

Despite the physical and mental requirements, pro players have been able to combine sports and medicine

DOCTORS IN THE HUDDLE

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Originally published in Legends, June 1985

WHEN ONE TAKES INTO account the number of youngsters who play football at some level in the course of a year and the number who reach the professional level eventually, the pro football player is truly one in a million.

If you take that further and consider the handful of pro footballers who successfully combined an athletic and medical career, then you really have an elite group.

Nonetheless, from the earliest days of the National Football League there have been players who have achieved that lofty height. Joe Alexander, an All-America center at Syracuse and later captain of the New York Football Giants, was one of the first with dual careers. Johnny Mohardt, a quarterback from Notre Dame, was another player/physician pioneer. Eddie Anderson, an end at Notre Dame who later became an outstanding college coach, was still another who combined medicine and pro football in the early 1920s.

Although the first three NFL doctors are no longer living, two of them were members of a very exclusive group -- The Chicago Bears Doctors Club. Although the group was not formally chartered, it is more than a coincidence that nearly half of the players up to the 1960s who went on to become doctors played for the Bears. The reason, as both Mohardt and Anderson attested, was the player/coach/owner of the Bears -- George S. Halas. Halas, himself a graduate engineer, saw the value of a professional degree as a stepping stone to a secure second-career. He encouraged those players of his, so inclined, to continue their medical educations.

Joe Kopcha -- a guard from the Gary, Indiana area -- came into the NFL with the Bears in 1929. With the nation just about to be plunged into the deepest economic depression of the century, Kopcha needed the salary he earned playing with the Bears to continue onto medical school.

He says, "Coach Halas will always be number one in my book. Not only did he tolerate my medical studies -- he encouraged them. Never once did he think twice about time I'd miss from practice because of my studies. Also, in my day guards earned ninety dollars a game. Halas gave me one-hundred-ten because I advised the trainer on injuries."

So supportive was Halas of Kopcha's medical studies that when Kopcha finished his work at Rush Medical College in Chicago and accepted a residency in Detroit, Halas traded his all-star guard to the Detroit Lions to play one final season (1936) in the NFL.

Oddly enough, Halas replaced Kopcha with another guard who was planning a medical career. Dan Fortmann, who made Phi Beta Kappa as well as All-East at Colgate, was Halas's final choice in the 1936 player draft.

Following being contacted by the Bears, Fortmann applied to the University of Chicago Medical School.

"There was one remaining vacancy in the freshman class and fifty applicants," says Fortmann.

"Dean B.C.H. Harvey eliminated all the applicants but two -- myself and one other. "Then he asked his secretary, 'Which one should I select? Both are Phi Beta Kappas. One is a football player and the other is a violin player,' The secretary happened to be a football fan."

Fortmann, who just recently retired as Chief of Staff at St. Joseph's Hospital in Burbank, California, says, "I was determined to go to medical school, but the academic quarters always overlapped with the start of football training camp. George Halas was very understanding. He allowed me to miss two weeks of camp each year while I finished up at school.

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"Normally, he didn't give anybody permission to miss practice. But he believed medical school was a tremendous ambition. It was almost as important to him as it was to me. Without Mr. Halas, I could never have prepared for my future."

Fortmann paid handsome dividends for Halas, holding down the starting left guard position for eight seasons -- making Afl-Pro six times and eventually being enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Tony Ippolito, Jim Logan, and Paul Podmajersky were all members of the Bears doctors' club in the 1940s. As was Nick Sacrinty who played the 1947 season with the Bears.

Bill McColl is one of the legendary college players from the West Coast. He was a three-time Afl-America at Stanford in the early 1950s and has sent two sons -- Duncan and Milt -- on to his alma mater where they received similar honors. Naturally, McColl was a draft day plum or so it would seem. However, he made no bones about wanting to attend medical school.

He said, "I made it very clear that I was going to medical school, that I would not play pro football.

"I didn't think I could accomplish both. The Rams and the he 49ers were interested in me, but they were wary because of my interest in medicine.

"Coach Halas, to whom we all owe a great debt of gratitude, approached it from another angle. He'd already had success with Joe Kolcha and Danny Fortmann and the others who played for the Bears while studying medicine or dentistry. He convinced me to try both football and medical school."

McColl, like Fortmann and the others, had to miss some practice and training camp, but Halas was understanding. After making McColl the team's number three draft choice in 1952, Halas worked with him, allowing him the time he needed until he finished medical school in 1955. McColl continued to be the Bears starting flanker through the 1959 season.

After becoming an orthopedic surgeon in 1962, McColl practiced in his native California. He then volunteered to become a medical missionary in Korea and later in the Congo. While at a Presbyterian hospital in Teagu, Korea, he worked extensively with patients afflicted with leprosy, tuberculosis, and other diseases. He now practices in California again.

It didn't take Eddie Sutton long to decide that he was going to follow a medical career as well as an athletic career.

