

Philadelphia Memories

(From 1979 NFC & AFC Championship Game Programs)

**A retrospective account of the Eagles' halcyon days, the late 1940s,
told by two workhorses who played vital roles.**

by Jim Campbell

If Jim Lewro had not been Bert Bell's grocery deliveryman, and if John Yovicsin had not been insistent, the great Philadelphia Eagles teams of the late 1940s might not have had the services of two important players – end Jack (Blackjack) Ferrante and guard Dusan (Duke) Maronic.

The early Eagles teams were never mistaken for the Chicago Bears of that era, and nearly every curbstone coach and Monday morning quarterback had the answer to the perpetual question: How can the Eagles get better? Lewro, a young deliveryman, was no exception. Lewro would drop off the groceries at the back door of Bert Bell's suburban Mainline home and wait while the owner-coach of the Eagles counted out the correct amount. He would tell Bell, "You really ought to take a look at Jack Ferrante of the Seymour A.C. I know he could help the team. He's a great end."

Bell would nod appreciatively and remain noncommittal. It became almost a weekly ritual – Lewro's suggestion and Bell's reaction. Finally, in 1939 Bell, who later would become NFL commissioner, agreed to a tryout for the young sandlot receiver.

John Yovicsin had played high school football with Duke Maronic in Steelton, Pennsylvania. After completing his college career at Gettysburg, Yovicsin was trying out with the Eagles in 1944, and Maronic was doing the same.

When they arrived at Philadelphia's Penn Station, Maronic looked at Yovicsin and said, "John, let's get back on the train and go home. We're going to get our heads knocked off."

Yovicsin, who made the 1944 Eagles and later went on to become a successful coach at Gettysburg and Harvard, would hear none of that. "We've come this far," he said. "I can't let you go back without even giving it a try." By the mid-forties the Eagles no longer resembled the hapless teams of the thirties. In fact, they were fast becoming the dominant team of their era.

Under head coach Earle (Greasy) Neale, the Eagles finished second in the Eastern Division in 1944, 1945, and 1946. They won the eastern title in 1947 (but lost to the Chicago Cardinals in the championship game), then gained NFL championships in 1948 and 1949.

The proof of the Eagles' greatness is found in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. Neale is one of the honored group. Steve Van Buren, the Eagles' great running back, is also an inductee, and so are Pete Pihos, who made all-pro as an offensive and defensive end, and linebacker Alex Wojciechowicz. Chuck Bednarik, a rookie center-linebacker on the 1949 team, is another Hall of Famer.

There were other brilliant performers: Tommy Thompson, a one-eyed quarterback; Bosh Pritchard, an elusive halfback; Joe Muha, an outstanding punter and linebacker; team captain Al Wistert, an all-pro offensive tackle; tackle Vic Sears and center Vic Lindskog, two other offensive standouts; Mike Jarmoluk and Bucko Kilroy, the heart of the defensive line; and defensive backs Russ Craft and Pat McHugh.

But no two players were more unlikely to be part of the team than Maronic and Ferrante, both of whom made it to the NFL without having the benefit of going to college or having played a down of college football.

Jack Ferrante, who recently retired from a job he held with a Philadelphia brewery for 30 years, looks younger than his 63 years.

"It was the middle of the depression," he says, relaxing in his suburban Philadelphia home, "and I was old enough and big enough to help the family by working. I tried to work and continue school at the same

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 13, No. 6 (1991)

time – I was in my sophomore year of trade school – but a situation came up where the principal wouldn't approve my working. So I quit school and went to work full time.

"I was going to go back to school after a year, but after being out that long it seemed more difficult. I always regretted not finishing.

"Besides," he says, glancing over at his wife Connie, "I was in love." They laugh.

"Sports always were important to me," Ferrante continues, "and I began playing for Seymour A.C. soon after quitting school. It was good football.

"With the depression, a lot of guys hadn't gone to college, so we had some pretty good ballplayers. I was doing pretty good myself. I could always catch the ball.

"After Jim Lewro talked Bert Bell into giving me a tryout in '39, I went to camp with the Eagles. Right away I felt that my sandlot background wasn't good enough for the NFL. It wasn't so much my ability as it was experience, but I gave it my best shot."

In the thirties and forties there were several minor professional football leagues. The American Association was one of the best, with teams such as the Newark Bears, Jersey City Giants, Patterson, New Jersey, Panthers, Wilmington Clippers, Providence Steamroller, and Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Bulldogs.

Coaches of those teams would go to NFL practices and make notes on players who looked promising but might not make the final roster. In 1939, Ferrante was released by the Eagles, but he showed enough promise to be contacted by the Wilmington club.

