

DANTE LAVELLI: GLUEFINGERS

By Don Smith



Dante Lavelli played three games as a sophomore end at Ohio State in 1942 and then was injured. The next year he was in the U.S. Infantry and, during his three-and-one-half-year tour of duty, he played no football at all.

Upon his discharge from the Army, Dante elected to pass up his final two years of college eligibility and give pro football a shot. He found a willing taker in his old college coach, Paul Brown, who was just organizing the Cleveland Browns in the new All-America Football Conference. Lavelli signed a Browns' contract early in 1946.

That summer, when he reported to training camp, he was unheralded and by far the least experienced of five players vying for the right end job on the new team.

One candidate was a tested professional. Two were former college stars who had earned national reputations as members of outstanding service teams.

The fourth was John Yonaker, a "can't-miss" 6-4, 225-pounder from Notre Dame.

Yet after the summer skirmishing was over, the first three had been chased out of camp and Yonaker had been switched to defensive end. That left the 6-0, 199-pound Lavelli, the guy who had played only three college games, as the Browns' first-string right side receiver.

It was the first great pro triumph for the Hudson, Ohio, native and the start of a career that was so sensational that it would bring him pro football's highest honor, induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

It is particularly appropriate that Brown will be on the scene because it was his decision when Dante was an Ohio State freshman that may have vaulted Lavelli into all-time greatness.

In high school, Lavelli, the son of an Italian immigrant who came to this country in 1905, had been a standout quarterback and his running and passing had paced the Hudson Explorers to three straight undefeated seasons. He reported to the Buckeyes as a halfback but Brown soon noticed a flaw in his running style and decided that Dante would be more likely to succeed as an end.

Once he heard of his coach's plans, Lavelli went right to work learning and perfecting his cuts and fakes. By the start of his sophomore season, he had the starting end job locked up. Three games into the season against Southern California, he was injured and did not play again in the college ranks.

On his discharge from the Army, Lavelli first thought of turning to professional baseball. Even while in high school, he had been offered a contract with the Detroit Tigers' farm system.

Dante opted instead for a professional football career.

"I had seen a pro game in New York. One of my Ohio State buddies was playing for the Giants," Lavelli explains. "I thought if he could make the grade, so could I. So when Brown, my old coach, offered me the chance, I was really ready."

Brown never was sorry that he placed his confidence in Lavelli for Dante was a star right from the first game. He led the AAFC in receptions as a rookie with 40 catches for 843 yards, a scintillating 21.8-yard average per catch, and eight touchdowns. He capped a brilliant season, in which he also was named to the official all-AAFC team, by catching the winning touchdown pass in the championship game against the New York Yankees.

As a pro "sophomore," Dante upped his catch total to 49 and once again won all-AAFC honors. Once in 1949, he caught a league-record four touchdown passes in a single game against the Los Angeles Dons. That's the way it was for "Glue Fingers" throughout the four years that the powerful Browns were tearing up the AAFC.

Once the inter-league war ended and the Browns entered the National Football League, skeptics were loudly questioning how well the Cleveland team and its many supposed stars would fare in the so-called "faster company" of the NFL.

The Browns as a team responded to the challenge as did all of the team's leading individuals. Lavelli was no exception. He caught 37 passes his first year in the NFL and, in the famous 1950 championship game between the Browns and the Los Angeles Rams, the team that had deserted Cleveland in 1946, Dante caught 11 passes and scored two touchdowns as the Browns won, 30-28.

The sleek receiver earned all-NFL acclaim in 1951 and 1953 and won starter's roles in three of the first five Pro Bowl games. Without a doubt, he was one of the most vital cogs in the awesome Cleveland machine that brought the Browns six divisional and three NFL championships in their first six years in the league.

Through the years, Lavelli became the favorite target of Otto Graham, Cleveland's super passer and field general. For his 11-year career, Lavelli wound up with 386 receptions for 6488 yards and 62 touchdowns. All but 20 of his receptions came while Graham was triggering the attack.

Like any great pass-catch team, Graham and Lavelli spent long hours learning the other's every habit.

Dante was a dedicated pattern-runner but once there was a hint that things weren't going right, he preferred to take off down the field and then look back toward Graham and yell for the ball.

"That hollering helped me more than once," Graham, also a Hall of Famer, admits. "Dante had a voice that seemed to penetrate and it was a welcome sound when a couple of big tackles were bearing down on me. We hit more than once for touchdowns on one of those broken plays."

Another favorite Lavelli ploy was a trick he had copied from Don Hutson, the fabled ace of the Green Bay Packers. Dante would race for the goal posts, swing around a post with one hand and then be ready to grab a perfectly-thrown pass from Graham when he appeared on the other side.

Lavelli is remembered as quick and sneaky fast but not exceptionally fast. He worked hard on his patterns but he was much more ready to abandon his route in case of trouble than the classic pattern-runner of the Raymond Berry type.

What set Dante apart from all other receivers were his great hands which, of course, explains why he was popularly known as "Glue Fingers" throughout his career.

"I think Dante has the strongest hands I've ever seen," Brown once observed. "When he goes up for a pass and a defender goes up with him, you can be sure Lavelli will have the ball when they come down. Nobody can ever take it away from him once he gets his hands on it."

Graham seconded his coach's praise: "We had a lot of great receivers on the Browns but, when it came to great hands, there was nobody like Old Spumoni. There was no better competitor, either."

Graham retired after the 1955 championship game but Lavelli was persuaded to stay for one more year. "Glue Fingers" still was one of the Browns' leading receivers but catching passes from a new corps of quarterbacks just wasn't the same. So he called it quits at the age of 33.

Both as an individual and as a member of a team that had made winning championships a way of life, Dante had experienced about everything good there was to enjoy in professional football. The only thing left was that coveted spot in the Pro Football Hall of Fame that became a reality this year.

Dante Lavelli truly made it all the way from absolute bottom to absolute top in the pro football world.

YEAR	Gm	NO	YDS	AVG	TD
1946 Cle-A	14	40	843	21.1	8
1947 Cle-A	13	49	799	16.3	9
1948 Cle-A	8	25	463	18.5	5
1949 Cle-A	9	28	475	17.0	7
1950 Cle	12	37	565	15.3	5
1951 Cle	12	43	586	13.6	6
1952 Cle	8	21	336	16.0	4
1953 Cle	12	45	783	17.4	6
1954 Cle	12	47	802	17.1	7
1955 Cle	12	31	492	15.9	4
1956 Cle	11	20	344	17.2	1
Total	123	386	6488	16.8	62