



Sam Salemi

This article was written by Jeffrey J. Miller.

Sam Salemi's first brush with football greatness, though no one could have predicted it then, came back in 1912. Sam, a young boy living in the largest city in the country, remembered the day as if it were not so long ago. "I saw Jim Thorpe in 1912 with the Olympic team when they came home," he recalled in a 2003 interview. "I was a little kid, but I remember sitting on the curb on Broadway and watching them go by."

That was Sam's first experience with a football immortal, but there would be many more along the way before he would end up an unlikely immortal in his own right. Sam Salemi, who later changed his name to Sam Dana, was the oldest surviving former National Football League player when he turned 100 on August 7, 2003. Sam played one year of NFL ball, 1928, but in his career he brushed up against some of the biggest names in the sport, both college and pro. The list goes on and on, as we will see in this article.



He was born Samuel Salemi on August 7, 1903, to a large Italian American family living not far from the bowery on Oliver Street. Around 1910 they moved to 14th Avenue in Brooklyn, and later moved again to Manhattan, where his father ran a struggling textile importing business. Young Sam attended New Utrecht High School in New York. Prior to his junior year, he was encouraged to go out for the high school football team. "Some kid was chasing me through the school," Sam remembered. "My math teacher, Mr. Cohen, who was also the football coach, saw me running and said, 'You should go out for football.' I did in 1919, and he started me at halfback. I played two years on the varsity."

It was while he was still in high school that Sam got his nickname, which he has carried ever since. "I started running with the ball, sidestepping, twisting and turning," he



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recalled. “Sambo Scheher, one of our linemen, said, ‘That’s Smoke for ya.’ The name stuck.”

After high school, Sam was intent on going to Cornell, but his father wanted him to stay close to home. He came from a large family and in keeping with tradition, the boys were expected to work in the family business. A compromise was reached in which Sam would attend New York-based Columbia so that he would not be too far away from home. During his freshman year at Columbia (1921), the football bug bit him once again. “I fell in love with the game so I played freshman football. I wasn’t recruited.”

The following season, Sam played on the varsity squad. The Columbia team that year featured All-American halfback Walter Koppisch and future baseball immortal Lou Gehrig. Though he was only a reserve back on the 1922 squad, Smoke held many cherished memories. Most of them center on the many characters with whom he played, Gehrig in particular. “He was damn good,” Dana recalled. He could hit that line. He had powerful legs.” Ironically enough, Dana felt Gehrig might have been better suited for the gridiron than the diamond, although he was inclined to agree that the Iron Horse made the right decision in going with the Bronx Bombers.

One of the starting halfbacks was Ben Roderick, a transfer from Boston College, whom Dana called “a sweetheart of a player.” In fact Sam was so fond of Roderick, who later played two seasons of pro ball with the Buffalo All-Americans, that he “...adopted his style. He ran with his knees up high, and I started to run like him.”

Another character Smoke remembered well is Eddie Fischer, a guard who went to Masten Park High in Buffalo. “He was good,” said Sam. “He was powerful.” According to legend, Fischer was the first player to wear eyeglasses in a major college football game. Sam doubted that claim. “He’d go in with the glasses, but he’d throw them off,” Sam remembered with a chuckle. “Then they had to go out and grab them so no one would step on them.”

Then there was Walter Koppisch, another Masten Park alumnus who was a two-time Walter Camp All-American and the Lions’ captain for three years running. Dana had very fond memories of Koppisch, whom he called “a prince.” Koppisch was the star of the team, and his national fame was eclipsed only by that of Red Grange and the Four Horsemen of Notre Dame. “He was very good,” said Dana of Koppisch. “He was fast—a good broken-field runner. He was a terror on defense too. He had tremendous speed. He was a terrific tackler. He was beautiful to see.”

According to Dana, Koppisch was responsible for him staying on at Columbia after team officials (Dana asked that specific personnel not be identified) told him that he was off



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the team. “I went back to my room and started packing. Walter Koppisch came dashing into the room and told me to stop packing my bags. He said if I was going then he was too!”

Through Koppisch’s intervention, Smoke remained with the club, but he never felt wanted there. Dana says, “I just stayed and finished the season.”

