

LOU RYMKUS: THE BATTLER

By Bob Carroll

Notre Dame coach Frank Leahy always called him 'Louis,' but the nickname was first hung on Lou Rymkus at South Bend. It wasn't when he won the school's heavyweight boxing championship as a sophomore. The nickname didn't come until the next year when Lou was a regular tackle on Leahy's first South Bend eleven, an undefeated but once tied powerhouse. Just before halftime of the Georgia Tech game, a 20-0 Irish win, Rymkus caught an elbow smash in the face.

"Boy, do I remember that one," he could smile years later. "No face guards in those days, you remember. They put nine stitches in my lip at the half and I wore a big bandage." From then on, he was 'The Battler.'

One look at Rymkus' normal phizz (sans bandage) and the name fits – an aggressive nose that hasn't quite determined its final direction and a jutting chin (in Mickey Herskowitz's phrase) "that seems designed to shovel cement." Rymkus looks the part – but more important – he's lived it. The Battler has never learned "the better part of valor." And, it's cost him.

Life for Lou Rymkus might have been very different, at least in his post-playing career, if he'd only been able to shut his mouth, go along, let it be. Of course, then he wouldn't have been Lou Rymkus; he'd have been somebody else, somebody that the real Lou Rymkus wouldn't have liked very much.

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Born November 6, 1919, at Royalton, Illinois, Lou learned to play football at Chicago's Tilden Tech High School in the 1930's. As a senior, he was team captain, MVP, All-City (for the third year), and All-State. He also was a shotput ace and the city heavyweight wrestling champion. Notre Dame beckoned and he entered on a full athletic scholarship in 1939.

This was in the days of one-platoon football and Rymkus played both offense and defense, but his strong suit was pass blocking, an ability that was to later set him above other pro tackles. Rymkus explained how he'd learned to pass block under Leahy.

"Pass protection was drilled into us at Notre Dame. We had Angelo Bertelli in 1941 at quarterback, and he could throw that ball. Leahy wanted the guys up front to protect him, so we started spring practice – that's a laugh, spring practice. It was February and snow was on the ground. I think Leahy let us take a little break around exams, but that summer about 25 of us stayed at school and we hit every day, every day. No wonder we went undefeated. Johnny Druze coached the tackles for Frank and he really worked us."

After the undefeated 1941 season, Leahy's Irish were 7-2-2 and ranked sixth in the nation in 1942, Lou's senior year. He received some All-American mention, although Minnesota's Dick Wildung and Michigan's Albert Wistert were the consensus picks at tackle. End Bob Dove got most of Notre Dame's AA votes, but his Irish teammates chose Rymkus the team MVP and Leahy always rated him as "one of the greatest tackles I ever saw."

Rymkus' last game for the Irish was an exciting, 13-13 tie with Great Lakes, a wartime power, at Chicago's Soldier Field. The Irish trailed 13-0 at the half, but battled back in the second half on the passing of Bertelli and the running of Creighton Miller. Rymkus' play at tackle received special mention in some news stories. Certainly it impressed the Great Lakes coach, a dapper young man named Paul Brown.

In April of '43, the NFL Champion Washington Redskins drafted Rymkus on the fifth round. The 6-4, 223-pounder won a regular tackle slot on the team that took the Eastern Division title that year. Among his contributions were a pair of blocked punts, an interception, and two touchdowns.

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After his first season of pro ball, Rymkus entered the U.S. Navy. He soon found himself playing for the undefeated Bainbridge Naval Training Station team. It was an "amateur" team that could have held its own against anyone. In addition to Rymkus, its stars included Buster Ramsey, later All-NFL with the Cardinals, and Choo Choo Charley Justice, the post-war North Carolina All-America.

In the meantime, plans were being laid for a new pro football league after the war, the All-America Football Conference. Lou was stationed at Pearl Harbor when he received an offer from the Cleveland Browns, one of the teams in the new circuit. By then, he had a wife and twin sons to think about. He called Redskins owner George Preston Marshall.

"That league will fold in a week," Marshall scoffed. "Don't pay any attention to it."

"Well," Lou said, "they've offered me more than twice what you paid me, plus a \$200-a-month retainer until I get out of the service."

Marshall, never quite as free with his money as with his blood, gasped. "I paid you \$2,000 as a rookie, and I'll offer you the same to sign with us again. Forget what you heard from them."

Rymkus decided to cast his lot with the new league and with Paul Brown. It was a decision he never regretted. Eventually, he came to regard Brown and Leahy as the two men who most influenced him. Certainly both men rank at the very top as football coaches, and certainly Rymkus played on some of their best teams, but one wonders if Rymkus' admiration might not be rooted more deeply. When critics find fault with Leahy or Brown, they usually focus on bluntness, lack of tact, and single-minded dedication -- the same charges often leveled at Rymkus.

