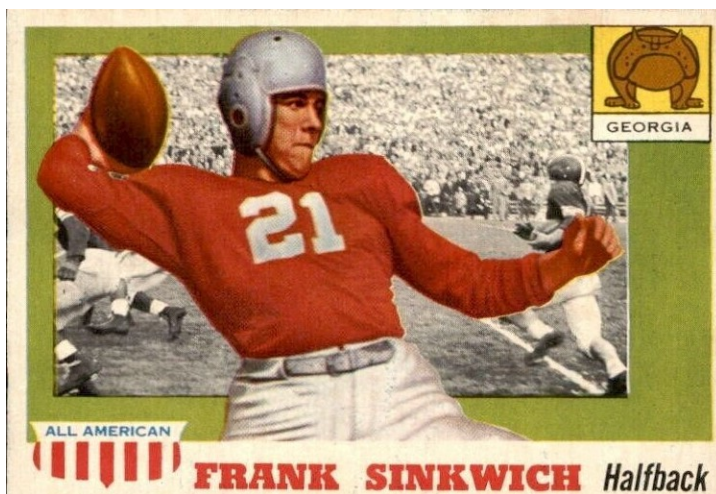


Frank Sinkwich

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

Frank Sinkwich learned the ropes of competition growing up in Youngstown, Ohio. He was a standout athlete at local Chaney High School, where he picked up a keen interest in football. He recalled, “I learned early in neighborhood pickup games that I had the desire to compete. When people ask why I succeeded in athletics, I always tell them that I didn't want to get beat.”¹ At the time, Ohio was a football recruiting hotbed. Sinkwich's desire was to play locally at Ohio State. He was passed up for other local recruits, but University of Georgia assistant coach Bill Hartman spotted him on a recruiting trip to the state.² He sold Frank on Georgia and the rest became history. Sinkwich went on to become arguably one of the most outstanding players at the university, where he earned the Heisman trophy as a senior in 1942.³



He was drafted as the top overall pick in the 1943 NFL Draft by the Detroit Lions. He made his professional debut on September 19, 1943 against the Chicago Cardinals by tossing a 17-yard touchdown pass to Bill Callihan that proved to be the winning score as the Lions prevailed, 35-17.⁴ Unfortunately, the game would be a brief bright moment for Detroit as they slumped to a 3-6-1 record. Sinkwich was arguably the team's top player, starring in all aspects of the game. He was not only a prolific offensive talent, but he also played defensive back, punter, and carried the return duties. In fact, he led the NFL with 45.9 yards per punt, 228 punt return yards, and 20.7 yards per punt return.⁵ If you watched the Lions during that era, chances are that Sinkwich was on the field just about every play. He also recorded one interception on defense, which he returned 39 yards for a touchdown on November 14 against the Washington Redskins.⁶ His play turned heads



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because he was named a second-team All-Pro by the *Chicago Herald American* and a first-team choice by the *NY Daily News*.

The Lions turned their fortunes around in 1944, sporting a 6-3-1 record that saw them finish second in the NFL Western Division.⁷ Detroit did not have much talent around Sinkwich, but did feature future Hall of Famer Alex Wojciechowicz and All-Pro Bob Westfall. Sinkwich led the team in passing with 1,060 yards and 12 touchdowns, and rushing with 560 yards and six touchdowns.⁸ On defense and special teams, he topped the Lions with 148 punt return yards, recorded three interceptions, made 24 of 30 extra points and converted two field goals. Detroit struggled early in the season, with just one win in its first five contests. They were swept by the eventual NFL champion Green Bay Packers that eliminated any chances at the postseason.⁹ Detroit mustered only six points in the contests between the clubs. But the Lions were 6-1-1 against the rest of the league in earning their second place finish. For his efforts, Sinkwich earned consensus first-team All-Pro honors and earned the NFL Most Valuable Player award, then known as the Joe F. Carr Trophy.¹⁰

Duty to his country called following the 1944 season, where he served for two years in the United States Armed Forces. While playing football in the service, he suffered a severe knee injury that hampered his full return to professional football.¹¹ Sinkwich attempted to rejoin the professional ranks in 1946 with the All-American Football

