

ARNIE WEINMEISTER

By Bob Braunwart & Bob Carroll

Who were the greatest tackles in pro football? Ask this question of a variety of football fans and you are likely to get a variety of answers -- Turk Edwards, Forrest Gregg, Pete Henry, Cal Hubbard, Bruiser Kinnard and others. But one player who is almost certain to show up on the list is Arnie Weinmeister, who played offensive and defensive tackle for eight seasons with the New York Yankees and Giants and the British Columbia Lions.

Arnie was born of German immigrant parents in Rhein, Saskatchewan. His parents moved to Portland, Oregon before he was a year old, and it was there that he grew up. His first experience with organized football was with Jefferson High in Portland, where he was twice named all-city tackle.

After high school he entered the University of Washington on a football scholarship. He played two years as an end before dropping out of school in 1943 to begin military service.

After four years in the army, including a stint in Europe, Arnie returned to Washington in 1946. The life of an army sergeant had apparently agreed with him, because he had grown while he was away -- to 240 pounds. The Huskies decided to take him out of the line and try him at fullback.

He was spectacular in his first start at the new position, drawing high praise from the press and also from New York Yankees' coach Ray Flaherty. Flaherty described him as "the best-looking fullback prospect in the country." On the basis of Flaherty's scouting report, the Yankees acquired Arnie's A.A.F.C. draft rights.

It was fortunate that he had made such an impression in that first game, for the following week Arnie injured his knee in the Washington-U.C.L.A. game and was out for the season. He was back the following year, but as a tackle -- a position he hadn't played since high school.

At the end of his college career he was chosen to play in the 1948 Chicago All-Star game, but at yet another position -- guard.

Nineteen forty-eight was an ideal time for good college prospects to enter professional football. The All-America Football Conference had survived two full seasons and had demonstrated that it was not just a fleeting shadow. It was a strong competitor with the N.F.L., and one of the areas of strongest competition was in signing upcoming college talent.

Besides the New York Yankees, Weinmeister had also been drafted by the Boston Yanks of the N.F.L. But Boston's offer was too little, too late. Arnie signed with New York for an estimated \$8,000.

"Frankly, if it hadn't been for the two leagues and the 'war,' I wouldn't have played pro ball," Arnie claimed. "The salaries they were paying before wouldn't have interested me. The 'war' was a good thing for the players and in a way, for pro football, too. It brought a lot of fellows into the game who wouldn't have considered it otherwise."

Although the Yankees had drafted Arnie as a fullback prospect, they used him at tackle. In 1948, his first season in the pros, then head coach Ed Strader told reports, "He's the greatest tackle I've ever seen." One of the things that impressed Strader was Weinmeister's speed. Except for speedster Buddy Young, Arnie was the fastest player on the Yankee team.

Arnie played two ways with the Yankees. In his second year he was chosen to the all-A.A.F.C. team. It was the first of five consecutive all-league selections, extending all the way through his N.F.L. career.

With the demise of the All-America Conference following the 1949 season, the New York Giants acquired negotiating rights to Weinmeister and several other ex-Yankees, including Otto Schnellbacher and Tom Landry. Ted Collins, whose New York Bulldogs (as the Boston Yanks) had originally chosen Arnie in the N.F.L. draft, was furious. Arnie himself was not too pleased when he discovered that the Giants intended

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 4, No. 3 (1982)

to cut his salary by 30%. Nevertheless, the 1950 Arnie became a Giant. By the following year he was earning \$11,000 annually, top wages for a tackle.

During his career with the Giants, coach Steve Owen played Arnie almost exclusively on defense. His exceptional speed and skill earned him top honors in the N.F.L. from the start. He was chosen to the all-league team every one of his four playing seasons, 1950-53. Buck Shaw of the Forty-Niners once said of Weinmeister that he "is the outstanding tackle in the National Football League One man can't handle him."

In 1954 Steve Owen left the Giants, and so did Arnie Weinmeister. Arnie signed with the new expansion team in Vancouver, the British Columbia Lions of the Western Interprovincial Football Union, as a player-coach. Vancouver offered him \$15,000 a year, \$3,000 more than the Giants had paid him in 1953. According to B.C. head coach Annis Stukus, it made him "among the highest paid football players in Canada."

This was the second player war of Arnie's career, and he found himself one of the more important skirmishes. It was truly a good time to be the greatest tackle in pro football.

The Giants went to court, claiming breach of contract. However a New York judge ruled that the Giants had not properly exercised the option they held on Weinmeister's services. He allowed the B.C. contract to stand.

Besides the pay raise, one of the more attractive aspects of the Vancouver offer for Arnie was that he would be only an hour's plane ride from his home in Seattle. He was finally back in the Pacific Northwest.

He played two-way tackle again, but he couldn't prevent the Lions from going 1-15 in a dismal premier season. He was back again in 1955, but that was his final professional season.

After his retirement from football, Arnie worked as an official for the Teamsters Union in Seattle, where he had always maintained a home. In 1962 he took on the additional responsibilities of line coach for the Seattle Ramblers, a power in northwest amateur football.

Throughout his career as a lineman, Arnie Weinmeister was known for two things -- his speed and his determination. Wellington Mara, Giants' owner, was fond of telling the following story.

"At our training camp at Saranac Lake, there's a place on the side of a hill called the Eagle's Nest. It's about a city block straight up, or so it seems. Well, Charley Conerly jokingly bet Weinmeister a dollar he couldn't carry him up there. Arnie walked over, picked up Conerly -- all 185 pounds of him -- and lugged him up the hill. He was staggering at the end -- but he made it. I don't know how. It wasn't the bet so much as the challenge to his strength and endurance. He's not apt to be shown up by anyone."