

Jerry Groom, All-American:

Notre Dame Football, the Chicago Cardinals, and Coach Frank Leahy's Lads

By: Jim Sargent

Jerry Groom, the finest all-around football player to come from Des Moines, Iowa, won a great deal of gridiron recognition in the Hawkeye state, at the University of Notre Dame, and with the Chicago Cardinals of the National Football League. But when Jerry reflects on his football achievements, his happiest memories remain with Notre Dame and legendary coach Frank Leahy.

Inducted into the Iowa Sports Hall of Fame in 1983 and the College Football Hall of Fame eleven years later, Groom began winning major football honors as a high school junior in 1945. As a student at Dowling High, an all-male Catholic school in Des Moines, he started four straight years as center and linebacker. Jerry first lettered as a sophomore, and he won All-State honors during his junior and senior seasons. The versatile young man also played baseball, lettering three times in the diamond sport.

Born on August 15, 1929, Jerry grew up in Catholic family that loved sports. He dreamed about playing football for Notre Dame, and he worked hard to make his dream come true. By the time he was a senior, many colleges were recruiting the 6'3" athlete who had grown to a then-huge 255 pounds.

During Jerry's senior year, the Dowling eleven lost one game but defeated all of the large Des Moines schools. After the season ended, Frank Leahy was invited to Dowling to be the featured speaker at the school's football banquet. During the evening he visited with Paul and Helen Groom and their strapping son Jerry.

The coach asked the senior to visit Notre Dame in the spring of 1947, before he made a commitment to attend any college. Jerry agreed. Iowa's head coach, Dr. Eddie Anderson, also make a strong pitch for Groom. But the Dowling star made his commitment to Notre Dame after visiting campus.

When Groom made his trip to South Bend, Leon Hart, later a star end for the Detroit Lions, and Bill Wightkin, later a fine defensive end and tackle for the Chicago Bears, showed the Iowa senior around the campus.

"In those days Catholic kids wanted to go to Notre Dame to play football," Groom recalled in a 2003 interview. "Leon Hart and Bill Wightkin showed me the Grotto, the Sacred Heart Church, the Dome, the football stadium, and old Cartier Field, where Knute Rockne's teams used to practice and play.

"I remember being impressed with all the tradition. I stayed in Sorin Hall in the dorm room of Johnny Lujack, because Johnny was gone on a speaking engagement. Johnny would be a senior in the fall of 1947.

When they took me to Coach Leahy's office, the coach said, 'Jerry, do you want to come to Notre Dame?'

"I said, 'Sure.'

"He said, 'You will be on a four-year scholarship, whether or not you make the team, but I know you will make it.'

"Coach Leahy predicted I would become a starter, make All-American, be captain in my senior year, be a number one draft choice, play in the East-West Shrine Game and the All-Star Game, and play in the NFL. Everything came true. It was amazing to me!

"Leahy was a great coach. He outcoached everyone. None of the professional coaches I later played for in Chicago, or even in the Pro Bowl, could come close to Leahy. He was well versed in every phase and detail of the game."

The former Notre Dame All-American who started at tackle during Knute Rockne's last three seasons produced a remarkable coaching record at his beloved alma mater. During 11 seasons from 1941 through 1943 (he served in the Navy for two years) and 1946 through 1953, Leahy's "lads," as he liked to call his players, won 87, lost 11, and tied 9. During four postwar seasons, 1946 to 1949, the Irish played 39 straight

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games without a defeat, although they were tied twice. Notre Dame won national championships in 1943, 1946, 1947, 1949, and tied for the title in 1953.

Groom enrolled at Notre Dame in 1947 and played on the freshman football team. When he arrived on campus, he weighed 255 pounds. By the time the tough practices and the '47 season ended, Jerry had slimmed down to a muscular 235 pounds.

Also, the character of college sports changed after World War II. Many veterans returned in 1946. During the late 1940s, the athletic rosters at colleges and universities included many excellent athletes in their 20s who had served in World War II. Most of these young men attended college on the GI Bill, a federal program of financial aid for veterans, and they were serious about their studies.

