

Ray Wietecha

This article was written by Jim Marino.

Raymond Walter Wietecha played ten years with the New York Giants and was considered the foundation of the offensive line during the glory years of the 1950s and early 1960s. He didn't miss a game in his 10-year career. Wietecha constructed a streak of 126 consecutive games at center which only ended with his retirement after the 1962 season. Wietecha's football career consisted of two varsity seasons at East Chicago Roosevelt High School, one year at Michigan State, three years at Northwestern, two years with the U.S. Marine Corps Service Team, ten years in the National Football League, and eighteen years coaching in the NFL and USFL. Listed at 6-1, 225, Wietecha was small for a center, but his technique, strength, durability, and intelligence enabled him to be a four time all-pro, and the last New York Giants offensive lineman not to wear a cage mask.



1957 Topps football card. The first time Wietecha was All-Pro

Wietecha, born November 2, 1928, in East Chicago, Indiana, was from a Polish-American family. The family lived in East Chicago where Ray played football at Roosevelt High School. Wietecha recalled how he became the starting center, "I wanted to play in the backfield, but I was second team. I got a football and a backup quarterback and practiced centering for hours and hours."¹ His chance came when the regular center got hurt. He earned two varsity letters and graduated in 1944.

Ray played his freshman season at Michigan State University and then transferred to Northwestern. In three seasons for the Wildcats, Wietecha played center, and linebacker. In 1949, Wietecha started at right outside linebacker in Northwestern's first appearance

¹ Blunk, Frank M. "Wietecha Is Middle Man In Giant Operations" *New York Times* November 18, 1955, 30.



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

in the Rose Bowl. The Wildcat's victory was considered the "most controversial game" in Rose Bowl history.² A disputed fumble ruled a touchdown resulted in a media firestorm. And maybe, for the first time in football history, a sports reporter, John B. Old, called for cameras to determine if a touchdown was scored. Old suggested a new rule, "The installation of an eye-in-the-sky or a photo finish camera" at the goal line to determine a touchdown.³ Wietecha registered four tackles; one of them a sack in the victory.⁴

The 1950 NFL Draft, conducted on January 20-21 in Philadelphia, included three teams absorbed from the All American Football Conference, the Cleveland Browns, the San Francisco 49ers, and the Baltimore Colts. Wietecha's draft eligibility was quirky. He was a junior at Northwestern and would not graduate until 1951, but played four years of varsity football, three with Northwestern, and one with Michigan State. It seems George Halas of the Chicago Bears and Wellington Mara of the New York Giants were the only two who knew Wietecha's status. However, Halas and Mara each thought no one else knew. Halas talked to Wietecha telling him Chicago would draft him in the twentieth round, but Mara pulled the lever in round twelve.⁵

The Giants waited for Wietecha to finish college and his two-year military service. Ray entered the United States Marine Corp during the Korean War. He reached the rank of captain and played two years on the Marine's Quantico football team. Wietecha signed a minor league baseball 'bonus' contract with the Washington Senators after leaving the Marines in 1953. Wietecha played for the Charlotte Hornets in the Class B Tri-State League. He was selected as an All-Star while leading Charlotte with sixty-six RBIs and thirteen homeruns.⁶ After the All-Star game, Wietecha left the Charlotte team to report to the New York Football Giants pre-season camp. Wietecha explained his decision to switch to football. "I was hitting .260 and thought I'll never make the big leagues at this rate. Maybe I should quit baseball and try football."⁷ Clark Griffith, owner of the

² Old, John B. "Did Wildcat Reach Goal With Ball?" *The Sporting News*. January 12, 1949, 33.

³ IBID.

4

Northwestern Football vs. California (Rose Bowl), 1949 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRaFcdmddsE>

v=iRaFcdmddsE

⁵ Daley, Arthur. "Sports Of The Times: The Iron Man" *New York Times* November 4, 1962, 52.

⁶ "3,107 Watch North Topple South In Tri-State Classic, *The Sporting News*. July 29, 1953, 34.

⁷ Daley, Arthur. "Sports Of The Times: The Iron Man" *New York Times* November 4, 1962, 52.

⁸ IBID.

⁹ Blunk, Frank M. "Wietecha Is Middle Man In Giant Operations", *New York Times* November 18, 1955, 30.

¹⁰ IBID.

