

FRANK GATSKI

By Bob Barnett & Bob Carroll

Frank "Gunner" Gatski makes John Wayne seem like a talkative milquetoast.

As strong as the West Virginia hills where he grew up and as quiet as the deep coal mines where he and his father worked, the former all-pro center for the Cleveland Browns asked no quarter and gave none on the football field or in life. He left the hills only to fight in World War II and to play twelve rock-'em-sock-'em seasons of professional football.

He was so tough he never missed a game or a practice in high school, college, or pro ball. He was so quiet that Hall of Fame quarterback Otto Graham, his teammate for ten seasons, cannot remember him ever saying a word on the field. Off the field, Frank was nearly as taciturn, but allowed: "you gotta be tough to play football." It was a philosophy that helped make him the top offensive center in pro football during the first half of pro football's "Golden Age," the 1950s.

Gatski came by his toughness honestly. Born in Farmington, West Virginia, in the heart of the soft coal country on March 18, 1923, he grew up in Number Nine Coal Camp, one of those rugged Allegheny hamlets where you're either tough or you're nothing. He played four years of football at Farmington High School -- the same school that a decade later would produce another hard-nosed all-pro named Sam Huff. Then he went down into the mines. That's what you did when you were from Number Nine Camp.

A year later, Marshall College football coach "Cam" Henderson offered Gatski a chance to "try out" for the Marshall team. Like many small colleges at the time, Marshall held a "survival of the fittest" pre-season try-out camp. The players who proved they could play were given jobs on campus to pay for their schooling; the others returned home to the mines.

Some idea of how the camp operated can be gained by the way "Gunner" taught football years later when he became head football coach and athletic director at Pruntytown, the state reform school for boys. He had the responsibility of taking delinquents and disciplining them into a football team.

"Those kids were tough to work with because very few of them had ever played football," he recalls. To get the job done, he used some methods he'd learned at the Marshall camp, and perhaps embellished them a bit.

When his candidates assembled for their first practice, he had them line up 20 yards apart. At his signal, they'd run at each other as hard as they could. Once they'd exhibited their courage with head-on collisions, Gunner would have them scrimmage for a couple of hours.

After practice, he'd take them to a nearby hill with a sheer, 25-foot drop. Gatski stood at the bottom and the boys went to the top and took turns charging to the edge and leaping out in space. Those who sailed the farthest before crashing and rolling down the remainder of the steep slope might receive a gruff "Way to go!" Coming from their rugged ex-all-pro coach, that was better than a medal.

Coach Gatski's game regimen was just as severe. No one was allowed water and no ankles were ever wrapped. Sometimes they scrimmaged at halftime. "I tried to make them tough," he explains, "and they loved it. They felt it gave them a psychological edge."

"That's the way I was taught," he explained.

Whether Coach Gatski's methods were more or less drastic than those of Marshall's Henderson is a moot question. Both produced winning teams.

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Frank not only survived Henderson's camp in 1940, he became the regular center on the freshman team. The next two seasons he started at pivot for the varsity. The high point of the '41 season came when little Marshall stepped up in class to defeat Wake Forest, 16-6.

"I didn't play my senior season because Marshall dropped football in 1943 because of the war. Anyway, the army reserve unit I was in was activated." His nickname of "Gunner" had been hung on him at Marshall and had nothing to do with his war service.

"After basic training, we were sent to England and later followed the troops through Normandy and into Europe." He adds quickly, lest someone think he was bragging: "I wasn't in any heavy fighting."

After his discharge in 1945, he played part of the season with Auburn University. "Marshall hadn't started back up, and I hadn't played football for two years," he explains. "I didn't want to sit around and do nothing, so I went to Auburn."

That might have been the end of Frank's football career. He'd been a solid player for some less-than-famous teams. The National Football League had a glut of returning veterans and famous college stars. But, as World War II was winding down, plans were being made to establish a new professional football league, the All-America Football Conference.

The Cleveland Browns of the new league were coached by Paul Brown, and one of his assistants was John Brickels, a former high school coach in Huntington, West Virginia. Sam Clagg, a teammate of Gatski's at Marshall and later president of the school in 1983 and 1984, contacted Brickels and arranged a try-out for Gatski. Frank lacked the All-American reputations of some of his new teammates, but he won another "survival-of-the-fittest" trial to make the first Cleveland squad in 1946.

He scored the only touchdown of his pro career as a rookie and remembers it fondly. "We were playing the Chicago Rockets. Their quarterback, Bob Hoernschemeyer, threw me the ball and I decided I better run. I think it was 55 yards" – then the quick disclaimer – "but I had an open field all the way."

Despite his reputation for silence, Gunner will speak proudly about the great teams he played on or his famous teammates. But, when it comes to his own contributions, he lives by a code of working hard and letting your accomplishments speak for themselves.

That 1946 Brown team was the nucleus of one of sports' most fabled dynasties. In four seasons in the AAFC, they won 47, lost only five, and tied two, while winning four straight league championships. They were so good that they literally destroyed their own league, as fans in other cities around the AAFC tired of constant Cleveland titles.