And neither Brown nor Leahy nor Rymkus has ever been criticized for an excess of modesty. Listen to Rymkus on his own ability: "One year we're playing the Bears. George Connor is tearing us up. Paul Brown told me to go in and settle him down. I hit him on the blind side and rolled him in the turf. I said 'Hey, George, how do you like pro ball?"

"I handled Connor that day. Leo Nomellini ain't got by me yet. Neither has Bruiser Kinard."

Rymkus can tick off the names of players he 'handled' until he's listed just about every important lineman of his day. It's an honesty that can be both refreshing and aggravating. Either way, the record seems to support him.

In every one of his six seasons with the Browns, Lou was named either first or second team on one of the major All-Pro or All-League teams.

For an offensive lineman, his "statistics" are his all-pro selections. The Browns were among the league leaders in rushing and passing in each year Rymkus played, but, fair or not, the backs get most of the credit for the yardage. Linemen are noted only when they make mistakes (which put Rymkus at near zero visibility) and at the end of the season when 'experts' pick teams and grudgingly admit that the linemen may have had a little something to do with the team's success.

No team has ever been more successful than the Browns during Rymkus' tenure. Four straight AAFC Championships were followed by an NFL title in 1950, and an Eastern Division crown in 1951, his final year. But, unlike other veteran Browns who were six-for-six at that point, Rymkus -- who captained the team in his final two seasons -- was seven-for-seven, counting the Redskins' '43 NFL East win. In fact, with his last two years at Notre Dame, when they were the nation's top-ranked independent, and his season at Bainbridge, he could be considered ten-for-ten.

In 1946, Coach Paul Brown had assembled a brilliant nucleus for his first Cleveland team: quarterback Otto Graham; runners Marion Motley and Special Delivery Jones; ends Dante Lavelli, Mac Speedie, and John Yonaker; guards Bill Willis, Lin Houston, and Ed Ulinski; centers Mo Scarry and Frank Gatski; and kicker Lou Groza.

"The Toe" was just learning to play tackle, but Cleveland was well-stocked at that position. Coach Brown could call upon Jim Daniell, who'd starred for him at Ohio State and played one season with the Chicago Bears, former Tulane All-American Ernie Blandin, and Chet Adams, a veteran of five NFL seasons, as

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well as Rymkus. Daniell was named team captain, but, according to Brown, "within two weeks [Rymkus] was our best tackle and remained so for six years."

The respect was mutual. Years later, when star runner Jim Brown said Coach Brown wouldn't listen to suggestions from his players, Rymkus rushed to defend his coach: "I remember Paul many times asking me 'What do you think will work in the line, Lou?' And he did this with a lot of players."

Rymkus' pass blocking especially endeared him to his coach. He often had Lou demonstrate the techniques to other Browns linemen.

"A lot of the movements in pass blocking are not unlike a boxer's," the Battler explained. "You keep your feet moving, well balanced, not too close, not too wide, and you try to outfight your man. The important thing is to stay on your feet, don't go to the ground, stay up, stay up. Set yourself quickly and know when to hit. You strike and recover, set again, be ready."

Eventually, the Rymkus' talent for keeping the seat of Otto Graham's uniform unsoiled cut into his playing time. Rymkus was still a two-way tackle for his first couple of years in Cleveland; then, even though Lou graded out as his top defensive lineman, Coach Brown moved him strictly to offense. The Battler didn't like his restricted duty and would often approach the coach when opponents were moving the ball, asking for a chance. Brown always sent him back to the bench with the admonition he was too valuable on offense.

When Groza mastered the intricacies of line play, Coach Brown unabashedly claimed he had football's two best offensive tackles in "The Heel" and "The Toe," as the two Lous styled themselves.

During his first season with the Browns, an opponent fell across Rymkus' leg, tearing the knee cartilage and causing his knee to lock. Lou had trainer Wally Bock show him how to snap it back in place, and he played the rest of the season, even though his knee would lock as many as six times in a game. Then, after the Browns had tucked away their first AAFC championship, he told Coach Brown he would need an operation for his knee. Brown was shocked; it was the first he'd heard there was anything wrong.

In *PB: The Paul Brown Story* (written with Jack Clary), the coach tells one of his favorite Rymkus stories:

Lou was being pounded with fists and elbows by one of San Francisco's tackles and started to get upset. Late in the game we needed a first down to keep one of our drives going, and Otto decided to use it to his own advantage.

"Can you take one more punch for the good of the team?" Otto asked him in the huddle.

