

The Toe

by
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In 1946, Paul Brown began to assemble the Cleveland Browns for play in the new All American Football Conference. He also knew that in order to be highly competitive, he needed a balanced team. Winning championships at Massillon High School and Ohio State, Browns' teams always had a potent offense, staunch defense and proficient kicking game. However, in the pro ranks, many teams put little emphasis on the kicking game in particular. Not for Paul though. Among his first moves, he signed a 6-foot, 3-inch, 240 pound offensive tackle/placekicker by the name of Lou Groza. But for a man his size, he had great flexibility.

Lou had a brilliant career at Martins Ferry High School in Ohio. As a freshman, he so impressed his coach with his kickoffs that traveled 60 yards consistently, that he was promoted to the varsity. In his sophomore year, he went perfect on his extra points. The following year in a crucial game against Bellaire High School, Lou kicked the winning field goal late in the game. All the time that Lou spent working on his kicking with his brother Frank and uncle Julius, was paying off big time for him. With his fine play in the offensive line, Groza was voted the outstanding tackle in Ohio in his senior year. He also earned varsity letters in baseball and basketball.

No doubt, Lou was heavily recruited by every major college in the country. Paul Brown, who was the head coach at Ohio State, took note of Lou's achievements. He visited Lou and offered him a full scholarship which he accepted.

Lou made the Buckeye's freshman team without any difficulty. The squad played only three games in 1942 but he kicked five field goals in all. One was a 48-yarder against Pittsburgh and another, a 25-yarder, that edged Michigan 15 to 14. Ernie Godfrey, an assistant coach at Ohio State, helped Lou to refine his kicking even more. Ernie had been studying the skill since 1911.

Unfortunately, Groza never got the opportunity to play for the Buckeye's varsity which had won its first national championship in 1942. He was drafted in the spring of 1943 and served in the South Pacific during World War II. Other Buckeye stars such as Dante Lavelli and Tommy James were also called to serve. Lou, along with these players, would later become members of the first Cleveland Browns team. Coach Brown then kept in touch with Lou during the war. He also sent him footballs and a pair of football shoes so he could practice his kicking whenever he got the chance.

When Lou was discharged from the service in February of 1946, Paul Brown immediately signed him to play for his new professional team. Cleveland opened the AAFC season in 1946 by shutting out Miami 44 to 0. Lou contributed 14 points to the scoring from five PATS and three field goals.

Late that season, with Cleveland playing Chicago, the offense was bogged down just inside the Rocket's 50-yard line. Just then, Coach Brown started to call for a punt. Instead, he called Groza to the sideline.

"You couldn't kick a field goal from there, could you?"

"Why not," said Lou.

He then trotted back on the field, took his stance and launched a tremendous 51-yard field goal through the uprights. It would eventually turn out to be the longest three-pointer in the AAFC. "Wee Willie Wilkin, who just missed blocking the kick, turned to Lou and said with respect, "That was a great kick, Groza."

Now because of his kicking exploits, the press was looking for a nickname to fit Lou. James Doyle of the Cleveland Plain Dealer, came up with "the toe". He first tried rhyming toza with Groza which just didn't sound right. He then reduced it to "the toe". The nickname stuck and would remain with Lou throughout his career.

During this season, Lou developed a kicking aid which was vital for the alignment of his kicks. He used to draw a line on the field with his cleats straight to the middle of the uprights. At the suggestion of a teammate, Lou took a 72-inch piece of adhesive tape, stuck it together back-to-back, and used it in place of the scratch mark. Just before he attempted a kick, he would take the tape, which was hidden in his helmet, and point it towards the middle of the crossbar. Wee Willie Wilkin, who saw how well Groza could kick, once remarked, "When Lou goes in to kick, someone steal his tape."

Lou connected on another 50-yarder in Cleveland's 34 to 0 win over Miami in the season's final game. With a long-range scoring weapon in Groza now, the Browns seldom went into punt formation on fourth down anywhere near their opponents' 50-yard line.

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Groza then finished the season by leading the AAFC in field goals with 13 and in scoring with 84 points. He managed to kick brilliantly too, even after taking a beating playing in the offensive line. More important, he had won the confidence and respect from his coach, teammates and opponents.

The AAFC disbanded after the 1949 season, but the Cleveland Browns were absorbed by the NFL along with the Baltimore Colts and San Francisco 49ers in 1950. Pro Football critics along with NFL team officials, sneered at this move, claiming the Browns were no match for those in the senior league. But, the Browns proved them wrong. They compiled a 10-2 record, tying the New York Giants for first place in the Eastern Division, forcing a playoff game. The Giants, however, gave the Browns their only two losses.

With the game tied 3 to 3, Lou Groza kicked a 28-yard field goal with 58 seconds remaining in the fourth quarter to put the Browns ahead. Then Cleveland's defense sacked quarterback Charlie Conerly in the end zone for a safety to seal an 8 to 3 victory. The Browns then advanced to the NFL Championship game much to the surprise of everyone.