"In my final intrasquad scrimmage with the Eagles that summer of '39," says Ferrante, "I hooked up with a rookie quarterback (Ed Kress) from Lebanon Valley on quite a few passes. When the Eagles cut me, Walt Masters, an old Penn player who coached the Clippers in Wilmington, made me an offer.

"Wilmington played two games a week, usually one at home and one away. They paid us seventy-five dollars for the home game and fifty dollars for the road game. The team had to pay travel expenses, which is why we got less on the road. I'll tell you this, though, I felt like a millionaire with \$125 a week.

"After a couple of decent years in the American Association, I took another shot at the Eagles in 1941. This time I made the team, but I really didn't play that much. I caught only two passes that year.

"Then it was back to Wilmington for more 'seasoning' during '42 and '43, but I was back in Philly to stay in 1944."

A sprawling Bethlehem Steel mill along the banks of the Susquehanna River seems to be the sole reason for the existence – not to mention the name – of Steelton. Duke Maronic is a product of this small town just south of Harrisburg.

"I was a fair high school player," says Maronic. "Actually, I guess I was better than fair. I made the all-state team in my senior year in 1938. I would have enjoyed playing college football, but I weighed only 167 pounds, which is pretty light for a college lineman.

"There wasn't much else to do, so I played semipro football for the Harrisburg Bears. We weren't in a formal league; we played teams from Lancaster, York, Reading, and Carlisle (nearby Pennsylvania cities). Some of the guys got paid a little bit, but I didn't take anything. I thought that if I ever got the chance to play college ball I'd better protect my eligibility. I also took an assumed name – Don Morgan.

"Later, I played for the Harrisburg Trojans. They were an all-Negro team. I was the only white guy on the team. I never gave much thought to it. Neither did the black guys, but once in a while one of the opponents would make a remark.

"Some of the teams we played were good, some not so good. I remember one team we played, Sun Ship from Chester, Pennsylvania. They had a former All-American end from Villanova – Johnny Wysocki. He was pretty good. Another team, from New York City, was run by Chris Cagle, the Army All-American and

old New York Giants halfback. Hell, he must have been past thirty-five at the time. He wasn't much of a threat, just a drawing card.

"I continued to play semipro and grew a little bit. I guess I got up to around 180 or 185 – still not that big. Then the war came along, and I found myself in the service. I had really flat feet, so there wasn't much the army could do with me, but it took them about six months to get me processed out. During that time I didn't have that much to do. I just got plenty of exercise and plenty of food, and built my weight up to 205 pounds – closer to my NFL playing weight. I was solid, but I had kept my speed. After getting out of service, I played some more semi-pro ball."

The Second World War caused a man-power shortage in nearly all phases of civilian life, and the National Football League was no exception. The Cleveland Rams suspended operations for the 1943 season, the same year the Philadelphia Eagles and Pittsburgh Steelers pooled their resources to form the "Steagles." In 1944, the Steelers merged with the Chicago Cardinals, while the Eagles decided to go it alone.

During the course of the war, 638 men who played in the NFL were called into service. Most NFL teams of the late war years were a collection of old men, draft-deferreds, and 4-Fs.

"Pop' Clarke, the sports editor of the *Harrisburg Telegraph*, was contacted by the Eagles," Maronic remembers. "They wanted to know if he knew of any good players in the area who might be able to help them. He recommended me. They got in touch with me and offered \$150 a game. That sounded good to me. Of course, you had to make the team to get paid, but I jumped at the chance and signed for the 1944 season.

"I won't lie to you, I had some doubts when I arrived in Philly. Lucky for me, Johnny Yovicsin wouldn't let me go home when I wanted to. I stuck it out in training camp and made the team."

By the 1947 season, the nucleus of the Eagles was made up of the players who would take the team into the three consecutive championship games.

Philadelphia and Pittsburgh finished in a tie for the Eastern conference title at the end of 1947. The Eagles routed the Steelers 21-0 in the playoff. Paul Stenn (Stenko), a tackle for the Steelers, says, "We probably shouldn't have been on the same field with them. They just had too many horses for us. Besides, our single-wing had us burned out."

1947 NFL Championship Game CARDINALS 28, EAGLES 21

Chicago, December 28--The Chicago Cardinals went rushing over a frozen field and beat the Philadelphia Eagles in the playoff for the National League championship in Comiskey Park this afternoon, 28-21, keeping possession of the ball for the last five minutes of the game to protect their lead.

