

THE MAN FROM NORTH DAKOTA

By Tony Cusher

Who was North Dakota's first player in the National Football League? Not many from the state have made it in professional sports. Big N.D. has a small population and severe winters. It's an agricultural state. Add it up and there are only limited opportunities to play team sports. Despite these handicaps, a few made it big -- Roger Maris in baseball and pro footballers Pete Retzlaff, Dave Osborne, Steve Myhra, and Steve Nelson come to mind. My research shows the first in the NFL was Larry J. Steinbach.

Larry was born December 23, 1900, on a farm in Eddy County, near New Rockford, N.D., about 115 miles northeast of Bismarck. Life on the Dakota prairie was very rugged in those days. "Modern" conveniences were few. Temperatures often dropped to 40 or 60 degrees below zero! Growing up in such a climate certainly prepared Larry for the rugged life of a pro football player.

His attendance at grade school was intermittent because of the necessities of farm work and the many times he could not get to school through the heavy snow. Additionally, he was plagued with various illnesses. As a consequence, to complete his secondary education so he could go on to college, he enrolled in high school at the advanced age of 22.

Then it was on to St. Thomas College at St. Paul, Minn. With only a little high school football experience but weighing 225 pounds, he went out for the Tommie squad and made the team. He was fortunate to be coached by three former Knute Rockne pupils: head coach Joe Boland and assistants Joe Brandy and Frank Mayer.

After the first practice, Joe Brandy who liked his determination promised, "Larry, I will make an All-American out of you."

Steinbach played four seasons on the Tommie team, working part time until he gained a football scholarship. He didn't make All-America, but in his last year, when St. Thomas won the Minnesota Conference football championship, he was named to the All-State team.

Coach Boland knew the Bears needed another good tackle and sent Larry to Chicago for a tryout. He showed such bone-crushing talent that George Halas signed him to a 1930 contract -- as a 29-year-old rookie! In later years, he recalled with obvious delight playing four 60-minute games in nine days during that first season. At the other tackle position was Roy "Link" Lyman, a future Hall of Fame member. When Larry's playing days were over, he often visited Lyman in California as their friendship endured. Others on the Bear squad were Red Grange, Bronko Nagurski, George Trafton, and Carl Brumbaugh.

After a few games in 1931, Larry went to the Chicago Cardinals where he played until mid-1933. He finished that season with the Philadelphia Eagles, then in their first NFL year.

In an interview before his death in 1967, Larry contrasted players' conditions in his day with more modern situations. There were no "fringe benefits," of course. "And," he added with a laugh, "you just didn't dare get injured because you'd be released from the team with no income." He was always grateful for having been able to play four injury-free seasons. He also remembered that financing a team was a problem. Usually, the first three games each season were simply financial affairs -- to buy equipment for use during the balance of the schedule.

Because of the slight salaries, players supplemented their income by "barnstorming" after the season. Larry did his share, taking to the road with such well-known grid stars as Ernie Nevers, Johnny Blood, and Nagurski. Among his favorite recollections was a game played January 24, 1932, against the Notre Dame All-Stars at San Francisco. He was told a crowd of 44,000 paid to see the game.

After his retirement, Larry was asked by Halas to help organize a professional football team in the Los Angeles area. Another time, through a friend, he could have bought the Cardinals. But, with a cutious

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eye to the future, he declined, preferring the security of his 3,400-acre farm near New Rockford. There he spent his remaining years actively supervising a profitable grain and cattle operation.

On January 29, 1967, North Dakota's first NFL player, Larry J. Steinbach, passed away. He lies at rest in the Calvary Cemetary, Jamestown, North Dakota.

He was a good -- although not great -- player. Had he begun his NFL career at an earlier age and played for eight or ten years, he no doubt would have achieved a bigger reputation. So, in an odd way, his origins in North Dakota both limit his fame (by lopping years off his NFL tenure) and make him noteworthy (as the first from the state to play in the league). But, perhaps Larry Stenbach's real importance was that he was one of a relatively small group who helped make pro football the entertaining -- and profitable -- sport it is today.