.
- 2 0 "Notre Dame Football: Irish legend Frank Tripucka dies," SouthBendTribune.com, September 12, 2013, <https://www.southbendtribune.com/story/sports/college/2013/09/12/otre-dame-football-irish-legend-frank-tripucka-dies/45843467/>.
- 2 1 "Sports Writers Choose Michigan Almost 2 to 1," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 7, 1948, 16.
- 2 2 "1948 Rose Bowl and the National Championship debate," mvictors.com, January 24, 2008, <https://mvictors.com/1948-rose-bowl-highlights-youtube/>.



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limited action as a rookie, playing in six contests, four starts, and a mark of nine touchdowns to 14 interceptions.²⁴ In the summer of 1950, he was traded to the Chicago Cardinals for three rookies: Jim Cain, Clarence Self, and Ray Stackhouse.²⁵ During the 1950 and 1951 seasons Tripucka started just five contests for losing Cardinals squads that went 5-7 and 3-9, respectively. Mid-way through the 1952 campaign he was sent to the Dallas Texans. He started six games going 1-5 on a team that was atrocious, to say the least.²⁶ The extreme lack of talent and ownership accountability saw the club finish 1-11, and as a result of financial woes, was sold back to the NFL.

Following 1952, Tripucka departed for the CFL, signing with the Saskatchewan Roughriders as a quarterback. He took over the starting duties in 1954, throwing for over 2,000 yards every season thru 1958 as the team won 10 games each in 1954, 1955, and 1956.²⁷ Their nemesis was the Winnipeg Blue Bombers, who defeated the Roughriders three consecutive years in the playoffs. Finally, in 1956 Saskatchewan broke through, defeating the Blue Bombers to reach the Western Interprovincial Football Union Finals, where they lost to Edmonton.

Tripucka was traded to the Ottawa Roughriders for the 1959 season.²⁸ Several games in he was released and re-signed with Saskatchewan, taking on the head coaching duties.

Following his tenure with the Denver Broncos in 1963, he would return for a short time, finishing his professional career with Saskatchewan.²⁹

Tripucka was an avid golfer during his career and in retirement. He commonly golfed with New York Yankees catcher Yogi Berra and Notre Dame Heisman winner Angelo Bertelli.¹⁷ Ed Batta, chairman of the New Jersey State Golf Association Caddie

2 3 “Frank Tripucka,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed November 28, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/T/TripFr00.htm>.

2 4 “Frank Tripucka,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed November 28, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/T/TripFr00.htm>.

2 5 “Frank Tripucka,” ProSportsTransactions.com, accessed November 28, 2022, <https://www.prosportstransactions.com/football/Search/SearchResults.php?Player=tripucka&Team=&BeginDate=&EndDate=&PlayerMovementChkBx=yes&submit=Search>.

2 6 “Frank Tripucka,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed November 28, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/T/TripFr00.htm>.

2 7 “Former CFL, NFL star Frank Tripucka dies at 85,” cbc.ca, September 12, 2013, <https://www.cbc.ca/sports/football/cfl/former-cfl-nfl-star-frank-tripucka-dies-at-85-1.1700359>.

2 8 “Former CFL, NFL star Frank Tripucka dies at 85,” cbc.ca, September 12, 2013, <https://www.cbc.ca/sports/football/cfl/former-cfl-nfl-star-frank-tripucka-dies-at-85-1.1700359>.

2 9 “Former CFL, NFL star Frank Tripucka dies at 85,” cbc.ca, September 12, 2013, <https://www.cbc.ca/sports/football/cfl/former-cfl-nfl-star-frank-tripucka-dies-at-85-1.1700359>.

1 7 “New Jersey Sports Legend Frank Tripucka, An Avid Golfer, Passes Away,” NJSGA.org, September 20, 2013, <https://www.njsga.org/news/post/new-jersey-sports-legend-frank-tripucka-an-avid-golfer-passes-away>.



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Scholarship Foundation said, “Frank was a very active golfer. He was a very charming guy for someone with all his fame. He would never walk by without saying hello.”¹⁸

1 8 “New Jersey Sports Legend Frank Tripucka, An Avid Golfer, Passes Away,” NJSGA.org, September 20, 2013, <https://www.njsga.org/news/post/new-jersey-sports-legend-frank-tripucka-an-avid-golfer-passes-away>.