

# WELLINGTON MARA

## A Giant

By Joe Horrigan

Few, if any members of the Pro Football Hall of Fame would ever admit that they enjoyed sitting on the bench. But on a cold October 18, 1925, the bench was the seat of preference for one future Hall of Famer. On that day, Wellington Mara was happy to ride the pine as his father Timothy J. Mara, debuted his New York Giants football team to a home-town crowd of 25,000 curious onlookers at the Polo Grounds. After all, what nine-year-old boy wouldn't have been thrilled to sit alongside the likes of Jim Thorpe, Bob "Nasty" Nash and Century Mustead. That game, 71 years ago, marked the start of Wellington T. Mara's life-long devotion to pro football and the National Football League.

Mara, whose nickname is "Duke," has done everything with the Giants from his first job as a training camp ballboy to the on- the-field operations to scouting and general organization, and eventually to the front office executive capacity where he now serves as President and Co-Chief Executive Officer. The only interruption in Mara's Giants' career was World War II when he served with distinction for more than three years in the Navy. Lieutenant Commander Mara saw action in both the Atlantic and Pacific Theaters.

Although more than 16,000 men have played, coached, or served pro football in an administrative capacity, only 189 have been rewarded with Hall of Fame induction. Mara not only joins that elite few, but also becomes the first and only son to join his father as a Hall of Fame enshrinee. The senior Mara was elected to the Hall as a charter member in 1963.

Pro football in the 1920s was a risky proposition. Tim Mara, a bookie -- then a legal profession -- purchased the New York franchise in the fledging National Football League for a reported \$500. "Pop knew absolutely nothing about pro football," Wellington remembers. "But he always said, 'An empty store with two chairs in it in New York are worth a few hundred dollars.'" Friends told Mara he was crazy to attempt to field a pro team in New York. Even Al Smith, the governor of New York, advised him to get out of pro football. "Al Smith was a good friend of pop's," Wellington recalled. "He advised pop to get out while he still had his means, but pop said, 'I can't Al. My boys love it too much.' The reason he kept it all going was Jack and me."

The Giants were a family love affair from the start. As young Wellington enjoyed the team's inaugural home game from the bench, his 17-year-old brother Jack ran the sidelines working the down markers. Their mother, Lizette Mara, cheered from the stands but in reality worried more about her nine-year-old son's health and comfort than the outcome of the game. "I had a cold and it was not a warm day," Wellington remembers. Mrs. Mara observed that the Giants bench was on the shaded side of the field while the visitor's bench was in the sun. "She talked to my father about it after the game and told him that he should move the Giants bench to the sunny side of the field, where it was warmer. He did that for the next game, and its been that way ever since." Mara remained a regular on the Giants bench until 1951, when he decided that, "Maybe since I was 35 years old it was time to go upstairs."

In all quarters of professional football there is a deep and profound respect for Wellington as one of the most knowledgeable men in the game. His extensive experience in organization, player personnel, trading and drafting have helped lead the Giants to 16 NFL Divisional championships and six NFL championships, including victories in Super Bowls XXI and XXV. "He has devoted his whole life to the game in a most unselfish way," offered former Giants' star, Frank Gifford.

Even as a student at Fordham University, young Mara compiled information on hundreds of college athletes. In 1934, he personally scouted and recommended to his father future Hall of Fame running back Tuffy Leemans. The story goes that, while vacationing in Washington, D.C., Mara, then just 18 years old,

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attended a football game between George Washington University and the University of Alabama. There he witnessed a fine performance by the relatively unknown Leemans, a George Washington sophomore. Mara reported back to his father that Leemans was a prospect that the Giants must sign once he was eligible. Two years later, Wellington returned to Washington to sign Tuffy to a contract. Leemans, reportedly, was shocked to see someone that young handling such an important deal. "If I'm remembered for nothing else, I'd like to be remembered for discovering Tuffy Leemans," Mara once said. "It's a good thing the Redskins didn't move to Washington until 1937 or we could never have gotten Tuffy."

After graduating from Fordham in 1937, Wellington joined his father and brother as a part-time assistant to the president. His father wanted him to go on to law school, but Wellington had other plans. "I had skipped the fifth grade," Wellington says, "so I said to my father, 'Let me have this year with the team.' His father agreed and Wellington never left.

"All the fellows were my age," says Mara of the 1937 Giants "I was close to them, part of them." In fact he even roomed for a time with Ward Cuff, the team's star running back. It was the players who nicknamed him "Duke" because they knew he had been named after the Duke of Wellington, a man Tim Mara called "the fightingest of all Irishmen." The name "Duke" was immortalized when it became the name of the official NFL ball in 1941.

In 1938, Mara began to work full-time with the Giants as club secretary. The owner's son was responsible for everything from travel arrangements to purchasing game equipment to evaluating talent and negotiating contracts. He even filmed the team's games with a 16mm camera his parents gave him as a Christmas present and ran the projector during team meetings.

From 1945 until 1965, first as the club's vice-president and secretary and later simply as vice-president, Mara was responsible for the Giants' football decisions, while brother Jack handled the business side. Following Jack's death in 1965, Wellington, assumed the title of president. From 1966 through 1973, he successfully ran both the team's football and business operations. However, the strains of owner-management and his involvement in league affairs that kept him away from his team more and more, caused Mara to relinquish his day-to-day football responsibilities to others beginning in 1974. "These days I'm pretty much a businessman," he confessed during a 1978 interview.

During his seven decades with the team, Wellington Mara has been the steady force that has guided the NFL's marquee franchise through the good times and the bad. Perhaps the most difficult football situation he and his family faced occurred in 1946, soon after his return from military service.

