

# The Life and Times of Fred Gehrke

by Peter Vischansky

Based on a version originally published in the *Pennsylvania Football News*

When Fred Gehrke sat down in his garage the summer of 1948 to paint a yellow laquer on his team's leather helmets, little did he realize that he was creating a multi-million dollar business and insuring his football immortality as well.

Gehrke was born April 24, 1918, in Salt Lake City, Utah. Growing up, he would sneak into University of Utah football games. He developed a love for the sport, and idolized his favorite players. The future All-Pro attended South High School where he participated in swimming, track, and, of course, football -- all at a weight of 133 pounds. His second passion was building model airplanes. Both football and model airplanes led him to careers as an adult.

By the time Gehrke started college at University of Utah as an art major, he had filled out to a more robust 145 pounds at 5' 11". On the Utes football team he starred as a running back on offense and left cornerback on defense. He also returned punts and kickoffs. Meanwhile, he continued to grow. Eventually, his pro football weight hit 190 pounds.

Although undrafted, he got a try-out with the Cleveland Rams. When he returned a kickoff for a touchdown in an exhibition game, he made the team. His first contract with Cleveland gave him an enormous paycheck of \$135.00 per game. He got little chance to earn it during the regular season. Parker Hall, the NFL's MVP that year, was the starter and his success kept Gehrke on the bench.

With war clouds on the horizon, Fred reported for his "walking army" physical, in Salt Lake City. As he went through the second line exam, the doctor noticed a vicious looking operation scar across the footballer's knee, and immediately declared Gehrke 4F. He protested, but to no avail.

Determined to contribute to the war effort, Fred landed a job with Northrup Aircraft in California as a technical illustrator and began helping with the design of airplanes. In 1942, Gehrke joined the Hollywood Bears of the Pacific Coast Pro Football League. With many National Football League players then in the service stationed on the West Coast and others working in war industries, the PCPFL brand of football was arguably on a par with the NFL in the east. The players worked out and played their games at night. Gehrke played for the Los Angeles Bulldogs in 1943 and the L.A. Wildcats in 1944.

In 1945, with the war over, Gehrke returned to the Cleveland Rams. His timing was perfect. The Rams, led by rookie quarterback Bob Waterfield, won the NFL championship by defeating the Washington Redskins 15-14. Gehrke led the National Football League that year in both rushing average, with an effort of 6.3 yards per rush, and a punt return average of 15.0 yards. Gehrke was named to *Pro Football Illustrated's* All-Pro team in 1945.

Owner Dan Reeves had wanted to move the Rams to Los Angeles from the time he bought the team. Even though the Rams had won the championship, Clevelanders were far more excited by the news that legendary coach Paul Brown was bringing a team to town in the new All-America Football Conference. With the war over and airlines making the West Coast only a few hours away, Reeves was given permission to move his team.

Before the 1946 season, the Rams, as defending NFL champions, played the College All-Stars in Chicago. Gehrke recalls that among the college all-stars of 1946, many were actually older than Rams players because of the return of servicemen. Although the Rams failed to repeat their championship, Gehrke was named to PFI's All-NFL second team. Fleet-footed Gehrke repeated as NFL rushing average leader at 5.2 yards per carry. He also continued working at Northrup aircraft and like other players of the time, would take three months off to play professional football.

### THE LOGO

The blandness of helmets and uniforms of that time didn't sit well with the art major. He toyed with the idea of painting a helmet. At the urging of his his coach, Bob Snyder, he made a pen and ink drawing to illustrate what the design would look like. Coach Snyder suggested the halfback paint a helmet with the ram horns on it that he could present to owner Dan Reeves. Using his skills as a technical illustrator, Fred painted two ram horns on an old college helmet. An intrigued Reeves had reservations about the legality of having an adornment on a helmet and said he would have to check with NFL. According to Gehrke, the answer Reeves recieved from NFL was "You're the owner; do what you want!" The stage was set. Dan Reeves commissioned Fred Gehrke to paint 75 helmets at \$1.00 per helmet. The project took Gehrke all the summer of 1948

The first game of 1948 was an exhibition, (as pre-season games were called back then) versus the Redskins -- a night game at the Los Angeles Coliseum before a crowd of 105,000. Up to game time, only Gehrke, Coach Bob Snyder and the equipment manager knew of the "new " helmets. The team went through their warmups with out the headgear. When they returned to the dressing room, the team put on the ram horn helmets. As they bunched together in the tunnel ready to go out on the field, they wondered how the football hungry crowd would react? The lights in Colosseum were turned out and, on cue, turned back on as the Rams streamed onto the field

The crowd began screaming and shouting in excitement and followed with a five minute standing ovation. The players, owner, and Gehrke had their answer. Professional football had its first helmet logo. The story was picked up by the national press.

