

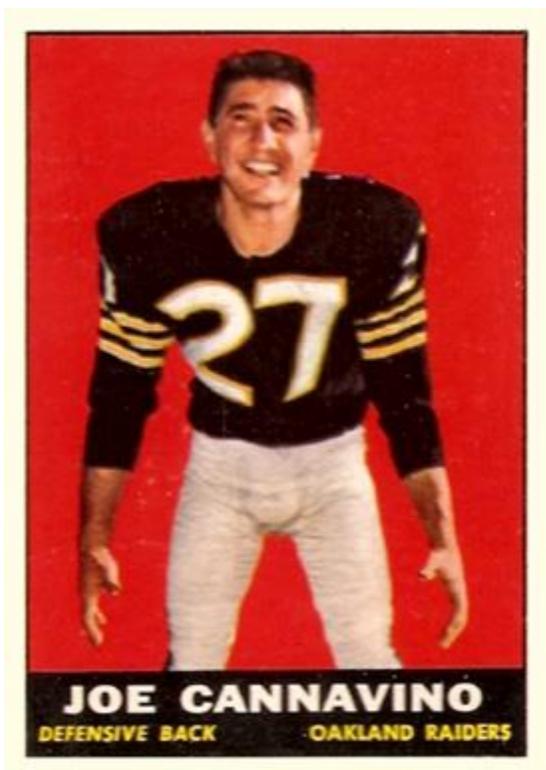


Joe Cannavino

This article is by Budd Bailey.

Joe Cannavino had a relatively brief football career, and was never exactly a household name. Still, he deserves plenty of credit for one quality: he knew how to exit the stage. Cannavino had his best moments in his final game as both a college and pro player.

Joseph Patrick Cannavino was born on January 20, 1935 in Cleveland, Ohio. He stayed in that city throughout his childhood, attending Collinwood High School on Cleveland's East Side. Joe is one of eight people from Collinwood as of 2020 who reached the NFL. The latest of them was Cecil Shorts, who played for three teams in the 2010s.



Cannavino was one of those three-sport standouts that were relatively common in those days. He piled up eight letters in high school, and also played for the basketball and baseball teams. However, Joe did his best work as a Railroader for the football team. Cannavino played both ways (defensive back and running back), and was an all-conference pick. No wonder he was eventually selected to the school's Hall of Fame.



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Along the way in school, Cannavino met a woman named Irene who eventually became Mrs. Irene Cannavino.

He graduated from Collinwood in 1953. If you were a good high school football player in Ohio at that time, chances were pretty good that you'd get a phone call from Ohio State football coach Woody Hayes or one of his assistants. Cannavino answered that call, and headed to the Columbus campus in the fall of 1953. Hayes was coaching the Buckeyes for the third season that year, and they went 6-3.

Cannavino wasn't on the varsity roster in 1954 either; perhaps an injury kept him out of the lineup. If so, he no doubt had a good seat for a year to remember. That Ohio State team that was absolutely loaded. The Buckeyes went undefeated (9-0) during a spectacular regular season. They scored at least 20 points in all but one of those games, and never gave up more than 14 points in any of those games. It was climaxed by a 20-7 win over Southern California in the Rose Bowl. Three of the players were All-Americans, including Howard Cassady, and eight of the Buckeyes were drafted by the NFL before the 1955 season.

Despite those graduation losses, OSU was still good in 1955. Cassady ran for 958 yards and 15 touchdowns on his way to winning the Heisman Trophy. Cannavino served as one of his backups. He ran for a touchdown in an October 29 win over Northwestern, which was coached by future Buffalo Bills' coach Lou Saban. Ohio State suffered a couple of early losses, but won its last five in a row to finish 7-2 and on top of the Big Ten Conference standings again. However, the Buckeyes weren't allowed to go back to the Rose Bowl due to a conference rule that prevented teams from playing in that game in consecutive years.

Even with Cassady gone, Ohio State was quite talented in 1956. The Buckeyes went 6-3, although season-ending losses to Iowa and Michigan – put a sour note on the year. The team spent that year on probation, as Hayes admitted he had loaned money to some of his players. Therefore, Ohio State wouldn't have played in the Rose Bowl even if it had compiled a perfect record. Cannavino apparently found his niche in the defensive backfield around this time.

The NFL Draft was held on November 26, 1956 (first three rounds), and on January 31, 1957 (remaining rounds). Cannavino was picked in the 15th round by the Baltimore Colts. But he did have a year of eligibility left, and he decided to use it before trying his luck in the pros.

The Buckeyes lost their first game in 1957, an 18-14 decision in Ohio Stadium to TCU. Then Ohio State started on a roll that lasted the rest of the season. OSU won its last eight



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games, including a 31-14 romp over arch-rival Michigan in Ann Arbor. Joe missed most of the final two games because of an ankle sprain suffered against Iowa. During the season, he helped out at running back enough to finish with 39 carries for 198 yards and three touchdowns. From there the Buckeyes went on to the Rose Bowl to play against Oregon for a chance to win the national championship.

