

THE EAGLE TACKLE WAS ALBERT

By Bob Carroll

In case you didn't notice, there was no number 70 on the Philadelphia Eagles' roster last season. In fact, there hasn't been a 70 in Eagle green for nearly forty years, or ever since Al Wistert hung up his cleats. The reason for this digit-disappearance is that the last number 70 -- the previously mentioned Mr. Wistert -- played so excellently that the team declared his uniform "retired" when he was, making it perhaps the first NFL uni to go into permanent mothballs.

Now, if you're moderately familiar with the football of more than two decades ago, you may remember that there was more than one Wistert of repute. You may have to take a few seconds to sort out which Wistert was the Eagle.

There was a Francis "Whitey" Wistert, the consensus All-America tackle at Michigan in 1933, but he never played pro football.

Alvin Wistert, the two-time consensus All-America tackle at Michigan in 1948-49, was a World War II vet in his 30s, and he didn't play pro football either.

But there was still another Wistert -- Albert who was an All-America tackle at Michigan in 1942. He's the one who played for the Eagles.

Well, no wonder you were confused. What are the odds of three guys with the same last name playing the same position at the same university and all three winning All-America honors? Does Guinness know about this? It gets worse. Two of them were named Al -- Albert and Alvin. And two of them were called "Whitey" -- Francis and Albert. Oh, and by the way, all three are in the College Football Hall of Fame.

Before saying anything much about Albert the Eagle, we should note Francis and Alvin. And the whole Wistert milieu. The Wisterts were a Chicago Lithuanian family -- the name was originally Vistartius -- with three girls and three boys. Albert Alexander, the youngest of the boys, was born on December 28, 1920. While he was still a youth, his father, a police sergeant, was killed in the line of duty.

Francis "Whitey" (because of his nearly white blond hair), the elder brother, arrived at Michigan in 1930. Because he stood 6'3", he was at first regarded as a "likely end candidate," but coach Harry Kipke soon discovered that the muscular 205-pounder belonged at tackle. Among Whitey's teammates on the undefeated 1932 squad that won the National Championship (under the Dickinson Rating System) were quarterback Harry Newman, who later made all-NFL with the Giants, and sub-center Gerald Ford, who later went into politics.

In '33, the Wolverines were again undefeated, though tied by Minnesota, and again won the National Title. Whitey modestly ascribed his All-America selection by *Collier's* to Grantland Rice being his fraternity brother, ignoring the fact that he was chosen on just about every other honors eleven. The campus newspaper explained that "one of the two best tackles in Michigan football history rates his selection because of his outstanding offensive and defensive line play throughout the season, coupled with his ability to drop back into the backfield and throw long distance passes."

Whitey, who died in 1985, was also a talented baseball pitcher who made it as far as a couple of games with the Cincinnati Reds in 1934 before opting for a law career.

Alvin, the middle brother, got out of the education loop and then spent four years touring the Pacific courtesy of the U.S. Marines and World War II. The GI Bill gave him the chance to return to school after the war. He was 31-years-old before he played his first game for the Wolverines in 1947. He wasn't the only "overage" veteran on the college fields of the day, and perhaps not even the oldest. But he was the best. The 6-3, 223-pound graybeard (nicknamed "The Moose") won consensus A-A marks with Bennie Oosterbaan's National Championship winners of 1948, and then repeated the honor in 1949 at the football-ripe age of 33.

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Alvin was preceded at Michigan by baby brother Albert, who showed up at Ann Arbor in 1938. Since every eye was focused on Tom Harmon at the time, Albert's arrival did not cause much of a stir. He was the smallest of the brothers at 6'2" and 205. And he had a further handicap: Foreman High School in Chicago had not had a football program. Whitey and the Moose had gone to a different high school. The only organized sports Al had played were basketball and baseball. Coach Fritz Crisler despaired of awkward Al ever becoming a football player.

In 1939, Harmon's senior year, Al came up to the varsity but when he broke his ankle, he decided to sit out the whole year to keep his eligibility. When he returned in 1940, he had completely changed. The clumsiness was gone, replaced by astonishing strength and speed. He was All-Western Conference three years in a row. By 1942, when the Wolverines were a strong 7-3-0, Albert gained his All-America niche just like Whitey had and Alvin would.

