

INDOORS AT THE GARDEN

By Philip J. Carver

To most sports fans the Boston Garden is synonymous with the Celtics and Bruins and their numerous championships that have taken place within its hallowed halls. Legends like Russell, Orr, Bird and Bourque have all gained fame in the Garden and have called it home. Their exploits are well documented and for obvious reasons are largely responsible for the much heralded "Boston Garden Mystique". Yet to truly understand the "Mystique" one must look past the obvious events and turn to the lesser known or least remembered happenings that have taken place in the history of this wonderful building.

Since it was constructed in 1928 the Garden has been host to a number of events both sporting and otherwise. Political rallies, rock concerts and even religious ceremonies have all made their way to Causeway Street. It was these out of the ordinary events combined with the prosperous hockey and basketball seasons that have lent a certain amount of character to the grand old lady.

In the Garden's formative years Walter Brown and his family (original owners) were forced to look to other venues to help keep the fledgling arena solvent. The logical solution was to try to move popular outdoor sports indoors so they could be played year round regardless of the weather. This strategy worked in some cases and failed miserably with others. There was a men's indoor baseball league, a women's softball league, a ski tournament, the Ice Follies, tennis and, of course, boxing. The two mainstays that continually packed the Garden around this time were pro wrestling and the rodeo. This is important to note because it was this unlikely duo that would lead to the single most bizarre event in Garden lore -- INDOOR FOOTBALL.

The notion of indoor football was not unique to sports fans but it was still considered a novelty. The Boston Garden game did not do much to enhance the public's perception of this relatively new concept. Around the early 1930's the N.F.L. had staged quite a few indoor games with varying degrees of success. They proved that if properly run the indoor game was a glimpse into the future. The Boston game of 1935 would prove to be the exception; it was the complete antithesis of its N.F.L. predecessors. Instead of being a legitimate sporting event as it was billed, it became nothing more than a money-making masquerade.

The football game was the brain child of former wrestler turned wrestling promoter Joe Alvarez. It was Alvarez who convinced the Garden management that a first class exhibition could be staged and also produce a handsome profit. Once the Garden management agreed to house the event, Alvarez set out to find two teams that would generate fan interest. Considering college football was at its peak of popularity in the region it was only logical for him to make one team a compilation of local collegiate All-Stars.

The first team he gathered with relative ease included local gridgers Warren Casey and Bob Haley of Harvard, Dick Van Iderstine of Boston University and Leo Curly of Georgetown (who was the son of then Governor James Curly). Finding a team to play the All-Stars would prove to be a much more difficult task than Alvarez had anticipated. What team could rival the popularity of the local collegians? This was his quandary.

The only logical selection for a predominantly Irish town was an Irish team -- Notre Dame. Unable to secure the most popular team in the country, Alvarez did the next best thing. He decided to put together a Notre Dame Alumni team. This proved to be a public relations coup that the Boston fans would eagerly anticipate.

Alvarez, now completely in over his head, made a pledge to the city of Boston that he had no intention of keeping -- to stage the game as a benefit for the Boston Evening American's Christmas Basket Fund. The sports fans were completely unaware that a master charade was being played out before their eyes with Alvarez at the helm.

Alvarez quickly discovered that he would be unable to produce more than half of the players he was advertising so he solicited the aid of former Notre Dame star Jim Harris (at the time an assistant coach at

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Holy Cross). Harris inherited the task of recruiting fellow alumni, Frank Carideo, Marty Brill, Jim "One Play" O'Brien, Bucky O'Conner and any Knute Rockne pupil willing to come to town. Harris became concerned because most of the advertised players said they could not or would not be able to attend.

Fearing the worst he contacted his former teammate Jim Leonard who was then playing for the Philadelphia Eagles. Leonard recalls, "It was after the last game of the season at about 2 A.M., and I was playing cards in my hotel room with fellow Eagles Swede Hansen, Jim Zyntell and 'Old Man Football' George Kenneally when Harris called and asked if I would play. I said sure I'll come. Then Harris asked who can I bring with me to play. I told him I'll bring my poker buddies." The fact that Leonard was the only Notre Dame graduate playing cards that evening was inconsequential. The need to fill the roster superseded everything.

On the Monday before the game the Eagle contingent made their way from Philadelphia to New York, where they were supposed to pick up two other prospective players. One was a steady end named Frank Leahy who went on to become one of the greatest college coaches in football history; the other was Notre Dame hero John "One Play" O'Brien. Upon their arrival in New York the Eagles found only Leahy. O'Brien like numerous others had decided not to attend. It was suggested to Kenneally who was an All-Pro and ten year N.F.L. veteran that since he played the same position as O'Brien he was a logical substitution and as a result Kenneally assumed the alias of "One Play".

While the N.D alumni continued to assemble their costume party, the Garden was being converted into a make shift field. The first step in the transformation was to spread four hundred tons of loam that had been left by the Rodeo all over the Garden floor. The lights which at the time hung low were pulled high into the rafters to allow for both the passing and kicking of a football. The field's measurements were an awkward seventy yards long and thirty yards wide which would prove to be as confusing for the fans as the program.

