

# **THE DUKE OF BOSTON**

By Bob Braunwart & Bob Carroll

When Gino Cappelletti was chalking up 100-plus points a year for the Boston Patriots as regularly as the neighbor's cat has kittens, he said: "The scoring title seldom enters my mind. Naturally I love to score points. The more I score the better our chances of winning are, but I don't go into a game wondering how many points I'm going to score."

From a lesser player that might come out as typical company hype. From Gino, it was simply a statement of the way things were ordered in his personal priorities. He was a "team player" first. Being a "star" was only a distant second.

But, in all things, he was a perfectionist.

His birthplace -- Keewatin, Minnesota -- is a little two (pop. 1,500) in the iron range country. As a high school tailback, Gino led his team to two championships but he spent as much time crushing grapes. His father took great pride in making his own wine and Gino was his press.

"I had special rubber stomping boots -- and he made sure every grape was crushed. I hated it because it deprived me of playing football. But if I'm a perfectionist, it's pa who made me that way."

Apparently grape-stomping gave him the legs of a kicker. At the U. of Minnesota, where he played second-fiddle to All-America Paul Giel for three years, they hadn't tried a field goal in years. They didn't even practice the play. But as a sophomore, Cappy talked the coach into letting him try a 43-yarder in a tie game with Iowa. His teammates laughed in the huddle when he told them the play. But he made it, and the Gophers went on to win. Years later, in reference to another game-winning kick, Gino said: "It's not how many you kick, but when you do it."

As a senior he switched to T-quarterback and led Minnesota to a 7-2 record. He was named to the All Big 10 second team.

Then, no one in the NFL saw fit to draft him.

He spent 1955 playing semi-pro football for Sarnia of the Ontario Rugby Football League. At \$500 a game for 20 games, he made more than some NFL rookies. And he had a good enough year to earn a chance with the Detroit Lions for 1956.

Actually, he had less chance than his father's grapes used to. The Lions had Bobby Layne and Harry Gilmer for quarterbacks and Jim Martin and Layne for kickers. Two weeks after he arrived at camp, he was on his way home. There he got an offer he couldn't refuse -- from the U. S. Army.

Things looked pretty good for a while. After a season lost to basic training, he looked good enough in service ball during 1957 to be spotted by several scouts. Surprisingly, he turned down three NFL offers to sign with ex-Minnesotan Bud Grant at Winnipeg in the Canadian Football League.

"Everything was going too good," Gino says. "I should have know better."

Sure enough, before the season began, he was traded to Regina. There he failed to beat out veteran Frank Tripucka and was dropped. Back to Sarnia.

He had another good semi-pro season, but his football career was going nowhere and with great determination. He decided to quit. Back in Minneapolis, he went to work in his brother's bar and confined his football activity to playing in the local 6-man touch football league.

"I had given up on myself," he admits.

Early in 1960 Lou Saban came to Minneapolis to recruit several former U. of Minnesota players -- but not Cappelletti -- for the Boston Patriots of the new American Football League. After much soul-searching, Gino called Saban's hotel room. He'd checked out. Cappy tried the airport. Saban's plane had just taken off. Finally, he reached Saban at home and asked to come to camp. Why not? There were 125 other candidates.

But Cappelletti made the cuts. When the season opened he was both a starting defensive back and the team's kicker. He even scored the first points ever registered in the AFT -- a first quarter, 34-yard field goal.

It was a Cinderella story, but midnight came early.

The Patriots lost the opener and Gino lost his starting berth on defense. He became strictly a kicker. And that wasn't enough for him. "I don't consider kicking as playing," he said.

One day at practice a receiver was slow returning to the huddle. Cappelletti jumped into his place, ran the pattern, and caught the pass. Then assistant coach Mike Holovak encouraged Cappy to learn the new position. "All I needed was someone to take an interest," says Cappelletti.