Then, in 1943, Albert did something Whitey and Alvin never would. He turned pro. The Philadelphia Eagles had drafted Albert on the fifth round in 1943. He signed for \$3,000 a season.

Being drafted by the Eagles wasn't much of an honor in those days. In ten years of NFL-ing, the Birds hadn't accomplished a winning season. They were so bad that for the 1943 season, they were combined with that other habitual loser Pittsburgh in a hybrid that became known as the Steagles.

Yet, poor as the Eagles' history was, in the first days of training camp it wasn't at all clear Albert would get the chance to become part of it. It seems that at Michigan, he'd picked up another nickname -- "Ox." The derivation was his tremendous strength and early tremendous awkwardness. At first, he showed little of the former and lots of the latter. The Eagles -- or Steagles, to be precise -- were seriously considering asking waivers on him. After all, they had Vic Sears coming back and another rookie named Frank Kilroy who looked good. What could they do with the smallest tackle on the team if he kept falling over his own feet?

Coach Greasy Neale later explained to AL: "You were of a disposition different from all the rest. You were an All-American and I expected too much from you at first." Okay, one more chance.

And that was all he needed. Almost overnight, Albert began exhibiting the quickness and coordination that were to be his trademarks over the rest of his career. But the nickname has created some confusion over Wistert's physical attributes. Tackles named "Ox" are supposed to be big and slow. Albert was small and quick. Once the season began, he got more and more playing time, contributing to the Eagles' -- well, Steagles' -- first winning season.

Coach Neale put it this way: "The Philadelphia Eagles won the first game they ever won from the New York Giants in 1943 at Philadelphia. The following Sunday Al Wistert could not play because of a shoulder injury he had received in the latter part of the game the preceding Sunday. We played the Giants in New York. Without Al, we lost by an overwhelming score."

In his second season, Albert was everybody's All-NFL tackle. And he repeated in 1945. And that's EVERYBODY -- Associated Press, United Press, *New York Daily News*, International News Service, *Pro Football Illustrated Magazine*, and your Aunt Sophie.

Some tend to ignore those All-NFL honors of 1944-45. As everybody knows, the competition was weakened because a lot of NFL stars were away in the war. They weren't all back and in shape even in '45. Oddly, nobody seems to notice this when they talk about the great years Sid Luckman, Sammy Baugh, Bruiser Kinard, and Don Hutson had. But then, THOSE guys had many outstanding seasons when there wasn't a war going on.

What about Wistert? Well, to tell the truth, he got better. Against some pretty terrific post-war opponents, he remained a consensus all-NFL in 1946, 1947, and 1948. And, the INS chose him to its first team in 1949. And THEN, in 1950 and 1951, he was named to the *New York News'* second teams.

That's five consensus seasons as all-NFL and at least a second team selection in eight of his nine seasons. As a matter of fact, considering the number of seasons he played and the number of "all" teams available, Wistert is the most consistently honored tackle of all time.

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Interestingly, the Eagles nearly lost Al in 1946 when Michigan wanted him back as line coach. A five-year contract, rare at the time, convinced him to stay in pro football. Under its terms, he stood to make a princely \$7,000 a year.

From 1947 through 1950, he captained the Eagles. He was known as a "peppercot." There was nothing fake about his rah-rah, and he had the rare ability to infuse others with his enthusiasm. "If I thought the team was not up for the game on Sunday," Coach Neale explained, "on Saturday I would turn the team over to Al, and when he was finished with them, he had changed the attitude ... of nearly all who would play."

Those were the greatest seasons in the team's history, as the Birds won the Eastern Division title in '47 and NFL championships in '48 and '49. Winning the NFL crown over the Chicago Cardinals in a blizzard at Shibe Park was one of the two greatest thrills of Al's career.

In his first four years with the Eagles, Al played both offense and defense. At 215 pounds (one year he trained down to 190!), he was one of the smallest linemen in the league. On defense, he lacked the bulk to overpower blockers who often outweighed him by 50 pounds, but his speed allowed him to make numerous spectacular tackles. He was particularly devastating on kick coverage.

