

A COLLECTION OF GOLDEN MEMORIES

By Lido Starelli

Most of you who were born east of the Mississippi River, especially you younger fans, take professional football and the NFL for granted. It's always been there – or so it seems.

I'm a San Franciscan and a proud member of PFRA. I joined about nine months after the organization began. I've regularly received The Coffin Corner, but have found few articles have mentioned great pro teams or players from west of the Mississippi prior to World War II. I used to ask myself why. The conclusion: there weren't any.

It's safe to say that prior to World War II the prevalent conception among Easterners was that the West consisted of a vast empty prairie inhabited by cowboys and Indians, adobe houses, and little towns with hard-to-pronounce Spanish names.

I remember back in 1938 an Easterner visiting my neighbor was astonished that little old San Francisco possessed two of the longest and most beautiful bridges in the world as well as multi-story buildings. He was amazed an Indian didn't appear every time he turned a corner.

You can readily see why we of the West were so ecstatic when little college teams like St. Mary's (350 students at the time) went east and beat teams like Fordham. Or when Santa Clara (450 students at the time) was invited to be cannon fodder for ferocious L.S.U. in the 1936 Sugar Bowl and humiliated the Tigers. Looking for retribution, L.S.U. faced Santa Clara again in 1937 and was stopped again.

We have always had great college teams on the Coast. Then during World War II, a service league was created to entertain the troops. Teams like St. Mary's Pre-Flight, El Toro Marines, Fleet City Bluejackets, Second Air Force Blue Bombers had such stars as Frankie Albert, Buddy Young, Len Eshmont, Frankie Sinkwich, and many others. As a Navy man, I got to see many of the great stars I had only heard of through radio broadcasts and rare newspaper articles.

Dreams Come True

When the war ended, all my dreams came true. The 49ers were born. My beloved Niners were included in a new league – the All-America Football Conference. Other teams were the Cleveland Browns, New York Yankees, Buffalo Bills, Chicago Rockets, Brooklyn Dodgers, Los Angeles Dons, and Miami Seahawks. If you thought the first Seahawks were in Seattle, you have forgotten Miami's 1946 team which was replaced by the Baltimore Colts the next year.

Can you understand how much that little 25 cent program meant to me? Not only did I get to see all those stars in person, but I could take that little program home with me, look through it at any time and revel in my dreams and fantasies about the stars and teams I had seen. You Easterners had enjoyed pro football forever; for a San Franciscan like me, pro football was born September 7, 1946, when the Niners took on the Chicago Rockets.

After four years, the AAFC folded, but three of its teams were incorporated into the NFL: Cleveland, Baltimore, and my 49ers. Every star of pro football was now playing in front of me. Can you blame me for going gaga?

A Son's Suggestion

Time marches on. By the early seventies, my son – born just eighteen days after the Niners' first game in 1946 was now a young man with a son of his own. I offered him boxes full of 49er programs – every game I had seen (and I'd only missed one home game in 1959 when my father died).

"Dad," he responded, "why don't you try getting all the away game programs? Then you would really have something to crow about. Do you know what you have in those boxes? You have something that practically no one else has."

I asked him how in hell you go about doing that. As he was into memorabilia collecting at that time, he directed me into the intricacies of collecting. First on the list was the direct ordering of present and future programs from opponents on their schedule. That way I was assured I wouldn't miss any contemporary or future editions.

As for the back-dated programs starting in 1946, that was a different matter. We began advertising in newspapers all over the country where the Packers had played their games. We also advertised in various collectors' journals. The effect was mild; I picked up a few programs here and there.

Bingo!

Then we hit the jackpot! We received a call from a retired local publisher who formerly had been one of the country's largest football program publishers. He had this old warehouse and shop that had been closed for years, and he invited us to browse and help ourselves to anything we wanted.

Can you imagine how those English archeologists felt when they discovered and opened King Tut's tomb? Well, just imagine when we walked into this storeroom of ageless football memorabilia. There were hundreds of college programs, posters, window display schedules, media guides, and original paintings for program covers.