"Every team had great talent after the war," Groom recollected. "So many of these young guys came back from the service. They wanted to finish their education, not go back to work."

Commenting on his Notre Dame memories for Jack Connor's excellent book *Leahy's Lads* (1997), Jerry said, "I remember the day of my first scrimmage. We had been practicing for a couple of weeks and all of a sudden Leahy said, 'Coach [Marty] Brutz, send the boys over.' The first thing they did was put us in a box for tackling practice—they would just run halfbacks one after another."

The tackling box drill meant a defensive player took several turns trying to stop a back who got a 10-yard running start and had to go over or around the defender within a 3-yard wide zone.

"It was like horses coming at you. The first one I tried to hit was Sitko. Red was about 190 and had a lot of speed; he was at top speed in two steps. I was low and I caught him low and it was a helluva thump. Leahy, of course, is watching all this from the tower. The next one that came through was John Panelli and there was another loud pop. I thought to myself, 'How long is this going to go on?' The next guy is Billy Gompers—and the first thing I know, a leg is here and a leg is there and I'm just grabbing air. Then it was Coy McGee and Bob Livingstone and I'm grabbing for air again as all the backs are now laughing. That lasted for about 15 minutes.

"Then we had a line scrimmage and I'm playing against guys like George Connor, George Strohmeier, Marty Wendell, Joe Signaigo, George Sullivan, and the rest of those guys. Now they decide we'll have a little scrimmage. I don't think they really wanted to put the freshmen in there so fast, but Leahy couldn't resist—he wanted to see what we had. The scrimmage lasted an hour and a half. If a freshman would crack one of the varsity, Leahy would say, 'This is just a freshman, what are you going to do when you meet Purdue in the opening game?'"

Groom recalled scrimmages that lasted for hours, continuing under the lights. But football allowed him to develop many lasting friends, and he has fond memories of his collegiate years:

"The great thing about Notre Dame is that on the field you were a freshman, but there was no harassing or hazing of any of that type of stuff. When I went over to the dining hall, it was great—I'd sit with George Connor, Bill Walsh, other freshmen, or a Heisman trophy winner; it didn't matter and everyone treated you the same."

Hard-working, friendly, and low-key, Groom played freshman ball in 1947, but he started during his last three seasons. In 2003 he said: "I started in 1948 at middle linebacker, and I called the defensive signals. I started in '49 as a linebacker. We were undefeated in 1949. That was our championship year. I wasn't eligible to play in '47, but that was another championship year.

"In 1950, my senior year, I played both ways, center and linebacker. I was later told that I averaged 55-56 minutes a game in my senior year. By that time the talent was beginning to drop off from the postwar years. I think we had played 39 or 40 games without a defeat. But in the second game of the year, Purdue came in and beat us, 28-14. We ended up going 4-4-1."

Jerry chuckled and added, "I was the losingest captain Leahy ever had!"

Thinking about his coach, Groom recounted the final game of the 1949 season, a 27-20 victory over Southern Methodist:

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"We played Southern Methodist in the Cotton Bowl, and they had Doak Walker, who was injured at the time, and another great back by the name of Kyle Rote. Kyle had a tremendous day against us. Later we read that he rushed for more than 100 yards and completed 10 passes. He scored all of their points that afternoon.

"In the first five minutes of the game, our offensive center, Walt Grothaus, got hit in the mouth and took 25 stitches. So I had to play both ways the rest of the game. Kyle mentioned in his book how I intercepted two of his passes. One of the interceptions came with four minutes to go. They were driving for a tying touchdown, and we were ahead, 27-20.

"When they scored the third touchdown, Leahy put a man over the head of the center, and he pulled their center, and I went through the line and blocked the extra point, leaving the score tied at 20-20.

"After they scored, we took the kickoff and marched right down the field. We had a great team that year. Leahy said it was the greatest all-around team he ever coached, even though he had many great players in other years.