¹¹ Troup, T.J. *The Birth Of Football's Modern 4-3 Defense*, 75.



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

Senators, challenged the Giants regarding Wietecha's minor league contract. Because of the contract dispute, Wietecha left the Giants pre-season camp, and sat out the rest of the minor league season.

At home, Wietecha contemplated whether to play football. To prevent inquiries by the Giants, Ray put up a language barrier by having his grandmother, who only spoke Polish, answer the phone. The first few Giants calls failed to broach the barrier. Steve Owen had a line coach, Ed Kolman, who spoke Polish. Kolman called, and speaking Polish, he asked to speak to Ray. Ray's grandmother put him on. Kolman told him to report to camp. Ray doubted that he would make the team since he was only 195 pounds, and there was only two days left in camp. Kolman replied, "Let me decide that. Come to camp and start learning the business. You won't regret it. You'll get bigger and strong and Johnny Rapacz [the Giants starting center] will soon quit."⁸ Wietecha reported the day after the Charlotte season ended, September 7, 1953. He made the team and eventually cracked the Giants' starting defensive lineup during the season. Ray lived in Cranford, New Jersey during his playing career.

Wietecha bulked up to 225 pounds. Owen placed him on the depth chart as a backup linebacker, a backup center, and all the special teams. "Because of Wietecha's speed and need of a third end, Owen transferred him from center to the flank, because Owen reasoned he could catch footballs."⁹ By mid-season, Wietecha replaced Bill Albright as the starting right linebacker where he gathered in his only career interception in a game against the Chicago Cardinals.

The next year, new head coach Jim Lee Howell moved two defensive starters free safety Frank Gifford and right linebacker Ray Wietecha to offense. Those changes paid off for a decade of team success. In pre-season, Ray beat out Johnny Rapacz at center. Wietecha's name became etched in stone as the Giants starting center for the remainder of his career, 126 straight games. During his first season at center, Wietecha earned the nickname of 'The Iron Man' because he played more minutes than any other player on the team.¹⁰ Little did they know the nickname would describe his career.

Howell tasked Kolman with remodeling the Giants offensive line. "Kolman did his job as the group allowed the fewest sack yards in the league with 141 yards."¹¹ The front five became the foundation of the offense for the Giants dynasty. The two permanent pillars of the unit were Wietecha and Hall of Famer Rosey Brown at left tackle. Both manned

8

9

10

11



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

their positions for nine consecutive years. Other line men in that stretch were Bill Austin (four years) at left guard, Darrell Dess (three years) at left guard, Jack Stroud (five years) at right guard, Dick Yelvington (four years) and Frank Youso (three years) both at right tackle. Over the years, Wietecha became the leader of the unit. Wietecha recalled, “I could remember assignments. I told players what to do. I was in charge of the little group up front.”¹²

Wietecha played in the last Giants game at the Polo Grounds on November 27, 1955, a 35-35 tie against the Browns. The following year, Ray was the starting center in the Giants first game at Yankee Stadium against the Steelers, a 38-10 victory. More significantly, Wietecha played in his first of five NFL championship games; the first ever played in Yankee Stadium. Under Howell, Tom Landry, and Vince Lombardi the team gelled into the league’s best team. Wietecha was a significant part. In his fourth year, he was a “shoo-in at center” on the All-Pro squad.¹³

Wietecha gained a formidable reputation for his blocking. Regarding run and pass blocking, sportswriter Joe King termed him “practically flawless.”¹⁴ “Ray Wietecha picked up the red dog as well as any center in the league.”¹⁵ The unusual aspect of blocking was the center had to take on three different men depending on the play called. Wietecha blocked either the left or right defensive tackle, or the middle guard or middle linebacker. Wietecha played center during pro football’s transition to the 4-3 defense from the 5-3 or 5-2 with a middle guard [a nose tackle in today’s terminology]. In his first year at center, Wietecha played against an odd man front with a middle guard in all twelve games. By 1957, Wietecha played the entire season against middle linebackers. He last faced a middle guard, Vince Costello of the Cleveland Browns, in both games in 1959. Giants centers did not face a nose tackle again until the 1970s when the AFL teams were part of the NFL.