Among all these ageless treasures was the biggest nugget of them all. Six bound books containing every program, home and away, of every team in the defunct AAFC. Can you believe that? We were in shock. Then while rummaging through some other treasures, we came across some boxes of 49er programs. Although mostly home games that I already had, among them were a bunch of away game programs I needed. After a couple days of working my way through that warehouse, I needed only about 20 programs to complete my collection.

Count Down from Ten

Time, perseverance, heartaches, and some jubilation – ten years later, I needed only ten more programs. It was 1984 and the 49ers were at their zenith in popularity. They were headed for Super Bowl XIX against Miami. The bay area was a hotbed of Niner mania. Interest was at a fantastic peak. That's when a reporter from the San Francisco Examiner decided to do a story on some old fogie who claimed he had nearly every Niner program and other memorabilia, and who had missed only one game since the team's inception.

When he came over for our interview, he seemed skeptical until he asked me to show and tell. Needless to say, he became mesmerized when he saw that my collection of programs were bound year by year with black and gold for home games and red and gold for away. All the original paintings were framed and hung.

About a week later, the newspaper printed my story with a big picture of me on the front page with a caption describing me as old faithful. The following week, TV station KPIX did a five minute segment on their nightly six o'clock news. Not to be outdone, another station's "Evening Magazine" devoted fifteen minutes to my collection the next week. They brought me to the Niner practice field and filmed me meeting my heroes. At the end of the program, they broadcast the number of programs needed and the dates.

You can imagine the furor. People from all over the bay area called. They were encouraging and some of them donated 49er artifacts and some of the programs needed. The retired team doctor called and invited me to pick through some things he had. It turned out he had about five of the needed programs plus many medical record books, rule books, and NFL injury statistics. When all the hoopla was finally over, I needed only four more programs.

Now the pressure began; so near, yet so far.

The Traveling Trunk

Five years later in 1989 the Niners were again headed for a Super Bowl. Number XXIII. That's when it happened all over again.

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One morning I read an article in the newspaper by one of our leading columnists. At the very bottom of his article, he had inserted a short paragraph stating that Lido Starelli, the 49er memorabilia collector, needed only four programs. He listed their months and years and added my phone number.

I no sooner shouted the good news to my wife who was cooking breakfast, when the telephone rang. It was a woman who asked if I was the man mentioned in the article. I assured her I was. She told me she had the program from the Pittsburgh-49er exhibition game played in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1951. I almost fainted. I began offering her money, but she said, no, it was mine to add to my collection. Then she scared me out of my wits. She said, "If I've still got it, it's yours."

Still got it? She told me to hang up and that she would call me right back. Fifteen anguished minutes later, she called again. "I've got it! I've got it!" she shouted. "It's yours."

After things came back to normal, I asked her how she came to acquire this book.

"In 1950," she said, "I married an air force officer. We were stationed in Phoenix. With nothing else to do in town, we decided to go to a football game that was being played in some small stadium. The game was an exhibition between Pittsburgh and San Francisco, and we couldn't have cared less about either team. We just had nothing else to do that evening."

Upon returning home that night, she threw the little two-bit program into their trunk. That trunk went to Korea, Viet Nam, England, Germany, back to Texas, and finally to Dixon, California, where one morning 38 years later a short paragraph at the end of an article awakened her happy memories of a long ago past.

Success

The article brought more responses from other collectors. I was able to trade for two more of the programs I needed. Finally, in 1991, I was able to acquire the last one.

So many people contributed – so many unselfish people and a few who tried to hold me up. I have boxes and boxes of correspondence which I treasure. They represent 47 years of pleasure and love. I've made outstanding friends. And my quest produced my association with PFRA.

I want to thank everyone who helped, including the NFL teams who put up with my requests ten times a year. Of course, I can't leave the 49er organization out. They have never failed to help me when I asked.

My collection consists of every program of every regular season or exhibition game, home or away, the Niners every played, every media guide ever printed in their behalf, and original paintings of the program covers for San Francisco's first two years in the NFL (1950-51). Believe it or not, I even have every Christmas card they have sent since 1946. Additionally, I have programs for every AAFC game.

I've recently built a beautiful room to house and show my fantastic collection. When I enter this inner sanctum, I feel that I am surrounded by a multitude of golden memories – memories that will remain with me for the rest of my life. Someday, it will belong to my wonderful son who many years ago gave me the inspiration to begin.