

Lou Rymkus – “The Battler”

By Kevin Carroll

On January 3, 1960, Bud Adams hired 40-year-old Lou Rymkus as the first head coach of the Houston Oilers. The son of Lithuanian immigrants, Rymkus grew up in the coal-mining town of Royalton, Illinois, where people were a tough breed accustomed to hard work. One of the toughest was Lou Rymkus.

In 1934 the Depression forced the Royalton mines to close. Unemployed, his mother, widowed when Rymkus was seven, moved with her two sons to Chicago, where she worked in the city's stockyards while Rymkus did manual labor jobs on the south side.

Rymkus attended Chicago's Tilden Tech High School where he excelled in football and wrestling. His gridiron talent caught the eye of Notre Dame coach Elmer Layden and, in 1939, Rymkus departed for South Bend on a football scholarship.

In 1941 Frank Leahy succeeded Layden as the Irish head coach. Under the tutelage of Assistant Coach Johnny Druze, Rymkus mastered pass blocking and tackling. The 6-foot-4-inch, 240-pound tackle soon became a force to be reckoned with. In a bitterly contested Georgia Tech game that year, Rymkus substituted for Captain Paul Lillis, who was sidelined by a concussion. Shortly before halftime, Rymkus was gashed in the upper lip by an elbow. With blood running down his chin and soaking his jersey front, Rymkus went to the sidelines only long enough to receive 14 stitches to close the wound. Aided by Rymkus' blocking and relentless defensive play, the Irish defeated Tech 20 to 0. Walking off the field after the game, Rymkus spied Coach Leahy approaching with his hand extended. Shaking the blood-splattered tackle's hand Leahy said, "Lou Rymkus, you're a real battler!" (The nickname would eventually stick, thanks to a newspaper story in 1946 that dubbed him the "Battler.")

In the spring of Rymkus' junior year, Ed "Moose" Krause joined Leahy's coaching staff. Krause had been an All-American basketball player at Notre Dame and a standout lineman under Knute Rockne, and would later serve as the school's athletic director. But in 1942, on a windy April afternoon, Coach Krause decided to test the mettle of every tackle on the squad by personally engaging in a live blocking drill. Like Rymkus, Krause too was a Lithuanian from Chicago's south side.

When Rymkus' turn came, he assumed a three-point stance opposite the new assistant coach. At the count of one, Rymkus was to rush past Krause, who was playing the role of an offensive blocker. On the designated count, the two giants collided, and the sound of popping leather echoed across the field. The grunting and pushing against each other ended only when an elbow landed directly on Rymkus' nose. As he shook his head to clear his vision, blood trickled from a nostril.

"Hey, Coach, let's try that again!" Rymkus requested.

The Lithuanian giants once again assumed their stances. This time Rymkus clenched his right fist and on the snap count launched it like a missile at Krause's "family jewels." Upon the fist's impact, Krause dropped to a knee, the breath rushing from his lungs so fast that it made a whoosing sound. Rymkus glided past the fallen coach. Seconds later a pained but determined Krause rose and beckoned, "Okay, next man!"

After this incident, Krause and Rymkus became close, lifelong friends.

Upon graduating Rymkus asked Coach Leahy if he had any advice for a young man considering a coaching career. "Lou," said Leahy, "get strong, mean defensive linemen who want to tackle the quarterback and all of your coaching prayers will be answered."

The young graduate was to play a lot of football, however, before entering the coaching ranks. In 1943 Rymkus signed a \$2,000 contract to play for the Washington Redskins. The great Sammy Baugh led the Redskins. Yet, Rymkus soon made a name for himself by blocking a punt and intercepting a pass on successive Sundays and returning both for touchdowns.

Like millions of other Americans, World War II preempted Rymkus' career. He spent 1944 and 1945 in the Navy training recruits at Great Lakes Naval Station and later serving at Pearl Harbor. It was during this time that Paul Brown offered Rymkus a contract for \$4,000 to play with his Cleveland Browns. The Browns were to begin play in 1946 in the new All-American Football Conference (AAFC). Rymkus phoned Redskins' owner George Preston Marshall to inform him of Cleveland's offer. "Why would you want to play with those renegades?" Marshall demanded. Believing that the new league would soon fold, Marshall offered Rymkus only his same 1943 salary upon his return from active duty. Rymkus signed with the Browns.

In the summer of 1946 Rymkus kissed his wife, Betty, goodbye and hitchhiked the 130 miles from Nappanee, Indiana to the Browns' inaugural training camp in Bowling Green, Ohio. That season Rymkus tore cartilage in his knee, an injury that often caused the knee to lock. But Rymkus didn't tell the coaches. Instead, Trainer Wally Bock showed Rymkus how to manipulate the knee so it would unlock and he could resume playing. By using this procedure as often as six times a game, Rymkus was able to finish every contest playing on both offense and defense. "In those days if you didn't play on Sunday, you weren't there on Monday," explains Rymkus.

Like most coaches, Paul Brown believed that pre-game day practices should be merely limbering-up sessions. After many pre-game practices a concerned Lou Rymkus would approach his head coach and confess, "Paul, I'm not sure that I'm physically ready to play tomorrow. Maybe I'd better stay out and run more laps?"

"You're ready, Louis. Now take it in," was Brown's standing reply.

