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Tim Cohane, 1912-1989

By Ed Gilleran, Jr.

College football lost a devoted friend in January, 1989 when Tim Cohane, one of the great chroniclers of the gridiron sport, passed away at Derry, New Hampshire at age 77. For all his working life as a college sports information director (Fordham), New York City newspaper writer (N.Y. World-Telegram), sports editor (LOOK magazine), and author of five books, Tim was devoted to recording the history of college football. Until he died, Tim continued to write articles about the glorious days of college football of yesteryear for Athlon Football Publications, Modern Maturity magazine, and the souvenir grid programs distributed at Boston College, Harvard and Yale football games.

I was acquainted with Tim for a long time. As a 12-year-old, I lurked in the background and listened attentively as Tim, Jack Coffey, Fordham's erudite athletic director, Jim Crowley, the Notre Dame Horseman who coached at Fordham, and my father, who was a Fordham faculty member and president of the alumni association, met at our home and discussed football. I was privy to information that not even some sports writers knew.

Five years later, when I was a Fordham freshman, Tim gave me some valuable tips when I auditioned for a sportswriting position on the Fordham RAM. I got the job and, after WWII, became RAM sports editor.

Forty years later, Tim thrilled me when he described my book about Fordham as "priceless."

We corresponded about Fordham and football from time to time during Tim's later years. In one of his best letters he reflected, "If only Fordham had signed up for the Navy V-5 program to keep keep the game going in 1944, 45 and 46, and if they had later hired Vince Lombardi as head coach, the Rams might be part of the big picture today." Tim also let me down gently by explaining to me that a second manuscript of mine about the glory days of New York City football in the 1930s and 40s was not marketable. Tim said, "publishers no longer go for old-fashioned sports books; they buy the ones where mortal flaws of the heroes are unmasked. They respond to the public's fascination with gossip and the misdeeds of the mighty."

Knowing Tim for all those years, I guess I am qualified to do a "This Is Your Life, Tim Cohane."

Graduating with honors from Fordham in 1935, where he had been sports editor of the Fordham RAM, Tim took over the newly created role of Sports Information Director at his alma mater in the Bronx. He held that post through 1940. He

played a significant role in publicizing the Fordham Rams as they became one of college football's aristocracy.

A knowledgeable, witty and good-natured host, Tim became a favorite of coaches, athletic directors and sports writers all over America as Fordham played host at New York's Polo Grounds to the finest teams from around the country.

Tim was known as the poet laureate of the Polo Grounds. The inspired verse he wrote for the Fordham souvenir grid programs was classic.

Nothing contributed more to raising Fordham to the college football summit and Tim Cohane to the sports publicists limelight than the three consecutive scoreless ties played by Fordham and Pitt in 1935, 36 and 37. Cohane had a field day pouring out press releases for the wire services, sports editors, and radio sportscasters such as Bill Slater, Ted Husing, Stan Lomax, Ford Frick and Bill Munday. The Panthers fielded an offensive juggernaut that ran over virtually everyone they faced those three seasons, including Notre Dame, Southern Cal, Nebraska, Ohio State and Washington. Pitt was No. 3 in the 1936 AP poll and No. 1 in 1937. Fordham was No. 15 in 1936 and No. 3 in 1937.

I recall hearing Cohane tell my father a number of years later that Fordham's "Seven Blocks of Granite" stopped Pitt largely because of the scouting reports of Hughie Devore, one of Jim Crowley's assistant coaches. Crowley had only four assistants compared to the platoons of helpers today's coaches employ. All four were Notre Dame alumni. Earl Walsh and Glen Carberry were practicing lawyers who took a leave to coach football every autumn. Young Frank Leahy and Devore were the other two. Cohane said that Devore scouted Pitt in all the Panthers games before they came to New York, and that Devore's astute analyses of what made the Panthers tick were so accurate that Fordham was able to contain the most feared offense in football. Cohane and Devore remained lifelong friends, although Tim lived in the Boston area and Hugh lived in Houston where he helped coach the Oilers and later did front office work for the Astros.

At another time I remember Tim revealing that much of the success of the "Seven Blocks" could be attributed to Frank Leahy. Tim said Frank demonstrated at that early date in his career that he was a master at designing and teaching defense.

