

The Bears' victory in Super Bowl XX marked a return to glory for one of the NFL's most successful franchises. It was kind of a surprise to realize that the Bears first NFL championship did not come until 1931. A 1921 title was accomplished while the team was called the "Staleys" and technically under a different franchise; additionally, the league was called the American Professional Football Association in '21.

That 1932 title was won in what will probably always rank as the oddest playoff for a championship ever. Although it was a post-season game for the championship, it was not a Championship Game but a play-off between two teams that were tied for first place in the one-division NFL. The results went into the official standings and dropped the loser into third place.

Two PFRA members actually played in that game: Glenn Presnell, star back of Portsmouth, and the late Joe Kopcha, the Bears' great guard.

The following is based on one of the many interviews of Dr. Kopcha before the Super Bowl. He died in 1986.

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JOE KOPCHA RECALLS 1932 TITLE GAME

By Leo R. Joint, Sports Editor
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The year was 1932. The day, Sunday, Dec. 18.

The Chicago Bears were playing for the National Football League championship against the Portsmouth (Ohio) Spartans – who became the Detroit Lions in 1934.

A week earlier, an arctic storm had ripped through Chicago and it was decided the title game would be moved from Wrigley Field to the warm confines of Chicago Stadium.

This first indoor championship game was played on a makeshift 80-yard dirt and turf field, which a week before had hosted a circus.

The Bears, anchored by such names as Bronko Nagurski and the legendary Harold "Red" Grange, played Portsmouth dead even, 0-0, through the first three quarters.

But in the fourth frame, with the Bears in possession and looking at fourth and goal on the Portsmouth 2-yard line, Nagurski took a handoff from quarterback Carl Brumbaugh. Nagurski headed for the line, stopped, backed up and tossed a pass to Grange, who was standing alone in the end zone.

Portsmouth disputed the score, charging Nagurski had not been the prescribed five yards behind the line of scrimmage (the rule for passing at the time) when he threw to Grange.

The protest was ignored. Paul "Tiny" Engebretsen kicked the extra point, and moments later the Spartans fumbled the ball out of their own end zone for a two-point safety: Bears 9, Portsmouth 0.

"The only thing I really remember about the game," recalled guard Joe Kopcha from his home in Hobart (Ind.) recently, "was the smell of elephant (dung from the circus) and that I hurt my shoulder in the last two minutes of the game."

He also remembered the \$246 bonus he received for the championship game – a far cry from the \$36,000 each member of the winning team and \$18,000 each member of the losing team will receive Sunday.

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With all the excitement surrounding the Chicago Bears heading for Super Bowl XX in New Orleans Sunday, the 80-year-old Kopcha has had several requests from the media to relive that Sunday afternoon in Chicago Stadium.

The cable sports network ESPN filmed a segment Thursday with Kopcha in the stadium.

Born Dec. 23, 1905, Kopcha – or "Big Boy" Kopcha, as he was tagged during his playing days – graduated from Whiting High School in 1924 and attended the University of Chattanooga from 1925-29, where he was a three-year letterman in football, basketball and track.

He played one year ('29) for the Bears after graduation, then took the next two years to attend medical school in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

He returned to the Chicago Bears in 1932 as a starting guard on the championship team. He played for the "Monsters of the Midway" through 1935, was All-Pro four times, and played his final season in 1936 for Detroit.

The personable Kopcha received his medical degree in 1934 from Rush Medical College, interned at Detroit's Harper Hospital from 1935-37 and did post-graduate work in obstetrics and gynecology at Western Reserve University Hospitals from 1937-40.

If that all sounds like a busy, determined man, you're right – he was and still is.

"Like one guy said, 'When are you going to retire?' I said 'Why do I have to retire?'"

Sitting with Kopcha and his wife of 43 years, Bernadine, it was obvious that reminiscing about the good old days was a pleasure for the still-practicing physician.

He recalled the first meeting with "Papa Bear" Halas.

