

Art Donovan

By Don Smith

The Baltimore Colts were one of three teams invited to join the National Football League when the famous "surrender-merger" with the All-America Football Conference came about in 1950. The 1950 Colts floundered, moved from the city for two seasons, and then came back to Baltimore again in 1953. From that point on, the Colts wrote one of the most glorious chapters of any team in pro football's long and colorful history.

Many great players wore the Colts' blue and white, but the first elected to Pro Football's Hall of Fame was Art Donovan. Donovan served 12 years in the National Football League as a 270-pound defensive tackle, one of the best the game has ever seen and certainly one of history's most popular football players.

The son of a famous boxing referee of the same name, Donovan first played football at Mount St. Michael's High School in the Bronx. Somehow, he was overlooked on the all-metropolitan prep team and, when he played football at Boston College, he was overshadowed by Ernie Stautner.

But in the professional ranks, it was a different story for Art, whose World War II service stint in the U.S. Marines so put off his college career that he was a 26-year-old rookie when he first joined the Baltimore camp in 1950. Art left Baltimore with the Colts, of course, but found his way back to the Baltimore corral when the team returned in 1953.

Big, strong and fast, Donovan was an all-NFL selection in 1954, 1955, 1956 and 1957, and he played with the West squad in five straight Pro Bowl games in the mid and late 1950s. The Baltimore Colts' title teams of 1958 and 1959 were considered to be among pro football's best-ever teams and they featured a huge and fearsome defensive line. Donovan, of course, was one of a foursome that included Gino Marchetti, Don Joyce and Big Daddy Lipscomb.

As great as Donovan was on the field, many feel his greatest value was as a morale builder, for lovable and laughable Artie always proved to be a pressure safety valve whenever team tensions built up.

His gifts to the Colts were laughter, amusement, and comedy, and it was always at the expense of himself. Perpetually the brunt of Colt jokes, Donovan would feign anger, shout down his tormentors with Marine-acquired language, and maybe even threaten to punch someone full of holes. Then there would be a smile from the group, Donovan would explode into uproarious laughter, and the Colts would erupt into convulsions of glee.

Baltimore fell in love with Art Donovan, but it's certain the feeling was mutual. The man with a perpetual smile and an endless repertoire of gridiron comedy made more personal appearances than any other Colt for year after year after year. At boys' clubs, service organizations, church groups, no matter the cause, Donovan was always willing to go – and without a fee of any kind.

"I always thought it was a compliment to be invited some place," Donovan would modestly explain.

Big Art reported to training camp for what would have been a 13th season in 1962, but it soon was obvious that Coach Weeb Ewbank had a younger man tabbed for 39-year-old Artie's defensive tackle spot. Rather than have to face the unwarranted indignity of being placed on waivers, intimates convinced Donovan he should retire instead. Artie, although he felt he could still help the Colts, graciously accepted the decision.

It's not surprising that, when the 1962 season opened about two weeks later, Baltimore was ready with a big special day for Donovan. There were the usual features of such days – the presentation of a car, numerous other gifts, the reading of telegrams from around the nation, and the retirement of Donovan's No. 70 jersey.

Choked with emotion, sentimental Artie thanked the city and the team that had done so much for him.

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"Up in heaven there is a lady who is happy that the City of Baltimore was so good to her son -- a kid from the Bronx."

And 55,000 fans cried right along with Artie.

There never was a doubt that Art Donovan, a special kind of football player and a special kind of human being, will always be the truly "unforgettable and irreplaceable Colt."