

BOB ST. CLAIR: THE GOLDEN GEEK

By Bob Carroll

Bob St. Clair?

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There's something to be said for notoriety. When a man plays a position where only grabbing a fistful of jersey or jumping offsides gets his name called on the P.A., he needs something special to separate him from the madding crowd in the pits. It's not enough to be bigger than the rest of his playmates -- which St. Clair was -- or better -- which he may have been; he needs that extra something to be remembered by anyone other than grateful running backs.

Bob St. Clair ate raw meat.

Yech!

Teammates used to turn away at the training table. Bruno Banducci, the veteran 49ers guard, christened him "The Geek," after a character in an old Tyrone Power movie -- the carnival performer who bit off chicken's heads and drank their blood.

Waiters never seemed to understand the first time:

"You mean rare, sir?"

"Raw!"

In defense of St. Clair (and various other carnivores), his unusual diet wasn't a mere publicity stunt. Far from it. He learned and earned his preference for fresh flesh honestly. As a pimply-faced high school sophomore in San Francisco, he stood an uninhibiting 5'9" and barely nudged the scales to 150. When he turned out for football at Polytech High, he was told to turn around and go home. Too frail. Worse, his lack of muscle made him perfect pickings for eight members of a rival gang who ganged up on him one day to teach him anatomy. Like he learned that his jaw and three of his ribs were breakable.

Bob responded with his personal version of "Shazam!" In his case, that consisted of plenty of health foods: honey, wheat germ, raw eggs, and, yes, raw meat.

"I had a Yaqui Indian grandmother from Mexico," he explained, "and when I was little she fed me blood gravy and bits of raw beef."

Did it work? Well, when Bob St. Clair, high school junior, went out for football, the coach drooled: 6'4" and 210 pounds. Eventually, he became All-City.

Oh, and the eight guys? It took Bob a year to catch up with them, one by one. But after he'd finished -- well, let's just say that the next time they considered a group mugging, they first asked the victim if he was SURE he was through growing.

Now, if YOUR diet had taken you from scrawny victim to robust football hero and righter of wrongs, wouldn't YOU be likely to continue eating your food uncooked?

Incidentally, football was more than a mere diversion to young St. Clair. Before he was captured by the game, he was on a course to be captured by the cops. Something of a hellion, he led his own street gang (which explains why eight guys went gunning for him). Football got him away from all that. A good thing too, some of the other members of St. Clair's gang wound up getting their mail Care of the Warden.

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Eventually, after he'd played pro for a couple of years, St. Clair's diet got him up to 6'9" and 260-270 pounds. Along the way, he had a few other adventures worth noting.

When he was 17, Bob and his girl, eloped to Las Vegas. In two days they were broke and afraid to call home because they knew their parents would have the marriage annulled. "Do something!" pleaded the bride. Bob put their last 50-cent piece in a slot machine -- and hit the jackpot! Speaking of jackpots, he and wife Ann eventually had six kids.

Bob started his college career at the University of San Francisco and won all-Coast honors while a junior with Joe Kuharich's fabled 1951 team that sent Ollie Matson, Gino Marchetti and several others to the NFL. The unbeaten team was so good in fact that USF promptly dropped football, embarrassed at fielding a squad too powerful for its pretensions.

Switching to the University of Tulsa, Bob became an all-Missouri Valley Conference tackle while earning his degree in business administration. He also kayoed the local Golden Gloves boxing champ in a bout that took 30 seconds to complete and 45 minutes to quell the resulting riot, and rode out a tornado which tossed his car around like a matchbox.

Things just seemed to happen to Bob.

Once, while duck hunting, he slipped face down underwater into a deep hole and found himself being sucked down into the mud. He was drowning AND suffocating. Any normal person would have panicked. And died. But Bob started crawling through the muck to where he expected the shore to be. When he awoke, he was on the bank with only his head above water.

That dark-haired head was easily spotted, towering above everything not on stilts. Three hefty, heckling fans took him on in the parking lot after a game against Green Bay. Final score: St. Clair 3, fans 0. Not to mention the dented car hood. "Let them sue me," Bob explained. "I didn't start it."

When the 49ers played an exhibition game in Akron, Ohio, he decided to check out one of the cars in the National Soap Box Derby. Naturally, he wouldn't fit IN it, so he sat on the back and started down the hill. Since those cars roll freely on gravity, and since St. Clair weighed more than any kid (more than some HOME ROOMS!), the car got up to about 50 m.p.h. before ploughing into a wall and sending its oversized driver skidding 75 feet across the paving. With his whole body contused and 20 percent of his skin back on the Soap Box track, Bob played the entire exhibition game.

St. Clair didn't seem to react to pain the way you or most other non-Martians do.