"He (Halas) had a desk (at the Morrison Hotel in Chicago) and all he was doing was signing up these fellas with a contract," Kopcha said of that spring afternoon in 1929.

"When I was in line there were six, great big All-American tackles in front of me and I said 'holy cripe.' So when it came to my turn to sign I looked up at Halas and he said, 'Young man, what are you up to?' I said, 'Well, I'd like to go to medical school if I possibly can.' He said, 'What do you play?' and I said, 'Anything.' Halas said, 'How 'bout guard?' and I said, 'Oh, yes sir, yes sir.'

"I was a tackle at the time. He said, 'Sign here.'"

Kopcha inked a contract for \$90 per game.

"Gee, I thought that was a lot of money. You have to remember this is back in the Depression. There weren't any jobs to be done. My dad was having a hard time keeping the family together. He did a lot of odd jobs just to keep food on the table.

"Somebody asked me the other day," continued Kopcha, "'Don't you wish you were playing today at the salaries they're getting?' I said, 'No, because the \$90 a game made it possible for me to get through medical school.' "Let me put it this way -- if I was making \$90,000 like Richard Dent (current Bears' defensive end) and a few of those others, \$150,000, there wouldn't be any incentive for me to go to school. What would I have been at the end of four, five, six years. I would have been just a regular guy, probably working back in the mills."

Kopcha used football and any other work he could find, including washing pots and pans and operating a hotel elevator, while playing football at the same time, to help fund his medical schooling.

But along the way he established close personal relationships with Halas and roommate Red Grange.

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"I don't know how much closer you can get to a man who has made it possible for you to get through medical school," Kopcha said warmly of Halas.

Kopcha left pro football after his first season and entered medical school in Alabama for the next two years. In 1932 he was transferred to Rush Medical in Chicago and again he went Halas for a pro contract.

"I made an appointment to see Mr. Halas and I told him I was being transferred to Rush Medical and I'd like to play football again. He said, 'I don't know. You've been out two years.' I said, 'Mr. Halas, I'm not asking for any favors. I've kept myself in shape. If you think I can't make it, just tell me and I'll just go right back to medical school. This is my last hope.'"

Halas agreed to give Kopcha the opportunity and a \$110 contract was signed. He picked up the extra 10 bucks for doctoring the Chicago players.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

"If he could help out," Kopcha said of Halas, "he did. He helped out a lot of guys. That was the 'other man.' The public, they thought he was a bastard.

"We (Kopcha and his wife) were dancing one time," Kopcha recalled, "and someone came up and made some remark about Halas, and Mrs. Kopcha said, 'You don't say anything bad about Mr. Halas in front of Dr. Kopcha.'"

"We had a close relationship. He always ended his letters with 'Give my love to Bernie.'"

"There's so many things he has done," said Mrs. Kopcha. As an example, the Kopchas said Halas paid for all of Brian Piccolo's medical bills. Piccolo was the fullback who ran along side Gale Sayers in the late 1960s.

In 1969, Piccolo removed himself from a game against the Atlanta Falcons. It was his last game. A little more than seven months later, he died of cancer.

It was inevitable, while talking about the Bears, past and present, for Kopcha to be drawn into comparisons.

"When I was sitting there (last) Sunday (at Soldier Field during the playoff game against the New York Giants), watching the game, I was thinking to myself, 'These fellas aren't playing any different than we did. We had a good camaraderie, team spirit.' And I'm thinking about all this and the Bear shuffle and all that stuff. Hell, we did a lot of goofy stuff back in our day."

Most of which is unprintable here.

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Ed. note: In a letter to the editor, Dr. Joe said: "I've had more interviews the past two weeks – and I couldn't believe it. My memory became a lot sharper – as I've been actually been too busy with medicine to bother remembering."

Imagine a man whose life is so full that he can't "bother remembering" his all-pro status on world championship teams and you will recognize a very happy man. And a deserving one.