Were he playing today, he could be used as a linebacker. In fact, during the 1947 Championship Game, Coach Neale had him pulling out of the defensive line to cover the man in motion. According to Neale, Al's man didn't catch a pass.

Most of the '47 season and through all of the next two championship years, Wistert concentrated on offense. Neale marveled at Wistert's ability to pass block much bigger men. And "on screen passes [he] was always first out of the line. And what a downfield blocker he was!"

On in-line run blocking, Al's record is clear. The Eagles' bread-and-butter play was a slant off tackle by Steve Van Buren with Wistert throwing the key block. In 1947, Van the Man became only the second NFL runner to rush for over 1,000 yards. He did it again in 1949 and would have had three straight thousand-yard seasons had he not sat out an easy win over Boston in 1948.

After winning the 1949 championship, Philadelphia opened its 1950 exhibition season with the College All-Star Game. Eight years earlier, Al's first taste of pro football had been as captain of the 1943 All-Stars. Now the game nearly ended his career. Al tore up a knee and it was feared he might be lost for the season. At least.

Throughout the rest of the exhibition season, he struggled through a painful reconditioning program, each day riding a bicycle twelve miles from his home in Havertown to Shibe Park. By will power, he was ready to start by the second game of the 1950 season. Because of injuries to others, he played the remainder of the year on both offense and defense. At the end of the season, he was chosen to play in the first Pro Bowl, co-captaining the East squad.

Ironically, the only regular-season 1950 game Al missed was the one that has, in some minds, tarnished the Eagles' reputation as one of the great teams in pro football history -- the season opening loss to the Cleveland Browns that proved the AAFC champs were ready for the NFL. Much has been made by historians of Cleveland's state-of-the-art passing attack. And subsequent history showed that the Browns were still on a roll while the Eagles had passed their peak. AND, there's no doubt the Eagles were overconfident going into the game. But, it should also be noted that Philadelphia played the game without either Van Buren or Wistert. They were back, though neither at his best, for a later meeting with Cleveland and the game was much closer.

The Eagles actually forged into the division lead for a while in 1950 before age and injuries caught up with them. The 6-6 final record cost Coach Neale his job. In 1951, they slipped to 4-8 under Bo McMillin and Wayne Millner. The team that had once been the deepest in talent in the league was getting thin. In his final season, Wistert switched to offensive guard because he was still one of the fastest league linemen. Changing positions so late in his career may have cost Al the chance to go out with a flourish -- a final all-NFL selection -- but typically he made the move without a complaint.

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He could have done plenty of complaining. A sacroiliac condition necessitated a 45-minute taping job before every game. All things considered, including the Eagles' declining fortunes, perhaps Al's second-team all-NFL selection by the *New York Daily News* was quite a "flourish" after all.

When Wistert retired after 1951, he said: "Pro football is a great game as long as you're able to give more than you receive. In the past few years I've reached the point where the receiving is getting the edge."

Such a humble statement is refreshing in today's market where every second word out of an athlete's mouth is "pride" and every third word is "renegotiate." It comes as somewhat of a surprise to learn that Al once renegotiated his contract too.

In 1947, during the second year of his five-year deal, Al learned that the Eagles had signed a rookie tackle for the same \$7,000 he was making. He didn't complain or do anything about it until about two-thirds of the way through the season. The Eagles were leading in a game by a couple of touchdowns when an opponent piled on Van Buren and kneed him in the kidney. Wistert went after the miscreant and a fight erupted that culminated with Al being thrown out of the game by the officials.

On the sideline, Neale exploded. "Do you know what you just did? You just lost the game for us!" Sure enough, the Eagles ended up on the wrong end of the final score. Neale was so angry he fined Wistert \$300 instead of the usual \$50 for being tossed out of the game.

Now Al was making less than the rookie on the bench. "I get thrown out of the game and they think I lost it," Al reasoned. "I must be worth a hell of a lot more money than I'm receiving."

