

WORLD WAR 2 AND THE HALL OF FAME

by Andy Piascik

No event impacted pro football the way World War 2 did. After Pearl Harbor, there was talk of shutting the pro game down. That did not happen but the NFL season was shortened, attendance dwindled, and several franchises either merged or shut down.

Hundreds of players served in the military during the war. Hundreds of other future pro players went from high schools and colleges to the service and had their pro careers delayed. Many other potential careers were ended before they began by death, injuries, psychological trauma, and time away from the game. 21 active or former players made the ultimate sacrifice.

But the game survived and every franchise from 1941 was around to play again in 1946. In part because of the NFL's perseverance in the face of such adversity, pro football experienced a major surge in popularity after the war.

Some of the game's greatest players graced NFL fields during those difficult years. Many of them have been elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Of the Hall of Famers who served during the war, there is a small group whose time in the military appears to have been factored into their selections. Those players are Ace Parker, George McAfee, Bill Dudley, Wayne Millner (all of whom missed 3 years), Charlie Trippi (2 years), and Tony Canadeo (1).

Looking at what these players achieved without considering the interruption or delay to their careers, only Dudley has credentials that are of Hall of Fame caliber. Yet with the exception of Millner, widely considered to be the Hall's biggest mistake, the selectors were absolutely justified in taking into account the unique circumstances when they voted these men in.

By no means is this meant to question the abilities of these players. Except for Millner, all were selected as first team all-pros at least twice and several had MVP and MVP-like seasons. All but Dudley played in at least one Championship Game. The point simply is that these players had careers that were potentially of Hall of Fame caliber, and that is different from a bona fide Hall of Fame career.

What complicates matters is that there is an equal number of players similarly impacted by the war with *better* credentials who have been bypassed by Hall of Fame selectors. In several cases, the bypassed players have vastly superior credentials to the ones mentioned above. Those players are Mac Speedie, Gene Brito (4 years each), Dick Barwegan, Dick Stanfel, and Lou Rymkus (2 years each).

Significantly, four of the five bypassed players were linemen. Canadeo, Dudley, McAfee, Parker, and Trippi, on the other hand, were all backs. Of probably even greater significance, three of the five bypassed players played substantial parts of their careers in the All-America Football Conference. Many modern day fans and perhaps some Hall of Fame voters do not realize that the AAFC was a major league just slightly below the level of the NFL.

MAC SPEEDIE, End, Cleveland Browns 1946-1952

Mac Speedie is a bit of an anomaly to this discussion because he belongs in the Hall of Fame irrespective of the time he lost to the military. Of the five great receivers from the decade after World War 2 - Pete Pihos, Elroy Hirsch, Tom Fears, Dante Lavelli, and Speedie - Speedie was the best, yet he is the only one not in the Hall of Fame. Speedie won more receiving titles (4) and was a first team all-pro as a receiver more times (6) than his great contemporaries even though his career was by far the shortest.

One of Speedie's most impressive credentials is being named to the first team on the combined all-AAFC/NFL teams in three different seasons. No other end who played in the 1946-49 period, not any of the four above or other outstanding receivers like Jim Benton, Mal Kutner, Ken Kavanaugh, Alyn Beals, Jim Keane, and Billy Dewell, was named even twice. In fact, of all the great players from that era, only five were

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named both all-league and all-AAFC/NFL in the same season three times: Otto Graham, Steve Van Buren, Bulldog Turner, Al Wistert, and Speedie.

It's all the more remarkable, then, that Speedie accomplished what he did despite missing *four full seasons* to military service. By the time he played his first pro game, he was only four months shy of his *27th* birthday. As short as his seven year career may seem, he was already 33 1/2 because of the time he lost when he went to play in Canada in 1953. Even then, Speedie was still among the very best in his last NFL season, as he led the league in receptions and was a first team all-pro.

When he went to Canada, Speedie was second in career receptions and was first all-time in catches and yards per season, ahead even of Hutson. Those records stood until they were broken by Charley Hennigan of the Oilers. Setting the early AFL aside for a moment, Speedie's records stood for 20 and 25 years among receivers who played at least 7 seasons. When they were broken, it was by all-time greats Lance Alworth and Charley Taylor, both of whom had their best years during the 1960's passing revolution.

The Browns made it to their league Championship Game in every one of Speedie's seven seasons, winning five times in succession. Of all players from every era, only Wistert and several others have Hall of Fame credentials that are the equal of Speedie's. Given that he spent 51 months in the Army, however, Speedie is probably the one player most deserving of induction.

DICK BARWEGAN, Guard, New York Yankees, Baltimore Colts, Chicago Bears 1947-1954

While attending Purdue University, Dick Barwegan joined the Army Air Corps and served for two years. He then returned to Purdue in 1946 for a year before signing with the AAFC Yankees. By the time he played his first pro game, Barwegan was almost 26.