On December 11, 1935 the game that the whole town was talking about and close to 10,000 people paid to see was set to begin. The Notre Dame Alumni team was set up accordingly:

NOTRE DAME ALUMNI

Left End - O'Brien (a.k.a.-Kenneally) & Quinlan
Left Tackle - Leahy & Donahue
Left Guard - Harris
Center - Bowdren & Greeny
Right Guard - Pivarnack
Right Tackle - Devore
Right End - Bonar
Q.B.- Banas
Backfield - Leonard, Brill, Sheeketski

Unfortunately it is not possible to ascertain the exact lineup of the All-Star team. We know who played but because of the chicanery going on behind closed doors the positions those individuals played is sketchy at best. Many of the collegians decided like most not to travel to Boston to play so their spots where filled by players like Swede Hanson and Jim Zyntell of the Philly Eagles.

Regardless of the off field difficulties the game managed to start and in the early minutes appeared as if Alvarez had done the impossible. Unfortunately as time went on the crowd realized it had been duped.

The makeshift Garden field slowly became unplayable as the game wore on. It was unstable and difficult to run on. Leonard recalls that it was "like trying to run on wet sand." The conditions made it almost impossible to run the football and both teams were forced to rely on their passing games. Early in the first quarter Marty Brill of the Alumni team took one of the few handoffs and romped downfield. After a jarring tackle, the ball popped free and was recovered by the All-Star's Van Iderstine who proceeded 30 yards in the other direction for the game's first touchdown. The extra point failed and the All-Stars led 6-0.

It was around this time that the Garden faithful realized they were being mislead and started to voice their displeasure. Alvarez felt that the novelty of watching an indoor game being played by a handful of All-Stars with a stark white football would be enough to keep the fans happy. He was mistaken. The fans

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paid hard-earned money to watch their favorite players play and instead were handed a potpourri of impostors.

Van Iderstine's touchdown was the only offensive production until late in the second quarter when Warren Casey of the All-Stars blocked a punt in Notre Dame territory to set up a field goal by the All-stars Q.B. Bob Haley from 25 yards out. That pushed the score 9-0.

The real excitement however began at halftime when the crowd who had worked themselves into a fit of rage grew even more restless. They started to chant the names of all the absent stars they had been led to believe would attend. The call for Notre Dame star Frank Carideo shook the Garden rafters. The problem was that Carideo was in Mississippi not Boston. The players sitting in their respective locker rooms also were concerned. They did not want to return to the field to face the now frenzied crowd. The players were familiar with Alvarez and his shady reputation as a promoter and were afraid he would skip out without paying for their services. They refused to resume play until they were paid in full. Somewhat reluctantly Alvarez paid the players so the game could resume and his life would be spared. (He later reneged on the trip to Bermuda that was promised to the winners.)

After a delayed halftime the game resumed and the once curious fans were transformed into an angry mob. They taunted the players and littered the field with debris, anything they could do to vent their frustrations. In the third quarter the playing conditions were so deplorable that even the players wanted to leave. The rodeo loam that was used as a playing surface was giving way under the players feet and the foul odor it emitted made it quite obvious that it's previous owners were horses.

The players continued bravely on under these harsh circumstances and did their best to entertain the ever dwindling crowd. The game was now shifting in favor of the Alumni team and once they took control they would not look back. Marty Brill hauled in a pass from Sheeketski and raced the length of the field for the alumni's first touchdown. Leonard converted the extra point and cut the All-Stars lead to two points.

In the fourth and final quarter the Irish pulled out all stops. According to Leonard, on the way from Philadelphia he and the other Eagles devised a trick play known as the Tackle Eligible. With the clock running and time almost expired they decided to spring the play on the unsuspecting All-Stars. The tackle eligible pass worked to perfection when O'Brien (Kenneally) caught the pass from Leonard and rumbled over fifty yards to the collegian's ten yard line. It could not have been scripted any better -- time running out, the under dogs in scoring position and the All-Stars stop the Alumni for three downs. Rather than risk being stuffed again the Alumni decided to try for a field goal. The only problem was no one wanted to attempt it until Leonard who was growing impatient decided he would do it. With only seconds remaining, he calmly kicked the game-winning three-pointer to defeat the All-Stars 10-9.

The game was not the rousing success that Alvarez had hoped for. In fact, it made him the laughing stock of the Boston sports scene. The following day, newspapers were more interested in the drama of people playing under aliases than the game itself. The Boston Traveler reported that "Joe Alvarez's masquerade ball is over," The Globe stated that "Greater Boston's first indoor game was a flop for every one but the promoter."

Remember how the game was billed as a benefit for a Christmas charity? Well, he grossed well over ten thousand dollars and donated only nine hundred of it. He claimed whatever was left went to payroll costs.

Over the past 60 years the Boston Garden has given us some of the greatest memories in sports history and has proven to be a gracious host to every thing from the Stanley Cup to the N.B.A. Championship game. The best lesson we have learned from the grand old dame is that her cozy confines are no place for football.