- 1 "Growing Up in Working Class Youngstown – Frank Sinkwich," bobonbooks.com, June 20, 2020, [Growing Up in Working Class Youngstown — Frank Sinkwich | Bob on Books](#).
- 2 "Growing Up in Working Class Youngstown – Frank Sinkwich," bobonbooks.com, June 20, 2020, [Growing Up in Working Class Youngstown — Frank Sinkwich | Bob on Books](#).
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- 4 "Chicago Cardinals at Detroit Lions – September 19th, 1943," ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 29, 2023, [Chicago Cardinals at Detroit Lions - September 19th, 1943 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 5 "Frankie Sinkwich," ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 29, 2023, [Frankie Sinkwich Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 6 "Frankie Sinkwich Career Game Log," ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 29, 2023, [Frankie Sinkwich Career Game Log | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
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- 8 "Frankie Sinkwich," ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 29, 2023, [Frankie Sinkwich Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 9 "1944 Detroit Lions Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 29, 2023, [1944 Detroit Lions Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 10 "Joe F. Carr Trophy (MVP) Winners," ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 29, 2023, [Joe F. Carr Trophy \(MVP\) Winners | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 11 "Growing Up in Working Class Youngstown – Frank Sinkwich," bobonbooks.com, June 20, 2020, [Growing Up in Working Class Youngstown — Frank Sinkwich | Bob on Books](#).



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Conference's New York Yankees. He played in just four contests in a very limited role. The following season he played three games for the Yankees and eight games with the Baltimore Colts primarily in a reserve role and as a kick returner. He announced his retirement following the 1947 season. Sinkwich played in 35 professional games with the Lions, Yankees, and Colts, making 16 starts.¹² He was the first Lions player to win the MVP award and the only player in franchise history to win it, until Barry Sanders won it in 1997. Sinkwich finished his career with 1,101 yards from scrimmage, 1,913 passing yards, and 1,949 all-purpose yards.¹³

After his days in the NFL, Sinkwich ventured into the collegiate coaching ranks for two seasons (1950, 1951) with the University of Tampa Spartans. In 1951, he led the Spartans to their first postseason appearance in school history.¹⁴ The team participated in the Brandeis Classic in Miami, Florida, defeating the Brandeis Judges, 7-0. The season also included a major upset of in-state foe, Florida State, by the score of 14-6, to cap the regular season with a 7-3-1 record.¹⁵ Following the season, Sinkwich resigned in order to pursue interest in business ventures. He ran a beer distributor and became involved with the University of Georgia athletics as a fundraiser.¹⁶ As one of his accomplishments, he worked in a collaborative effort to raise funds for the construction of Butts-Mehre Heritage Hall, which was constructed in 1987.¹⁷ The Hall houses the players' locker room, weight room, training room, meeting rooms and coaches quarters.

Sinkwich was born on October 10, 1920 in Zagreb, Croatia. He spent most of his youth in Youngstown, Ohio, where his family ran a grocery store and later, a restaurant.¹⁸ He attended the University of Georgia on a football scholarship, where he became one of the greatest running backs in school history. As a freshman, he was a part of the "point-a-minute" Bullpups team that went undefeated.¹⁹ Varsity head coach Wally Butts convinced him to play halfback that would utilize not only his fleet foot work, but also his abilities to pass the ball, saying, "He acquired, through hard work and endless

1 2 "Frankie Sinkwich," ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 29, 2023, [Frankie Sinkwich Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 3 "Frankie Sinkwich," ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 29, 2023, [Frankie Sinkwich Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 4 "Spartans to play post-season game," *St. Petersburg Times*, November 15, 1951, 22, [St. Petersburg Times - Google News Archive Search](#).

1 5 "Spartans to play post-season game," *St. Petersburg Times*, November 15, 1951, 22, [St. Petersburg Times - Google News Archive Search](#).

1 6 Richmond, Krista. "After 75 years, UGA returns to the Rose Bowl," news.uga.edu, December 18, 2017, [After 75 years, UGA returns to the Rose Bowl - UGA Today](#).