Often, Gehrke would take helmets home at night to retouch the rams horns which suffered chipping damage from player collisions. Eventually, a logo frenzy followed. The Baltimore Colts followed with the second logo, the famous horseshoe. To this day, Gehrke's rams horn logo is still worn by the team. The Pro Football Hall of Fame displays one of the original helmets along with the story behind it each year during Super Bowl Week.

### THE FACEMASK

Prior to hysteria of the Coliseum that fall of 1948, Gehrke had already made a mark in football that practically went unnoticed.

Early in the 1946 regular season, Gehrke took a hand-off and quickly moved through the line and into the open field. He remembers "two rather large defensive players closing in fast." Both tackled the running back and left him with a clear message -- a severely broken nose which "bled like a stuck pig." Unable to control the bleeding, he was forced to leave the game. His nose was broken again in each of the next two games.

In the off-season, the former art student and aircraft designer decided to do something about it. Using his art skills he fashioned a 1/2 skull face from clay. From supplies at Northrup Aircraft, he got a piece of aluminum and took the material to the machinists running the power stamping machines. Gehrke asked them to mold the aluminum to fit the clay face. The resulting piece covered the nose, forehead and rested on the cheekbones to bear the brunt of blows. Next, Gehrke took this device to his grandfather, a shoemaker, who covered it with leather and attached it to the front of a helmet. So he could get the helmet on, it was cut up the back and laces were weaved in. The inventor had made the first helmet with a full facemask. He played the entire 1947 season with the facemask.

The mask did the job. Gehrke found only one drawback -- catching passes to either side he could only see the ball with one eye because the mask protruded slightly. On punt run backs his vision was, of course, unobstructed. The next year, Gehrke went back to regular headgear.

As a player Gehrke did it all. Rushing, pass receiver, punt runbacks, kick off returns, an occasional pass, and spot duty on extra points and field goals. He spent three more years with Rams. In 1950, he was traded to Chicago Cardinals. In mid-season they traded him to San Francisco '49ers. He scored his last touchdown with San Francisco. Weary of moving and constant travel, Gehrke retired at the age of thirty-one.

Teammates on the Rams constituted a football Hall of Fame: Elroy "Crazylegs" Hirsch, Tom Fears, Norm Van Brocklin and Bob Waterfield. His roommate for several years was "Old 98," Michigan's Tom Harmon. Of Van Brocklin and Waterfield, Gehrke states they were great leaders and athletes but adds, "I was

faster than Van Brocklin. Waterfield was a great runner and punter for the Rams. He could pass with either left or right arm. An all-time great athlete, Waterfield was a natural at any sport. "

The opponent who stands out for Gehrke was Hall of Famer , "Slingin Sammy" Baugh. "He threw the football like it was a baseball! He had a lightning quick release and was a feared runner."

Gehrke declined to comment on his own skills, instead referring instead to his coach Snyder: "Ask him what kind of player I was".

### THE PLAYER

Snyder spoke effusively of Gehrke: "Freddie always gave 100% effort and was always in good shape. He had excellent speed. The year before Fred rejoined the Rams we won one game. In 1945 with Gehrke on roster the Rams lost only one game to Philadelphia and won the world championship 15-14 over the Washington Redskins.

"From 1945-1948, Freddie beat Tom Harmon and Les Horvath for the starting job. Both were Heisman Trophy winners!"

Coach Snyder, 87-years old, said of Gehrke, 81, "Freddies a good 'kid' ".

In appreciation of his coach's role for his part in the famous Ram's horns on the helmets, Gehrke mailed coach Bob Snyder the original drawing he made for coach Snyder to show owner Dan Reeves. Snyder is very proud of the drawing and it is prominently displayed in his house. He turned down an offer of \$10,000 for the original artwork. "It's not going anywhere, it means too much."