Sam took a couple of years off from school before deciding to go back in 1925. “A friend of mine named Harold Drumm said he was going to St. John’s. I said, ‘I’ll go with you. I played at St. John’s for two years. I was a starting halfback both years.’”

Sam recollected that this was the year he first received money to play football. “When I was at St. John’s I played pro ball with the Orange (New Jersey) Tornadoes.” Wishing to maintain his amateur status, Sam adopted the nom de guerre of Smoke Saunders. The Tornadoes were an independent team, not aligned with the inchoate National Football League. “I played for Orange a couple years. I made \$75 a game.”

A year later, Sam appeared one game with another independent outfit. “At the end of the 1926 season, I was offered a chance to play for the Hartford Blues,” Sam recalls. “I said, ‘Sure!’ Harry Stuhldreher was the quarterback. Ed Hunsinger, one of the Seven Mules of Notre Dame, was also on the team. I played one game. I made \$75. We played a team called the New Britain Tigers.”

Sam found himself at his third college in 1927. “My good friend at St. John’s, Joe McClain, quit and was going to go to Canisius in Buffalo,” Sam recalled. “I said, ‘I’ll go with you.’ Luke Urban was the coach. He was a good man. He used the Major Cavanaugh system. He had a spread formation that he used from Cavanaugh but he made some changes. It was a beautiful thing.” As Sam recollected, he was in the starting backfield along with Carl McNally, Marty Fisher, and Jack Collins, the quarterback.

In 1928, Sam was at home working in the family business when he received a phone call from none other than Charles C. Pyle, Red Grange’s manager. “I was surprised,” he said. “I thought someone was kidding me. I don’t know how he knew about me. Joe McClain, my teammate at Canisius, was already there, but he said he didn’t tell him.”

“I went to see Pyle at the Chrysler Building,” Sam explained. “We came to terms--\$125 a game of which he kept \$25.” The \$25 was held back from each player to help sustain the team, with the understanding that they would get the money back at the end of the season. The players never saw it though, as the team went bankrupt and folded after the 1928 campaign.



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The Yankees were a formidable team, featuring two future hall-of-famers in guard Mike Michalske and end Ray Flaherty. “We had some good men in the Yankee backfield—Bo Molenda, Wild Bill Kelly. I played left halfback.” Sam never felt awestruck by the stars on the Yanks, however. “I didn’t think about who were stars because I was a player. I fit in.”

Sam appeared in five games with the Yankees that year. His first game, he explained, was credited to halfback Hector Cyre, who left the team the week before Sam arrived, and wore #14 on his jersey, which Sam inherited. “I replaced a guy named Cyre in the game against Providence [October 21]. When they said Cyre, that was me!” Cyre was credited with the only Yankee touchdown of the contest—a 20-yard aerial from quarterback Gibby Welch—but it was actually Sam. The Yanks lost 12-6 before 7,000 witnesses.

Smoke made his first appearance in the game program on November 4 against Paddy Driscoll and the Chicago Bears in the Windy City. Some 10,000 fans watched as the Bears mauled the Yankees 27-0. The *New York Times*, however, gave credit to a few of the Yankee players who stood out in the loss, including Sam: “Molenda, Kelly, Smith, and Salemi turned in creditable performances in the Yankee backfield.”

He was still in the starting lineup the following week when the Yankees faced the Packers at Green Bay. Neither team was able to generate an offense—in fact, the teams were able to reach their opponent’s 20-yard line just once each in the entire contest. The game ended in a 0-0 stalemate.

Sam’s most memorable game came against the Chicago Cardinals on November 25. Near the end of the second quarter, he went airborne to catch an overthrown pass. “The crowd yelled when I caught the ball,” he recalled. “I had to leap way up. I no sooner caught the ball when I felt a crashing tackle. I must have landed on my head.”

Shortly thereafter the first half ended. When the coach called out the starters for the second half, he called the regular starting lineup, so Sam took his regular position on the field. “I’m standing there at my defensive position. I watched the quarterback throw a pass and then I watched the man running down the field to catch the pass. Mike Michalske came running over and asked, ‘How many fingers am I holding up?’ I said, ‘four!’ He said, ‘You’ve had enough.’ Then I said, ‘Isn’t there four Mike?’ He said, ‘Yeah, just go sit out for awhile.’”

