

# TONY LATONE: THE HERO OF POTTSVILLE

By Joe Zagorski

He came out of the coal mines to play pro football – a shy but rugged individual whose actions did his talking for him. He was a true-to-life hero in a town where heroism meant making it through a 12-hour work day in the mines. His name was Tony Latone.

During the 1920's, Latone played for the Pottsville Maroons of the National Football League, competing against athletes who'd earned glittering reputations on college gridirons. Although he never attended college, Tony was considered one of the league's top players.

Remembering the balding, Lithuanian-Italian fullback, the late George Halas claimed: "If Latone had gone to college and played college ball, he would certainly have been one of the greatest pro players of all time."

In the Anthracite Region of Northeastern Pennsylvania, mining provided rugged men in places like Pottsville, Frackville, and Shenandoah with a way to make a living. Pro football provided early century coal miners with a brief respite from their hard lives.

Like most of the men, Latone entered the mines not because he wanted to but because he had to. His father died when Tony was 11-years-old, leaving the Latone family without a breadwinner. Tony went to work in the mines immediately after his father's death. The cold, the stench, and the pain crushed many; in Tony's case it turned him into a strong man.

"That's how Tony got his strength," said Russ Zacko, the son of the Maroons' number one fan and the one who supplied the uniforms that gave the team its name. "He was a slaypicker in the mines, and let me tell you, that was one tough job. He developed his legs by pushing locies (shuttle cars) up a slope."

Latone's matchless leg-driving power was best exhibited on the football field as a run-blocker. From the old single wing formation, Latone moved defensive linemen and opened holes for Maroon teammates like Carl Beck and Walter French. Pro football games in the rugged coal region were won with brute force.

While the hard-hitting Latone excelled in the physical aspects of the gridiron, he was not known for his cerebral accomplishments.

"Tony wasn't too bright," said Zacko. "He only had a fifth-grade education. There was always talk going on about Tony's not being too smart."

One story came about because Tony was always paid in cash, a common occurrence for pro players of the day.

"One day," remembers Zacko, "several players found some money on the bench. They asked Tony, and he said it was his. 'What are you doing, Tony?' one of the players asked. 'Why don't you get yourself a checking account?'"

"Tony didn't understand how a checking account worked and didn't want to get one. But because the other players kept bugging him about it, he eventually gave in and got one.

"A week later, the players found his checkbook lying on the bench, and every check in the book was signed. Tony had signed each and every check. He'd go into a place and ask the clerk, 'What do I owe you?' Then he would fill in the amount on the check because his name was already on it."

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 9, No. 10 (1987)

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On a typical autumn Sunday, more than just Latone's name was on the minds of his opponents. Few thought the 5-11, 190-pounder lacked any `smarts' on a football field. Forearm shivers, crunching blocks, and those hard-driving legs made him famous in Schuylkill County while the Maroons were still an independent team.

In 1925, the Maroons joined the NFL. Tony contributed eight touchdowns to a memorable season in which the powerful Pottsville attack led the league with 270 points. When the Maroons defeated the Chicago Cardinals in December, they believed they'd won the NFL championship.

On December 12, Latone and his teammates faced the Notre Dame All-Stars, a squad made up of former Fighting Irish luminaries including the Four Horsemen: Harry Stuhldreher, Don Miller, Jim Crowley, and Elmer Layden. A sparse crowd of 8,000 turned out at Philadelphia's Shibe Park.

"We always felt," said Stuhldreher later, "that Latone was just about as rugged a football player as anyone would want to see, and on that day, Tony turned out to be a one- man gang."

Tony was the driving force behind the Maroon attack. Late in the fourth quarter, with the Maroons trailing 7-6, his plunges brought several first downs in Pottsville's "game drive." Charlie Berry's field goal gave the Maroons a 9-7 win.

The "Notre Dame Game" was played against league wishes in the territory of the Frankford Yellow Jackets, resulting in a suspension for the Maroons, one that cost them the championship. But despite the controversy that surfaced, the victory was perhaps the proudest moment in Maroon football history. Latone continued with the Maroons through 1928, then went with the franchise to Boston in 1929. His last NFL season was with Providence in 1930.

Many years later, at a banquet in Williamsport, Pa., Red Grange had these words to say about Latone:

"Tony was one hell broth of a rugged coal miner, and for my money, he was the most football player I have ever seen. I simply cannot imagine anyone who could equal that power-play fullback whose leg drive was so unbelievably potent he simply knocked the linemen kicking."

Following his playing days, Latone moved to Michigan and went into business with former Maroon teammate Frank Bucher. For many years, he'd sit in the stands at Briggs Stadium in Detroit, watching a modern brand of football and no doubt recalling the glory days when he was the one carrying the pigskin.

Walter Farquhar, the dean of Pottsville sportswriters, summed up Latone's career: "Because he was a non-collegian and because pro ball was then young and primitively guided, the greater part of the football world will always be ignorant of his true worth."

Pottsville certainly wasn't.

### RUSHING (Unofficial)

			---COMPLETE GAMES---				INCOMPLETE GM				
			CG	ATT	YDS	AVG	TD	IG	AT	YDS	TD
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1925	Pottsville	N	11	138	540	3.9	5	1	12	53	2
1926	Pottsville	N	12	144	578	4.0	4	-	-	-	-
1927	Pottsville	N	12	136	407	3.0	0	-	-	-	-
1928	Pottsville	N	9	164	482	2.9	2	1	2	8	1
1929	Boston	N	2	41	132	3.2	2	6	40	165	7
1930	Providence	N	3	46	223	4.8	2	8	21	60	1
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6 years			49	669	2362	3.5	15	16	75	286	11