During his career, Wietecha faced the cream of the league. He explained the combat at the spearpoint of the offense, “When I finish a game the three guys I’ve mainly been in

¹²12 “Ray Wietecha, Key To Giants’ Glory Days, Dies At 74” *New York Times* December 22, 2002, 52.

¹³ King, Joe. “Giants Capture Nine Spots; Bears and Lions Six Apiece”. *The Sporting News*, December 19, 1956, 36.

¹⁴ King, Joe. “Jurgenson, Starr Lead All-Pro Squads”. *The Sporting News*, December 20, 1961, 18.

¹⁵ Troup, 75.

¹⁶ Mercer, Dick. “The Specialist In Pro Football No. 5: Ray Wietecha, Center”, *Sport* January 1963, 32.

¹⁷Troup, 223.

¹⁸ IBID, 278.

¹⁹ Palladino, Ernie, 149.



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

contact with were the two biggest guys on the field, those tackles, and the cleverest guy on the field, the middle linebacker.”¹⁶ Ray faced ten hall of famers, twenty other Pro-Bowlers, and two Rookies of the Year. He faced Hall of Famer Ernie Stautner of the Pittsburgh Steelers most often, fourteen games. Wietecha confronted other hall of famers: Chuck Bednarik six times, Art Donovan five times, Henry Jordan four times, both Leo Nomellini and Ray Nitschke three games, and two games each against Alex Karras, Joe Schmidt, Les Richter, and Bill George. Two Rookies of the Year players he faced were Gil Maines of the Detroit Lions, 1954, and Joe Lovetere of the Los Angeles Rams, 1959. Ray faced twenty-five different middle linebackers.

Wietecha gained his first Pro Bowl appearance in 1957 for his “overall strong play at center.”¹⁷ The next year he earned first team All-Pro recognition and a second trip to the Pro-Bowl “for his versatility at center.”¹⁸ That same year he played in what has been called the greatest game in NFL history. But, to get there, the Giants had to beat the Cleveland Browns in the last game of the season to create a one game playoff. The game is best known for Pat Summerall’s 49-yard field game-winning goal on a snowy field. Ray had a significant role in the successful field goal with a perfect snap. Wietecha took great pride in his ability to consistently snap the ball perfectly for the holder. It took constant practice. Landry practiced the trio (Summerall, Wietecha, and Conerly) 10 to 15 minutes every day.¹⁹

Ernie Palladino wrote in his book, *Lombardi And Landry* that, “Landry would drill Ray Wietecha, telling him how many revolutions the ball should make before it reached the holder Charlie Conerly.” A perfectionist with the consistent, accurate long snap, Ray explained how it was achieved, “Practice and experience. The holder doesn’t want it fast, but crisp, about two or three feet off the ground. It should always be the same speed; that’s important. Otherwise you ruin the kicker’s timing.”²⁰ Summerall once recalled: “In four years of place-kicking with the Giants I never saw the laces of the football. Wietecha always snapped the ball with the strings facing front.”²¹ That winning field goal gave the Giants a chance to beat the Browns in the playoff the following week to become Eastern Division champions, and the right to face the Baltimore Colts in the overtime classic at Yankee Stadium.

A repeat visit to the championship game, in 1959, was a result of another fine season for Wietecha and the Giants. Allie Sherman, assistant in charge of the offense, pronounced,

¹⁶

¹⁷

¹⁸

¹⁹

²⁰ Mercer, 83.

²¹ Valentine, Ed. “Giants By The Numbers: No. 55 Is For Ray Wietecha.” June 21, 2010. <https://www.bigblueview.com/2010/6/21/1524809/giants-by-the-numbers-55-is-for>



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

“Our pass blocking was the best of the year.”²² Tex Maule declared before the game, “The two best offensive lines in football anchored on the two best offensive centers, Ray Wietecha of the Giants and Buzz Nutter of the Colts.”²³ The 1959 championship pitted the league's top defense against the best attack. The Giants defense held the lead but a 24-point explosion by the Colts in the last quarter sealed a repeat defeat for the Giants.

