

George V. Kenneally Sr. “A Forgotten Hero”

by Philip J. Carver

The Boston sports world has been blessed by some of the greatest legends to ever play their respective sports, from yesterdays heroes like Williams & Orr to todays heroes like Bird and Clemens. These individuals have had a distinct impact on their sports and the way they were played. Many local fans feel that football is the only sport left in our region to not have a true “super-star” suit up for the local eleven. A viable argument could be made on behalf of Patriots Hall of Fame guard John Hannah, yet as great as he was he did not step to the teams fore front and become a “marquee name.” What is unknown to many football fans in New England is that one of the games true pioneers and outstanding athletes was born and raised in South Boston. Not only was he an ALL-PRO player and considered to be one of the N.F.L.’s premier ends but he was responsible for bringing football to Boston when no one else could or would. It appears as though time has played a cruel trick on one of this city’s native sons, and instead of being remembered as “The Father of Pro Football in New England” (a title that was bestowed on him by the Boston media) he is relegated to being a mere footnote in the annuls of the sport. The man I am referring to is the late George V. Kenneally Sr., and many feel that his illustrious 40 year association with football more than qualifies him to be remembered with the aforementioned legends.

“GIGI” as he was affectionately known began his athletic career at Boston Latin High School where he played varsity football, baseball and held the city record for the fifty yard dash. Upon graduating in 1919 he joined a group of local youths; who were forming a semi-pro team to play out of the local Knights of Columbus, they were known as the Pere Maerquettes. The Pere’s were a phenomenal team that would capture the local semi-pro championship for the 1921 season. Gigi played exceptionally well and soon found that his services were being sought by many big time colleges throughout the country. Instead of enrolling at a well known football factory he decided to follow his heart and his older brother and enroll at a small Catholic university in Olean New York known as St. Bonaventure. In 1922 he began his collegiate career at St. Bona’s and soon became an accomplished athlete and scholar. During his four years there he won sixteen varsity letters, was the schools middleweight boxing champion and the captain of the football team, he also garnered many national and regional awards for his football prowess. In 1925 after receiving his bachelors degree Gigi was forced to decide what career path to choose, the option to become a professional football player or professional boxer were both open to him. The decision was made fairly easy for him, because offers to play in the National Football League soon started to come. Although St. Bona’s was an obscure location to cultivate a football career word traveled fast about his on field exploits and many teams were interested in the “Little All-American.”

Gigi joined the N.F.L. in 1926 with the powerful Pottsville Maroons (Pennsylvania), the Maroons were an awesome team that made it’s home in this small mining town and proved to be the only form of entertainment for the miners and their families. The 1926 Maroons played an unbelievable 19 or 20 game schedule in which they out scored their opponents 392 to 29. In 1927 Gigi was chosen as the team’s captain and was also named to his first All-Pro Squad, the Maroons however were an aging team and they began to slip from their perch atop the N.F.L. The 1928 season was the Maroons worst and ultimately their last; they finished with a disappointing 2-8 record. Kenneally, despite the teams poor play was again voted All-Pro and found his stock was raising rapidly throughout the league even though the team was on the verge of folding. At the close of the ‘28 season the team succumbed to financial difficulties and were no longer solvent. Gigi viewed this as a perfect opportunity to try his hand at the management level and along with his partner purchased the Maroons players and all for \$2,500. The next step was to have the team transferred to Boston where it would become the Boston Bulldogs, the first N.F.L. franchise to call our city home. Kenneally would wear four hats for his fledgling franchise – that of part owner, assistant Coach, team captain and star end. The Bulldogs were a competitive team and would finish the season at 4-4 the economy however would not allow them to succeed. 1929 was not a good year for business ventures and when the stock market crashed the Bulldogs soon followed suit. The team finished it’s schedule and disbanded with no debts against them, this alone stands as a tribute to Gigi’s integrity.