In a hard-fought contest against the Los Angeles Rams, Cleveland trailed by a point, 28 to 27, late in the game. An errant snap on a PAT in the second quarter had cost the Browns a chance at a tie. It was however, the first missed extra point for Cleveland all season. With 29 seconds left in the game, Lou readied himself for the 16-yard game-winning kick. He wished that he could use his kicking tape now, but the NFL had outlawed it that season, stating that no artificial medium can be used by a player to assist in the execution of a placekick. This became known as "the Lou Groza Rule".

"This is it, Lou," said quarterback Otto Graham as he knelt to receive the snap from center. "Make this one, buddy, and we're the champs."

Groza nodded and said nothing. Otto got the snap, placed the ball on the spot, then Lou drilled the ball through the uprights, making the Cleveland Browns the champions in their first year in the NFL. Afterwards, while celebrating in the locker room, Lou's teammates passed his square-toe kicking shoe amongst themselves in sheer admiration, while some even kissed it in the process. Incidentally, in 1950, Groza scored the only touchdown in his career. It came on a tackle eligible play, when he caught a 23-yard scoring pass against the Washington Redskins in December.

Again, in 1951, Cleveland advanced to the NFL Championship game against the same Los Angeles Rams. Lou opened the scoring for the Browns by blasting a 52-yard field goal. It was the longest kick in championship history and the record still stands today, 54 years later. But Cleveland went on to down Los Angeles 24 to 17, to clinch their second straight NFL Title.

Lou became an automatic kicking machine in 1953. He turned out a record 23 field goals out of 26 attempts for a record .885 average. At one point during that season, he clicked on 12 consecutive three-pointers to tie another NFL mark. Just nine years earlier, in 1944, 23 field goals were kicked in the entire league, yet Groza had just equaled that total himself. And counting his 39 extra points out of 40 tries, Lou made a total of 62 kicks out of 66 attempts for an unheard of .939 average. He scored 108 points too, the most so far in his NFL career. Still, in the 33-year history of the NFL, no player ever had such a phenomenal season placekicking as Groza did that year.

Groza's .885 field goal average was also the highest ever accumulated by a straight-on placekicker in league annals and that record still stands today. Overall, this record stood for 28 years until Jan Stenerud, a soccer style kicker, topped it with a .917 average in 1981, making 22 field goals out of 24 attempts.

Lou in 1957, also won his fifth field goal title, by leading the NFL with 15. In addition to tying Sam Baker for the scoring crown with 77 points, he was named All-League Most Valuable Player.

Because of his kicking prowess, Groza became the first placekicker ever featured in an *Sports Illustrated* article in September of 1958. The piece entitled "Lou Groza Teaches You the Placekick" was the most in-depth ever written on the skill, complete with illustrations.

A back injury forced Lou to miss the entire 1960 season. He did come back to play in 1961 but only as a kicker. Groza again made pro football history both in 1964 by becoming the first player to score 1,000 career points and in 1965 by becoming the first player to kick 200 career field goals.

After playing 21 years in pro football, four in the AAFC and 17 in the NFL, Groza retired following the 1967 season. By that time, he had scored 1,349 points from 244 field goals and 641 PATS, all lofty NFL records then. He also led the NFL a record five times in field goals, 1950, 1951-54, and 1957 and an unprecedented three consecutive times, all marks unequalled today. Altogether, he owned dozens of team and league kicking records.

He appeared in a record nine NFL championship games, 1950-55, 1957, 1964-65 setting several marks in those contests. Lou earned All-Pro honors six times, 1951-55, 1957, and was voted to the Pro Bowl an unequalled nine times, 1951-56, 1958-60. In 1974, Groza was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Then he was named to the NFL's 75th Anniversary Team.

Later, his jersey number 76, became one of five uniform numbers retired by the Cleveland Browns. In another move to honor him, the Cleveland Browns changed their address to 76 Lou Groza Boulevard in

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1998. And the next year, Lou was included among the best 100 pro football players of the century by The Sporting News.

No doubt, Lou forever changed the way teams looked at the field goal as a scoring weapon. This also led to a change in kicking strategy too. Teams could no longer afford to give up the football inside its own territory by punting it away. If a team passed the mid-field mark, chances were good for a field goal, especially if the offense failed to score six points. This in turn, took a great deal of pressure off the offense.

The affordable Groza, after retirement, was very accessible to the fans and the community. He was easily approachable for autographs as well as discussions about his football career. But on Wednesday, November 29, 2000, Lou died of cardiac arrest. He is survived by his wife of 50 years, Jackie, and three sons, Jeff, John and Judd and one daughter, Jill.

Ironically, Groza, who was born in Martins Ferry, Ohio on January 25, 1924, died at the age of 76, the number he wore and cherished so much.

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