

JOHN ALEXANDER
The First Outside LB

by Chris Thorne

Here's a quickie quiz for all pro football fanatics. Who was the first outside linebacker in pro football history? A - Tony Dearing B - Dick Farrell C - John Alexander D - Dale Musil.

If you answered C, you must have been conversing into the wee hours of the morning with the inimitable John Alexander, who turned 87 on July 4. Alexander resides in Metuchen, New Jersey, and played for the Giants in 1926. He is believed to be the oldest living Giant. He made pro football history on October 1, 1922, while playing the outside linebacker position for the Milwaukee Badgers against the Chicago Cardinals. The Cardinals won the fierce defensive battle, 3-0. A report on the game said Alexander played well, but the tall easterner seemed to be out of condition because of his strenuous and tiring experiment. John admits being a little tired, but not out of shape.

"I did get a little tired, but I was in shape," said Alexander about the linebacker experience. "Some people don't believe I did it first, but I did and I have the proof."

John says he decided to make the historic move to give himself a little more leeway on the field. He moved one step back and was one yard outside of the defensive end. Alexander has mountains of newspaper clippings, mostly photostatic copies of articles from many papers, including the Newark *Star-Eagle*, and Newark *Evening News* and the Staten Island *Advance*.

Alexander, who played at 6-3, 248 (everyone was listed at 210 if they weighed more so they wouldn't intimidate the opposing team) has been featured in the magazine *Legends*, produced by the NFL Alumni Association, and the Professional Football Researchers Association newsletter in recent issues.

"I keep everything," said John. "I enjoy going back and reading about the old days. I still get letters from some of the people that saw me play way back then."

John played his college ball at Rutgers and his high school ball at Newark's South Side High (now Shabazz). He lettered at Rutgers in 1919 while a younger John Alexander lettered from 1973-76. The two made connections recently which pleased both men.

Alexander's exploits gave former Giant coach Steve Owen an idea for his famed "umbrella defense," a long standby of the Giants and another reason to believe that Alexander was the first outside linebacker.

John also had a hand in the Giants' debut in the NFL. John gathered 12 of his "pals" to face the tough Gothamites on September 27, 1925. The pickup players called themselves the Red Jackets. They faced the Giants at Newark's Dreamland Park (in the Weequahic section of town). The game drew more than 3,500 fans and the Jackets displayed a tough defense, but fell to the Giants, 3-0. The Red Jackets, who did nothing more than a few exercises before the game, had held their own against the Giants and earned \$50 for their efforts. Alexander made many outstanding tackles which stopped some long runs by the Giants. John played for Orange that year and it beat the Giants for the Eastern pro football title.

Alexander also played offensive tackle in the days of the 60-minute man. The most money he earned as a pro for each game was \$100 because the team was allotted \$1,800. While with the Milwaukee club, Alexander played with two black legends in Rutgers -- grad Paul Robeson and Brown University All-American Fritz Pollard. "Those two guys were so good, but they had to take so much grief. Robeson asked for \$200 and threatened not to play if he didn't get it. He got it because people wanted to see him play. He helped a lot of us get more money."

Alexander talked about how Robeson and Pollard had to stay in separate facilities after games. "Despite all the trouble they went through, they played great in every game. They were fantastic."

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 5, No. 9 (1983)

The players supplied their own uniforms, food and lodging and everything else except their jerseys.

Alexander played for Newark A.C., the Unions, the Stapletons, the Bayonne Vikings, and the Orange A.C. and other teams that he can't remember. He played until 1933 when tuberculosis struck him down. He jokingly says the TB also cut down some of his height.

John was in the jewelry business before retiring in 1970. He says he doesn't watch much football on television because "today's players are spoiled. They get all that money and most of them don't play longer than 14 minutes," said John. "They get a hangnail and they don't want to play. Most of them are money hungry. And the drugs...what a shame.

"I'd like to see the Giants do well for the new coach (Bill Parcells) and all the loyal fans that have been behind them during the losing years."

* * *

Chris Thorne's story on P.F.R.A. member John was originally published in the Newark *Sunday Star-Ledger*.

* * *

WITNESS

John "Mike" Wittpenn was an assistant coach at Rutgers in 1919 when John Alexander first began evolving from a tackle to an outside linebacker. Still alive and well, Mike tested his memory in this recent letter to *The Coffin Corner*.

"I came out of the Army in 1919 and that fall became assistant to George Foster Sanford [at Rutgers], who a few years before had his one tackle play outside of his end on offense and hit the defense from the side. Of course he could not move until the ball was passed. However, on defense he had both tackles stand up and hit the offense from the side.

"John was big and fast and moved on the line and hit as the ball was passed. Shortly after being on the line, he decided to back off the line and move fast and hit the offensive end as the ball was passed. Sandy thought it was a good move and let him back still deeper and he charged the offense still harder.

"We stood up on defense from tackle and end but did not get off the line until John did it and made quite a name for himself as a rough and tough tackle.

"1920 through 1929 I was an assistant, but believe me it was part time in those days. I left the office at 3:00 P.M., caught the train and arrived at New Brunswick for practice at 4:00 P.M., finished at 5:30 or until it was dark, and caught the train for dinner at home at 7:00. So you see at that time it was a part time job."

* * *

The Milwaukee *Sentinel* reported the first pro game to have an outside linebacker, but didn't know what to call it. The final paragraph under the sub-headline:

ALEXANDER PLAYS WELL

In the line the angular Alexander, Big Jim Duff, Webb and "Budge" Garrett were the most formidable. Alexander introduced a new style of playing defensive tackle that should work wonders for a man in condition, but with the tall easterner in the condition, or lack of same, he was yesterday, it appeared a bit strenuous and tiring.