

Al Mahrt: Wonder Athlete

Ed. note: Al Mahrt was one of the greatest players of the pre-NFL era of pro football. Before his death in 1970, the *Dayton Daily News* printed this profile.

By John Dye, January 10, 1965

High on a hill overlooking Chillicothe lives a man who may be the greatest all-around athlete Dayton ever produced. He is Al Mahrt, a soft spoken person who makes you feel he would do anything for you. His step is slow at 71 and he is weakened from a recent prostate operation that nearly cost him his life. But he was once a beautifully coordinated package of muscle, the wonder of Midwest playing fields in the World War I era.

For years after he quit playing, he remained the standard of excellence in Dayton football and basketball. The highest accolade for a new star was to be called "the best since Al Mahrt." It wasn't even considered anyone could be better. Time passes. Nearly all those who saw Al Mahrt play are dead. His feats have largely faded into the limbo of yellowed newspaper clippings.

The story of these clippings starts at the turn of the century with a group of boys playing ball in the back yards and empty lots around Franklin and Ludlow Sts. – Mahrt, Al Schumacher, Hugh and Norb Sacksteder and Ralph Baker. They all graduated from Emanuel school and went to St. Mary's Institute, predecessor of the University of Dayton. They were joined there by George (Babe) Zimmerman.

Under the guidance of a bearded priest, Father O'Maley, these six teenagers formed a basketball team in 1908 that soon became nearly invincible. Calling themselves the St. Mary's Cadets, they sacked the city league, winning 35 straight games in two years. One victory was 139-0. The Dayton speed boys started playing out-of-town teams in 1910-11. For the next five years they blitzed independent and college teams throughout the Midwest, extending their career record to 162-11.

They drew rave press notices wherever they went, such as this one in Toledo after a 44-17 trouncing of the Buckeye Paints: "Their passing was brilliant and had the Paints completely befuddled. The Cadets easily hurled the ball under the basket and seldom failed to slip it through the ring."

The Cadets met their first defeat in 1911 at the hands of the Hull House Midgets of Chicago, national AAU champions. But the following year they came back to beat the Midgets twice. At one time, after defeating the famed Buffalo Germans, the Cadets claimed the unofficial world championship. The Germans were considered the kings since they won the St. Louis World's Fair tourney in 1904, collected the best players and won 462 games in 18 years.

Dayton beat Buffalo 45-30, but then lost two return engagements the following year. Mahrt and Zimmerman were the Cadets' scoring stars, with Mahrt noted for looping in "Long Toms" from his guard position.

Mahrt and Co. were also football players. They were the nucleus of the Cadets and later the Dayton Triangles (formed in 1916), who took on the best teams available in the pre-National Football League days. Dayton held its own against Canton, Massillon, Akron, Rock Island, Detroit, Toledo and others.

Mahrt considers the Triangles' 20-20 tie with the Jim Thorpe-led Canton team the greatest game he played in. Thorpe tied the score in the closing minutes with two tremendous field goals from midfield, one of them a drop kick on the dead run. The game was also noted for a tackle by Mahrt of Joe Guyon, a burly Canton runner. Guyon was knocked cold for several minutes and wasn't up to par the rest of the game. This tackle was cited 20 years later by a Dayton sports writer when he tabbed Mahrt "the greatest natural tackler" ever seen in Dayton.

It was Mahrt's passing, though, that drew the most superlatives. A Detroit writer, after the Triangles had humbled the Heralds, 14-7, before 7,000 Detroit fans, said of Mahrt's passes: "They come like a rifle shot. He gets the ball to his man faster and with more accuracy than anybody who has ever raced around on the Detroit football greens."

In 1935, a Dayton sports buff journeyed to Texas, saw some college football games there, and reported back: "This fellow, Sam Baugh, on TCU, is one of the best passers I've seen. The best, maybe, next to Al Mahrt." Baugh went on to become the greatest passer in the history of pro football.