"I was five years old and living in the Smokies of western North Carolina," says the native of Cullowhee, North Carolina, "I had an uncle who was an Emory-trained surgeon. He had a small hospital -- thirty beds -- nearby at Six Miles. My cousin and I used to fill syringes with ether and put bumblebees to sleep by injecting them.

"By the time I was in eighth grade I was really serious about medicine, but also had time for athletics. After high school -- I went to nearby Syva for my senior year and it was the only high school football I ever played -- I was one of eight Morehead Scholars at the University of North Carolina. Of the original group, we were something like Rhodes Scholars -- sports and academics, there are five physicians, two lawyers, and one Ph.D.

"I still continued to participate in sports at Carolina as well as study pre-med. I lettered in four sports -- football, basketball, track, and baseball. Since I wasn't on an athletic scholarship, I had a little more leeway with labs and so forth, but I still had a very tight schedule. I really think having the wolf constantly at my heels as far as time was concerned helped me. If I didn't have so much to do, I may not have had the discipline to do it at all."

Sutton, who was high school valedictorian, continued to do well in college. Although North Carolina was not on the more popular 4.0 system for grades, Sutton's 91.9 average did qualify him for the dean's list.

By accelerating, Sutton was accepted into medical school at the end of his junior year of undergraduate school. He did, however, return to Carolina for another season of football and won all-star honors.

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Sutton was determined to attend medical school -- like the other NFL doctors before - but he probably had less of a decision to make than the early pro physicians. It would still take a lot of time and dedication, but there was less of a problem with juggling both careers.

The University of Tennessee -- Memphis was on a four quarter system and this allowed Sutton, and others, to attend medical school for two quarters each year without interfering with pro football.

Sutton, a very versatile halfback, was drafted on the third round by the Washington Redskins for the 1957 season. With the number of teams -- 12 then, he would have been a number one choice under today's 28-team setup. He was also taken number three overall in the Canadian Football League draft that year by the Montreal Alouettes. He signed with the Redskins, and as a member of the "Papoose Platoon" -- he and fellow rookie running backs Jim Podoley and Don Bosseler -- turned in a fine rookie season. Sutton saw action on both offense and defense and had the distinction of being the last NFL player to score on a touchdown pass and also make an interception in the same game -- December 8, 1956 versus the Philadelphia Eagles -- until Roy Green of the St. Louis Cardinals duplicated the feat in 1981.

Sutton says, "I figure I'm still one up on Green, although he's a fine athlete. I also completed a 21-yard halfback option pass to Leo Elter that day."

Sutton was traded to the Giants for the 1960 season and acquired by the Packers in 1961.

Though his time in Green Bay was rather brief, Sutton did have the privilege of coming under the influence of Vince Lombardi, the Packers' Pro Football Hall of Fame coach.

"I didn't bother to tell Coach Lombardi himself that I wasn't going to report for the nineteen sixty-two season. I sent a telegram. I knew that if I talked to him I would report. He was that persuasive!

"Later I was sitting with a group of Packers when they were playing in Los Angeles, where I first set up practice. Lombardi came up behind me and gave me a bear hug. I didn't know who it was. When I turned around and saw him, there was nothing I could do but cry. I thought all along he was mad at me, but he really respected what I had accomplished," says Sutton. After serving in both Korea and Vietnam he established a general practice in Gardena, California, for several years. Sutton then moved with his wife Sharon and sons Coleman and Christopher to Fresno, where he is president of Valley Industrial and Family Medical Group.

"We have three clinics," he says, "Bakersfield, Fresno, and Visalia. Our main thrust is working with work-related injuries. We treat sprains, cuts, eye injuries, and so on. Naturally, being in the middle of the world's largest and most productive agricultural region -- the San Joaquin Valley -- we get into monitoring pesticides, testing for exposure, and so forth. We do exams and therapy, and referrals to specialists. I liken us to the infantry -- we're the first wave -- then we refer patients to the various specialists, depending on the problem."

Perhaps Sutton speaks for all the NFL doctors when he says, "I consider myself lucky to have played pro football and studied medicine - I wish I could do it all over again."

Tommy Casanova, former all-star safety with the Bengals, Doug Swift, a standout linebacker with the Dolphins of the 1970s, and John Babinecz, a former high-round draft-choice linebacker with the Cowboys, represent more recent pros who have carried the torch that has been passed by the first to combine two very demanding careers.

Space prevents the detailing of stories on each of the men who made the sacrifices of their time and energies to reach the top of the football profession and the medical field, however the NFL Alumni would like to pay tribute to them in some small way.

The adjacent listing honors the accomplishments of the special few who made those sacrifices to make their mark in two very demanding fields.

EDITOR'S NOTE. A special thanks for early research on NFL doctors is extended to Dr. Stan Grossbandler of Raleigh, North Carolina, who still has a draft-questionnaire sent to him by the then Cleveland Rams while he was an end on the Ohio State team in 1945.