After his retirement from pro football Gehrke returned to Northrup Aircraft and moved into an administrative post as head of the department. His old roommate, Tom Harmon called him. Harmon was broadcasting San Francisco 49er games and had signed a contract to do college games on Saturdays. The ex-Michigan star was swamped and needed help with stats and spotting. Gehrke agreed to help his old roommate. Harmon would leave mid-week to prepare for the game. Gehrke, working full-time at Northrup, would work at night drawing up large position charts of offense and defense, and other vital statistics. Gehrke would leave Friday night to be at Saturday's game. On air Gehrke would point to charts so Harmon, doing play-by-play could name runners and tacklers. Gehrke chipped in with occasional commentary. Maybe the first color man in history. The association with Harmon lasted 13 years.

### A FINAL CONTRIBUTION

From out of the blue in 1964, a phone call came from an old football chum, Mac Speedie, who played on the University of Utah football team a couple of years behind Gehrke. Mac Speedie had landed the head coaching job with the Denver Broncos in American Football League. Speedie needed scouts and wanted Fred to become a pro scout for him. Gehrke, seeing this as a risky venture, said no. Time passed Speedie, ever persistent, and aware of Gehrke's football savvy, called and offered the aircraft industry executive a position of assistant coach/ director of player personnel for a salary of \$10,000, a pay cut from his salary at Northrup Aircraft. Again, Gehrke declined, but Speedie, not willing to let Gehrke slip away, upped the offer to \$12,000. Gehrke, tired of dealing with people on administrative end of aircraft industry, relented and accepted the post.

Wrapping up business in California Gehrke flew into Denver and was met by Mac Speedie. Anxious to see his office and the stadium, Gehrke was told he was already booked on the next flight out to Chicago, for a meeting of league scouts. "You have to learn the rules" Speedie informed him. After the scouts meeting, Gherke went back to L.A. to finish a few details.

When he returned to Denver, Gehrke's first request to Speedie was,"Let's see the offices!" Those offices were next to the stadium. The new director of player personnel was pleasantly surprised to see a brick faced front on his offices. Unfortunately it was a facade disguising a metal military quanset hut ( a half - cylindrical type shelter with downward curved ceilings.) Ducking his head, he sat behind the desk anxious to get to work. A knock on the door, preceded the appearance of Gerald Phipps, the owner of the Broncos whom Fred had never met. When Phipps entered, Gehrke stood to greet him and promptly bumped his head on the ceiling.

Mr. Phipps said, "Don't worry; it'll get better."

Gehrke thought, "How could it get any worse?" That question was answered upon inspection of the stadium and practice field. Bears Stadium, ( later renamed Mile High Stadium ), was an old baseball park with a capacity of only 37,000. It was necessary to set up bleachers on the east side of the stadium so it would resemble a football stadium. The dressing room was under leaky plumbing ; only two working shower heads were available to players. Players sat at little booths seperated by chicken wire. The practice field, a downhill slope, measured only about 80 yards. It was impossible to run an out pattern to one side of the pratice field because a fence was close to the sideline. Gehrke had seen better conditions in the semi-pro leagues.

However, owner Phipps was prophetic, and, indeed ,conditions did get better soon. Gehrke rose from personnel director to general manager to vice-president. He said of the experience " I went from the outhouse to the penthouse to the Superbowl."

The aircraft designer made his final contribution to football while pacing sidelines as director of player personnel. In the economy-minded Broncos organization, Gehrke also coached kickers and punters. During a game he noticed the kickers had no way to practice their skills. Instructing the equipment manager to get some netting , he constructed an aluminum pipe structure. The first kicking cage had been made. Now a staple on on football sidelines, Gehrke patented the invention and "made some money." After patent rights expired a manufacturer quickly snapped up rights.

When the team was sold to a Canadian businessmen who brought in his own personnel, Gehrke and Coach Red Miller were asked to resign. He and Red Miller were hired by Denver Gold of the United States Football League (USFL). After three years the league folded. Gehrke's life in football finally came to an end.

### **LIFE AFTER FOOTBALL**

After retirement as general manager of Denver Gold, he made and refinished wooden drivers mostly for friends. He still enjoys the hobby he began as a kid in Salt Lake City, building model airplanes (including radio controlled.) and working in his woodshop.

Gehrke and his wife Jean recently moved from Colorado to Desert Hot Springs California, where they plan to build. He still has contact with workers of old at Denver and his coach with the Rams, Bob Snyder. Like the kid who used to sneak into University of Utah football games, Fred still watches a lot of football , but now its on television. Today, any any player who dons a helmet with a logo and any kicker who practices with a cage on the sideline is unknowingly paying homage to Fred Gehrke.