With that, Sam was pulled from the game. “I went over to the bench. Joe McClain said I was a little wacky.” After the game, Joe was concerned and took me to see Al Jolson to get my mind off the game. I always enjoyed Jolson’s singing, but Joe said I was asking about the game throughout the show.”



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Smoke made his final appearance in a Yankee uniform on December 9 against Benny Friedman and the Detroit Wolverines at Yankee Stadium. After not starting a game since being injured two weeks earlier, Sam went in for Red Smith when Smith sustained an injury in the second quarter. Although he was unable to help the impotent New York offense, Sam stood out on defense, picking off a pass in the fourth quarter and gaining 15 yards on the return. The Yankees were crushed, 34-0, and Sam Salemi's pro career was over.

"I would have played the next year but the Yankees went bankrupt," Sam says. "I didn't want to play away from New York, and the Giants were all filled up, so I forgot about it."

Sam remained in the Big Apple after his playing days. He returned to his father's import business before going to work for the Internal Revenue Service. Sam took some time off to serve his country during the second World War. Just before his discharge, he married the former Helen Saunders of Brooklyn in March 1945. That was also the year he changed his last name to Dana. "I didn't want my family to have to put up with the wisecracks," he explained.

According to Robert Dana, Sam's son, maintaining his Italian heritage was very important to Sam, and he was able to do so by adopting the surname of a family relative. "He wanted to maintain his heritage as he got the name from one of his mother's relatives who was also Italian but who spelled his name Danna. Several other family members also changed their names to Dana, but he was the first."

After the war, Sam found his way back to Western New York, thanks to the IRS. "The Brooklyn office transferred me to Buffalo," he said. "I was a special agent. I worked in intelligence—I investigated income tax fraud cases." When Presidents came to the Queen City, Sam would be called upon to help with the security detail. He remained with the service until retiring in 1969. Sam and his wife had two children, Robert and Margaret, four grandchildren and, thus far, one great-grandchild.

Of his claim to being the elder statesman of former NFLers, Sam offered with genuine modesty, "I knew all along—I didn't care."

Added son Robert Dana, "He didn't feel anybody would be interested." Well, he could not have been more wrong—newspapers, magazines, and TV reporters have been scrambling to write his story. NFL Films sent a crew to Western New York to record his vast collection of memories. The Buffalo Bills had Sam come down to Ralph Wilson stadium for a visit and a tour of their facilities.



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Until March 2003, however, no one outside the Dana family knew that Sam Salemi was still around. In fact, were it not for Robert's tenacity, Sam's story might never have been told. Even *Total Football*, the NFL's official encyclopedia, reported a Sam Salemi deceased in 1969! Happily for Sam Dana, it was the wrong guy.

It was not until Robert sent a letter to Joe Horrigan, Vice President of Communications and Exhibits at the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, informing Horrigan of the NFL's oversight that Sam's story came to light. The letter was sent in March, and the response was immediate. Within hours, the younger Dana received a reply from Horrigan, and within days a follow-up correspondence was received informing Sam that, "to the best of our knowledge, you are the oldest living alumni of the NFL."

Sam admitted to being a bit surprised by all the attention, "I'm not worth all the trouble—I only played in five games." He never sought the notoriety, but at the same time, he thoroughly enjoyed his newfound celebrity, "I'm very flattered," he told a reporter from *USA Today*. "I'm proud of being the oldest NFL player."

Dana's reign as the oldest surviving former NFL player came to an end on October 29, 2007, when he passed away due to complications from an infection. He had been living with son Robert in Buffalo before spending his final two years in an assisted living center in Kenmore, New York, where he regularly watched his beloved New York (baseball) Yankees and Buffalo Bills on television.

"We are beyond sad about the passing of our dad," Robert told the *Associated Press*. "But at the same time, you look back on his life and he enjoyed life. It gave him opportunities the last four years and enjoyment that he wouldn't have had. How many people can say the last four years of their life at 104 were outstanding?"