At first, Gatski played backup to All-AAFC center Moe Scarry, but when Scarry retired after the '47 season, Gunner took over as the iron center of the Cleveland line. In his first year as a regular, the Browns rolled undefeated through a 14-game schedule and then crushed Buffalo in the championship game, 47-7. Only the '72 Dolphins have matched a perfect season and title-game win. Someone once asked Frank what he considered the highlight of his four years in the AAFC? A less courteous man might have laughed, but Frank answered politely, "The highlight was winning four championships."

Unfortunately, such consistency was not in the league's best interests. After '49 the AAFC folded and the NFL absorbed the Browns. Knowledgeable NFL-ers insisted the upstarts would finally get their come-uppance.

The Browns welcomed the challenge. "We were ready to go," Gatski recalls. "All the NFL owners wanted us to get beaten early to put us in our place. In the first exhibition game, we beat Green Bay, 47-0, and we felt we had a chance with those National Leaguers.

"Then, in the first regular game of the season, we beat the NFL-champion Philadelphia Eagles, 35-10. Now, that was a great game! Everybody's life is spent trying to prove something. That day we proved to the world that we weren't some sandlot team. We proved it again later that season. After winning the conference, we beat the Rams 30-28 to become NFL champions ourselves."

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They weren't done "proving." During their first six NFL seasons, the Browns won six Eastern Conference and three league titles. Gatski was named All-NFL more often than any other pivot of the period – in 1951, '52, '53, and '55.

Some contend he deserved a couple more all-pro mentions, suggesting that when honors were handed out he was a victim of the "numbers" game. The Browns were loaded with excellent players at more headline-grabbing positions: Otto Graham, Marion Motley, Bill Willis, Dante Lavelli, and Lou Groza, to name only the Hall of Famers.

Certainly, offensive centers – even all-pros – are better known to their opponents than to a general public that only hears their numbers when they make a mistake. Gatski's number was positively obscure! Still, at 6-3 and 240 pounds, he was hard for even the most myopic fan to overlook.

"The way he plants his frame," wrote one reporter, "the enemy has to go around him, never over him. Cleveland's style of offense, splitting the ends and massing the middle of the line, depends on an emplaced center like Gatski for down the middle anchorage."

Quarterback Graham appreciated Gatski's blocking: "You never have to worry about anyone jumping over Frank or bumping him out of the way." But Otto found another, subtler advantage to playing behind big Gunner. "When he bends over the ball, I can stand almost straight up and down and still get the snap properly. If he had short legs, I would be forced to bend over further to take the ball." Graham went on to explain that standing straighter allowed him to see defenses better, gave him an extra split second when dropping back to pass or hand off, and even kept him fresher late in the game.

Graham retired in 1956 and others were aging. When the team slumped, Coach Paul Brown began looking for youthful replacements. Gatski was traded to the Detroit Lions before the '57 season.

Once more he had "something to prove – that he wasn't washed up. That year, he played every down on offense for the Lions, as they won the Western Conference championship. Then – as fate would have it – Gunners's new team smashed his old Browns, 59-14, in the title game.

After that last triumphant season in Detroit, Frank called it a career. In twelve years, he'd played on eleven division winners and eight championship teams. No other non-kicker in pro football history can match that record. "Once you win one championship," he says, "you want to win the next one. Then it just kind of builds up."

Frank worked as a Boston Patriot scout for a couple of years, then settled into his job at Pruntytown.

When the reform school was closed in 1982, Gatski retired. Today, he lives near Grafton, West Virginia. "All I do now is hunt, fish, and ride horses," he says.

"When I first retired from pro football, I missed it because I played so long. But then I got into the mainstream of life. There's a whole bunch of life after pro football. Having babies and raising kids (he's the father of seven) and getting in the mainstream, that's the real ballgame. Football's easy because you have plays, but there are no plays when you get out in the street."

When Frank was named to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1985, nearly 30 years after he left the NFL, he was thrilled. "I never thought much about getting in. I figured if I make it, okay, and if I don't make it, okay. But once you make it, then it's something special. Then you know you are accepted as one of the best."

For those who played with and against him, there was never any doubt.

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FRANK "GUNNER" GATSKI

Center

Born: March 18, 1923, at Farmington, WV

Hgt: 6-3 Wgt: 240 Colleges: Marshall, Auburn

Year	Team	Lg	Record			Championship Game	
1946	Cleveland	AAC	12	2	0	1st-West	14- 9 N.Y. Yankees
1947	Cleveland	AAC	12	1	1	1st-West	14- 3 N.Y. Yankees
1948	Cleveland	AAC	14	0	0	1st-West	49- 7 Buffalo
1949	Cleveland	AAC	9	1	2	1st	21- 7 San Francisco
1950	Cleveland	NFL	11	2	0	1st-East	30-28 L.A. Rams
1951	Cleveland	NFL	11	1	0	1st-East	17-24 L.A. Rams
1952	Cleveland	NFL	8	4	0	1st-East	7-17 Detroit
1953	Cleveland	NFL	11	1	0	1st-East	16-17 Detroit
1954	Cleveland	NFL	9	3	0	1st-East	56-10 Detroit
1955	Cleveland	NFL	9	1	2	1st-East	38-14 L.A. Rams
1956	Cleveland	NFL	5	7	0	4th-East	
1957	Detroit	NFL	9	4	0	1st-West	59-14 Cleveland

12 years

Pro Football Hall of Fame 1985

Named to All-Time Cleveland Browns Team

Member of West Virginia Hall of Fame