Also in the mid-thirties, Carl (Scummy) Storck, a Daytonian who was then president of the NFL, told a reporter he still considered Mahrt the best passer he had ever seen. It's worth noting that Mahrt did his passing in the game's pioneer days when the ball was round and bulky, hardly suited for holding, let alone pinpoint accuracy.

Mahrt was also a baseball player. He caught Jesse Haines on the old Lily Brews so well umpire Harry Martin said, "If Mahrt ever cares to take up professional ball, I believe he can become one of the stars of the game."

As star of the Triangles, Mahrt was paid \$150 a game, which dwarfed his regular salary as a clerk. The most odious of comparisons is between standouts of different generations, whether in politics or sports, so there's no telling how Al Mahrt would do today. (He himself thinks he would be too small at 165 pounds.)

One thing indisputable is the personal esteem Mahrt has piled up through the years. A Daily News editorial during Al's athletic years proclaimed him the best all-around athlete in the city and added this tribute: "He is quiet and gentle... He is clean in his habits of life and in his thinking. He is considerate of other people's rights at all times."

This sort of character, plus intelligence and hard work, enabled him to rise to the heights in the business world. When he retired in 1959, he was executive vice-president of the huge Mead Corp. with a salary well up in five figures.

Mahrt was an accelerated student before the term was invented. From grade school he jumped to the sophomore level and graduated from high school at 15. He got his college degree from St. Mary's in 1912 at 18.

Mahrt got a \$9-a-week job as office clerk at Dayton Breweries. In 1916, he switched to one of the Triangles' sponsors, Dayton Metal Products, as accounts payable clerk. In the evenings, even while he was still active in sports, he started studying accounting at the YMCA. "The most satisfying thing in my lifetime," Al says now, "is that I was able to maintain an interest in a permanent career in those days. I always realized I couldn't depend on athletics for my life work."

In 1922, Al quit the Triangles and joined Smart, Gore and Co. to acquire more accounting experience. These were busy days. Al worked all day and studied accounting until late at night. He was also a top flight basketball and football referee. He would sometimes drive all night to get back to work after officiating a game in a distant city.

"We only had one night out a week," recalls his wife, Marcie.

"It paid off, though," Al replies.

Marcie is the former Marcie Niehaus of the old Niehaus & Dohse sporting goods store family. In 1921, she was voted the prettiest girl in Dayton by the photographers' club.

By 1928, Al was ready for a step up in his career. He was hired by Mead to handle the financial details of a series of new paper Mills in the South. From then on he worked up the chain of command: assistant treasurer, treasurer, vice president, executive vice president in charge of finance. As a depression economy move in 1933, Mead's offices were combined with its main operating plant in Chillicothe, so the Mahrts moved to Chillicothe.

"We thought it was the end of the world," Al says.

When the Mead offices moved back to Dayton in the mid-1950's, though, the Mahrts stayed in Chillicothe. It's not hard to see why. Their five-acre estate in the Belleview section includes a beautiful white-columned house and dozens of trees. From the porch and yard, one can see miles and miles of Southern Ohio hills.

Al is still president of two kraft paper mills in Georgia owned 50-50 by Mead and the Inland Container Corp., Indianapolis. A third mill is planned in Alabama.

"It's a perfect setup," Al says. "My duties only take up about half of my time."

A big lift to Al during his illness was the news that Mead will name a division after him. In addition, the company town for the new Alabama mill will be called "Mahrt, Alabama."

Al is still an avid sports fan.

"I wouldn't give anything for my combined experience of sports and business. They work hand in glove. Sports helped me immeasurably, bringing me before the people that really counted. But you still have to work. You can't just rely on your athletic name. If you do, your career is ended the moment your skills are gone."

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 6, No. 3 (1984)

For every broken down athlete who drifts aimlessly through society once his skills are gone, there is a clean cut athlete of character who goes on to make his mark all his life. Al Mahrt would be the antidote for 100 of the misfits.