

REMEMBERING GENE BRITO

Based on articles by Jim Campbell and Robert L. Cannon

John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon each sought the U.S. Presidency in 1960. In the public's mind they are forever stamped as opposites. Although they were political opponents, they both agreed that football was a great game. They both rooted for the Washington Redskins – not necessarily an easy task during the 1950s. And, according to pronouncements by both, Gene Brito was their favorite Redskins player.

They were not alone.

Born in 1925, Gene was the son of an athlete; his father, Gene Joseph Brito, boxed professionally. He was born and raised in Los Angeles where he graduated from Abraham Lincoln High School, apparently without setting the football world on fire.

However, the real world was on fire in those days as World War II raged. Gene took his diploma into the service where he became a paratrooper. He fought in the Philippines as the United States overcame the determined efforts of the Japanese.

By 1947, he was back in civilian life but still wearing uniforms – the athletic uniforms of Loyola University of Los Angeles (now Loyola Marymount). He starred in football, baseball, basketball, and track and field. From his freshman year through his senior year of 1950, he started as a two-way end in every football game Loyola played. His last team finished 8-1, and Brito was named to the Independent College All-Coast Team. Nevertheless, when he graduated in 1951, he planned to become a teacher.

The Redskins waited until the 17th Round of the 1951 Draft before tagging Brito. At age 25, he was older than most rookies today, but in the early 1950s, many players had spent time in the service as he had. He decided to give pro football a shot.

As a rookie, he was used mostly on offense where he caught a respectable 24 passes for 313 yards. He followed that with 21 receptions the next year but began seeing more time on defense. By 1953, he was a defensive specialist and people were beginning to notice. After the '53 season, he was named to the Pro Bowl.

Unfortunately, the Redskins didn't find him irreplaceable. A contract dispute in 1954 sent him to the Canadian Football League for a year. When he returned in 1955, he was ready to begin winning All-NFL honors. The AP tabbed him for a first team slot from 1955 through 1957, UP in 1955-56 and 1958, and the NEA from 1955 through 1958. In all four seasons, he was named to the Pro Bowl. All this despite the fact that the Redskins had only one winning season during the span.

At 230 pounds, Brito was on the light side for a defensive end, but he made up for any lack of bulk with his quickness. Supposedly, one day Brito was having a field day with a Pittsburgh tackle and then all but destroying the quarterback. Finally, the bloodied signalcaller pulled the hapless tackle aside and ordered him to forget the rules and hold Brito even if an official was standing right on top of him.

Sheepishly, the lineman replied: "But I have been holding him!"

After the 1958 season, Brito was traded to the Los Angeles Rams. Although that brought Gene back to his home, it wasn't a step up footballwise; the once proud Rams had fallen to the bottom of the division. He gave the Rams two good seasons, largely hidden by the team's poor record.

In the 1961 preseason, Brito was stricken by a disease similar to the ALS that felled baseball's Lou Gehrig. His health continued to deteriorate. He died in 1965 at age 39, survived by his wife June and two daughters.

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Teammate Les Richter said at Brito's funeral, "He was never a cheerleader and he never was emotional - his cheerleading and emotional qualities appeared to us in the way he played the game."

GENE BRITO – DE-OE

Gene Herman Brito 6-1, 230

Loyola (CA) HS: Abraham Lincoln [Los Angeles, CA]

B: 10/23/1925, Los Angeles, CA

D: 06/08/1965, Los Angeles, CA

1951-53, 1955-58 Washington, 1959-1960 Los Angeles