

## **Glory days**

**Andy Robustelli and the Giants popularized the 'D'**

**By Norm Miller**

Each time you've heard that rhythmic chant of "DEE-fense! DEE-fense!" cascade from the stands, have you ever wondered how and where it originated?

The chant began back in the late 1950s at Yankee Stadium. Since then, other teams and other sports have picked it up. But it was the New York Giants and their fans who were the first in all sports to glorify defense.

Hall of Fame defensive end Andy Robustelli, the leader of the great New York defense during that successful era, recalls that the Giants were the first NFL team to introduce the defensive unit over the public address system before a game.

"The real change occurred when the defense became the darlings of Yankee Stadium," Robustelli wrote in his autobiography, *Once a Giant, Always ...*

"Until then, football belonged to the offense and so did all the cheers," he went on. "Then, for the first time, the cheers went to the defense every time we came off the field, and even before the game. One season ... it was decided to introduce the offense. They were met with a chorus of boos. There was no doubt we exulted in this, but we also had earned it. I never worried that the offense might have resented our intruding into their glory path; my feeling was: Go out and earn it."

The front four of what may have been the greatest of all Giant defenses included, from the right side to the left, Robustelli, Roosevelt Grier, Dick Modzelewski and Jim Katcavage. They played virtually intact from 1956, the season the Giants won the NFL championship, to 1962, when Grier was traded to the Los Angeles Rams. The only exception to that string was the 1957 season, when Grier was required to fulfill a military obligation. The unit began to break up when Grier was traded in 1963. Modzelewski was traded a year later; then Robustelli retired after 1964 to become an assistant coach. Katcavage kept playing through the 1968 season.

Robustelli and Modzelewski came to the Giants in trades masterminded by Wellington Mara, Grier was a third-round draft pick in 1955, and Katcavage was a fourth-rounder a year later.

Robustelli made it to the NFL from humble circumstances. After coming out of the Navy in World War II, he played at Arnold College, a small school that later became part of the University of Bridgeport. He was drafted on the 19th round by the Rams in 1951. He and his wife, Jean, gave much thought to whether he should accept the pro offer of \$4,250 or a chance to coach high school football. He opted for pro football. Andy believed his best chance to make the Rams was on offense, and when coach Joe Stydahar assigned him to defense, Robustelli didn't unpack his bags for the first two weeks of training.

But his fierce competitiveness prevailed. He impressed the Rams' staff as a defensive lineman and went on to become one of the game's best pass-rushing ends.

A native of Stamford, Conn., he got the break of his career in 1956 when he was traded to the Giants. In his 14 pro seasons he was voted to the Pro Bowl seven times, and in 1962 he won the Maxwell Award as the NFL's Player of the Year. He missed only one game during his playing career – in his rookie season.

Robustelli was clearly the leader of the Giants' defense. He was the coach on the field, the godfather who beefed up the sagging morale of the others, who chewed out a player

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 14, No. 5 (1992)

---

he thought wasn't giving 100 percent, who consistently came up with big plays. He was the only one of the four linemen eventually to be elected to the Hall of Fame.

As for the others on the front line:

**Roosevelt Grier:** "Rosey had a great amount of ability but weight always was a problem for him," says Robustelli. "Sometimes it ballooned over 300 pounds. He spent every summer in training camp at the 'fat man's table,' where overweight players were rationed with salads and gelatin. Rosie went through all of that without saying a word, but we knew he went out at night after our meetings and loaded up with a plateful of goodies that undid all that he had achieved from two-a-days and three sparse meals. During the season his stamina suffered when his weight went above 300 pounds and he couldn't get into a play quick enough. He was always looking for timeouts on the field. 'We can't, Ro, we can't,' I'd tell him. 'We have to save them for the offense.' One time we got one, and when it ended, he wanted another. We almost strangled him.

"If Grier, who was a big loveable guy, had kept himself in some semblance of shape, he would be in the Hall of Fame," Robustelli went on. "In those times when he was around 280 pounds, no offensive lineman in the league could handle him one-on-one. There never has been a quicker inside lineman. He had great agility and an amazing ability to spin off a block and catch a running back before he barely reached the hole. When he spent the 1957 season in the military, his absence was part of the reason why we didn't repeat as champions."

**Dick Modzelewski:** "In addition to being one of the steadiest and most dependable players, he also was one of the funniest. Mo came from the coal mine country in Western Pennsylvania and he spun stories by the hour about his dad and the coal miners he grew up with. Dick never forgot where he came from and this was reflected in his work ethic. He was not the biggest player at six feet and about 250 pounds, but he was one of the most tenacious. He totally believed in Tom Landry's defense. When he filled a hole, it stayed filled, regardless of the size of the player across from him."