1 7 Richmond, Krista. "After 75 years, UGA returns to the Rose Bowl," news.uga.edu, December 18, 2017, [After 75 years, UGA returns to the Rose Bowl - UGA Today](#).



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practice, the ability to pick the open receiver better than anybody I ever saw.”²⁰ By 1941, he was the team's top halfback, earning consensus All-American honors. He set the Southeastern Conference rushing record with 1,103 yards, and totaled 1,816 total yards, also a record. Georgia was en route to a 9-1-1 season, finishing ranked in the top 15, and secured a win over TCU in the Orange Bowl.²¹ In the victory, Sinkwich was the star, amassing 355 total yards and three passing scores. The most impressive element of the game may have been the fact that Sinkwich played the game with a broken jaw.²²

As a senior in 1942, he set the Southeastern Conference passing record at 1,392 yards. He added 795 rushing yards that led to unanimous All-American honors. Georgia featured the top ranked offense in the conference and Sinkwich leading the Bulldogs to a 10-1 record in the regular season.²³ Their 6-1 record in conference play won the Southeastern Conference over second place finishers Georgia Tech and Tennessee. Georgia's only loss was to rival Auburn, 27-13. The Bulldogs knocked off two top three opponents: downing Alabama, 21-10, and blowing out archrival Georgia Tech, 34-0. In the 1943 Rose Bowl, Georgia met UCLA, whom they beat, 9-0. Georgia's Charley Trippi was named the game's MVP, but Sinkwich scored the game's only touchdown in the fourth quarter on a one-yard run that sealed the game.²⁴ The high powered Georgia offense outgained UCLA in total yardage, 379 to 157, and held the Bruins to just four first downs.²⁵

The Bulldogs were named national champions by major selectors including the Billingsley Report, Poling System, and the Sagarin Ratings - the school claims this season as a national championship. They finished second behind 9-1 Ohio State in the final Associated Press rankings. Sinkwich was the recipient of the Heisman trophy by the Downtown Athletic Club of New York, becoming the school's first winner. He won in a landslide, receiving 1,059 points, strongly ahead of second-place finisher, quarterback Paul Governali of Columbia University.²⁶ He was also the first foreign born player to win the award.

1 8 “Growing Up in Working Class Youngstown – Frank Sinkwich,” bobonbooks.com, June 20, 2020, [Growing Up in Working Class Youngstown — Frank Sinkwich | Bob on Books](#).

1 9 “Frank Sinkwich,” heisman.com, accessed July 29, 2023, [Frank Sinkwich – Heisman](#).

2 0 “Growing Up in Working Class Youngstown – Frank Sinkwich,” bobonbooks.com, June 20, 2020, [Growing Up in Working Class Youngstown — Frank Sinkwich | Bob on Books](#).

2 1 “Frank Sinkwich,” heisman.com, accessed July 29, 2023, [Frank Sinkwich – Heisman](#).

2 2 “Frank Sinkwich,” heisman.com, accessed July 29, 2023, [Frank Sinkwich – Heisman](#).

2 3 “Frank Sinkwich,” heisman.com, accessed July 29, 2023, [Frank Sinkwich – Heisman](#).

2 4 “U.C.L.A. beaten on blocked kick,” *The Spokesman-Review*, January 2, 1943, 9, [The Spokesman-Review - Google News Archive Search](#).

2 5 “U.C.L.A. beaten on blocked kick,” *The Spokesman-Review*, January 2, 1943, 9, [The Spokesman-Review - Google News Archive Search](#).

2 6 “Frank Sinkwich,” heisman.com, accessed July 29, 2023, [Frank Sinkwich – Heisman](#).



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In his collegiate career, Sinkwich totaled 2,271 rushing yards, 2,331 passing yards, and 60 total touchdowns. In 1996, he was inducted into the University of Georgia Circle of Honor. He is also one of just four Bulldogs to have their numbers retired. He graduated with a degree in education in 1943.²⁷

2 7 “Frank Sinkwich,” heisman.com, accessed July 29, 2023, [Frank Sinkwich – Heisman](#).