

GINO MARCHETTI

by Don Smith

Ernest and Maria Marchetti always had the somewhat normal parental fear that their son, Gino, would be hurt playing football.

"Whatever you do, Gino," the elder Marchetti used to say, stay out of the other boys' way, so they no hurt you."

Every quarterback who played in the National Football League in the 1950s and early 60s wishes like everything Gino had followed his father's advice.

But Gino Marchetti, 6-4, 245 pounds and extremely talented, didn't listen to his father and Gino wound up instead as "the greatest defensive end in pro football history," as selected by a special panel of experts in 1969. Many will say that a better pass rusher never lived.

It is an irony that Ernest Marchetti, who had shunned opportunities to see his son play in high school, college and the early years of pro football, finally did tune in on the national telecast of the 1958 NFL championship game between Gino's team, the Baltimore Colts, and the New York Giants.

The game turned out to be, in many eyes, "the greatest game ever played," and the Colts won, 23-17, in overtime. Gino, however, wasn't around at the finish. He had suffered a severely broken ankle late in the fourth period while making a critical tackle of the Giants' Frank Gifford. Marchetti's teammate, 300- pound Gene (Big Daddy) Lipscomb, fell on top of Gino after the tackle to cause the injury.

Marchetti's stop proved to be a key play for it ended the Giants' drive and gave Baltimore the ball. From there, the Colts went on to tie the game in the final seconds of regulation play and then win in overtime. Gino stayed on the sidelines until the game was tied but was taken to the dressing room in the overtime period.

"The docs were afraid the crowd might trample me if we scored," Gino explained. "I was stretched out on the table when I heard the guys coming in. I could tell they won, they were all whooping it up. Right then, that ankle stopped hurting!"

Many felt that the injury would prematurely end Marchetti's brilliant career. As it turned out, all it did was prevent him from setting an all-time record for Pro Bowl appearances.

The record book now shows that Gino played in 10 Pro Bowl games in an 11-year stretch from 1955 to 1965 and missed only the 1959 game. He had already been chosen to play in the game when he suffered his injury. During the same period, Gino was all-NFL seven times, missing only 1963 in the 1957-1964 span.

Even in his final full season in 1964, Marchetti continued to perform with the same enthusiasm that had characterized his play throughout his NFL career.

Gino was an all-around brilliant defender, but he was best known for his vicious pass rushing techniques. Marchetti was known for clean, but hard play and was a particular terror on third-down, obvious-passing situations. When opponents double- teamed, and sometimes triple-teamed him, that only served to make the rest of the Colts' rush line more effective.

Marchetti was also adept at stopping the running play. He could recover quickly to close the inside holes and he could swing wide to stymie end sweeps. The Colts captain through much of his career, he was highly respected by his teammates and a tremendous favorite with Baltimore's rabid fandom.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 18, No. 5 (1996)

All of this was a remarkable accomplishment for the product of an Italian immigrant family who never really showed much football talent until he was a senior at Antioch, Calif., high school. He was the Most Valuable Player as a high school senior but a year later, at 17, he was serving in the U. S. Army and fighting in the pivotal "Battle of the Bulge" in Belgium.

After the war, he organized the Antioch Hornets, a semi-pro town team, and this was important to the Marchetti story in that he attracted the attention of a Modesto, Calif., junior college scout. After a year at Modesto, Gino was sought out by the University of San Francisco whose coach, Joe Kuharich, was building the foundations of a football powerhouse.

At USF, Marchetti developed into the finest tackle on the West Coast, winning all-coast and all-Catholic honors in his senior season in 1951. One of his USF teammates, halfback Ollie Matson, will be joining Marchetti as a fellow 1972 enshrinee of the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Gino's pro career started discouragingly because of the unique team situation that developed right after Marchetti's second round selection by the New York Yanks in the 1952 draft. The Yanks were transferred to Dallas for the 1952 season. Then the hapless Texans folded after one year and Marchetti's contract was assigned to Baltimore, which was setting up shop again after the original Colts had folded after the 1950 season.

The new Colts were a second-division team but, as they built toward championship status, so too did Marchetti develop into super-star proportions. He played in his first Pro Bowl after his first season in Baltimore, just a mere hint of the great career that was ahead of him.

Marchetti was always determined to retire before he lost his great effectiveness and he tried to quit after the 1963 season, when he had also served as a defensive line coach for the Colts. But the Colts had high championship hopes in 1964 and they coaxed Gino out of retirement. After the 1964 campaign, he retired again.

Almost two years later, in November, 1966, he was asked to play again when the Colts, in title contention, suffered heavy injuries on their defensive line. So Gino came back. He played only four games and, for the only time in the 161 times he answered the gun in the NFL, he wasn't super-effective. In one way, coming out of retirement was a mistake. In another way, it showed just what kind of a guy Gino was -- and is.

"As far as I am concerned, I am not making a comeback," Gino explained. "I'm doing them a favor. "Everything I have I owe to them and if they think I can help, I have to give it a try."

Besides the more obvious advantages pro football had provided for Gino, he was also referring to the help Colts owner Carroll Rosenbloom had given him midway in his career when he insisted that Gino start in some type of business and then loaned him the cash to get started.

Gino and his associates started a chain of quick-order restaurants and now there are more than 300 of them. Now a millionaire, Gino also owns a highly successful restaurant in Wayne, Pa.

Unlike many great athletes who can never quite let go, Gino has been content to concentrate on his business and more or less stay away from the game to which he contributed so greatly. But of course, that's not totally possible.

His election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame is ample proof that people can't forget Gino Marchetti!