"We scored and kicked the extra point, making the score 27-20. Southern Methodist came right back and drove to our 20-yard line. I intercepted Rote for the second time, and we ran out the clock and won the game.

"Coach Leahy had been talking to some of the pro coaches like George Halas, because they were friends. After the SMU game we were in the locker room celebrating, and I said to Leahy, 'Coach, can I talk to you?'

"He said, 'Sure,' and we went into the men's room.

"I said, 'Coach, did you not tell me when I came here that you would be my coach for four years at Notre Dame?'

"He said, 'You're right, I did.'

"I said, 'Well, I'm going to hold you to that. I know the pros are interested in you. But you made a promise to me, and I expect you to live up to it.'

"Leahy said, 'You're right, and I will.'

"After the 1950 season, when we went 4-4-1, Coach Leahy had a speaking engagement, and I went with him to Fort Wayne, Indiana. I was driving, and we were talking about our '50 season.

"He said, 'You know, Jerry, you held me to that promise that I'd be your coach for four years, but I think it was a lousy decision on my part!'

"After Leahy left Notre Dame, following the 1953 season when we were co-national champions, he never went back into coaching. I think he had a falling out with Father Hesburgh. I think it was a joint decision for coach to retire. He was 46 years old when he retired.

"Coach Leahy could have gone to Texas A&M for a big salary. Leahy told me he just couldn't go to another position after coaching at Notre Dame. 'My heart wouldn't be in it,' he said. So he recommended a friend of his, Bear Bryant, who was coaching at Kentucky, and that's how Bear got the position."

After his senior season, Groom became the number one draft choice for the Chicago Cardinals, and he was a co-captain of the College All-Star team:

"The Cleveland Browns had a great championship team with Otto Graham at quarterback. I believe they beat us, 33-0. They didn't break a sweat! I had to play both ways in that game. I didn't have a face mask, and I already had my four front teeth knocked out before the very first game I played at Notre Dame. I didn't have a mouth guard in the All-Star game. During the game I got hit in the mouth. The hit put my peg tooth through my lip, and it took seven stitches to close that.

"After the game, all the guys who were going to the pros left to report to their teams. When Curly Lambeau, coach of the Cardinals, saw the lip, he said, 'Geez, we're off to a rough start!'"

Groom made it as a starter with the Cardinals because of his great talent, but the Chicago club did field one of the NFL's weaker teams.

Jerry remembered, "When I came up with the Cardinals, there were only twelve teams. I was a first draft choice, and I signed for \$8500 the first year and \$9500 the second year. According to Curly Lambeau, who

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signed me, the only two Cardinals with two-year contracts were Charley Trippi and me. I was a center and linebacker, and they wanted me to play linebacker.

"The 1951 season was when the teams began to spread the halfbacks out. They were starting to split the tee formation out, and sometimes a halfback would go in motion. Some of the halfbacks were so fast that as a linebacker, I didn't have a chance to stay up with them. But I played mostly defense. But I did play some offense, and I played on special teams. We had kind of a helter-skelter team that year."

In 1951 the Cardinals finished sixth, or last, in the NFL's American Conference with a 3-9 record. Chicago needed a better quarterback, as Jim Hardy had proven to be an erratic passer in 1950. Lambeau moved standout halfback Charley Trippi, the former Georgia All-American, to quarterback. But Trippi could not lift the aging Chicago eleven above mediocrity. In addition, after quarreling with team president Walter Wolfner most of the year, Lambeau compounded the team's problems by resigning with two games left.

The Cardinals, a great team when they won the NFL title in 1947 and lost to the Philadelphia Eagles in a rematch for the 1948 crown, hired Joe Kuharich as head coach in 1952. Kuharich got his team off to a good start, winning three of the first four games. Trippi ran the ball well, but he could not give Chicago a consistent passing threat.

