

PAT O'DEA: "The Kangaroo Kicker"

By Stuart Kantor

In 1970, Tom Dempsey booted a 63-yard field goal to beat the Detroit Lions on the game's final play. For 28 years, no one in professional had kicked a field goal that far. In 1998, Jason Elam of the Denver Broncos equaled Dempsey's feat and received quite a bit of coverage on ESPN, CNN, FOX, the print media, etc. Now, I grant you, a 63-yard field goal is, indeed, a tremendous kick, however, 63 yards would be a chip shot for the man known as "The Kangaroo Kicker."

Every sport has its legendary figures, those that transcend the game, those whose mere presence exudes greatness. At the end of the 19th century, few football players were more popular or dominant than the dropkicking Australian import, Patrick John O'Dea. And none lived a more fascinating tale.

Christened Patrick John O'Dea on Saint Patrick's Day, 1872, in Melbourne, Australia, he grew up playing rugby. By age 16, he was chosen as an All-Australian halfback while attending Victoria High School. He furthered his skills at Krew College in Melbourne.

It was in 1896 that the seeds of a legend were planted. O'Dea's brother Andy was coaching Varsity Crew and was an assistant football trainer at the University of Wisconsin. Pat, interested to join his brother and see America, enrolled in pre-law at Wisconsin. This was after he received the Australian Royal Humane Society certificate for "saving a young girl from drowning."

On campus that Fall, his football exploits became evident. It is said that:

one day when football practice was going on in front of the Old Red Armory, the ball bounded over to Pat who was watching the drill along the sideline. To return the punt, Pat simply reverted to form and booted the pigskin the length of the field. Coaches, players and sideliners erupted with a concerted shout and converged on Pat who feared he had committed some offense in touching the ball; but the rush on Pat was to recruit him. So, after some talk, he agreed to put on a suit the next day and in his words, 'try and learn something about the crazy American version of the game.'

O'Dea broke his arm in practice after the first game. The next three years, however, were magical.

The Badger's first All-American, he was twice awarded that honor by the legendary Walter Camp. As a three-year captain, his teams went 33-5-1. Barely above 6-1, the 165-pound O'Dea's successfully converted 31 field goals during his brilliant career. His most famous effort came against Northwestern. O'Dea describes his 65-yard dropkick on Thanksgiving Day, 1898, against Northwestern:

Northwestern took the kickoff but immediately punted from the 25-yard line. We then used one play to get to the center of the 110-yard field where the ball was placed in a marked circle. I called the kick signal and dropped back about 12 yards, took one step and booted the ball between the posts for a field goal. Wisconsin went on to win 47-0.

His effort against Northwestern, as stated, is his most famous kick, but it is not his greatest field goal. Although "O'Dea's greatest place kick does not appear in the official records, it is well authenticated." Milwaukee, November 11, 1899 was the site of this spectacular boot. Against the Illini,

O'Dea's long punt soared into the end zone and the rules required Illinois to immediately punt back from the 25. O'Dea called to Bill Juneau to make a fair catch and the ball was taken just a few feet inside the sidelines, 57 yards away from the goal. O'Dea originally intended to use the dropkick, but the referees ruled that Juneau would have to hold the ball. O'Dea then calmly place kicked the

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 21, No. 4 (1999)

ball through the uprights, clear over the bleachers and into the street. Old timers recall that the ball must have sailed at least 80 yards through the air!

The *Minneapolis Journal* heaped more praise for the powerful O'Dea in an 1899 game against Minnesota.

Minnesota brought the ball in 25 yards and again Knowlton punted. The ball flew straight to O'Dea, ten yards beyond center and with Gil Dobie right under it. Great was the surprise of the Minnesota men to see O'Dea dodge an attack from Dobie and then deliberately kick a drop from the center of the field. A nicer kick could not have been made, and Wisconsin had a score 5 to 0.