It was a lead that was in jeopardy, because Tommy Thompson, the Philadelphia quarterback and forward passer, threw 44 passes and completed 27 for a total of 297 yards. But try as he might, he could not break up the ball game. Nor could he ever get the Eagles out in front.

The Cardinals led all the way, scoring in every period. They held Steve Van Buren, the league's leading ground gainer, to twenty-six yards by rushing while their own Elmer Angsman was gaining a total of 159 yards.

Angsman's were a pair of quick-openers for 70 yards each. Charley Trippi scored on a 44-yard scrimmage run and a 75-yard punt return.

It was a cold day. The thermometer in the park read 28 degrees. There were only 30,579 persons in the stands.

Jack Ferrante on the 1947 championship game: "We felt pretty good about going into this game. I know I did. We had that great day against Pittsburgh to settle the Eastern Division. I scored on a twenty-eight-yard pass, and we were ready for 'em.

"Then we got to the ball park in Chicago and saw the weather. Comiskey was like a skating rink. I hadn't seen anything like it before, but we had taken the weather into account as we got ready in the pregame. We had on regular football shoes, but the cleat were filed to pretty sharp points. That gave us the traction we needed. I thought they'd work better than the tennis shoes the Cards were wearing. Everything was great until early in the game, when one of their guys got cut by one of our filed cleats and raised hell with the officials. They made us change into basketball shoes right on the spot. I'll tell you this, sneakers might have won for the Giants in the 1934 championship game, but they weren't worth a darn to us. We just couldn't get any traction. You'd think we were wearing leather-soled shoes on a hockey rink the way we were slipping and sliding.

"About the only good thing for me was the eight passes I caught. It was a record at the time."

Maronic on the 1947 game: "We came damn close to winning, but we couldn't get the ball back at the end. I think if we'd have been able to keep our regular football shoes on, we'd have won. But they really were illegal. Just a little too sharp. The thing I had a tough time figuring out was why Steve (Van Buren) couldn't run in the basket ball shoes. We opened nice holes for him, but he was like a guy on roller-skates for the first time. He just kept slipping whenever he'd make the slightest kind of move. So you add that to the four long runs by Trippi and Angsman, and there's the story of that game."

1948 NFL Championship Game EAGLES 7, CARDINALS 0

Philadelphia, December 19—The Philadelphia Eagles performed like a set of animated snow plows today to whip the Chicago Cardinals 7-0 in the National Football League's "world championship" playoff game in a driving snowstorm.

Playing under miserable weather conditions on a field that was inches deep in snow before the finish, the Eagles found their footing in the final quarter to push over the only touchdown of the game.

Big Steve Van Buren, who learned his football under sunny Louisiana skies, made that one score on a five-yard smash through tackle just as the final quarter started, and Cliff Patton converted to complete the scoring job.

The weather, surprisingly, did not keep the fans away. Virtually all of the 37,000 seats in Shibe Park were sold in advance, and 38,864 die-hard fans actually turned up and sat through the proceedings. They did it the hard way, too, for the wet snow disrupted surface transportation, forcing many of them to walk long distances to reach the park, where they sat in uncovered stand.

Ferrante on the 1948 championship game: "I don't think I'll ever forget that game. Hell, they won't let me. Tommy Thompson and Greasy (Neale) always liked to give the opposition something to think about right away, so we worked all week on a pass play for our first play from scrimmage. It was called the 'Ferrante Special.' That was the thing that made Greasy such a great coach. He could always come up with a play to win. I was to get as deep as fast as I could. They'd call it a fly pattern today. I broke from the line of scrimmage – our thirty-five – and Tommy just let it fly. I grabbed it at their twenty, went down, got up again, and ran in.

"There was only one problem. The play was called back because of an offside penalty. I was really steaming about that. I went up to the ref and said, 'Who the hell was offside?' You know, I was really going to line out the guy that cost us the six points. The ref said, 'You.' That shut me up!"

To this day Al Wistert isn't sure that Ferrante was offside. "I've looked at that film a lot over the years," says Wistert, "and I *still* have my doubts. Remember, the field was covered with snow, you couldn't see the yard lines or anything, and the line was set for pass blocking. Sure, Blackjack was the first to move, but with the linemen all dropping back on that initial step to set up, I think it only looked like he left early. He was the only guy going forward. Naturally, it could look as if he were offside."

