

Lawrence T. 'Buck' Shaw

March 28, 1899 - March 20, 1977

By John C. Hibner

On March 20, 1977, at Stanford University - Branch Convalescent Hospital, Lawrence T. "Buck" Shaw, the famed "Silver Fox" of football coaches, died at the age of 77. Shaw never had a sick day in his life, but in October, 1976, a routine health examination revealed cancer had progressed into his lungs and other parts of his body.

Two weeks before Shaw's death, his 1938 Sugar Bowl team visited their old friend and coach. Shaw talked with every player, and called each by his first name. The administrator of the hospital made this statement about the visitors: "It was hard and difficult to take -- seeing all those big men crying."

What made this person a legend? He was born March 28, 1899, in Mitchville, a small town 10 miles east of Des Moines, Iowa, to cattle ranchers Tim and Margaret Shaw.

A well-built, well-coordinated young man, Shaw loved track and field competition. In fact it was track, not football that attracted him to Notre Dame. He enrolled at South Bend and went out for the track team.

Instead, Shaw fell into the hands of Knute Rockne and became one of the greatest tackles and place-kickers in Notre Dame history. He was a starter for Rockne from 1919-1921, opening holes for the immortal George Gipp. Shaw also set a record by converting 38 of 39 extra points during his varsity career -- a mark that stood until 1976, more than 50 years after he graduated. Shaw is a member of the all-time "Fighting Irish" football team.

Shaw began his coaching career at North Carolina State in 1924, then moved to the state of Nevada for four years. He took a job with an oil firm and wanted to stay out of the coaching field, but was talked into becoming an assistant coach by old teammate Maurice "Clipper" Smith. He served as line coach at Santa Clara from 1929 to 1935.

Shaw had never planned on becoming a head coach, but in 1936 was handed the reins of the Broncos when Smith resigned to take the head coaching job at Villanova. The material he inherited seemed mediocre. Shaw built his new team around quarterback Nello "Flash" Falaschi, the senior captain who led Santa Clara to national prominence.

Shaw took his Cinderella team of unknowns to New Orleans for a clash with the powerful Louisiana State Tigers on New Year's Day, 1937. Led by Falaschi, Jim "Mississippi" Smith, Bruno Pellegrini and the rest of the Broncos, Santa Clara upset LSU 21-14. Shaw's team captured the imagination of the collegiate football world.

Next season, even without the All-American Falaschi, Shaw's 1937 team was better. The Broncos produced a 9-0-0 record and set a college standard by holding opponents to an average of 69.9 yards per game. The Broncos were again invited to play in the Sugar Bowl and again defeated Louisiana State, this time by the score of 6-0.

Santa Clara dropped football after the 1942 war-time season. The silver-maned Shaw's record at Santa Clara was 47 wins, 10 losses, and two ties. At one time Shaw's teams won 16 games in a row. Shaw stayed on at Santa Clara for two years to assist the Army's physical education program,

Before World War II ended, the Morabito brothers, Victor and Tony, began organizing the San Francisco 49ers for entry into a new professional league, the All-America Football Conference. Shaw and his assistant, Al Ruffo, were hired by the 49ers, but then were permitted to accept a one-year contract at California when the league kickoff was delayed until 1946.

Shaw managed to mold California into a representative team and defeated a Frankie Albert-led St. Mary's Pre-Flight team 6-0. It was a losing season overall for the Bears at 4-5-1, but they had a good bunch of players. Shaw and his staff remarked after the 1945 season.

In 1946 Shaw took over the 49ers and with the left-handed Albert leading and directing the attack, the team placed second to the Cleveland Browns four times in the Western Division of the AAFC.

The 49ers slipped from their former lofty perch when the National Football League and the AAFC merged in 1950. In their first season, the 49ers were 3-9-0. San Francisco finished third in 1952, second in 1953, and third in 1954. During the middle of the 1954 season rumors began to circulate that Shaw's job was in jeopardy. Shaw was fired after the end of the season despite finishing with a mark of 7-4-1. His record for nine years with the 49ers was 71-39-4.

After a brief layoff from the coaching wars) Shaw went to the Air Force Academy, piloting the first-year Falcons to a 6-2-1 mark in 1956, and a 3-5-1 record in 1957.

He again left coaching for a short time, then replaced Hugh Devore as head coach of the lowly Philadelphia Eagles in 1958. In just three years Shaw transformed the Eagles into a championship club capping his career with a 17-13 win over the Green Bay Packers for the 1960 NFL crown. He retired after this victory. Shaw's illustrious coaching career spanned four decades and earned him a place in the College Football Hall of Fame.