

AL BLOZIS: JERSEY CITY GIANT

By Victor Mastro, Frank Alkyer, and others

You can't help but notice in Jersey City. There's the Al Blozis Hospital, the Al Blozis Little League, Blozis Hall, a senior citizen's apartment house, and several other memorials. If you didn't know, you might think Blozis was a wealthy philanthropist. Instead, he was a rugged football player.

And a legitimate American hero.

Al died over forty years ago while serving his country. His grave in St. Avold Cemetery in France is marked by a plain white cross. The simple inscription reads "Alfred C. Blozis 2 Lt 110 inf 28 div New Jersey Jan 31 1945." Similar crosses stand over the graves of thousands of Allied soldiers who died in World War II, and America recalls their sacrifice each Memorial Day. In Jersey City, they still remember Al Blozis daily.

Of the 638 National Football League players who served in World War II, 355 were commissioned as officers, 66 were decorated, and 21 lost their lives.

"Blozis died during the battle of Black Mountain, near Colmar (France)," said Joseph Scott, who served in the same regiment as Blozis and now is president of Hudson County (New Jersey) Community College. Scott said he knew Blozis was in his regiment, but they never saw each other.

"It (the fighting) was pretty fierce for a couple of days, considering it was cleanup duty. The war was practically over by that time."

On January 31, six weeks after he'd played in the 1944 NFL championship game, Lt. Blozis sent out a detail of nine men in the deep snows of the Vozges Mountains sector of France. Seven returned shortly through the heavy snow. When the other two had not reported in several hours, Blozis set out to look for them. His men saw him fade into the snow storm. Then there was one short blast of German machine-gun fire. Lt. Blozis was dead.

Four months later the regiment was sent home.

Al Blozis, of Lithuanian descent, was born on January 5, 1919, in Garfield, New Jersey. He grew very big very early.

Charles S. Witkowski, former mayor of Jersey City and Blozis' football coach at Dickinson High School, said he knew the giant youngster was going to be a great football player from the first time he saw Blozis.

Witkowski met Blozis in June of 1935. He had issued a call for players in Dickinson High School gym.

"In the gym, all the windows face the east and when I was talking to this group of boys, all I could see were their silhouettes lined up against the windows," Witkowski said. "I was talking to the group when this huge figure stood out. Al was 6 feet 6 inches tall, 250 pounds.

"Well, I kept my eye on this figure and called him over after the meeting. I said, 'I'm going to make a tackle out of you.' "

"Then Al said, 'Do you think so?'

"And I said, 'Yeah, and I'm going to make a great tackle out of you.'"

Blozis did not let Witkowski down. He was an All-State tackle at Dickinson in 1937. High schoolers as big as Blozis are often awkward and uncoordinated. Not Al. He was a complete athlete. Along with his

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prowess on the football field, he earned letters in basketball, swimming, and shattered virtually every high school record in the shotput.

He continued to shotput in college and threw the 16-pound ball more than 60 feet for an unofficial world record. This feat has been compared to a miler breaking the four-minute barrier for the first time. One of the nicknames he picked up was "The Human Howitzer."

World War II halted his chances to compete in the Olympics. Otherwise, he might have put off his pro football career.

Georgetown University was at the height of its football success when Blozis entered. Under former New York Giant Jack Hagerty (assisted by two other former Giants, George Murtagh and Mush Dubofsky), the Hoyas achieved national prominence. During Blozis' freshman year, the team went undefeated and untied. In 1939, when Al first earned a letter, the undefeated streak continued, marred only by a 13-13 tie with Syracuse.

The first Georgetown loss in three years didn't come until near the end of the 1940 season when undefeated Boston College nipped them 19-18 in a famous game. A second loss came in the Orange Bowl against another undefeated team, Mississippi State. Prominent Hoya stalwarts through this period included guard Augie Lio, tackle Joe Frank, and halfback Jim Castiglia.

In Al's senior year, the team's record slipped a bit as they lost four games. That so-so mark probably cost Al some All-America citations, but he was selected to play in the College All-Star Game in Chicago, where he started at tackle over several All-Americans.

New York Giant football coach Steve Owen had been a great tackle in his day. He prided himself on building impregnable lines. Big Al – the gentle giant of huge size and calm temper – was just what he needed.

The Giants made Blozis their third draft choice in 1942. The New Yorkers, eastern division champs in 1941, had been hit hard by military call-ups. The team started strong, sagged through the middle of the season, and had to win its final two games to finish at .500.

Blozis was an impressive rookie, pairing with veteran Frank Cope to keep New York strong at the tackle position. Had there been an all-rookie team selected, he no doubt would have been named to it.

In 1943, the Giants finished second in the division and Big Al was named to virtually every All-NFL team, including the Associated Press, United Press, New York News, and Pro Football Illustrated.

This was still before the two-platoon system, and players went both ways. Al was justly famous for his defensive prowess, but his offensive contributions brought him even more applause in '43. Rookie runner Bill Paschal bulled his way to a league-leading 572 yards and ten touchdowns, mostly running behind Blozis' earth-shaking blocks.

Al also scored his only NFL touchdown in 1943 when he made a 15-yard pass reception on a tackle-eligible play.

1944 was a big year for the Giants. World War II call-ups had stripped the NFL of many of its stars, but the Giants still had Blozis, Cope, guard Len Younce, and Hall of Famer Mel Hein in the line. Ken Strong gave them strong place-kicking, and Arnie Herber came out of retirement to give New York a passing attack. Veteran Ward Cuff and Paschal were fine runners. Bill again led the league, this time with 737 yards and nine touchdowns.

New York went 8-1-1, posting five shutouts, with both the loss and the tie suffered at the hands of the emerging Philadelphia Eagles. The Eagles finished second to New York when they played a second tie with Washington and lost late in the year to the Bears.

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Unfortunately, Paschal was limping on a badly injured ankle for the championship game with the Packers, considerably reducing the Giants' attack. Although New York had topped Green Bay 24-0 only four weeks earlier, that had been with Paschal at full-throttle. The title game developed into a defensive struggle. Green Bay took a 14-0 lead at the half, and a New York second-half rally – sparked by Herber passes – could garner only one touchdown.

Blozis entered the service right after the championship game. He didn't have to go. His size put him outside the limits of the draft, but he was determined to do his part. Six weeks later, he was killed.

The Giants retired Blozis' number 32, and he has been named to several all-1940's teams despite his short career of only three years. In 1986 he was elected to the National Football Foundation's College Football Hall of Fame.

One of the most fitting tributes is that the Dickinson High School gymnasium – where it all began with his huge figure silhouetted against the window -- has been renamed the Alfred C. Blozis Gym.

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BLOZIS, Alfred C. (The Human Howitzer)

Tackle

Born: January 5, 1919, in Garfield, NJ

Died: January 31, 1945, near Colmar, France

Hgt: 6-6 Wgt: 250 College: Georgetown U. (1939, 1941)

College Honors: Played in College All-Star Game - 1942

Nat. FB Foundation's College Football Hall of Fame (1986)

High School: Dickinson H.S., Jersey City, NJ

Draft Choice: 3rd round, New York Giants - 1942

Pro Career: 3 years: 1942-44 New York Giants

1943 All-NFL (1st) A.P., U.P., N.Y. News, PF Illus.

Misc. Notes: Outstanding college shotputter

YEAR	TEAM	LG	GM	=PASS RECEIVING==				PTS
				PC	YDS	AVG	TD	
1942	NYG	N	11	-	-	-	-	-
1943	NYG	N	10	1	15	15.0	1	6
1944	NYG	N	2	-	-	-	-	-