"On the Saturday night before the championship game we were at our training camp at Bear Mountain, just up the Hudson River from New York," said Mara, "and William O'Dwyer, the mayor of New York called us and said there was trouble and for us to come down to the city early the next morning." Giants coach Steve Owen, Wellington, Jack and Tim Mara, along with then-NFL Commissioner Bert Bell met with O'Dwyer at his home. There they were provided information indicating that a notorious gambler had approached Giants back Merle Hapes in an attempt to fix the title game.

Phone taps confirmed that Hapes turned down the offer, but fearful that he would appear guilty, Hapes decided not to inform league or team officials. He did, however, discuss the situation with teammate Frank Filchock. After considering the evidence, it was agreed that the game should go on as scheduled. Even though Filchock threw two touchdown passes, the Giants fell 24-14 to the Bears. Following the game, Bell ruled that knowledge of a fix was as bad as participation and he banned both players for life. Filchock's suspension was, however, later lifted.

Perhaps the most difficult personnel decision Mara ever made came seven years later following the conclusion of the 1953 season when he and Jack had to inform Owen he was through as Giants coach after 23 years and 151 victories. The Maras offered their long-time friend "any front-office job he wanted," but Owen was bitter about the decision. For nearly ten years he refused to talk to either brother. Then in December 1963, just six months before he died, the Maras convinced Owen to return to the Giants as a team scout.

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The mid-1950s through the early 1960s were the Giants' "Golden Era" as the team played in six NFL championship games (1956, 1958, 1959, 1961, 1962, 1963). Jim Lee Howell, Owen's successor, entrusted much of his coaching responsibilities to two assistants, Vince Lombardi on offense and Tom Landry on defense.

"Wellington knew Vince from his days at Fordham," recalled Landry. "He got Vince from Earl Blaik's staff at Army. So Wellington was responsible for putting together that staff (Howell as head coach, Lombardi as offensive coach and Landry as defensive coach) and it worked out extremely well," Landry humbly states.

"It was the best of times," Mara once remarked. "Never has so much genius been on one team." In 1956, the Giants captured their first league title in nearly two decades when they defeated the Chicago Bears 47-7. Two years later the team lost to the Baltimore Colts 23-17, in the epic overtime game that brought pro football nationwide notoriety through television. "Six out of eight years, and in 1957 and 1960 we were the team to beat," Mara proudly recalls.

A key to the Giants' championships of the 1950s and early-'60s were trades engineered by Mara that brought future Hall of Fame members Y.A. Tittle and Andy Robustelli as well as other standouts like Del Shofner, Dick Modzelewski, Joe Walton, and Pat Summerall to the team. Draft choices Gifford, Sam Huff, and Rosey Brown also went on to become Hall of Famers.

"In my years there (as a player, 1950-55; as a coach, 1954-59), Wellington always headed the Giants organization," remembers Landry. "He was very active in the trades that built the great teams of the '50s. Because of the contribution of the Giants to professional football, in the late-'50s, football was, for the first time, a sport of national interest."

Pro football's national success would have been seriously threatened had Mara not been conciliatory in many of the progressive steps that has produced the NFL's present successful format. In 1961, when commissioner Pete Rozelle asked for teams to pool their television revenues and share equally, in the best interests of the have-not clubs, Mara went along, even though he had the most to lose since New York was the largest market.

He again demonstrated his unselfishness in 1966, when it came time for the NFL and upstart American Football League to make peace after years of full-scale war. Mara was directly challenged by the placement of a rival AFL franchise in New York. This coupled with the retirements of many of his key players led to a period of decline for the Giants. "I think when the bottom started to drop out, we didn't recognize it," Mara recalled. "We didn't readjust our thinking or rebuild quick enough. Part of that had to do with the AFL's Jets," he continued. "We just didn't want to concede to them for a year or two to be better over the long run."

The battle between the AFL and NFL was suicidal warfare. Although Mara felt the NFL would eventually outlast the AFL, he feared other NFL clubs might unduly suffer, so he willingly agreed to a merger and the sharing of his heretofore exclusive territory.

"There have been several significant moments in the development of the National Football League," Rozelle once stated. "Two of the most important were when the league agreed to share television revenues and when the AFL merged with the NFL. Neither one of those events would have occurred without the support of Wellington and his family."

Mara always maintained a "league first" approach to his business. And, his multi-talents have long been respected within the structure of the NFL as evidenced by his being named to a myriad of key committees over the years. From 1971 to 1977, he was Chairman of the Executive Committee of the NFL Management Council, the labor negotiating arm of the NFL, and it was under his leadership that the NFL's labor peace of the ensuing five years was achieved.

In 1984, Mara succeeded the late George Halas as president of the National Football Conference. It was an appropriate move considering that, of all the NFL owners, only Halas was involved with his team at as

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many levels as Mara. Still active in league affairs, Mara currently serves as a member of the Realignment, Hall of Fame, and Player-Club Operations committees, as well as the Executive Committee of the Management Council.

A soft-spoken man, Mara, uncharacteristically responded to a journalist in 1971, who questioned the Giants' decision to play their home games in the new Giants Stadium, located across the Hudson River in New Jersey. "The son of a bookmaker," the critic wrote. "What else can you expect from an Irishman named Wellington?"

"I'll tell you what you can expect from an Irishman named Wellington whose father was a bookmaker," Mara launched back during a benefit luncheon. "You can expect that anything he says or writes may be repeated, aloud, in your own home, in front of your children. You can believe that he was taught to love and respect all mankind -- but to fear no man. And you can believe that his two abiding ambitions are that he pass on to his family the true richness of the inheritance he received from his father, the bookmaker, the knowledge and love and fear of God, and second, to give you (the fans) and Alex (then-Giants' coach Alex Webster) a Super Bowl winner."