

FIVE MEN I WISH I COULD HAVE INTERVIEWED

By Stan Grosshandler

I have always been fascinated by athletes who were able to make the Major Leagues in two sports. Two Renaissance Men I would have enjoyed interviewing were Charlie Berry and Hugo Bezdek.

Charlie Berry played college football at Lafayette College under the great Jock Sutherland and was picked at right end on the last Walter Camp All-American team (1924). The following year he joined the Philadelphia Athletics as a catcher but was behind Mickey Cochrane and Cy Perkins competing with a 17 year old kid, Jimmie Foxx. He managed to get into ten games.

That fall he and Athletic team mate Walter French joined the Pottsville Maroons of the NFL. A great receiver, he also kicked extra points and field goals. He led the league in scoring with 74 points. French's 5.4 yards per carry topped the league.

Berry returned to the Maroons the following season and then decided to devote himself to baseball, as did French, who became a .300 career hitter as a pinch hitter for the A's.

Following two seasons of minor league ball Charlie joined the Boston Red Sox, playing with them until traded to the White Sox in 1932. He returned to the A's in 1938, was a player coach and then a full time coach until 1940.

In 1940 Charlie became a Head Linesman in the NFL, officiating through 1960. He also became an American League umpire in 1942, continuing in this capacity through 1962. In the fall of 1959 he accomplished a feat no other man has equaled. He umpired in the 1959 World Series and then was an official in the Colt - Giant Sudden Death championship game. Charlie is a member of the College Football Hall of Fame.

Wouldn't it have been interesting to talk to Charlie about his recollections of both Sutherland and Connie Mack, the overtime game, the many great football and baseball players he had seen and played both with and against.

Hugo Frank Bezdek was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia, but moved to Chicago as a child. He attended the U. of Chicago and came under the guidance in 1902 of the legendary Amos Alonzo Stagg, for whom he played fullback for four years.

Hugo obviously learned a great deal from Stagg. In his first year out of college (1906) he coached Oregon to an undefeated season. Arkansas was the next stop, and then back to Oregon, where he guided his team to victory in the 1917 Rose Bowl. The following season he coached the Mare Island Marines to a Rose Bowl win in an all service game.

In 1918 he joined Penn State where he stayed until 1929. He had a third Rose Bowl team, as Penn State lost to USC in the '23 game.

Hinkey Haines was one of his star backs with the Nittany Lions who played a long time in the NFL and was a roommate of Babe Ruth's as a Yankee.

"Bezdek was a stern but very fair man," recalled Haines. "However, all the successful coaches of that time were very stern."

While coaching football in the fall he managed the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1917,18, and 19. His first team finished last but the next two finished fourth. Amongst his better known players were Honus Wagner, Max Carey, and Casey Stengel.

In 1937 he took over the Cleveland Rams, ending up 1-10-0. The only decent players on the team were Johnny Drake, a fine fullback, and center Chuck Cherundolo. The next season he had college stars Corby Davis, Jim Benton, Ray Hamilton, and Vic Markov to finish 4-7-0.

His last coaching job was at Delaware Valley in 1949.

In *The History of American Football*, by Allison Danzig, considerable space was devoted to the many innovations Bezdek brought to the game. He is now a member of the College Football Hall of Fame.

What a wealth of college, professional, and baseball stories he could have told!

Norm Standlee was a member of the 1940 Stanford backfield of Frankie Albert, Pete Kmetovic, and Hugh Gallarneau. Every long time football fan can recite this quartet, along with the Four Horsemen, the U. of Pittsburgh's Dream Back Field, and the Chicago Cardinals' Dream Four.

Stanford's undefeated 1940 season, along with their win over Nebraska in the Rose Bowl, was very influential in the restoration of the T formation to all phases of football.

Stanford coach Frank Shaughnessey called Norm one of the greatest players he had ever seen.

Norm was drafted second by the Bears and was the starting fullback on their great 1941 team. Norm carried 81 times for 414 yards, which does not sound like a great season, but consider the fact he shared the fullback position with long time vet Bill Osmanski, plus two very good players, Gary Famiglietti and Joe Maniaci.

Norm spent the 1942 through 1945 season in the service. When he returned for the '46 season, he joined his college quarterback, Frankie Albert, with the San Francisco 49ers of the AAFC, where he starred for four years. He returned to the Bears for the 1950, 51, and 52 seasons.

The experiences Norm Standlee had at Stanford and with the Bears and 49ers would have made great reading for all football historians.

As a freshman I was a member of the 1945 University of Cincinnati football team. The Bearcats were starting up football after closing it down for the war. The head coach was Ray Nolting, a Cincinnati native, who played for UC and then was a member of the Bears when they were the true Monsters of the Midway.

One story had it Ray joined the Bears so he could play with Bronko Nagurski and not against him. The wisdom of this move was confirmed in the first Bear scrimmage, when he found himself on the opposite team from the Bronk.

Nolting played halfback for the Bears from 1936 through 1943. His best season was 1937, when he rushed for 424 yards. This does not sound so great by today's standards; however, you need only look up the many great players Ray had to share the ball carrying role with on those Bear teams.

Only 33, Ray would often remove his false teeth, hand them to a manager, and scrimmage with the team. I have never seen a man who could attain full speed from a standing position so quickly. It was obvious why he had been such a tremendous T halfback.

Ray was one of the Bear players in a classic picture taken in the 1940's showing him and several other Bears testing the innovative low cut football shoes.

Nolting coached UC for four years, compiling a 23-15-1 record, and taking his second team to a Sun Bowl victory.

Nolting's assistant was John Wiethe, who had played guard for the Lions from 1939 through 1942. The '42 Lions, 0-11-0, were one of the worst squads in NFL history.

Wiethe was chosen all league guard his first two years. Two notable teammates were Hall of Famer Alex Wojciechowicz and Whizzer White.

Wiethe was a graduate of Xavier University with a Phi Beta Kappa key and was an attorney. He gave us all the impression he was a little punchy, but obviously this was wrong.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 21, No. 5 (1999)

In his latter years he became the most powerful democrat in Cincinnati, and a member of his 1945 team was elected mayor.

As a teenage freshman I held my coaches in awe and fear. It never occurred to me to ask these men, who had played with and against some of the greatest players in the history of the league, about their NFL experiences. It was truly a missed opportunity!