Major changes occurred for New York the next season. Landry left to coach the Dallas Cowboys and Harland Svare became the Giants defensive coordinator. Wietecha introduced the ‘blind’ snap for field goals, extra points, and punts in 1960. “For two years he practiced the ‘blind’ snap in pre-season before using it in an NFL game [1960].”²⁴ Wietecha developed the ‘blind’ snap to better protect the kick. Wietecha explained, “It’s rougher when I’ve got that long snap to make with a guy on each side of me. They do a lot of moving around, but when I’m looking at them it’s much easier for me to keep track of them.”²⁵ Summerall confirmed the success, “Because he is protecting himself by snapping ‘blind’ no one is breaking through center to block my kicks.”²⁶ During the first year of Wietecha’s ‘blind’ snap no punts, field goals, or extra points were blocked in the season.

In 1960, the Giants failed to capture the division crown. The other big news was Wietecha’s consecutive game streak was in danger. In late December, the *New York Times*’ headline blared, “Wietecha, Giants Center, Is Ill And Doubtful Starter Sunday.”²⁷ Sports reporter Robert Teague asked two days before the game, “Wietecha had surgery, will the streak end at 99 games?” On Sunday at Yankee Stadium, Ray lined up for the first snap against the Cleveland Browns, and played the entire game to stretch the streak to 100.

The next year, Sherman replaced Howell as head coach. Sherman admired and advocated Wietecha’s hidden contributions to the team. Sherman declared, “Wietecha is my quarterback up front. Ray calls out all the bastard defenses [odd man fronts]. We face anything other than the standard four-three, Ray spots it, calls it out, switches our blocking.”²⁸ During the two years Sherman coached Wietecha, he unabashedly praised the veteran center, “Ray’s unobtrusive efficiency cannot hide the fact that he ranks

²² Effbat, Louis. “Giants Crush Browns Before 68,436 For Conference Title.” *New York Times* December 7, 1959, 45.

²³ Maule, Tex. “To The Lucky Will Go The Spoils”, *Sports Illustrated* December 21, 1959, 21.

²⁴ Heeren, Harry. “Center’s Blind Snap Aids Giants”, *New York Times*, December 16, 1961, 19.

²⁵ IBID.

²⁶ IBID.

²⁷ Teague, Robert. “Wietecha, Giants Center, Is Ill And Doubtful Starter Sunday”, *New York Times*, December 16, 1960, 47.

²⁸ Mercer, Dick. “The Specialist in Pro Football No. 5: Ray Wietecha, Center.” *Sport*. January, 1963, 31.



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

alongside Jim Ringo as the top craftsman at the offensive center spot.²⁹ The two best centers competed in the 1961 championship in Green Bay. Ray's season ended on a disappointing note, a 37-0 drubbing.

On August 10, 1962, Wietecha became the Giants offensive captain in his last season. At the start of the decade when the Giants rolled to conference titles, Wietecha and his line protected the quarterback Y. A. Tittle and blocked for running backs Alex Webster, Joe Morrison, and Phil King. Wietecha once noted: "When we won, the Giants' offensive line became famous. I became well known. But first, you've got to win."³⁰

Several significant games and moments transpired in Ray's last year. In a must win game against Detroit, New York came from behind to beat the Lions. Wietecha explained why the Giants were able to win, "We just got angry. It's an old Giants habit. We were sore at the officials and also sore at ourselves."³¹ On November 4, against the St. Louis Cardinals, Wietecha matched Emlen Tunnel's durability record of 126 games. Wietecha also received 'a day' by the fans at Yankee Stadium when he tied the record. In the final regular season game against the Dallas Cowboys, Tittle had a chance to set the record of most touchdown passes in a season. When Tittle was reluctant to throw his 33rd touchdown pass for the record in a game the Giants had sewn up, Wietecha told him "to throw the ball".³²

In his final season, Wietecha earned his fourth Pro Bowl and third AP All Pro selection. Wietecha again faced Green Bay in his final championship game. The game played at Yankee Stadium was the last NFL championship game ever played in New York City. In a preview of the rematch, Joe King identified a major advantage of the Giants, Wietecha's unit. "The offensive line is revamped and considered the best in several years,"³³ the reporter wrote. Wietecha made his last snaps in a bitter 16-7 defeat.

Retirement did not mean the end of his football career. Back in 1955, Ray, when asked what he would do after football, said, "Well I'd like to match Mel Hein's record before I think of anything but football. That gives me twelve years to decide."³⁴ On January 28, 1963, Wietecha decided to start his coaching career. Former teammate Harland Svare hired Wietecha as the offensive line coach along with three other former Giants teammates for his Los Angeles Ram staff because, "I know these guys. We all speak the same language [system]."³⁵

²⁹ Daley, Arthur. "Sports Of The Times: The Iron Man." *New York Times* November 4, 1962, 52.