Maronic on the 1948 game: "That's one game that shouldn't have even been played. Nobody wanted to play it – the players, the coaches, the owners, the officials. We all wanted Bert Bell to call it off. Hell, it was a blizzard, but Bert said that the networks were committed – and that was just radio. There wasn't any television then.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 13, No. 6 (1991)

“Yo-Yo’ (Mario Giannelli, the Eagles’ middle guard) and I went to breakfast at nine o’clock in the morning. It snowed a foot in the hour it took us to eat. We got out to Shibe Park, and you couldn’t see a thing. But they were determined to play the game. A tarp was on the field and had to be taken off. The players helped the grounds crew do it. I think even some of the Cardinals helped us. We damned near had a disaster. One of the workers got caught in the thing and we were just rolling him right up along with the tarp. The poor guy was wrapped up to his neck before we finally realized it. He coulda been suffocated!

“Even after we got the tarp off, the field was a mess. It continued to snow. You couldn’t see a thing. I remember going down field under a punt, and you couldn’t see it. It just disappeared. Finally, when it came down you still couldn’t see the ball, just the shape of it under the snow.

“Talk about cold! A lot of us just ran for the locker room after the game and went straight into the hot showers. I mean, we didn’t take off our uniforms or anything – just our headgear. We stood under the hot water just to thaw out. I guess it wasn’t as cold as some games have been, but being soaked and all really got to you.”

1949 NFL Championship Game EAGLES 14, RAMS 0

Los Angeles, December 18--The Philadelphia Eagles defeated the Los Angeles Rams today, 14-0, to win the National Football League Championship for the second straight year.

The Eagles, masters in every department of play, scored one touchdown in the second quarter and added another in the third on a blocked punt.

The big disappointments were the weather and the crowd. It rained all night preceding the game – Los Angeles’s first view of a major league title show. It rained during most of the game and reduced the contest to a sluggish exhibition.

The owners and the players wanted to postpone the game until Christmas Day, and so did thousands of protesting Los Angeles fans. But Commissioner Bert Bell, in Philadelphia, ordered that the seventeenth National League title game be played.

As a result of the weather, only 22,245 fans braved the pelting rain to see the battle of the mud. Paid attendance was 24,980 for seats sold in advance, and 70,000 and more were expected had the skies been clear.

Ferrante on the 1949 championship game: “We really breezed through the East again. The Bears beat us, but they were the only ones. So we took an 11-1 record into the championship game in Los Angeles.

“I honestly don’t think too many of us were really thinking football. We were more concerned with the nice weather and all the attractions on L.A. and all the money we were going to be making.

“The night before the game something happened, or I’m telling you we would have lost the game. Like I said, nobody was really serious. Al Wistert, who was the captain of the team, sensed this, and called a meeting. We all had tremendous respect for Whitey (Wistert), and we listened when he talked. He said, ‘We’re not ready for this game. We’d better realize that we’re playing a great team on their own field. And we’d better get the lead out and begin to whoop and holler or we can kiss the championship bye-bye.’

“That got us thinking the right way, and we were ready to play the game. We weren’t ready for the weather, though. In 1948 we played in Philly’s worst snowstorm. In 1949, it looked like L.A.’s answer to the Johnstown Flood.

“With the field in the condition it was, we knew we couldn’t pass that much (Thompson attempted nine passes and completed five, one for a 31-yard touchdown to Pihos). But Steve (Van Buren) had a helluva day. They just couldn’t stop him. He carried the ball on nearly every play and always got yardage. He didn’t score, but he was the big gun for us offensively.”

Maronic on the 1949 game: “Probably the thing most of us were concerned with – but shouldn’t have been – was the big payoff. We were already spending the money in our minds. You gotta remember now that we were playing in our third championship game, and we still were looking for the pot of gold. We

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 13, No. 6 (1991)

had to settle for the losers' share in 1947, got snowed on in 1948, and now we thought we'd really rake it in. We're playing in a 100,000-seat stadium, and the projections were that a winner's share could be as high as \$5,000 to \$6,000, which equaled or bettered most of our yearly salaries. Then the rains came!

"Well, at least we could still play for pride. Once we got our minds on the game, it was a pretty easy time for us. Our defense – guys like Vic Sears, (Walt) Piggy Barnes, and Mike Jarmoluk, -- was outstanding. It was really fun to sit on the bench and watch them when the offense was out. They just shut the Rams' running game off completely (Los Angeles netted 21 yards rushing on 24 attempts).

"Steve (Van Buren) was hell on a leash against the Rams. They couldn't stop him, but then nobody really ever stopped Steve anytime. He just ran, ran, ran. The mud and rain didn't affect him one bit. When you had a back like Steve – one you know was going to get yardage – it was fun to block for him (Van Buren's 196 yards on 31 attempts is still the highest total in NFL championship history).