I also recall how Cohane and my parents helped Crowley keep the homesick Leahy in New York in 1933. Frank, from Winner, South Dakota (pop. 3400), had lived in only two other places in his life, South Bend, as a Notre Dame student, and East Lansing, where he was Crowley's line coach at Michigan State in 1932. He was frightfully intimidated by New York City. Cohane and my parents taught Frank how to cope with the big town, found him a quiet place to live near the Fordham campus, and even introduced him to his future bride.

In 1940, the New York World-Telegram, which was one of New York's seven daily newspapers at the time, hired Tim as an all-around sports reporter, but it was his coverage of college football and the Brooklyn Dodgers that built his reputation. His daily column, "Frothy Facts," became nationally syndicated.

One must remember there was plenty of college football in New York City for Cohane to write about in those days. Besides Fordham, Columbia was a national power, winning the 1934 Rose Bowl and, with great players like Sid Luckman, Paul Governali, Gene Rossides and Lou Kusserow, the Lions for many years were stiff competition for such teams as Wisconsin, Michigan, Stanford, Georgia and Army. Uptown in the Bronx, NYU played teams like Ohio State, Missouri, Georgia and Texas A&M, while Manhattan College entertained opponents like Michigan State and Kentucky, and also played in the first Palm Festival Game, later renamed the Orange Bowl. In addition, Andy Kerr's Colgate double-wingers came down to Gotham for their annual Tulane game, and Notre Dame and Army staged their annual get-togethers at Yankee Stadium. For writers like Cohane, it was Paradise.

From December 1944 until 1965, Tim was sports editor of LOOK magazine. Of the over 500 articles he wrote for LOOK during this 21-year period, many were about his true love, college football. When Grantland Rice died, Tim succeeded Granny as LOOK's annual forecaster of the nation's top 20 college grid teams. Tim inaugurated the Grantland Rice Award which for many years was presented to the top college football team.

Cohane was a close friend of scores of coaches, but particularly Colonel Earl Blaik of West Point. The two men spent many a summer day fishing and tramping through the woods of the vast military reservation's VIP log home reserved for generals and revered Academy football coaches. It was on one of these occasions that Tim convinced Blaik to hire as one of his assistants an unknown former high school coach and Latin teacher, Vince Lombardi. Many of the conversations between Blaik and Cohane are contained in Cohane's "The Grid-iron Grenadiers," a history of West Point football, and in "You Have to Pay the Price," the biography of Blaik.

On many an autumn evening one could have found Tim and Margaret Cohane in the company of Herman and Helen Hickman at Toots Shor, the famous restaurateur. Herman coached at Yale and Tim, who was born within walking distance of the Yale campus, authored "The Yale Football Story." Additional books include "Bypaths of Glory," Tim's personal reminiscences of college football, and "Great College Football Coaches of the Twenties and Thirties." If you want to discover something about the honest-to-goodness, no frills, no-time-out-for-commercials college football that preceded the packaged-for-TV game we have today, find this book and read it. Many consider it to be the authoritative reference on coaches for that era. In it the careers of 40 coaches from Bill Alexander to Bob Zuppke are covered in depth. Bud Wilkinson observed when the book was published: "It is certain to become a major addition to the bibliography of college football."

Tim never lost his fondness for "Sleepy Jim" Crowley, a nickname pinned on Jimmy by Knute Rockne when Jim dozed during a Rockne locker room talk. Cohane changed the name to "Somnolent Seamus" and called Jimmy by that name for the remainder of Jim's life. When the old horseman was buried in 1986 at age 83 in a little town called Moscow in the heart of the hard-coal region of Pennsylvania that Jim loved so much, guess who was at the grave side? Right. It was a fragile Tim Cohane who cast his illness aside and hobbled down from New Hampshire to say goodbye. John Druze, one of the "Blocks of Granite" was there, too. Druze recalled that after the funeral Cohane reminisced about how he had enjoyed playing jokes on Crowley and acting as a squelch when Jim gave him an opening. Like the time Tim accompanied Jim to one of the weekly luncheons of the New York Football Writers. The scribes used to guess what one of his dozens of finely tailored suits Columbia's Lou Little would wear to the luncheon, and what one of his 500 beautiful ties would enhance Lou's ensemble. Crowley prided

himself on his appearance and was always nattily attired at the luncheons. Cohane could not resist at one of the luncheons and remarked to Crowley, "Gee, Jim, when Lou shows up he makes you look like you just hopped off a freight train."

