

THE OLD PRO

By Emil Klosinski

He played the game for 18 years in the pioneer days of pro football, but it was a love affair that lasted a lifetime. Sure, 18 years of body banging is a long time in the aches and pains department, and actually during the last 5 or 6 years of his participation, he played on a selective basis. His family was increasing in size as were his responsibilities to it, but he kept getting lured back for one or two games per season long after he supposedly hung up his cleats for good. He was sought after as a player/coach, with the baiting emphasis on the "coach" part for certain post-retirement games; usually it ended up with the "coach" playing almost an entire game.

He probably weighed at most 170 pounds in his prime while playing the tackle position through most of his career. Those who saw him play and those who played with him and against him had the greatest admiration and respect for his ability and style of play. He was among the best of his era. His quickness was an asset which coupled with tenacity, drive and dedication made him a tough cookie to play against. He preferred playing a clean game but if someone played him "dirty," he would retaliate with fury and abandon.

No, he's not enshrined in the hallowed hall in Canton. Neither are almost all of his contemporaries whom one might consider as deserving. But that was the era of a struggle, little recognition and miniscule compensation. There are Thorpe, Henry, and a few others who had a collegiate reputation helping spotlight their pro football activities who are enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Because they did make the hall does give recognition and "class" representation to those who aren't named, thus preserving a historical fact.

So who was this great tackle? He was my father, John "Curley" Klosinski. Hunk Anderson, who coached the South Bend Arrows in 1920, gave him the ultimate compliment when Hunk said, "Curley was one helluva lineman. He was tough and fast and could play in the line for any team in his days, be it pro or college, and I'm sure he'd be a standout."

John started playing in 1912 when he was on the young-side of his teens. He had built up his muscles at the age of 11 carrying brick in hods to the bricklayers surfacing the neighborhood streets. While watching a local independent squad practicing, he was asked to participate on defense because the Shamrocks were short one man for a quick-whistle scrimmage. The Shamrock's manager didn't expect him to do any tackling and he was filling in mainly for blocking assignment purposes because he had no pads. John thrived on body contact and proceeded to make tackles. This impressed the manager who asked John if he wanted to play on that coming Sunday, he would get 10 bucks and all equipment would be furnished except shoes and stockings. He then was told to get into the offensive huddle and he got a crash course on the shamrock's offensive plays. When he got home, he took an old pair of shoes to the shoemaker shop and had cleats put on from shop scraps for 15 cents. He borrowed his sister's long white stockings and played that Sunday. John did exceptionally well and after the game the manager gave him his ten bucks saying, "Here's your money kid, you earned it."

Thereafter, John played for many South Bend teams including the Huebners, the Nationals, Muessel Brewers, South Bend Athletics (whose predecessors played Notre Dame to a 0-0 tie in 1901); the Jolly Fellows and the Arrows. Sometimes while being a member of one team, John would appear in the lineup of another on any given Sunday. In 1919 he played for the Rockford Grands in their city championship game against the A.A.C'S. It was a Notre Dame contingent that was "ringered" in for that game and required a good tackle who knew the Notre Dame signals and plays. Curley's Arrow team was coached by Slip Madigan, the Notre Dame center who engineered the sub-rosa appearance of some of the Irish players including George Gipp. John also played several games for a Toledo team one season.

I never did see him play, or if I did, I was too young to know what was going on. But it was his former teammates whom I had interviewed and relatives who saw him play where I heard the glowing tributes to his football prowess. It was Paster Sobieralski, a teammate of John's, who told of some incidents that

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depicted John's hard hitting and toughness. One such incident was against a Racine (WI) team. The halfback was about to make a sharp cut and planted one foot stiffly and raised his other leg, swinging it around to change direction, and at that moment the back was hit solidly with a shoulder tackle and went down with a broken ieg. One instance related was about retaliation when one lineman had a tough time coping with John's quickness and tried to intimidate him by throwing a fist towards his jaw. John saw it coming and moved his head quickly, thus getting only a grazing blow. Curiey went right after the guy and threw only one solid punch and the opponent was in dreamland. One of the combatants was ordered off the field and disqualified; the other was carried off the field and immobilized.

Then there was an incident involving the Fort Wayne Pyramids which i heard about in detail and read a slightly different version of it in the Fort Wayne paper. I was lucky to come across an article in my research which covered the South Bend- Fort Wayne game. Kenton Baker, the Fort Wayne and former Ohio U. star, suffered a " broken shoulder and a dislocated rib" according to the Fort Wayne Journal Gazette. A report in the South Bend paper only mentioned that the Arrows had to fight every minute to defeat the Pyramids and only the Arrows fullback Findley was mentioned as injured. Contrasting that report, the Fort Wayne team accused the Arrows of rough and unsportsmanlike tactics throughout the game; and particularly that the South Bend right tackle "threw Kenton Baker heavily to the ground after the whistle had blown."