"The field conditions really were horrible, though. What I remember is covering punts. In '48, the ball would disappear in the snow. In this game it would actually sink out of sight in the goo.

"We didn't have the big payday we expected, but we were world champs again, and that was the first time anyone repeated with back-to-back shutout victories."

The Eagles' dynasty began to crumble in 1950. Training camp injuries robbed the team of not only its leading ball carrier – Van Buren – but virtually every other able runner.

As a way to showcase the newly aligned NFL – Cleveland, San Francisco, and Baltimore were admitted from the old All-American Football Conference – a Saturday night opening game was scheduled between the Eagles and the Browns, who had been AAFC champions in all four years of the league's existence. The rest of the league opened the next day.

There was much speculation over what the Eagles would do to the Browns in a "real" football game. As it turned out, it was an embarrassment to the old NFL diehards. Van Buren and his running mate, the elusive Bosh Pritchard, were out of action. Clyde (Smackover) Scott, one of the few able-bodied running backs, went down with an injury in the second quarter. In the meantime, Otto Graham had a field day for the Browns, throwing to ends Dante Lavelli and Mac Speedie. The 35-10 score was an indicator of what was to come.

The Eagles rebounded from the opening loss with five consecutive victories but lost their last four games to finish with a 6-6 record.

With the AAFC no longer offering an alternative to playing in the NFL, most front offices in the league decided to freeze salaries, and in some cases even made pay cuts. This upset most players, including some key personnel on the Eagles. It led to a rift between coach Neale and Philadelphia president-general manager Jim Clark. Neale was fired after the season, and Tommy Thompson retired. Van Buren never regained his old running form, and several other important players were traded or retired.

"If it could happen, it happened to us in 1950," says Ferrante. "Everything seemed to go wrong for us.

"I had a decent year. I caught thirty-five passes, one more than in '49 and the most I ever caught in a season, but I knew the end of the line was near. They let me go in camp the next year. Detroit claimed me. I think I was in pretty good shape. I was still 6'1", 205 pounds, which I was when I first came up, but I was thirty-four years old and wanted \$10,000 for the season. That was \$2,500 more than I had made in '50. They (the Lions) wouldn't do it, so I went to work full time with a brewery. I don't regret it. It's been a pretty good life for me."

Like all Eagles players of the era, Maronic held Neale in high regard.

"I didn't like what Clark did to Greasy after we lost to the Giants 7-3," says Maronic. "He (Clark) said, 'You need more than a field goal to win in the NFL.' Well, it got pretty hot between Greasy and Clark, and I got my two cents in. Afterward, one of the players said that that was it for me as an Eagle. He was right. I got traded to the Giants for the '51 season, which was my last.

"I'd been officiating college basketball during the offseasons, and I continued to do that after I retired. I

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 13, No. 6 (1991)

also worked as an athletic trainer in the Cleveland Indians' minor league chain. I still observe officials for the Eastern Collegiate Athletic Conference, but my main job is jockey's trainer at Penn National Racecourse, near where I live in Harrisburg.

"Those years with the Eagles," says the 58-year-old Maronic, "were among the best in my life. We were a great team of great guys, and Greasy was as fine a man – and the finest coach – I ever saw. Those were days! The one thing I remember best about my playing days was all the pulling out of the line to lead running plays. Every play – pull and lead. That's why we were called running guards. Hell, I'd have gained more yardage than Steve Van Buren if I had had a football under my arm.

"Maybe it was unusual for Jack and me to be on those teams and not to have gone to college, but no one made a big deal out of it at the time. We were just ballplayers."

"Once I made the team," says Ferrante, "I never gave not going to college a lot of thought. The other guys on the club didn't say much, either. They just took us (Ferrante and Maronic) for what we were – a couple of guys who could help the team win.

"Even though I didn't go to college, one thing they used to do at the Eagles' home games really made me feel good. When the players were introduced before the game, as we'd run through the goal posts, the P.A. announcer would give their name and college. With me it was, 'From the sandlots of South Philadelphia, left end, Jack Ferrante.' They'd cheer like crazy for me; I got a special feeling from that."

Al Wistert says of Ferrante and Maronic: "The thing I remember about those two was the way they talked, which probably had more to do with their ethnic backgrounds (Ferrante's parents were born in Italy; Maronic is the son of Serbian immigrants) and where they grew up than any lack of formal education. A typical conversation between the two was Jack saying, 'Jeet jet?' and Duke saying, 'No, jew?' and Jack saying, 'Squeet.'"