That Monday, he went to Neale's hotel room and told him he wanted a raise or it was adios. Neale agreed and backed Al to the GM. "I worked for \$10,000 the rest of the season," Al says. "I had it for that season and three more."

No doubt Al could have put in a few more years with the Eagles despite his disclaimer that he was receiving more than he was giving. He was only 31. Had the NFL been paying salaries like today, it might have been tempting. There's no doubt that many of today's players stay in football longer just because the money is there.

On the other hand, what more could he have accomplished? The Eagles' great days were over. By retiring he was able to spend more time with his wife and two daughters. He had a flourishing insurance business and a budding career as a broadcaster. It was time to go.

Although he has the kind of personality that wins friends and influences people, there's just no getting around the fact that Albert Wistert isn't all that "interesting." He was never busted for any illegality. He didn't date Hollywood bombshells. He never beat up a cop or "guaranteed" a win or feuded with his coach. As a matter of fact, at his retirement, he cited the "privilege" of playing for Greasy Neale as the second of his two greatest thrills in football.

"I lost my father at an early age and I always wondered what I would have wanted him to be like. I'm sure now it would have been just like Greasy Neale. During the eight years I played for Greasy I never told him how I felt because I always wanted to be sure in my mind that if I ever slipped, sentiment wouldn't make Greasy keep me in the lineup."

If Wistert thought highly of Neale, the feelings were returned. In a 1967 letter to Al, he said, "I can never thank you enough for the many victories you helped bring to me ... I think of you often and often speak of you in great praise."

That same year, Neale wrote a letter to Jack Curtis who was on the selection committee for the College Football Hall of Fame. While admitting that he knew Al only as a pro player, Greasy could still recommend Wistert for character and leadership.

"I believe he was one of the greatest tackles that ever played football because of his speed and determination," Neale said. Not bad coming from a man who'd coached enough All-America's and All-Pros to fill a fair-size book.

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As for Al's ability as a blocker, Neale was adamant. "He was, without a doubt, the greatest offensive tackle I have ever seen."

ALBERT ALEXANDER WISTERT

Born: December 28, 1920, at Chicago, IL
6-1 217 College: U. of Michigan
Consensus All-America 1942
Selected to play in College All-Star Game 1943
Member College Football Hall of Fame

YEAR	TEAM	LG	GM	TEAM RECORD	
1943	Phil-Pit	N	9	5-4-1	3rd
1944	Philadelphia	N	8	7-1-2	2nd
1945	Philadelphia	N	10	7-3-0	2nd
1946	Philadelphia	N	9	6-5-0	2nd
1947	Philadelphia	N	12	8-4-0	1st* Lost Champ. Game
1948	Philadelphia	N	12	9-2-1	1st Won Champ. Game
1949	Philadelphia	N	12	11-1-0	1st Won Champ. Game
1950	Philadelphia	N	11	6-6-0	3rdt
1951	Philadelphia	N	12	4-8-0	5th

9 years 95

*-Defeated Pittsburgh in Division Playoff

PRO HONORS

- 1944 1st Team NFL - AP, UP, *NY Daily News*
- 1945 1st Team NFL - AP, UP, INS, *NY Daily News*, *Pro Football Illustrated Magazine*
- 1946 1st Team NFL - AP, UP, *NY Daily News*, *Pro Football Illustrated Magazine*
- 1947 1st Team NFL - AP, UP, *NY Daily News*, Sportswriters Inc.
2nd Team NFL - *Pro Football Illustrated Magazine*
- 1948 1st Team NFL - UP, *NY Daily News*, *Pro Football Illustrated Magazine*, *The Sporting News*
#Hon. Mention - AP
- 1949 1st Team NFL - INS Offense
#Hon. Mention - AP, UP
- 1950 2nd Team NFL - *NY Daily News*
Hon. Mention - AP, UP
- 1951 2nd Team NFL - *NY Daily News* (as guard)

- From 1946-49, AP chose a mixed NFL-AAFC team; Wistert's Hon. Mentions in 1948-49 are equivalent of 2nd Team NFL

1950 Selected to First Pro Bowl

Named to All-Pro Squad of the 1940s chosen by the Pro Football Hall of Fame Selection Committee