Ohio State was the heavy favorite, but the 7-3 Webfoots (as Oregon was called at the time) gave them a game. The Buckeyes held on for a 10-7 win, and Cannavino had a day to remember. Joe had two interceptions and a fumble recovery. The defensive back also broke up Oregon's final offensive play in the final minute. Ohio State was voted No. 1 in the country in one of the two wire service polls. It was a great way to cap a collegiate career. In hindsight, it's difficult to believe that Cannavino didn't win the game MVP trophy for his play. That award went to Oregon quarterback Jack Crabtree. There's no record of Joe playing in any of the college all-star games that winter. In the spring, Joe played his second final year of baseball for the Buckeyes, and then he moved on to the rest of this life.

Cannavino fell off the radar screen for a brief period at that point in the story. He apparently had tryouts with the Colts and the Cleveland Browns, but didn't stick. In any event, he popped back up in football circles around January of 1960. The Buffalo Bills of the brand-new American Football League signed him to a contract around that time. However, he was snapped up by the Oakland Raiders during a special allocation draft. The Raiders were the last team to be admitted into the AFL that year, and they were behind the rest of the league in their search for talent. While they took control of the Minneapolis franchise's draft picks (that team had left the AFL to join the NFL), the Raiders had already lost the chance to sign most of "their" selected players by the time late January rolled around – since they had signed with NFL teams. Oakland needed help. Thus, the other seven AFL teams protected 11 players each and the Raiders grabbed 24 of the unprotected players. The best known acquisition in that draft probably was Wayne Hawkins, who stayed at guard for the Raiders for the rest of the decade.

Coach Eddie Erdelatz greeted the usual cast of characters that inhabit first-year teams, and made a good impression on Cannavino. "I've played for Woody Hayes at Ohio State, Weeb Ewbank of the Baltimore Colts, and Paul Brown of the Cleveland Browns," he said, "and none can put ballplayers at ease like Coach Erdelatz. He tells us the game will be fun, so we go into it expecting to have a good time, and we do."

Cannavino must have been a long shot for making the final roster, considering he hadn't played any sort of football since the Rose Bowl game. But, he beat the odds and not only made the roster but was in the starting lineup on opening day against Houston on September 11, 1960. Joe's first career interception came on October 23 against the Bills,



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who finished as 38-9 winners. He had another pick in the Raiders' next game, a 28-27 win over the New York Titans. Cannavino also intercepted passes in a loss to the Los Angeles Chargers on November 27, and in a win over Denver on December 17. Add up the numbers, and he started 14 games at strong safety with a very respectable four interceptions. That earned Joe a second-team all-AFL honor from United Press International.

Erdelatz and Cannavino teamed up again for the Raiders in 1961. The 5-foot-11, 185-pound defensive back had an extra interception that season, picking off five opposing passes in his slightly different role as a free safety. Cannavino had interceptions against Denver on October 15, San Diego on October 22, New York on November 11, Boston on November 17, and Buffalo on December 3. Joe finished in a tie for the team lead in picks with cornerback Fred Williamson, who established a good-sized reputation while playing for Kansas City later in the decade. Along the way, Cannavino reportedly had a fight in a game with Broncos' guard Ken Adamson.

As for the Raiders' season, it didn't go so well. Oakland lost its first two games by scores of 55-0 and 44-0. That led to Erdelatz's departure as head coach; he was replaced by Marty Feldman. That helped a little, but the Raiders gave up more than 32 points per game as they finished 2-12. Cannavino certainly knew that changes were coming to Oakland, and soon.

One such change took place on March 30. The Raiders sent the safety to the Bills for Vernon Valdez, a cornerback who had started 11 games for the '61 Bills. Cannavino signed a contract in May and got ready to try his luck with the Bills, who had hired Saban as their head coach after a disappointing 1961 season.

Joe won a job in the starting lineup with the Bills, and even chipped in with an interception on opening day against Houston. But that game started a good-sized poor start to the season, as Buffalo dropped its first four games. On October 2, Saban did some house-cleaning. He put Cannavino, linebacker Ralph Felton, running back Carey Henley, and quarterback Al Dorow on waivers, and traded defensive tackle LaVerne Torczon to the Titans. No one claimed Joe, and he didn't play for the rest of the season.

In 1963, Cannavino gave pro football one more chance – signing with the Hamilton Tiger-Cats of the Canadian Football League. Joe fit in nicely, starting 12 of the 14 regular-season games. He had a couple of interceptions during the season, and also saw some spot duty on kick returns. As for the team, it turned out to be a memorable season. The Tiger-Cats raced through the year with a 10-4 record. They split the two-game East final with Ottawa, advancing on total points. Then Hamilton defeated the B.C. Lions, 21-10, in Vancouver in the Grey Cup final.



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That was Cannavino's last pro football game. Thus, he won the Rose Bowl title and national championship in his last college game, and a title and a ring in his last pro game. Joe finished his career on the American side of the border with 32 games played – all starts – and 10 career interceptions.

We don't know much about what happened to Cannavino from there. He apparently moved back to his native Cleveland area, where he moved into coaching CYO basketball for 31 years. Joe was selected to the Lithuanian Athletic Club's Hall of Fame in Cleveland, mostly for his coaching work. At last report, he was still on the scene in 2020.

He and Irene were keeping track of their three children and nine grandchildren.



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