Remember, at the turn of the century, the field's length was 110 yards, touchdowns were worth 5 points, and field goals were also 5 points. Gil Dobie proclaimed this play the greatest individual play he had ever seen. Why? Because the incredible O'Dea made this spectacular kick while running to his left. He was a right-footed kicker!

The incredible was commonplace for O'Dea. A one hundred-yard punt and a one hundred-yard kickoff return in 1899 against Yale. A 110-yard boot in 1897 against Minnesota. A 60-yard dropkick against Chicago in 1897. He could even kick accurately and with distance into the teeth of a blizzard, regardless of the fact that the goal posts stood on the goal lines.

Upon finishing his career at Wisconsin, O'Dea owned virtually every dropkicking, place kicking, and punting record. Simply put, he dominated the sport of American football.

In 1900 and 1901, O'Dea accepted the head coaching job at Notre Dame. In two years under him, *The Fighting Irish* (or *Ramblers* as they were known then) compiled a 14-4-2 record. In 1902, as coach of Missouri, his squad of 84 men recorded a 5-3-0 record, including victories over Simpson College, Washburn, Washington University, Oklahoma and Iowa.

The legend of Patrick John O'Dea was now due to explode into myth.

Pat O'Dea disappeared. That's right. Vanished. No trace, no explanation. Speculation abounded. He joined "the Australian Army which was passing through San Francisco, and he died in action while fighting with the Anzac regiment." Press releases stated he "probably lies beneath an unmarked grave in France." The *Literary Digest* (March 17, 1934) surmised he must be in the "grave of the Unknown Soldier in Australia." The University of Wisconsin Alumni Association "disclosed nothing as to his whereabouts."

So what happened to the kicker referred to the "Paul Bunyan of American Football"? Was he killed in battle? Was he lying 6-feet under in France or Australia? No. Pat O'Dea was fine and living in obscurity in the Northern California town of Westwood under the assumed name of Charles J. Mitchell. There, he "was a highly respected citizen, statistician for the Red River Company, and secretary-manager of the Westwood Auto Club and the Chamber of Commerce." Many reports have O'Dea working as a lawyer as well.

Bill Leiser, Sports Editor for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, revealed the true identity of Charles J. Mitchell to the world. Yet the reports were denied from coast to coast. Even Andy O'Dea, Pat's brother, now living in New York, denied the reports.

Why did Pat O'Dea hide from his fame? "Probably I was wrong," he told Leiser. "I wanted to get away from my past. As Pat O'Dea, I seemed very much just an ex-football player. I was very happy as Charles Mitchell for a while."

When the Wisconsin Alumni Association invited O'Dea as to be its guest of honor against the Illini in 1934, the official statement read: "Wisconsin is planning the greatest homecoming in history when Illinois sends its formidable football team here November 17."

Bill Leiser summed up the significance of Pat O'Dea's career.

Everyone who understands anything at all of the history of football knows of Pat O'Dea, the Australian who came to America in 1896 and for four years on the Wisconsin Varsity displayed a ravishing, kicking, smothering type of football player America never knew before and may never know again. What's in the record books alone will keep his name alive as long as the game is

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 21, No. 4 (1999)

played. There were heroes, great ones, before 1896, and have been heroes of the gridiron since 1900, but to those who saw Midwest football at the end of the last century, the names of Jim Thorpe and Red Grange even, mean little along side of Wisconsin's Pat O'Dea.

On April 4, 1962, one day before he died at the University of California Hospital at the age of 90, O'Dea received notice of his election to the Football Hall of Fame. The "Kangaroo Kicker's" leaves an incredible legacy that may never be equaled.

Were O'Dea kicking today, without doubt, he would be a first or second-round draft pick. He would soon be worth millions in free agency. Today's field is 100 yards long; field goals are worth 3 points; and defensive positioning and pressure is of utmost importance to counteract the modern aerial circus and punishing runners. Thus a kicker of O'Dea's quality would be vital to the success of any team poised to make a run at a championship.