³⁰ Mercer, 31

³¹ *The Sporting News*, November 3, 1962, "Giants YA Tittle Was Hazy Hero," 30.

³² Daley, Arthur. "Sports Of The Times: An Amazing Season." *New York Times* December 18, 1962, 14.

³³ King, Joe. "Juiced Up Giants Plot Packer Revenge," *The Sporting News*, December 29, 1962, 19.

³⁴ Blunk, Frank M., 30.

³⁵ Becker, Bill. "Svare Taking Giant Step To Rehabilitate Rams." *New York Times*, January 29, 1963, 8.



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

After two years as an assistant coach with the Rams, Wietecha joined Vince Lombardi in Green Bay as Lombardi's offensive line coach from 1965 through 1968 and two more years under Phil Bengston. Wietecha, along with Bob Schnelker, became the first former Giants players to coach in a Super Bowl. Wietecha scooped up two Super Bowl rings, and coached in three playoff and three championship games [one the "Ice Bowl"] with Green Bay.

After the 1970 season, Wietecha returned to New York. Ray lived in Florham Park, New Jersey while coaching with the Giants. Ray started as an advance scout for New York. The next year, Webster promoted Wietecha to offensive line coach to help rebuild and reinvigorate the unit. He did an outstanding job. According to *The Sporting News*, "One of the reasons for the Giants renaissance in 1972 was when Ray Wietecha took over the offensive line last year and helped turn New York around. His people preserved the quarterback so carefully they were sacked only ten times as the NFL leader."³⁶ The linemen adored Wietecha's approach to coaching. Greg Larson commented on Wietecha's style, "Ray eliminated the indecision in our minds as a blocker. He had so much confidence in his technique that it gave us a relaxed feeling. Wietecha's philosophy stresses percentage efficiency."³⁷ Wietecha explained his simple philosophy, "Moving someone out of the way for a runner that's what an offensive lineman wants to do. It's the good, hard-nosed type of football linemen love."³⁸ Before his last year coaching with the Giants, Ray was inducted into the Indiana Football Hall of Fame May, 1976.

Extremely disappointing seasons by New York mandated coaching changes. Wietecha survived a few but eventually was asked to leave. Alex Webster was fired in 1973, Bill Arnsparger halfway through 1976, with John McVay finishing out the year. Wietecha lost out applying both times for the head coach position after Webster and Arnsparger were released. Wietecha became the first assistant coach released by McVay, less than an hour after the Giants announced that McVay had been hired as the permanent head coach.³⁹

Wietecha then faced the nomad aspect of assistant coaching in pro football. One year as offensive line coach for the Buffalo Bills, 1977 and then two years coaching with the Baltimore Colts, 1980-1981. Wietecha jumped to the United States Football League in 1983 when George Allen hired him as the offensive backfield assistant for the Chicago Blitz. In 1984, Wietecha followed Allen to the Arizona Wranglers. Ray coached in three

³⁶ Oates, Bob. "National Football Conference." *The Sporting News*, July 21, 1973, 72.

³⁷ Amdur, Neil. "Giant Attack Line Hailed By Larson." *New York Times*, August 1, 1973, 15.

³⁸ Eskenazi, Gerald. "Wietecha Hopes Are High Walking The Line For Giants." *New York Times*, July 20, 1976, 24.

³⁹ Katz, Michael. "McVay's Ax Falls: Wietecha Is Dropped." *New York Times*, December 17, 1976. Section E, 11.



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

USFL playoff games and the final USFL championship game before the league folded. The next ten years Ray worked for the Green Bay Packers scouting college players.

Wietecha, at the age of 67, retired and settled in Phoenix, Arizona. At the age of 74, Wietecha died December 14, 2002 in Phoenix of an aneurysm. He was survived by his wife, Joan, three children and eight grandchildren. According to Arthur Daley, “Ray Wietecha is a Giant center in the Mel Hein tradition that automatically places him at the top.”⁴⁰ Ray was elected to the Pro Football Researcher’s Hall of Very Good in 2012.

⁴⁰ Daley, Arthur. “Sports Of The Times: The Iron Man,” 52.