**Jim Katcavage:** "Kat was like a big, raw-boned kid brother, but he probably was a better defensive player than I. If he had played on my side, on the right where there rarely was a tight end's block to contend with, he might have had much more recognition. He certainly was as quick as any defensive end who ever played, helping to mitigate a relative lack of size (six-foot-three and 240 pounds) when he faced a bigger offensive tackle. We nicknamed him 'Kat' not as much for his last name but because of his quickness, which was the biggest obstacle he had to overcome initially. He was so fast that he sometimes carried himself past his area of responsibility. But once he learned to control that quickness, he saved us from being burned on many potential big plays."

Robustelli goes on to tell one of his favorite stories about Kat and Mo. On one play Katcavage was buried under several bodies and began to scream, "My shoulder! My shoulder!" He staggered out of the pile and headed for the sidelines.

"Where the hell are you going?" Modzelewski asked him.

"My shoulder, my shoulder!" Kat replied in pain. "I don't know if it's broken."

"To hell with your shoulder," Mo told him. "It's going to be fine. You stay here, we've got a defense to play and we need you."

"Jim played the rest of the game and afterward X-rays showed the shoulder was indeed broken," Robustelli wrote. "I sometimes have wondered, 'Were we being cruel to him making him play with a broken shoulder?' At the time, it never occurred to me because playing the game was all-important. Now, I don't know."

The Giants' defense of the '50s and '60s may have been appreciated at home, but in those days when pro football was starting to soar in popularity, it was still one of the more

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 14, No. 5 (1992)

---

underpublicized units around the league. Oh, Sam Huff got his publicity from the television network that created "The Violent World of Sam Huff," but generally the other players never received the acclaim they deserved.

Other defensive fronts during the years that followed had catchy nicknames. The Minnesota Vikings had the Purple People Eaters, the Los Angeles Rams had their Fearsome Foursome, and the Dallas Cowboys had their Doomsday Defense. But in the Big Apple, which has a reputation as the hype capital of America, nobody ever came up with an appropriate nickname for the Giants' front four.

Robustelli claims the secret of the Giants' defense in those days was not necessarily the individual players, but the genius of Tom Landry. After an outstanding six-season career as a Giants defensive back, Landry took over as a coach under Jim Lee Howell. The 4-3 defense was his concept, and his remarkable teaching methods did the rest. It was a coordinated defense in which players strove for cool discipline rather than emotional intensity.

"Landry's coordinated schemes were his exclusive brain-child," Robustelli says. "Tom invented the 4-3 defense." Long before that, the most popular defense was a seven-man front with a diamond-shaped backfield. That evolved into the 5-4 defense, then the 4-5, and eventually to Landry's 4-3, as coaches replaced bulkier, slower defensive linemen with more agile linebackers.

"Tom's basic concepts of playing a coordinated defense and his teaching us to accept and carry them out with great confidence produced astounding results," Robustelli says. "There is little doubt that the concept – not the people – was responsible for our success. A team can get more from lesser-talented players who are willing to work in a coordinated fashion than defenses that depend on people dominating other people. In all honesty, had we not played Tom's system, we would not have been a good football team. His defense allowed good players to become better.

"We had total confidence that our defense was unbeatable if we played it properly, and this motivated us to be perfect."

No one can argue with the results. In the eight seasons from 1956-63, the Giants won six Eastern Division championships and one NFL title. In 1956, when the Giants beat the Chicago Bears 47-7 for the title, they led the NFL in rushing defense and sacking the quarterback. In 1959 they led the league in just about every defensive category.

Andy looks back fondly on these results and his own individual achievements.

"In one game against the Philadelphia Eagles, I sacked Sonny Jurgensen on three consecutive downs," he recalls. "We set 'em back nearly 60 yards."

In a 1961 win over the Washington Redskins, 53-0, the Giants sacked Norm Snead, then a rookie, seven times, including two safeties. In a 1964 game against the St. Louis Cardinals they had 11 sacks, one short of the league record. In one five-game stretch of the 1959 season, the Giants' offense sputtered badly, but the defense yielded only two touchdowns during those games and the Giants won all five.

"We would get five dollars for each sack we made," Robustelli laughs. "Five dollars for a sack, five dollars for a fumble recovery, five dollars for a blocked kick. We'd save up all our bonuses and at the end of the year give them to some needy person."

Andy believes that the Giants' two greatest defensive games came in 1958 when they beat the Cleveland Browns, 13-10 and 10-0, in back-to-back games at Yankee Stadium. The first, won by Pat Sumerall's unforgettable field goal, was the final game of the regular season and set up a playoff with the Browns the following Sunday. In that game the Giants' defense, led by Sam Huff, held Jimmy Brown to eight yards on seven carries. The Browns as a team netted only 86 yards.

## **THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 14, No. 5 (1992)**

---

You can't get much better than that.