During his retirement, Tim taught a professional business writing course at Boston University. The BU catalog described Tim's course thusly: "A fantastic educational experience. Even students whose major will not be journalism should take this course." Tim also found time to write many articles about college football of the 1930s and 40s. He was a contributing editor for Athlon football Publications and Modern Maturity. It is likely that Tim's Athlon articles about Dana X. Bible, "Whizzer" White, Bob Neyland, Doak Walker, Dixie Howell and Don Hutson, and the three consecutive Fordham-Pitt scoreless ties have been clipped and saved by many fans. Tim's final Athlon article was about Vic Janowicz, a unique young man whose accomplishments Tim deeply felt needed to be presented to today's generation of football fans. Cohane artfully traced the storybook career of Janowicz from Vic's days as a scholastic and athletic superstar at Elyria High in Ohio to the days when he was ushered into the College Football Hall of Fame. Included was a recreation of the Ohio State starts 17-yard field goal, kicked in a blinding snowstorm against Michigan. Cohane wrote, "Football men still regard Janowicz's kick as one of college football's most amazing feats."

Tim was an old-fashioned family man. He had an enduring love affair with his wife Margaret for 52 years. They had five beautiful daughters and two fine sons, one of whom served as head coach of basketball at the U.S. Naval Academy and later at Dartmouth. A fitting way to conclude this remembrance of Tim Cohane is by quoting one of his most memorable verses. It appeared in the N.Y. World-Telegram on Christmas Eve 1940 as Jim Crowley was preparing his Fordham team for its Cotton Bowl game against No. 1 Texas A&M.

'Twas the night before Christmas and all through Rose Hill
Not a player was stirring, the campus was still.
The bags were all packed by the lockers with care,
Tomorrow they'd leave for the Bowl date so rare.

Yes, the Rams were now nestled all snug in their beds,
While visions of Cotton Bowls danced in their heads.
Jim in his kerchief and Judge in his cap
Had just settled down for a long winter's nap.

When on Fordham Field there arose such a clatter
They leaped from their beds to see what was the matter.
Away to the window they flew like a flash,
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash.

The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow
Cave light to a ghostly gridiron tableau.
And what to their wondering eyes should appear
The Aggies of Texas in full football gear.

They rubbed then their eyes for they knew 'twas a dream,
Still they couldn't blot out the grim harrowing scene.
More rapid than eagles, the Aggies they came
And the quarterback shouted and called them by name:
Now Kimbrough! Now Thomason, Robnett and Pugh!
On Pannell, Buchanan and Moser on, too!
Come on, get those blockers in front of the ball.
Then dashaway, dashaway, dashaway all!

Spurning the speed with which Hurricanes fly,
They roared down the field as if it were dry.
It was Kimbrough off tackle and Kimbrough 'round end
And mark how the line from his charges would bend.
Around came Conatser to run a reverse,
To the weakside on defense, what play could be worse?

Then Pugh hurled a ghostly ball over the snow,
No longer the scoreboard for Texas read 0.
'Twas Sterling, a wingman, who pulled down the pass
And sped through the snow as he would on the grass.
A bundle of stiff-arms he flung as he ran
And showed how a wraith can pass through a mere man.

Then they lined up to try the extra-point stuff
And Big John came roaring for more than enough.
His 240 pounds were drawn up like a bow
And the Judge said to Jim: "Sleepy, how he can go!"

Then Jim pinched the Judge and said: "Let's go to bed!
We've already worries enough on our head!
We've got to stop Kimbrough on New Year's, it's true
But we don't have to stop him on Christmas Day, too!"

The Judge was Glen Carberry, Crowley's teammate at Notre Dame and a practicing attorney. John Kimbrough was on everyone's All-America team at fullback.