The Cardinals didn't have enough outstanding personnel. But in 1952 speedy halfback Ollie Matson launched his Hall of Fame career, averaging 3.6 yards per carry and scoring three times, catching 11 passes and scoring three more TDs, and running back two kickoffs to pay dirt. After spending 1953 in the military, Ollie returned to the gridiron in 1954. A highlight film all by himself, the elusive power runner led the league in punt return average in 1955 with 18.8 yards per return, scoring twice. In 1958 the San Francisco University great led the NFL in kickoff returns with a 35.5 yard average, again scoring twice.

Also, Don Stonesifer, a sure-handed All-American end from Northwestern who became good friends with Groom, led Chicago's receivers during the early 1950s. Peaking with 54 receptions in 1952 and 56 in 1953, Stoney enjoyed his best scoring season in 1955 when he caught 28 passes but scored 5 touchdowns, two more than his second most productive season in 1954 (44 receptions, 3 TDs).

In 1952 the Cardinals, lacking depth at most positions, lost seven of their last eight games. Finishing fifth with a 4-8 mark, the team seldom scored more than two touchdowns.

"At training camp in 1952, Joe Kuharich called me in and said, 'Jerry, we want you to play defensive tackle.' At Notre Dame I played at 6'3" and about 235 or 240. But in pro ball I got up to about 250. We never lifted weights in those days. We just exercised in the offseason. We had no organized training program. Most of the guys scattered to their home towns.

"I stayed in Chicago. Several of the guys stayed there in the offseason. We'd get together at one of the clubs and play handball. I played with guys like George Connor and Elmer Angsman. Handball was the big game in those days to keep you in shape.

"When Kuharich asked me to play defensive tackle, I said, 'Sure.' That was the best thing that ever happened to me. I didn't have speed, but I got up to 260 or 265. I felt like I had found a 'new home,' as we say. I loved it. By 1954 I made All-Pro, and I played in the Pro Bowl. So I played tackle in 1952, 1953, 1954, and 1955, and '55 was my last year in the NFL."

But Groom's Cardinals continued to experience losing seasons. After going climbing to fifth place in 1952, Chicago, now coached by Joe Stydahar, won only once in 1953. The Cardinals slipped to last place in the renamed Eastern Conference with a 1-10-1 ledger. In 1954 Stydahar's club went 2-10 and again placed last.

Under new coach Ray Richards in 1955, Chicago had a 4-7-1 record and ranked fourth in the East. Ollie Matson excited Cardinal fans with his runs from scrimmage and his kick returns, while Dick "Night Train" Layne played tough in the defensive backfield. Lane also took some turns on offense, and in one game the speedster scored on a 97-yard touchdown pass from Ogden Compton.

But the big highlight came when the Cardinals stunned the crosstown Bears in game ten, 53-14, breaking a six-game Bears' winning streak. The Bears finished at 8-4 and lost the Western Conference title by half a game to the Rams (8-3-1), making the Cardinals' victory even sweeter.

"By about 1953," Groom remembered, "we had a great defensive line. Tony Pasquesi from Notre Dame was one of our big tackles. We had Don Joyce of Tulane at tackle. We had Charley Ulrich from Illinois. We had Tom Bienemann of Drake and Leo Sugar of Purdue at defensive ends. We had good linebackers, so we played well defensively.

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"Offensively, we didn't have a real good quarterback. Charley Trippi, who was a great halfback, played quarterback one year. Frank Tripucka of Notre Dame played a few games at quarterback in 1951, but he got hurt. Halfway through the 1952 season they traded 'Trip' to the old Dallas Texans, and in 1953 they became the Baltimore Colts.

"Frank Tripucka was the best quarterback the Cardinals had by far in 1951. But Trip caught a shoulder hit and missed half the season. Red Sitko, Trip, and I roomed together, because their wives were home having babies.

"After he was traded and the Texans became the Colts, Trip went to Canada for the 1953 season, and he became a Canadian Hall of Famer. In 1960 Trip became the Denver Broncos' first quarterback, and I broadcast Denver's games.

"Trip gave me the nickname 'Boomer' when I was a sophomore at Notre Dame. He told the scribes when I hit the ball carrier, the noise went 'boom boom' all through the stadium!

