

## Ernie Smith

By John Maxymuk

Adapted from *Packers By the Numbers*, Prairie Oak Press, 2003.

70 years ago pro football was not at all major league. Working conditions were sparse, medical treatment was primitive and pay was paltry. There was no television and no Internet; games were covered on radio or not at all. Newspapers were the media giant, but they relegated all but major league baseball to deep inside the limited sports pages. Football coverage meant college football.

Ernie Smith is an illustrative case. He was a large All-American tackle for Coach Howard Jones' two-time national champion University of Southern California Trojans. He and his linemates averaged 50-55 minutes a game and allowed only two touchdowns all season. Were he playing today with a resume like that on either side of the ball, he'd be a high first round draft choice who would sign an extended contract for millions of dollars a year with several million upfront as a signing bonus. His agent would take his cut off the top and help guide the newly-rich tackle in ways to invest his new wealth so that he might never have to work again after football. Of course, there would be no guarantee on the soundness of those investments or of the person the player selects to manage the money, but the potential is there to be "set for life."

6'2" 220 pound Ernie Smith graduated in 1933, however, and did not even turn pro immediately. He spent the 1933 and 1934 seasons coaching the USC freshman team and getting started in a career in insurance that would last 53 years. In 1934 he played minor league football near his home with the Southern California Maroons of the Pacific Coast Pro Football League (PCPFL). Finally, in 1935 he signed on with Curly Lambeau and played tackle for three years, twice receiving All Pro consideration and helping the team win the 1936 title. In addition, he handled extra point kicking and the occasional field goal attempt for the Packers. He dropped out in 1938 to again play close to home for the Hollywood Stars of the PCPFL, but returned for a final NFL season in 1939 as the Pack won another title. In that title game, Smith set an NFL Championship Game record for longest field goal with a 42-yard shot; Lou Groza broke that mark in 1951.

After playing in a couple of exhibition games with the Packers in 1940, Ernie abruptly retired for good. He returned to Southern California where his insurance career was interrupted briefly by a World War II stint in the U.S. Army Air Force. Smith also appeared in movies, roughly 85 according to Porter's *Biographical Dictionary of American Sports: 1992-1995 Supplement for Baseball, Football, Basketball, and Other Sports*. A check of the Internet Movie Database, however, reveals only an Ernie Smith (I) who appeared in one movie in 1936 and one television production in 1966 and Ernie Smith (VIII) who appeared in *That's My Boy* in 1932 playing, in a bit of typecasting, a football player. It's likely that any other movie appearances by Ernie were as an extra or were in training and Rose Bowl highlight films. Perhaps he was helped in landing bit parts in films by fellow USC alumni who made a career in movies: actor Ward Bond who played on the 1930 Trojan team, film editor Cotton Warburton who was an All American quarterback from 1932-4, and production staffers Nate Barragar and Russ Saunders who played for the Trojans from 1927-9. Barragar and Saunders also played for Green Bay, and Barragar was a fraternity brother of Smith's. Perhaps even John Wayne who had played for the Trojans as Marion Morrison in 1925-6 might have put in a word for him.

In sports and, in particular football, the change in overall wealth was gradual. Magazine articles on the Packers in the 1930s noted how Green Bay players were fully integrated into the town. Former players were part of the scenery. Charlie Mathys ran a ground glass business. Jug Earp was a car salesman. Lawvie Dilweg was an attorney. Verne Lewellen was prosecutor. Current players had regular jobs to support their football sidelight. Dave Zuidmulder was a fireman. Arnie Herber ran a clothing store. Hank Bruder ran a tire company. George Svendsen had a gas station. Milt Gantenbein sold insurance.

Football cards in the 1940s and 1950s regularly listed players' off-season occupations: Jerry Helluin ran a gas station, Howie Ferguson worked in the oil fields, Al Carmichael was a movie stunt man and so on. In the 1960s the sport's popularity allowed the pay to increase to a living wage -- \$20,000 on average by 1963. In Green Bay post-season playoff bonuses became a regular thing to be figured in a player's budget during that decade. Off-season occupations were still listed on cards, but it was more likely the career the player was preparing for once he was done with football. In the 1970s as average salaries passed \$50,000 occupations began to disappear from trading cards and be replaced by hobbies. By the 1980s average salaries would stretch to six figures, making football a very well-paying full time job in which off-season conditioning was seen as part of the job requirements; not many players waited until training camp to get into shape anymore.

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In the 1990s, true free agency arrived and football's non-guaranteed contracts with salaries reaching seven figures were supplemented by the more important lump sum signing bonus to invite the aforementioned phrase "set for life."

While no one wants to go back to the football or the playing/ working conditions of Ernie Smith's time, that era's lack of guaranteed money and the resultant need for players to prove their worth on the field every day produced a competitive work ethic good for the game. The need for players to continue proving their worth and earning their keep after sports was done was a good example for the nation. Indeed, Ernie Smith continued to be a prominent member of the community for decades after his playing days, running kicking clinics and being involved with his alma mater. Today's model of athletes as entertainers who have hit the lottery is a far less positive image

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<b>ERNIE SMITH</b>	<b>Tackle</b>
Smith, Ernest Frederick	6-2, 224
College: USC	HS: Spearfish [SD]; Gardena [CA]
B: 11 / 26 / 1909, Spearfish, SD	D: 4 / 25 / 1985, Los Angeles, CA (75)
Year Team Games:	
1935 GB 12	1936 GB 12
1937 GB 10	1938 dnp
1939 GB 6	