

WHEN THE EAGLES FLEW HIGH

By Stanley Grosshandler

To have one top flight center is a real luxury to any NFL team today; to have three, well that is just unheard of. One team, the 1949 Philadelphia Eagles had such a prominent trio in Alex Wojciechowicz, Chuck Bednarik, and Vic Linskog. Alex and Chuck made the Hall of Fame, while Vic was voted the best center in the league in 1951.

Wojie, the elder statesman of the trio, had been a two-time All-American at Fordham where he centered the legendary "Seven Rocks of Granite." One story had it that he went to a coach and asked him if he should change his name so that people might have an easier time remembering him.

The coach replied, "Son the way you play nobody will forget you."

Alex entered the NFL in 1938 with the Lions, going to the Eagles in 1946. He retired in 1951 after playing parts of three decades and was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1968.

The second Hall of Fame pivot man, Chuck Bednarik, came to the Eagles in 1949. He was their bonus draft choice from Penn where he too had been an All-American. He made All-League eight times and as late as 1960 was playing both ways on the championship Eagle team. The last player to do this, his jersey hangs in the Hall of Fame as a tribute to this feat. A bruising tackler, he was often quoted as saying he enjoyed hitting and any player who didn't should not be out there.

Vic Linskog joined the club out of Stanford in 1944. He usually started at offensive center. Vic retired after the 1951 season to go into coaching. He had finally gained his recognition that year by being placed on the All-League team.

The post-war Eagles under coach Greasy Neale were one of the great powerhouses of the NFL. Taking the Eastern Conference in 1947, 1948, and 1949 they went all the way the last two years.

"Most of the credit for the success of the Eagles must go to Greasy Neale," emphatically states Alex Wojciechowicz. "Of my 13 years in the league, there were none greater. He was a fine teacher and leader."

Bednarik adds, "He was without a doubt the number one coach in football, a very astute individual."

Greasy Neale was indeed a remarkable man. He both played and coached at West Virginia Wesleyan. He would coach the collegians on Saturday then go to Canton on Sunday to play pro with Jim Thorpe and other greats of those dim formative days of pro football. Neale is the only pro football man to play in baseball's World Series. He was with the 1919 Reds, coach in the Rose Bowl (his Washington and Jefferson team tied a heavily favored Cal team) and coach in the NFL championship game. He too is a member of Canton's Hall of Fame.

"My most memorable game as an Eagle," said Wojie, "was winning our first championship game when we beat the Cardinals in that snow storm. After all my years in the league it was a dream come true. I must admit that our 1949 team was the best as it was the highest scoring team in the league."

"The team was great," declared Bednarik, because we had super talent ... like Steve Van Buren, Tommy Thompson, Bosh Pritchard, Joe Muha, Pete Pihos, Alex Wojciechowicz, and captain Al Wistert. I was privileged to play on that team as only three rookies made it.

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"Besides myself there were Clyde Scott of Navy and Frank Ziegler from Georgia Tech. I got to play my share by replacing Lindskog on offense and Wojie on defense. In comparing the two championship teams I was on I'd have to say the '49 team had superior talent to the '60 club which won on its great desire."

"Greasy came up with a defense against the T," Wojie recalled, "that few teams had much success against for several years. It consisted of planting a big guard over the center. This blocked off the plays up the middle. Either Frank (Bucko) Kilroy or Walter (Piggy) Barnes played there. Our tackles, Vic Sears on the left and Mike Jarmoluk on the right, played opposite the offensive tackles. Pete Pihos or John Green played left end, while Jay MacDowell was the right end. They played wide to prevent the sweep and drifted back to guard against the flat pass. The linebackers plugged the gap between the tackle and end, Joe Muha on the left and myself on the right. Our job was to shut off the middle from the pass and hold up the ends at the line to prevent the long pass. Russ Craft, a great running back switched to defense, played left half; while Dick Humbert and Neill Armstrong played right half. Both also played offensive end. Pat McHugh and Frank Reagen, the Penn All-American, were the safeties."

Neale had stood behind a much maligned quarterback in Tommy Thompson. Considered a hard man to handle, Greasy converted him from a tailback to a T quarterback and then backed him as he made mistakes in learning and was booed by the fans. He was rewarded as Thompson, the league's top QB in '48, led the Eagles to two titles.

The superstar was Steve Van Buren. Today in the Hall of Fame, Steve was one of the original, big, fast, halfbacks. An absolutely devastating runner, he was the first man to lead the league in both rushing and scoring. (Only two others have duplicated this feat). Four times he was the number one rusher in the league.

Neale, who often called the plays from the sidelines had very simple instructions for his quarterbacks Thompson and Bill Mackrides: "When you have important short yardage to gain, don't get fancy, don't fool around, just give the ball to Van."

When Van Buren retired, he owned seven NFL records.

For fullbacks there were Joe Muha, a great punter; hard running Jack Myers, and a fine blocker in the vet Ben Kish. Diminutive Bosh Pritchard played left halfback. His 6.6 average per carry in '49 was the best in the league. Clyde Scott, Jim Parmer, and Frank Ziegler played the other halfback spot.

The Eagles had a fine offensive line, and though the league allowed unlimited substitution that year, several went both ways. Left tackle Vic Sears and right guard Kilroy were two of them. Right tackle captain Al Wistert, one of three brothers to make All-American at Michigan, was an All-NFL tackle five consecutive years. Left guard Cliff Patton was one of the top placement artists in the game. There was great bench strength in Jay MacDowell, who played both offensive tackle and defensive end, tackle George Savitsky (another Penn All-American), and guards Dusan Maronic, Mario Gianelli and John Magee.

After winning their opening game, 7-0, and losing midway through the season to the Bears, the Eagles had little trouble in posting an 11-1 record. Basically a power running team, they had exceptional receivers in Jack Ferrante, who never went to college, and Pete Pihos, Indiana great. The durable and versatile Pihos never missed a game in nine years as an Eagle, often going both ways.

In 1952, Pihos was asked to confine himself to defense and made All-League. The next three years, he switched to offense, led the league in receptions all three years and again made All-League. he was selected to the Hall of Fame in 1970.

Under a torrential California rain storm, Philadelphia beat the Rams, 14-0, for the NFL championship in 1949. Van Buren churned for a record 197 yards as Thompson put the team on the boards with a pass to Pihos. A second TD came on a blocked punt. Leo Skladany, activated for the last three games, blocked a Bob Waterfield punt and fell on it for the score.

With the departure of Neale, Van Buren, and Thompson, the Eagles fell from their lofty perch for 11 years; but when they were flying high there were none that could soar higher.