He played for four different franchises in two leagues in his eight seasons, and at each stop he was one of the best guards in the game. Like Speedie, Barwegan established that fact in his very first season while playing with a strong Yankees team. He played both ways early in his career, but it was on offense that Barwegan was one of the game's best linemen.

Also like Speedie, Barwegan did very well on the all-AAFC/NFL teams. He was a second team choice as a rookie and then garnered first team honors in 1948 and 1949. He was also a first team all-AAFC choice in all three of those years.

Barwegan was one of the game's best guards even when he was playing for a weak Colts team in 1949. After the merger of the AAFC and NFL, he was traded to the Bears, one of the NFL's strongest teams with one of football's best lines. Barwegan was a unanimous first team all-pro in his first two NFL seasons.

Barwegan remained one of the game's best linemen through the end of his career. He was a second team all-pro in 1952 and was named to the Pro Bowl four times in a row after the 1950-53 seasons. When he played his last game, he was 33.

And again like Speedie, Barwegan has unfairly suffered in Hall of Fame consideration because of the inaccurate perception that the AAFC was not a major league. Relative to the NFL, the AAFC was stronger than the AFL was until at least 1968, and possibly for that league's entire history. The brevity of Barwegan's career when compared to players from more recent years is also likely to have caused some voters to bypass him.

Even setting aside the two years he lost to the military, however, closer examination reveals that Barwegan's career was not short at all for the times. That is evident when he is compared to a number of Hall of Famers from his era. Barwegan played 8 seasons and 92 games in his career. By comparison, Doak Walker played 6 seasons and 67 games, Arnie Weinmeister played 6 and 71, Parker 7 and 68, McAfee 8 and 75, Van Buren 8 and 83, Jack Christiansen 8 and 89, George Connor 8 and 90, Bob Waterfield 8 and 91, Bill Willis 8 and 99, Fears 9 and 87, and Trippi 9 and 99.

DICK STANFEL, Guard, Detroit Lions, Washington Redskins 1952-1958

Although he was not colorful in the manner of Bobby Layne or a national icon like Doak Walker, Dick Stanfel was one of the cornerstones of Detroit's outstanding teams of 1952-54. He stepped into a starting job as a

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rookie and was a unanimous first team all-pro in his second season. It is no coincidence that Stanfel's first year was both Detroit's first championship season in 17 years and the beginning of the greatest era in Lions history.

Stanfel went into the military not long after turning 18 and served for almost two years. Upon being discharged, he enrolled at the University of San Francisco, graduating in 1951. By the time he arrived at training camp that summer, he was 24.

Stanfel's career was then delayed another whole year when he suffered a serious knee injury. In 1952, he became an integral part of an excellent Detroit line that included Vince Banonis and Lou Creekmur. Beginning with his great 1953 season, Stanfel became a regular all-pro and Pro Bowler.

Stanfel played so well that he was a first team all-pro in 1954 despite missing half the season because of another serious injury. When he was injured again in 1955, he considered retiring. However, Redskins head coach Joe Kuharich, Stanfel's coach at USF, engineered a trade and convinced Stanfel to join Washington.

Stanfel regained a spot as a first team all-pro in 1956 and then repeated in 1957 and 1958. He was also a Pro Bowler in all three of his seasons with Washington. After a tremendous seven year career, Stanfel then retired. Kuharich had been fired by the Redskins and hired by Notre Dame, and he offered Stanfel a job as the Fighting Irish's line coach.

Having decided early on to pursue a second career as a coach, Stanfel walked away from the NFL while at the top of his game. His bad knees were a factor, but the opportunity to coach at Notre Dame was the main reason. Had that opportunity not come along, Stanfel has said he could have played several more years.

In games played, Stanfel's career was short by more recent standards. Still, he played more seasons and games than Weinmeister and teammate Walker. More importantly, he was probably the best player at his position in the 1950's. And his retirement at 31 after seven seasons raises an issue that is essential to understanding why careers were shorter 50 years ago.

When he retired, Stanfel's salary as an assistant coach was not much less than what he had earned as a five-time all-pro player. That is unfathomable today, yet it was common then. Pro football's salaries were far closer to those of other jobs, and players often took other offers when they became available.

GENE BRITO, End, Redskins, Los Angeles Rams 1951-1953, 1955-1960

After graduating from high school, Gene Brito spent four years in the service. He enrolled at Loyola Marymount University in his native Los Angeles, graduating in 1951. When he played his first game, Brito was just one month shy of his 26th birthday.