"Okay," Lou said because he never refused his team one ounce of his energy or his blood.

Otto outlined his scheme. After the next play he would complain to the officials that Lou was being slugged and ask them to watch for the infraction. In the meantime, Lou was to say something particularly nasty to his tormentor and incite him to deliver the decisive blow.

"If they catch him, we get fifteen yards on the penalty and a first down," Otto told him.

Everything went off just as Otto planned. The 49ers' player tagged Lou, and he was out for nearly five minutes. When he opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was Otto.

"Did we get the fifteen-yard penalty?" he mumbled.

"No," Graham had to tell him. "We scored on the play and had to decline the penalty."

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After retiring as a player, Rymkus became line coach at Indiana University in 1952, then took the same job with Calgary of the Canadian League in '53. From 1954 through 1957 he was line coach for the Green Bay Packers. Among his proudest achievements was his work with Forrest Gregg, Jim Ringo, and Bob Skoronski, all stars for Lombardi's Packers a few years later.

In 1958, he moved on to the Rams as line coach, and two years later he was named head coach of the fledgling Houston Oilers of the brand new American Football League.

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In one sense he was re-living Paul Brown's feat of starting from scratch in a new league. But whereas Brown had assembled a glittering array of talent in 1946, new coach Rymkus had mostly NFL retreads and rejects in 1960. When he took them to the first AFL Championship, he was deservedly named Coach of the Year.

He won games but he won few friends as he drove his Oilers, searching for the same single-minded dedication he had known with the Browns. When he thought a player wasn't giving his all, Rymkus could hammer him with a hefty verbal beating. He later denied some of the worst "war stories," but it would have been unnatural for the Battler to buddy-buddy his troops.

The Oilers started badly in 1961. Rymkus blamed owner Bud Adams' decision to have the training camp in Hawaii, feeling the team had gone soft. He drove them harder, but after the first five games they were a dreadful 1-3-1. When Adams made a strategy suggestion, Lou exploded, "Why didn't you help me coach last year when we won the title?"

Adams fired him. Nice guy Wally Lemm took over, the Oilers responded to his velvet glove and won their second straight title.

As a head coach, Rymkus was 12-7-1, with a league championship in his only full year. Out-of-work coaches with worse records than Egyptian generals have the telephone ringing off the wall with job offers. No one called Rymkus. He applied for every coaching job he heard of. No one called back.

In 1965, he coached a backwoods high school team in Louisiana, teaching history in the morning. All the bigger boys had to go home to work in the afternoons; Coach Rymkus got what was left. The team didn't win a game, but they learned to play tough.

In the '70's he did some coaching as an assistant and some scouting for a couple of NFL teams. Mostly, he waited for that head coach call. It never came.

Rymkus was a throwback to an earlier day – a time when you popped your knee back in place and kept playing, a time when you took a pop to the chin to get your team a first down, a time when you told a man what you thought to his face – not to newspapers. He knew all about playing football, but he never learned – never wanted to learn – how to "play the game."

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LOUIS (LOU) RYMKUS

Tackle

Hgt: 6-4 Wgt: 235 College: Notre Dame

High School: Tilden (Chicago)

Born: November 6, 1919, Royalston, IL

Drafted by Washington on 5th Round of 1943 NFL Draft

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Year	Team	LG	GM	Team Record	Div.Fin.
1943	Washington Redskins	NFL	10	6-3-1 .667	1-NFL-E
1944-45 in U.S. Navy					
1946	Cleveland Browns ..	AAC	14	12-2-0 .857	*1-AAC-W
1947	Cleveland Browns ..	AAC	13	12-1-1 .923	*1-AAC-W
1948	Cleveland Browns ..	AAC	14	14-0-0 1.000	*1-AAC-W
1949	Cleveland Browns ..	AAC	12	9-1-2 .900	*1-AAC
1950	Cleveland Browns ..	NFL	12	10-2-0 .833	*1-NFL-E
1951	Cleveland Browns ..	NFL	12	11-1-0 .917	1-NFL-E
7 seasons			87	74-10-4 .880	

* = Won Championship Game

Honors

1946: 1st team all-pro, Sportswriters, Inc.

1947: 1st team all-pro, Sportswriters, Inc; 1st team AAFC, Official Team, New York News, and Coaches and Officials team distributed by United Press.

1948: 1st team all-pro, Associated Press; 1st team AAFC, Official Team and United Press; 2nd team AAFC, New York News.

1949: 1st team all-pro, I.N.S.; 1st team AAFC, United Press; 2nd team AAFC, Official Team.

1950: 2nd team NFL, New York News.

1951: 2nd team NFL, United Press.