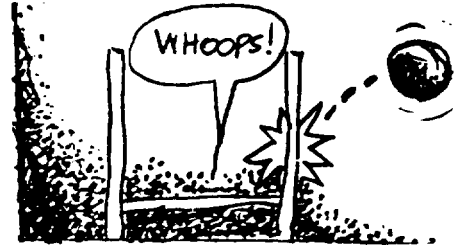

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Notre Dame 1947 - the best ever?

By Stan Grosshandler

The late 1940,s may well represent the zenith of college football. Military demobilization following the Second World War brought a cornucopia of talent to college campuses. There were men rho had played college football prior to the war and were returning to complete their educations. Athletes who had gone straight from high school into the military and played service ball with players who had both pro and college experience were already seasoned grid veterans by the time they entered college. And finally, there were youngsters directly out of high school.

The nation was starved for quality football and it was up to the colleges to provide it as the professionals were still a decade away from widespread recognition and acceptance.

The 1947 Notre Dame team under coach Frank Leahy was a typical team of this era composed of 52% returning military veterans, many of whom had previously worn Notre Dame uniforms. As was usually the case, the Golden Dome also attracted some of the finest high school talent in the nation.

Leahy, a disciple of the legendary Knute Rockne, returned to Notre Dame in 1941 to take over as head coach, and enjoyed immediate success. In '42 Frank proposed the unthinkable. He planned to replace the sacrosanct Rockne Notre Dame Box formation with the now revived and popular T formation. Leahy presented his case to Father Cavanaugh, university president, and obtained his approval for this monumental change.

Leahy compiled a record of 24-3-3 before accepting a commission in the U.S. Navy. Leahy returned in 1946, and his '47 squad was to be his masterpiece, perhaps the best college football team ever assembled.

We had a first and second team of equal strength," said team captain George Connor in a telephone interview with this writer. "Both teams played both ways with the first team usually going the first and third quarters, while the second group played the second and fourth periods.

We occasionally substituted in the defensive secondary, but the lines always remained the same. There were players on the team who failed to win a monogram, yet went on to successful professional careers."

The Gold and Blue first team lined up with Jim Martin and Leon Hart at the ends, tackles Connor and Zygmunt Czarobski, guards Bill Fischer and Marty Wendell, end Bill Walsh at center. Johnny Lujack was the quarterback, Terry

Brennan and Emil Sitko were the halfbacks, and John Panelli was at fullback.

The second squad had at ends Doug Waybright and Bill Wightkin. Tackles were Ralph McGhee and George Sullivan, with guards Joe Signiago and Bucky O'Connor, and George Strohmeier the center. Frank Tripucka at quarterback, Coy McGee and Billy Gompers at the halfback posts, and Mike Swistowicz playing fullback comprised the second backfield.

The Fighting Irish opened the season by drubbing the Pittsburgh Panthers 40-6 as Lujack threw three touchdown passes. Johnny again starred the following week, leading the team to a 22-7 win over Purdue as he passed and ran for TD's.

"Johnny Lujack was probably the greatest athlete I have ever seen," recalled Don Kindt who played with him on the Chicago Bears. "He could have starred at any position and was a particularly gifted defensive back."

Commenting on Lujack's passing, Connor said, "He threw a hard, heavy ball. Leahy wanted him to throw from behind the ear with lots of zip. He never floated the ball as is seen today. Consequently, his passes were often difficult to catch."

Long-time rivals Nebraska and Iowa came to South Bend to be shut out, then Notre Dame journeyed to Cleveland to meet the Naval Academy. The most people to ever view a sporting event up to that time in Cleveland's Municipal Stadium, 84,070, attended the game.

Lujack and Tripucka passed for scores, Brennan plunged for a third tally, and Bob Livingstone, who had played on the 1942 team, ran an interception back 47 yards as Notre Dame beat the Navy 27-0.

"Early in the game," Connor recalled, "Bill Fischer, who was playing next to me, complained his man was slugging him and he planned to retaliate. I told him to hold off as it was early in the game and we did not want to incur a penalty. Later the same player switched over and started slugging me. When I told Bill I planned to get him he laughed and reminded me we only had them 21-0 and I should hold off awhile."

The next opponent at home was the U.S. Military Academy. Army's powerful war-time teams had totally humiliated Notre Dame. Leahy dispensed with his usual pre-game pep talk, merely stating, "Gentleman, the Army is waiting."

Brennan took the opening kickoff back 97 yards, and for all intents and purposes the game was over. The final score was N.D. 27, Army 7.

Reminiscing on the '47 team, Connor stated a great team needs super stars, some whippingboys, and a clown prince. "In Lujack, Walsh, Fischer, and Sitko, we had the super stars. Our clown prince was Ziggy Czarobski. He kept us loose with his clowning and witty sayings. The coach was very fond of him.

"One night at practice before the Northwestern game he called a huddle and everyone started chanting, 'We want to eat.' Leahy came running across the field to find out what this was all about. When he got near the huddle, Ziggy yelled, 'We want to eat Wildcat.' Even Leahy got a laugh out of that one."

Many years later Leahy wrote, "A man like Czarobski is invaluable to a team in terms of morale. It was also our good fortune he could play football."

Northwestern's Wildcats were the only team to score more than once on N.D. as they went down 26-19. The next opponent was Tulane. Leahy pulled an old Rockne stunt. He had such little regard for the Green Wave he turned the team over to assistant coach Moose Krause and went to California to scout Southern Cal. Notre Dame defeated Tulane 59-6, but Brennan was injured.

"Leahy's success," concluded Connor, "lay in the fact he surrounded himself with coaches in whom he had the greatest confidence and would execute his orders exactly. All had been his former players. Practices were pure drudgery as we scrimmaged every day. Near the end of the week the third and fourth teams really went at it to see who made the traveling squad. The game on Saturday was almost a picnic."

The Fighting Irish, before the biggest crowd to ever see a football game on the West Coast, demolished Rose Bowl-bound USC 38-7.

The post-season honors flowed in as N.D. was voted the top team in the nation. Johnny Lujack won the Heisman Trophy and was a unanimous All-America choice. Other Irish first team All-Americans were Connor, Czarowski, Fischer and the sophomore Hart.

Thirty members of this team went on to professional football with Connor making the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Six members of the team, Connor, Sitko, Lujack, Fischer, Hart, and Czarowski, plus coach Leahy, have been elected to the College Football Hall of Fame. Six years after he graduated Terry Brennan succeeded Leahy.

This may have been the greatest college football team ever.