The coach would then watch his giant tackle stride glumly from the field until he disappeared into the locker room. Brown was right. Lou Rymkus was always ready to play on game day.

As a defensive tackle, Rymkus instinctively read trap blocks and would slide to his inside often demolishing both blocker and ball carrier. He felt he wasn't doing his job if he didn't punish a running back whenever the opportunity presented itself. One day against the 49ers, Rymkus tackled Norm Standlee just after the fullback faked taking a handoff. In the process Rymkus rolled Standlee around several times in the infield dirt of Cleveland's Municipal Stadium. He then feigned surprise.

"Norm, that was a great fake!" said Rymkus. "I really thought you had the ball."

"Go on, you big [%&#@*!]" snapped Standlee. "You knew I didn't have it."

"No, Norm, you really faked me out," replied Rymkus.

Rymkus then chuckled as he trotted back to the huddle.

As great a defensive player as Rymkus was, Paul Brown believed that he was even more valuable on offense blocking for Otto Graham and Marion Motley. In 1948 Brown decided that Rymkus would only play offense. The decision did not sit well with Rymkus. "What's the matter, Paul?" asked Rymkus. "Don't you think I can still play 60 minutes?"

Rymkus' Cleveland teams won five consecutive league championships between 1946 and 1950 -- four in the AAFC and the last in the Browns' maiden NFL season. After Cleveland's loss to the Los Angeles Rams in the 1951 championship game, Rymkus decided a change was in order. In six seasons with the Browns, Rymkus had never missed a game, and more incredibly, had never missed a practice due to injury or illness. But football's physical demands were beginning to take their toll on the 32 year old. In need of another knee operation and sporting a perpetually sore elbow, Rymkus decided to leave the game while he was on top and pursue a career coaching the game he loved.

In 1953 Rymkus began his pro coaching career as Bob Snyder's lone assistant with the Calgary Stampeders of the Canadian League. The next season Rymkus joined Lisle Blackbourn's staff with the Green Bay Packers. From 1954 to 1957 Rymkus developed talented linemen like center Jim Ringo, and tackles Forrest Gregg and Bob Skoronski. Unfortunately, Rymkus would not be around to see his coaching efforts reach fruition. After the 1957 season Blackbourn and most of his staff were dismissed. The lone remaining assistant, Ray "Scooter" McLean, assumed the Packer coaching reins the next

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season only to see Green Bay win but one of twelve contests. Vince Lombardi was hired as the Packer coach in 1959.

In 1958 Rymkus joined Sid Gillman's Los Angeles Rams' staff. Gillman had guided Los Angeles to the Western Conference title in 1955, his first year as the Rams' coach. But over the next two seasons the team slipped to records of four-and-eight and six-and-six. Stabilizing the offensive line, Rymkus helped the Rams rebound to a record of eight wins and four losses.

During the 1959 season, however, an icy relationship developed between Gillman and Rymkus. This antagonism festered until developing into a bitter rivalry between the later Rymkus-coached Houston Oilers and the Gillman-led Chargers of the American Football League.

A standout tackle for two of the game's greatest coaches, Leahy and Brown, and with seven years experience as an assistant coach at the pro level, Rymkus now became an attractive head coaching candidate for several AFL teams which were to begin play in 1960. However, it was Houston Oilers' owner Bud Adams who finally landed the "Battler." Rymkus signed a 3-year contract at an annual salary of \$15,500.

Organizing a coaching staff that consisted of ex-Cleveland teammate Mac Speedie, Wally Lemm, Walt Schlinkman and Fred Wallner, Rymkus built a 1960 Oilers' team from scratch that won ten and lost four. On New Year's Day, 1961, before a sellout crowd of 32,183 at Houston's Jeppesen Stadium, the Oilers defeated Sid Gillman's Los Angeles Chargers 24 to 16 to win the first AFL Championship. It was an especially sweet victory for Rymkus.

The Oilers' offensive lineup consisted of George Blanda at quarterback, running backs Billy Cannon, Dave Smith and Charley Tolar. Bill Groman, Charlie Hennigan, John Carson, and John White manned the end spots. The front line consisted of tackles Al Jamison, Rich Michael, and John Simerson, guards Hogan Wharton and Bob Talamini, and center George Belotti. On defense, Don Floyd, Dan Lanphear, and Dalva Allen played ends, while George Shirkey, Jerry Helluin, and Captain Orville Trask manned the tackles. The linebacking corps was comprised of Dennit Morris, Mike Dukes, Doug Cline and Al Witcher, who played several games both ways as a tight end and linebacker. Jim Norton, Mark Johnston, Bobby Gordon, Tony Banfield, and Julian Spence comprised the Oilers' secondary.

Despite winning the AFL Championship in 1960, Oilers' owner Bud Adams fired Rymkus as coach only four games into the 1961 season. (It should be noted that the Oilers went on to win the 1961 AFL Championship too.) While Rymkus would later serve as an assistant coach with the Detroit Lions, Super Bowl V Champion Baltimore Colts, and the 1965 Oilers, he would never again hold another head coaching job in the NFL.

When ex-Oilers' linebacker Al Witcher was asked about his old coach thirty-five years after their championship season, Witcher replied, "No one ever understood or coached the game of football any better than Lou Rymkus."