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THE DOCTOR'S CLUB

PHYSICIANS

Tony Adamle, Ohio State, linebacker - 1947-1951, 1954 Browns
Joe Alexander, Syracuse, center - 1921-22 Rochester Jeffersons, 1922 Milwaukee Badgers, 1925-27 Giants
Eddie Anderson, Notre Dame, end - 1922 Rochester Jeffersons, 1922-25 Chicago Cardinals, 1923 Bears, 1926 Chicago AFL
John Babinecz, Villanova, linebacker - 1972-73 Cowboys
Paul Berezny, Fordham, tackle - 1942-44 Packers, 1946 Miami Seahawks
Tommy Casanova, Louisiana State, safety - 1972-77 Bengals
Dan Fortmann, Colgate, guard - 1936-1943 Bears
Clyde Goodnight, Tulsa, end - 1945-48 Packers, 1949-1950 Redskins
Tony Ippolito, Purdue, guard - 1943 Bears
Bob Kolesar, Michigan, guard - 1946 Browns
Joe Kopcha, Chananooaga, guard - 1929, 1932-35 Bears, 1936 Lions
Chuck Latourette, Rice, defensive back/punter - 1967-68, 1970-71, Cardinals
Jim Logan, Indiana, guard - 1943 Bears
Mike Mandarino, LaSalle, center - 1944-45 Eagles
Bill McColl, Stanford, flanker - 1952-59 Bears
Dave Middleton, Auburn, flanker - 1955-1960 Lions, 1961 Vikings
Johnny Mohardt, Notre Dame, quarterback - 1921 Dayton Triangles, 1922-23 Chicago Cardinals, 1924 Racine Legion, 1925 Bears
Paul Podmajersky, Illinois, guard - 1944 Bears
Archie Roberts, Columbia, quarterback - 1967 Dolphins
Nick Sacrinty, Wake Forest, quarterback - 1947 Bears
Mike Sommer, George Washington, halfback - 1958-59, 1961 Redskins, 1959-1961 Baltimore Colts, 1963 Oakland Raiders
Ed Sutton, North Carolina, halfback - 1957-59 Redskins, 1960 Giants, 1961 Packers
Doug Swift, Amherst, linebacker - 1970-75 Dolphins
Jim Swink, Texas Christian, halfback - 1960 Dallas Texans

DENTISTS

Ed Beatty, Mississippi, center - 1955-56 49ers, 1957-1961 Steelers, 1961 Redskins
Billy Cannon, Louisiana State, halfback/tight end - 1960-63 Oilers, 1964-69 Oakland Raiders, 1970 Chiefs
Gary Cuzzo, Virginia, quarterback - 1963-66 Baltimore Colts, 1967 Saints, 1968-1971 Vikings, 1972 Cardinals
Brad Davis, Louisiana State, running back - 1975-76 Falcons
Mike Dennis, Mississippi, running back - 1968-69 Rams
Allan Donelli, Duquesne, halfback - 1941-42 Steelers, 1942 Eagles
Bill (Hoot) Flanagan, Pittsburgh, halfback - 1925-26 Pottsville Maroons
Sam Havrilak, Bucknell, running back/wide receiver - 1969-1973 Baltimore Colts, 1974 Saints
Les Horvath, Ohio State, halfback - 1947-48 Rams, 1949 Browns
Ray Kuffel, Marquette, offensive end - 1947 Bills, 1948 Chicago Rockets, 1949 Chicago Hornets
Bill Lenkaitis, Penn State, center - 1968-1970 Chargers, 1971-1981 Patriots
Ken MacAfee, Notre Dame, tight end - 1978-79 49ers
Dave Mays, Texas Southern, quarterback - 1976-77 Browns, 1978 Bills
Andy Miketa, North Carolina, center - 1954-55 Lions
Bill Osmanski, Holy Cross, fullback - 1939-1943, 1946-47 Bears
Angelo Paternoster, Georgetown, guard - 1943 Redskins
Jess Quatse, Pittsburgh, tackle - 1933 Packers, 1933-34 Steelers, 1935 Giants
George Savitsky, Pennsylvania, tackle - 1948-49 Eagles
John Siegal, Columbia, end - 1939-1943 Bears
Ed Vereb, Maryland, halfback - 1960 Redskins
John Williams, Minnesota, tackle - 1968-1971 Baltimore Colts, 1972-79 Rams

VETERINARIANS

Ted Davis, Georgia Tech, linebacker - 1964-66 Baltimore Colts, 1967-69 Saints, 1970 Dolphins
Jim Karcher, Ohio State, guard - 1936 Boston Redskins, 1937-39 Redskins
Ted Koy, Texas, running back/tight end/linebacker - 1970 Oakland Raiders, 1971-74 Bills

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Jimmy Webb, Mississippi State, defensive tackle - 1975-1980 49ers, 1981 Chargers

CHIROPRACTORS

Fred Cox, Pittsburgh, kicker - 1963-1977 Vikings

Jack Dolbin, Wake Fores wide receiver - 1975-79 Broncos

Clinton Jones, Michigan State, running back - 1967-1972 Vikings, 1973 Chargers