He spent his first two seasons as an offensive end. When coach Curly Lambeau switched him to defense in 1953, Brito's talents really came to the fore. Although relatively light for an end at 225 pounds, Brito was extremely quick and he earned the first of five Pro Bowl berths that year. Brito jumped to Canada in 1954 but Washington coaxed him back the following year. From 1955 through 1958 he was a first team all-pro and Pro Bowler.

Traded to the Rams, Brito was injured and missed most of 1959. He bounced back in 1960 and made second team all-pro. But the following year in training camp, Brito was struck down by a rare disease that forced him to retire at 35. He died in 1965.

Had Brito played exclusively on defense beginning in 1951, his Hall of Fame credentials might be overwhelming. The long military stint that pushed back the start of his career also cut into the period in which he was one of the game's best players.

Brito's chances for the Hall of Fame have probably also been hurt by the weak teams he played on. He did not play in a single postseason game, and the Redskins and Rams posted a combined 47-69-4 record while he was playing for them. They only finished above .500 twice and only finished as high as second place once.

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Like Speedie, Brito jumped to Canada for a much higher salary than he earned in the NFL. Before free agency and the players union, that was one of the only options available to players. Had they played those years in the NFL instead of Canada, Brito and Speedie might have made the Hall of Fame a long time ago.

LOU RYMKUS, Tackle, Redskins, Browns 1943, 1946-51

As a rookie, Lou Rymkus was named first team all-pro and played in the NFL title game. That set a pattern that repeated itself in every year of his career. In each of his seven seasons, Rymkus was named as at least a second team all-pro and his team made it to its league Championship Game, winning five times.

After his outstanding rookie season, Rymkus went into the Navy. During his two year stint, he signed with the Browns for their inaugural season in 1946. Rymkus was a first team all-league selection in 1947-49, and he was a first team all-AAFC/NFL selection in 1946 and 1949 and a second team choice in 1948.

Although Rymkus went both ways in the first part of his career, it was on offense that he really established himself as an outstanding player. The pass pocket was a new idea in 1946, and it was one of the keys to Cleveland's great passing attack. Rymkus was widely recognized as one of the game's best pass blockers, if not the best. He earned second team all-pro honors in 1950-51 as the Browns posted a 21-3 record in their first two NFL seasons.

Like Speedie and Stanfel, Rymkus has been overshadowed by a large number of Hall of Fame teammates. Bill Willis, Lou Groza, and Frank Gatski all played with him on Cleveland's great line. And like Speedie and Barwegan, Rymkus's stature as a player has been affected by misperceptions about the AAFC.

Rymkus's career illustrates the absurdity of the notion that the AAFC was anything but a major league. He was an all-pro in the NFL as a rookie, continued as an all-pro for four AAFC seasons, and then was an all-pro in the NFL again in 1950-51. Unless Rymkus was a dramatically better player in 1943 and 1950-51 than in 1946-49, that trajectory points to the two leagues being about equal.

Rymkus retired at 32 while still one of the game's best linemen. Like Stanfel, that was partly because of injuries, but mostly because he wanted to coach and an opportunity was available. And just as Rymkus's playing career was a rousing success, so was his brief tenure as a head coach. In his only full season, he guided the Oilers to the 1960 AFL Championship.

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Whether any of these five players makes it to the Hall of Fame, all have credentials and unique extenuating circumstances because of the war and the era that they played in that call for closer examination from selectors. Any one of them would have been a better choice than Canadeo, Dudley, McAfee, Parker, and Trippi, and Barwegan, Stanfel, and especially Speedie had better careers than a whole lot of other Hall of Famers as well. In the most extreme inconsistency in the World War 2 standard, Speedie has credentials that are vastly superior to Canadeo's (4 receiving titles to 0 rushing titles, 6 years as a first team all-pro to 2, 5 championship rings to 1) *and* he missed 4 seasons to military service, while Canadeo missed just 1.

Again, by no means is that to suggest that the selectors erred in respecting the time lost to military service of those who were inducted. However, there is no getting around the fact that there are major inconsistencies in how the World War 2 standard was applied and to whom that respect was accorded. Should the selectors review and perhaps induct some of the war-time players profiled here who have thus far been bypassed, then the Pro Football Hall of Fame would be an even greater institution for it.

DISCLAIMER: The policy of the Coffin Corner is to avoid articles that lobby for a player's induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame because (a) there are too many players for whom such a claim might be made, (b) the constant inclusion of such lobbying soon becomes boring, and (c) such ideas finally are subjective opinions, many of which we would not support. Obviously, this article breaks our rule. We have included it because we believe its main idea – that wartime service may have hurt several players' Hall of Fame credentials. However, we must add that the opinions of the greatness of some players in comparison to that of others expressed here are not necessarily those of PFRA or the editor.

--- Bob Carroll