As a 49ers rookie in 1953, he fractured the transverse process of his back in three places. That's a traction injury. Instead, Bob wore a plastic jacket and didn't miss a game.

He was knocked out of action in 1957 for seven games with a shoulder separation that required surgery. The interesting part: he didn't leave the game until EIGHT MINUTES after he was injured!

In 1962, he missed some games when he tore an Achilles' tendon. As everyone knows, that's a career ender. Instead, St. Clair was back as a regular tackle in 1963 and won the Len Eshmont Award as Most inspirational 49er.

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Before a second Achilles' injury finally finished him in 1964, St. Clair came up with several legendary -- perhaps inspirational -- feats on the field.

They say he won his 49ers' position on the offensive line as a rookie in training camp by holding his own against all-NFL teammate Leo Nomellini. The list of offensive tackles who ever broke even against "Leo the Lion" is only slightly longer than the list of former kamakaze pilots enjoying retirement in Florida.

Nevertheless, some opponents figured the third-round draft choice was too tall to make it on an NFL line. A couple of seasoned Green Bay tackles, Hawg Hanner and Gus Cifelli, decided to high-low St. Clair. Their aim was to do to St. Clair approximately what you could do to a bread stick with a karate chop. Wrong! Hanner took a knee to the chops and Cifelli hit a wall. Moments later, on the sideline, Hanner explained, "That ain't no Eye-ful Tower, coach. That's the god-damn Federal Mint."

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Although his regular position was OT, his height made St. Clair a natural when opponents lined up to kick. In 1956, he was credited with blocking ten field goal tries.

That same year, St. Clair did his bit for education. There was Giants rookie Sam Huff just standing around, quietly watching a pile-up. And there came St. Clair. Blindsight! Huff, who said Bob "like to cut me in half," never forgot the day's lesson: what NOT to do when a pile-up occurs.

In commenting on the play, Al Stump wrote: "Brutal? St. Clair is a good family man, smart, likeable, honest. But he's elemental. Had he lived 150 years ago he'd have been a Jim Bowie type, never hesitating to use his gun or his knife."

St. Clair, who grumbled about "Queensberry twaddle," put it this way: "The game is built around roughness. There is a personal thrill out of knocking a man down, really hitting him. It is the only satisfaction a lineman has. It gets you up, hitting a man; it gives you a jolt of the old adrenalin."

Those who find Bob's attitude a trifle Cro-Magnon -- say, ping-pong fans -- are surprised to learn that he spent a term as mayor of the town of Daley (pop. 44,000) near San Francisco and later served on the city council. Today he runs a successful chain of liquor stores. He's been active in environmental control and with problems with troubled youth. Elemental perhaps, but no geek.

He was as rough as a sandpaper slide on the field, but effective too. When Abe Woodson returned a kickoff 105 yards against the Rams in 1959, the films showed 14 blocks were thrown -- six by St. Clair!

Bob was a starting tackle in five Pro Bowls, a pretty good percentage for his eleven-year career. He was named to first-team all-NFL teams in five different seasons, but he earned at least second-team berths in ten seasons, missing only 1957, when he had that separated shoulder.

If that sounds impressive, think of this. From 1959 through 1961, only four other offensive tackles were ever voted ahead of St. Clair on any all-NFL team. Their names? Roosevelt Brown, Jim Parker, Mike McCormack, and Forrest Gregg. If those fellows aren't familiar to you, look them up under Pro Football Hall of Fame.

It would be lumbering Newcastle with extra coals to mention that all four played for teams with better records than the 49ers. And you'll never prove that all-pro selectors load their lines with members of successful teams.

However, it should be noted that the man Hall of Famer Joe Perry called the greatest blocking lineman he ever saw, played on lines that always seemed to be a player or two behind the competition. The effectiveness of an offensive lineman is usually directly proportional to the aggregate talent of his compadres. To put it another way, send the Packers' Kramer, Ringo, Thurston and Skoronski to the 49ers and any gap 'twixt Gregg and St. Clair would narrow.

St. Clair's 49ers never won even a division championship. The closest they came was 1957 when they tied the Lions and then blew the playoff.

Nevertheless, St. Clair had his personal triumphs. His greatest thrill in pro football came on a play that you probably won't believe. Emlen Tunnell of the Giants intercepted a Y.A. Tittle pass and took off for the endzone. At the 30, he figured he was in the clear and glanced back. Here came St. Clair, all 6'9" of him -- gaining! He caught him at the 20.

In 1990, St. Clair's greatness was belatedly recognized when he was enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Bob St. Clair had size, strength, speed, durability, smarts and a love of hitting. Now, if he only ate like a normal human being