

"THE GREATEST TONELLI OF THEM ALL"

By Mike Isaacs
(from Pioneer Press, May 26, 1994)

Mario "Motts" Tonelli is "the greatest Tonelli of them all."

That's the way the Skokie resident is described in "The Amazing Story of the Tonelli Family" in which author Bill Tonelli drove 12,000 miles across the country interviewing people who share his last name.

"From the start, one of my goals was to see what Tonellis had contributed to America, and as soon as I found (Mario) in my newspaper clip searches I knew he'd be our shining star," says Bill Tonelli in the book, which is due out in stores soon.

But the story of "Motts" Tonelli is worth far more than the seven pages he is allotted in this amusing and whimsical read. Tonelli is 78 years old, but when you first ask his age, he says, "38," and then lets loose with a broad and exuberant smile.

In his 78 years Tonelli has lived many lives -- all of which are extraordinary and fascinating -- and you can't help but be amazed at how one man has done so much.

Call Tonelli a star Notre Dame football player, a gifted professional athlete, a World War II prisoner of war survivor, a feisty politician who bucked the odds -- and you'd be right on counts.

There's nothing that appears old about Tonelli, especially as he pulls, up vivid memories of event and experiences that have shaped an unforgettable life.

"I'm still here," he says reflecting over all that has happened to him. "I'm proud of it. I'm proud that I'm still here."

Tonelli's mother and father immigrated from northern Italy, and young Mario grew up on the north side of Chicago. More specifically, he grew up in Chase Park where he found sports -- or sports found him.

"My mom and dad didn't know what sports were all about," Tonelli says. "But we didn't have a TV back then and I had to do some thing. I started playing basketball and track."

In high school at DePaul Academy, he was a handsome star athlete who won 13 or 14 letters. Today, you would call him a jock.

"Is that what they call it now?" he says not expecting an answer. "I was too busy to have any dates then and DePaul was a school for boys. I just played sports. That's practically all I did."

His mother slowly came to understand the talent her son possessed. But his father never did -- not because he was disappointed in his son but because he just didn't know.

"I think dad thought sports were a waste of time," Tonelli recalls. "I always used to carry a little bag with my clothes and my dad one day asked me what was inside it. He thought it was burglar tools or something. In Italy, he had very little education and this was all new to him. "The star fullback for DePaul could have gone to many colleges on a scholarship. His first choice was not the gold dome in Indiana, but the sunny beaches of California.

"Southern California was so exciting when I went out there," he says. "When I saw the glamour of that whole world, I knew it was where I wanted to go to college."

But his parents thought California was too far to travel so they all decided on Notre Dame.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 17, No. 5 (1995)

Tonelli was coached by Elmer Layden, one of the famous Four Horsemen. He was a star there scoring a game-winning touchdown against Southern California -- the college where he originally wanted to go -- and helping to lead the Fighting Irish to a national ranking.

"I was a good baloplayer," he admits but only after coaxing. "But it wasn't like it is today. When we won the championship (in 1938), we got a little gold football that my wife later put on her charm bracelet and that was it. We didn't realize how much it meant back then."

Successful Notre Dame football players were expected to go into a career of coaching at that time. Coach Layden told Motts that a school in the east was interested in hiring him as coach for \$3,000 a year.

When I told him I was going to play pro ball, he got very mad," Tonelli says. "It was a big disappointment because Notre Dame men go into coaching. It was just expected."

Tonelli now pauses in his story and then digresses -- like a running back abruptly changing his course down field.

He talks about how things were better then -- no drugs, no TV. You get the feeling he is always talking about the state of things but never with the bitterness of age, only out of appreciation for what he has lived through.

"I love this country," he says. "This country is good and I'm grateful for the life I've had."

It was an exciting life. Exciting when he played on Notre Dame and then became a professional football player for the Chicago Cardinals. He made between \$3,000 and \$7,000 a year and he signed a three-year contract.

But he only played one year. In 1941, with war just around the corner, he signed up for the army. He knew he would be drafted sooner or later and wanted to get his year requirement out of the way.

"I didn't feel bad about it," he says. "I owed it to the country. I wanted to get it over with and I felt it was only right that I should serve like anyone else."

Tonelli was stationed at Clark Field in the Philippines, the biggest air base in the Pacific, when Pearl Harbor was bombed. When the Japanese bombed Clark Field, his world changed forever.

"I was just coming out of the mess hall and I saw the formation of the bombers," he says. "At first, someone thought they were American planes but they weren't. They bombed the fields."

Men were jumping into barracks and ditches for cover -- to save their lives. He remembers lying on the ground, shooting at Japanese planes that were swooping down causing death and destruction everywhere.

But far worse was still to come.