Cappy kept practicing and Patriot receivers kept getting hurt. He started the last game of the season at flanker and caught one pass.

He was on shaky ground going into the '61 season. His kicking had been okay but hardly fantastic the year before. Moreover, he had to win a receiver spot on the squad. The talent-shy Patriots were not likely to carry a player who could only kick.

His credentials as a receiver were not overpowering. His hands were rated only fair to good, and he had what was described as "deceptive speed -- actually he's slower than he looks."

But what he did have was the perfectionist psychology of an old grape crusher. Holovak, by now the head coach, summed it up: "I've never seen an athlete work harder than Gino did to learn his new position; he wanted it so badly he approached it as if it were almost a matter of life or death."

Through practice, practice, practice he perfected the ability to run precise, meticulous patterns. His timing was quarterback Babe Parilli -- the "Grand Opera Twins" they were called -- was magic to watch. The Babe also held when Gino kicked. Again, magic.

The record is there. For six straight seasons, Gino topped 100 points, something no one else has done before or since. His 155 points in 1964 and 147 in '61 are still the second and third highest single season totals. He was the all-time top pointmaker in the American Football League, and in 1964 the league's MVP.

More importantly, the team won consistently. Only once did they get to a championship game (and then they were blown out by an inspired San Diego), but year after year the Patriots finished higher than the "experts" rated them in pre-season polls. A lot of the success was due to Gino Cappelletti.

His teammates called him Duke, in part because he was a classy dresser but mostly because he was a class guy. Typically, when he caught the pass for the TD that gave him 1,003 points in less than nine full seasons, he was not excited by the milestone. "I wish it had been part of a winning game, a winning season."

Unfortunately, Gino's Boston restaurant *The Point After* did better than the Patriots in his last years with the team. New phenoms came and went, and Gino was relegated to the job of kicking specialist on a team that didn't score very often. From 1967 through 1970 he attempted more field goals than extra points.

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In his final year, the Pats signed a new kicker, Charley Gogolak, near the end of the season. True to form, Gino responded by winning his job back.

But the last game of the season came up muddy, and after trying a couple of pre-game kicks, the Duke went to his coach and told him that Gogolak's side-winder style of kicking gave him better footing on the treacherous turf. It was typical Cappelletti class, but it ended his consecutive game streak at 153 -- every regular season game the Patriots had ever played!

When a reporter sympathized with him, he brushed it off. "The streak really ended two years ago," he said, referring to when he'd stopped being a receiver. After all, kicking wasn't really playing.

Looking back over his career, he said, "I'm still a little frustrated because I never felt I did all that I could have done. I felt like I could have done more. I feel like I could do more yet ... now. I've made great demands on myself and I couldn't quite reach them all."

Just a few more grapes ....

YEAR	CLUB	LG	GM	Pass Receiving				KICKING					
				PC	YDS	AVG.	TD	XP	XA	FG	FA	PTS	
1960	Pats	AFL	14	1	28	28.0	0	30	32	8	21	60	
1961	Pats	AFL	14	45	768	17.1	8	48	50	*17	*32	*147	
1962	Pats	AFL	14	34	479	14.1	5	38	40	20	37	128	
1963	Pats	AFL	14	34	493	14.5	2	35	36	*22	*38	*113	
1964	Pats	AFL	14	49	865	17.7	7	36	36	*25	*39	*155	
1965	Pats	AFL	14	37	680	18.4	9	27	27	17	27	*132	
1966	Pats	AFL	14	43	676	15.7	6	35	36	16	32	*119	
1967	Pats	AFL	14	35	397	11.3	3	29	30	16	31	95	
1968	Pats	AFL	14	13	182	14.0	2	26	26	15	27	83	
1969	Pats	AFL	14	1	21	21.0	0	26	27	14	34	68	
1970	Pats	NFL	13	0	0	0.0	0	12	13	6	15	30	
			11 yrs	153	292	4589	15.7	42	342	353	172	333	1130