Without missing a step Kenneally was back in the N.F.L. in 1930 to play along side his friend and football immortal Ernie Nevers and the Chicago Cardinals. This season would prove to be one of Gigi’s best in the league as he helped guide the struggling franchise to a 5-6 record. The highlight of the season was an

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indoor exhibition game played at Chicago Stadium between the Bears and Cardinals with the proceeds aiding unemployment relief funds. Kenneally was left with the distinct impression that indoor football would indeed be the wave of the future. In 1931 he decided it was time to come home and tend to his growing family. He accepted a coaching position at Boston University and rejoined his old team the Marquettes. He also utilized this sabbatical year to try to generate funds to restart his Bulldog franchise; this would not come to fruition. On the field with the Marquettes Gigi led his team on a monstrous schedule that consisted of two N.F.L. opponents. They would win all their games and out score their rivals 236 to 9.

In 1932 he learned that the N.F.L. was trying to place a franchise in the Boston market, this was of great concern to Gigi because he still owned the territorial jurisdiction rights from his Bulldog franchise. He still harbored hopes of obtaining the capital that would enable his dormant franchise to rejoin the land of the living. According to the Pro Football Hall of Fame the infamous laundry tycoon George Preston Marshall had purchased the defunct Dayton Triangles and wanted to move it to a large media market that was without a team (i.e. Boston). Marshall who had a well documented relationship with the league treasurer Carl Storck (the same man he purchased the franchise from) made it painfully clear to Gigi that he (Marshall) would win a battle over territorial rights. Kenneally was forced to concede and as a result Marshall moved the Triangles to Boston where it would operate as the 1932 Braves. The Braves were loaded with all star caliber players like Hall of Fame inductees Cliff Battles & Turk Edwards. With a stellar line up like this the choice for team captain was easy, George v. Kenneally Sr. Gigi armed with the "if you can't beat em join em" attitude did just that and became the Braves assistant coach, captain and star end. His relationship with the team lasted only one season because it seemed not many could stand the irrepressible Marshall and his antics for much longer. In 1933 Gigi left Boston with his friend and former Braves coach Lud Wray to play for and assist with the newly formed Philadelphia Eagles franchise. For the next three seasons he would anchor the Eagles line, serve as the teams captain and assistant coach and was again selected All-Pro for the 1934 season. At the close of the 1935 season Gigi was again asked to participate in an indoor football game this time in the Boston Gardens. The circumstances for his second indoor appearance differed greatly from his first. In Chicago he was George Kenneally but in Boston he had to play under the alias of Jim "one play" Obrien. As the story goes his Eagle teammate Jim Leonard was given the task of rounding up some of his fellow Notre Dame Alumni. This proved to be much harder than he thought so he decided to enlist the help of Kenneally and a couple of other Eagles, the fact that Leonard was the only Notre Dame grad was not an issue they would concern themselves with. The Notre Dame "alumni" team was now set to due battle against the local collegiate all-stars. The Boston Gardens was a make shift field at best that was only 70 yards long and 30 yards wide. It would however serve it's purpose. The main problem was how to get Gigi into Boston undetected by the media and fans in order to continue the masquerade. Kenneally would prove to be the difference in this closely contested tilt, he set up the game winning field goal with a spectacular fifty yard tackle eligible pass. The Notre Dame alumni won a narrow 10-9 victory vs the all-stars, the game was by and large a novelty whose proceeds were designated for charity. This was one of the last times that "Old Man Football" would don his cleats, his playing days were over but he would continue to leave his imprint on the game this time from the coaching position.

Although he was still considered to be the best end in the N.F.L. the leagues elder statesman decided it was time to retire at the end of the 1935 season. His reason was not one of diminished ability but rather an opportunity presented itself to him that he could not refuse. He was offered the position of head coach and General Manager of the Boston Shamrocks of the newly formed American Professional Football League. This was Gigi's chance to reclaim the city of Boston back from Marshall, the man who had bumped him from the ownership picture four years earlier. His job was simple, search the country and find enough quality players to field a competitive team and then devise a game plan that would both win games and attract fan interest. Public support was the key to succeed in the Boston market because of the fact that the city was just not big enough to support two pro football teams. The Braves were a powerful team that would win it's fair share of games yet they could not arise the interest of the Boston fans. The reason for the conspicuous lack of support was due in large part to their flamboyant owner – his disdain for the city and it's citizens were made painfully clear in his numerous media tirades. He also raised the ire of the public by raising ticket prices minutes before a big game, antics like this to a financially strapped region drove the fans away from the Braves and straight into the arms of the rival Shamrocks. For those fans that made the Shamrocks a regular part of their diet they were fortunate enough to see a revolutionary offense designed by Kenneally. While most football teams were struggling with the advent of the forward pass, Gigi made it an intricate part of his offense. The Shamrocks would play a torturous 19 game schedule which resulted in them capturing the league title as A.F.L. champs for the 1936 season and played a major role in forcing the Redskins (Braves) to a flee to a more receptive