Tonelli was part of the infamous Bataan Death March that began six days after American troops surrendered in 1942 to avoid certain annihilation. He then survived a 60-mile march at the hands of his captors while many died around him.

"As I get older, I become a little disturbed by people who forget," he says, taking another time-out in his story. "People who forget what we went through. They don't know Bataan. They don't know that the Japanese thought they'd come in here and clean up in a matter of days. Many people never even heard of the Bataan March."

The march itself lasted seven days in hot tropical sun -- from Mariveles in the south of to railroad sidings in San Fernando.

"For seven days, we didn't have any water," Tonelli says. "If you went to a stream to drink, they would shoot you. Bodies were all over the place. If you didn't go on, you'd be shot or bayoneted."

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 17, No. 5 (1995)

As a professional football player, Tonelli was in good shape. He is convinced it helped save his life. But he still faced horrors along that march that have never left him. He remembers marching toward a human head on a pole with bugs and flies all over it. He remembers heads cut off by Japanese aggressors. He remembers people fighting to keep up the pace so they would not be killed.

"If I told everything, no one would believe it," he says in a quieter voice. "It was that awful."

When he arrived at the first of five prison camps that would house him for the next three-and-a-half years, he was told that he would never go home again.

They said we disgraced America because we surrendered," Tonelli says. "In that first camp, we were burying 20 to 30 guys a day. You could smell the dysentery everywhere. I can still smell it today."

Tonelli has clear memories of the torture and inhumane treatment in those camps of more than 50 years ago. He remembers having to do push-ups over a latrine until he fell into it. He remembers being fed one ball of rice three times a day for each meal. He remembers starvation, exhaustion and disease.

At one camp, he worked in the rice fields and developed a parasite. He was one of the lucky ones, however, because prisoners caught diseases all the time. Some got ulcers and had sores all over their bodies.

"Sometimes, you wished it were the end," he admits. "You always had a desire to live but sometimes you thought those who died in Bataan were the lucky ones."

Later, Tonelli spent 93 days on a boat that went from Manila to Japan. He slept on the bottom level on a pile of salt with other prisoners. Every day, five-gallon buckets would be dropped to the bottom so the prisoners could relieve themselves. Food was delivered the same way and Tonelli was never sure whether it was the same buckets that were used.

Japan is where Tonelli was finally liberated nearly a year later. American planes had been bombing the area at night for weeks so the prisoners suspected the end was near, he says.

"We couldn't believe it when it was finally over. They dropped a carton of cigarettes that had writing on it. It said, 'Hostilities have ceased. We'll see you soon.'"

When Tonelli entered the war, he weighed 210 pounds. When he left, he weighed under 100 pounds and was sick with disease.

"When I came back, there was no celebration," he says. "My mother, dad, brother, sister and wife were at the station. That was all."

But he never forgets. On holidays such as Memorial Day, he remembers even more. He thinks of the many men -- no, the boys -- he saw killed at the hands of the enemy years ago. And what makes him most sad is that others do not take the time to remember, too.

"Memorial Day originally was for the dead soldiers," he says, his voice now quivering. "Today, people are relaxing. People don't think of the day as it's supposed to be. It's just a day off. But it's really about the sadness of young guys being killed. That's what I wish we would all take time to remember."

After recovering from his four hellish war years, Tonelli was able to create a new life. Against all odds, he ran for Cook County Commissioner and became the first Republican at that time to win the post. He served eight years in all.

He then served as Cook County's top environmental protection official until he retired six years ago. He says he stayed on too long -- his only real regret in life.

"I feel I've had a better life than a lot of the people who came back from the war," he says. "In fact, a lot of fellas never made it back."

People have told Tonelli that he should write a book.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 17, No. 5 (1995)

In his Skokie home, he has started preparing for it by gathering a large number of artifacts, and pictures and documents. They tell his story as well as his own words. Here is a photo of him shaking hands with the governor; there is a black and-white shot of him in football uniform in Comiskey Park. Here he is -- pale, thin, in a prison camp having lost so much weight. The eyes are empty, the face withdrawn, the spark of life he would later rediscover practically nonexistent.

He holds up the connection of medals he won after the war. He pulls out cards he sent to his family while he was a prisoner of war. The cards say that he is being treated well and doing fine, but that information was provided by the Japanese, he notes.

The greatest Tonelli doesn't reflect on such events with bitterness. He is only sad because he wants things to be better here; he wants people to remember the way things really were.

In fact, if anything, the greatest Tonelli of them all feels like the luckiest Tonelli of them all.

"I count my blessings every day," he says. "Every day I get up I do that. I look in the mirror and I am somewhat amazed I'm still here. I just thank the lord for bringing me to another day."