The South Bend version as told by Paster was that Baker at tailback position faked as if the ball was snapped to him and took one step to the left, then went to the right to run interference with the pulling guard over South Bend's left side, of the line. but the short snap to the up-back was fumbled; he fell on the ball and the whistle blew immediately. The pulling guard stopped as did everyone else but Baker continued on to make his block on Klosinski, the right tackle, who braced himself and coming up from underneath, rammed his shoulder into Baker's mid-section and with an arm underneath the crotch, flipped Baker hard to the ground. The game was rough, but the Arrows, inured to this hard-play tried to " hit the other man harder than he can hit you" which was a Rockne slogan effectively used by Hunk Anderson with the Arrows. During the mid-week after the Arrows game the Fort Wayne paper announced that there would not be a game scheduled that Sunday so that the Pyramids could recuperate from the battering received at the hands of the South Bend team.

Many of the old players had retired by the 1922 season and the K a S Company no longer subsidized the team for using the Arrow name. John Klosinski and Buck Zalas didn't give up easily. They hit upon the idea of running weekly dances as a way to get some finances. They also contacted a company that manufactured novelties and had some manufactured for sale at the games. The novelties were football-themed curios: badges, pennants and the like. If they played teams from other areas, the Arrows had to have funds to back a guarantee.

The Arrows, playing the first game of the season, consisted of a few veterans and a lot of newcomers, some untested under fire. The Arrows scored on the opening kickoff and thereafter the game was played on even terms. At half time, the Arrows led 7-0. As the second half started, the Arrows left tackle was injured and out for the rest of the game. Immediately the Elkharts ran plays through the substitute's position for huge gains with the safety man making most of the tackles. The opposition scored and tied the game at 7-7. On their next possession, the Arrows' opponents began to hit the same spot. In three plays they got to the Arrows' 20 yard line. That was enough for John and he decided to do something about it besides shifting the roving center to that side.

In those days, all coaches who were not player-coaches would wear a suit and tie as they roamed the sideline. Klosinski, as manager-coach was dressed in a suit he had just bought a few days before. He was so infuriated when the other team reached the 20 yard line going exclusively over the sub's position, that he took off his coat jacket, threw it on the bench, and substituted for the fellow who couldn't hold his own. Yes, the opponents seeing a guy with his Sunday best and street shoes decided that that still was the position to run against and tried two plays against Curley and each was for a short loss. A third down pass fell incomplete. While this was going on, the injured player who was sidelined was smart enough to take off his jersey and shoes. In the meantime, the opposition took time out to decide what to do on 4th down. During that respite, the water boy ran out on the field with the jersey and shoes and John hurriedly put them on. As play began, the opponents lined up for a field goal. On the snap, Klosinski, getting traction from cleated shoes, barreled in and blocked it. Thereafter, the opponents were checked and with John calling the plays, most of which were over his position when crucial yardage was needed, managed a sustained drive in the 4th quarter to score and win the game 13-7. Johnny Yeager scored for the Arrows on a two-yard plunge.

When it was all over, John's trousers were completely ruined with tears, blood and grass stains. His suit jacket fared no better. It fell off the bench onto the ground and was trod upon by countless cleated shoes. When he got home, I am told he got holy hell from my mother who was a gentle woman with infinite patience ... normally.

We had a terrible misfortune during my youth. Our house burned down on a sub zero February morning and we were lucky that our dad took us out through the bedroom windows. Everything was burned to the ground and all of his memorabilia, team and individual photos were consumed in the fire. Indelibly etched in my memory, however, are all the things others have told me about his playing days as well as some of his reminiscences. I was impressed as I grew older with the street recognition he had from people he didn't know. By that I mean that my dad and I would be waiting at a bus stop or perhaps we'd go to a hardware store and someone would come up to him with a greeting and immediately begin talking football and about dad's playing days. While some athletes are not easily recognized when they are out of uniform or not in a familiar milieu, especially when they have been retired for a number of years, it apparently was not so with John. One feature he had that stood out was a mop of naturally curly hair and it was a certainty in any game that he would at some point remove his helmet and toss it to the sidelines. It started early in his career when he began having headgear trouble with ill-fitting equipment. If it didn't cut into his eyebrows, then it would slide down easily over his eyes curtailing vision. Of course, if he was not a good ball player, he would not have been remembered.

John's last game was an old timer's all-star game versus a South Bend semi-pro team. During the Depression of the '30's, the South Bend Kiwanis, or perhaps the Lions Club, thought such a game would raise some money that could help out the soup kitchens and other organizations that tried to aid the unemployed. The sponsoring organization sold booster tags to businessmen, lawyers and doctors. Actually the tag was not needed to enter the game site because it wasn't an enclosed arena. Except for a front gate, the rest was open territory. During the game, a hat was passed around among the spectators for additional revenue. John was asked not only to play but also be a line coach for the game. Ike Voedisch, chief executive of the Hoosier Brewing Company, was selected to be the backfield coach, but of the three practices the old timers had, he managed to make only one. So John did most of the preparation for that game. Ike was one of the old time players as well, having played ball at Notre Dame under Rockne and also he had been a volunteer coach at Notre Dame.

It was a colorful sight to behold, because each of the old timers had a different jersey on. There were variations of dark and Navy blues; there were maroons, a burnt oranges a red, and even one with leather patches on front and sleeves as well as one with tiger stripes down each sleeve. The game was 0-0 through three quarters and in the 4th quarter, the old timers ran out of gas. The semi-pro youngsters scored once and were threatening to score again as the game ended. Said Klosinski in reminiscing the game. "That was the longest game I've ever played in, or it seemed that way. I never did get my second wind, and I made up my mind that this was my last game." It was.