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market.

Unfortunately for our city the A.F.L. was financially unstable and was soon forced to cease operations. The Shamrocks however would continue to operate as an independent until 1938 thanks to Gigi who assumed sole ownership of the team when the financial backers ran out on the team after the '36 season. His friends Art Rooney & George Halas of the senior league tried in vain to have the Shamrocks admitted to the N.F.L. The admission list was long however and Gigi's bankroll was depleted so the team would soon disband. The main reason the Shamrocks could not join the established league was George Preston Marshall; he felt our city did not deserve a pro team and would adamantly oppose any plan to add one. Kenneally tried his best to keep the team afloat by playing any team they could, the most notable being Art Rooney's Pittsburgh Pirates. Rooney brought his team here for one reason only and that was to show his support for his close friend Gigi. despite the show of support the Shamrocks were finished and so was Boston's last legitimate foray into pro football until the 1960 Patriots.

In 1939 Kenneally accepted the position of athletic director and head coach and history teacher at Revere High School. Although he was determined to turn the fortune of Revere's athletic program around, his services were still being sought by the pro game. In 1940 he took on a night job as the manager and advisory coach of the ill-fated Boston Bears in the newly formed and short lived American Football League. Again he was asked to find capable players and assist the head coach in formulating a schedule and game plan. It appears that the cozy confines of Fenway Park would not sustain the Bears and they disappeared as quickly as they came. It is quite clear that when there was talk of football in our region the man in the midst of it all was a local kid from Southie. From his career standpoint as a player, coach, manager and owner, no one knew the game better. It was however his misfortune to play in an era when fan support was not great and the economy was worse than it is now. These factors did not deter him from his pursuit to help further the sport he loved. TIME is the only reason Gigi is not remembered as a well-known New England legend, when football began to gain momentum in our region his time was passed.

Kenneally's last role in Pro football was in 1947 when he served for one year as the president of the New England Pro Football League. In 1950 he left the Revere athletic program in a vastly improved state and was off to become the line coach at Brandeis University. Gigi helped the "Brandeis athletic baby" win the trust of the New England college community and after four years retired from football completely. His retirement from football allowed him plenty of time to continue with his job as head of the Social Studies department at Revere, the position he would hold until his untimely death.

His career in football is unrivaled, it spanned well over 40 years and ranges from every level from high school and semi-pro to the professional ranks. He was involved in every facet of the game as a player, coach, manager and owner. For his efforts on behalf of the sport in our region he was dubbed by the local media as "The father of Pro Football in New England." In the 1950's Readers Digest published an article entitled "George Kenneally the toughest two-way end to ever play for the Philadelphia Eagles." In 1951 he was elected to the New England Sports Hall of Fame as a charter member; in 1970 he was inducted into the Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame (central chapter). In 1973 he was inducted into the Brandeis University Hall of Fame and in 1976 the Saint Bonaventure Hall of Fame. In 1988 the New England Sports Museum began a display dedicated to Gigi and his career. In 1990 he was inducted into the Massachusetts High School Coaches Hall of Fame and the South Boston Hall of Fame. These awards stand as a tribute to a man who dedicated his life to the game he loved and further solidify his place in history as a true pioneer .

On September 3, 1968, George Kenneally – a football legend died, his hero status gone with his heyday. It is a shame that he is remembered only as a mere footnote in football history, his position among the sports immortals denied him. More than anyone else he truly is Boston's greatest home-grown legend.