"In 1953 we had Jim Root and Steve Romanik at quarterback. In my last two years we had Lamar McHan of Arkansas at quarterback, and he was the best we had during those two years.

"Offensively, we just couldn't play well enough to win consistently. You get tired of losing. That's one reason why, after the 1955 season, I retired."

In 1958 Groom had a chance to come out of retirement and play for the Green Bay Packers. General manager Jack Vainisi called Jerry, who by then was working for a trucking firm in Denver, Colorado, and broadcasting football for the University of Denver. Vainisi asked Jerry to play offensive center for the Packers.

"In those days you had twelve teams with 35 players on a team," Jerry explained, "and linemen used to have to play both ways. You didn't play both ways in every game, or on every play. But you had to be able to go both ways, in case someone got hurt.

"So Jack called and said next year they were bringing in Vince Lombardi to coach the Packers. He offered me \$15,000, which was unbelievable money in those days. But I was married by then, and we had a little girl and a little boy. My wife didn't want to leave Denver. So I decided to turn it down. That's my one regret in football, that I didn't try to come back with the Packers and Vince Lombardi."

Starting in 1960, Groom, in addition to the trucking business, handled color commentary for Denver's new American Football League team, the Broncos. After that season, he and his family moved to Arizona, where Jerry went to work for the apparel firm, Levi Strauss. He worked at a number of positions over the years, retiring in 1986 as a vice president.

Reflecting on his Cardinal teammates, Jerry particularly remembers end Don Stonesifer:

"Stoney's forte was the short hook pass. I know Frank Tripucka always wanted to throw to Stoney. He didn't have a lot of speed, but he had great hands. If he got his hands on the football, he caught it.

"I remember we'd be in the huddle when Trippi was playing quarterback, and Stoney would tell him, 'I can run my man down, and come back.' They'd talk to each other. Sometimes we even drew plays on the ground. Football in those years isn't like the game today.

"You played in our era because you loved to play, not for the money. The most I made was in 1955 when I signed for \$11,000. I heard that Otto Graham was the highest-paid player in those years, and Otto made \$25,000.

"Players in the 1940s and 1950s had a lot of intestinal fortitude. We had a lot of desire to excel. We were dedicated to our teams. Today in the NFL, the players want to move on if they don't do well, or if they can get more money."

Commenting on Matson, Groom said, "There was nobody like Ollie Matson in the 1950s. There's nobody like him in the NFL today. He was 6-3 and 225. Ollie could really shift gears. He ran back punts and kickoffs. He was a great receiver, and he had great speed. He excelled on special teams. Would they put Ollie Matson on special teams today?"

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"I remember one game against the Bears, Ollie scored three touchdowns, one on a punt, one on a kick, and one on a 65-yard run! That was 1955, the year we knocked the Bears out of the NFL title."

Groom's favorite football memories, though, concern coach Leahy's former players and their scholarship fund. For years many of Leahy's "lads" gathered at one Notre Dame game each year for a reunion. Ziggy Czarobski, the starting right tackle and the spiritual leader of the 1943, 1946, and 1947 teams, began the reunions in the 1950s. Even after Ziggy died of cancer in 1984, players continued to talk about "doing something" for Leahy's memory.

Finally, Notre Dame alums came up with the idea of a life-sized bronze sculpture, the first sculpture of any athletic person at Notre Dame. Today it stands outside the football stadium.

Also, in 1996, after considerable planning and with the cooperation of Father Bill Beauchamp, the executive vice president, Jerry and Jack Connor, author of *Leahy's Lads*, helped launch the Frank Leahy Memorial Fund. Linked to the Leahy sculpture, the Leahy Fund offers academic scholarships to young men and women who would not otherwise be able to attend Notre Dame. As of the year 2003, the fund has raised \$1.5 million for scholarships.

The biggest single contribution came in 2002. All-American hero Johnny Lujack contributed \$100,000 in the name of his friend and star running back Creighton Miller, saying, "If I had two best friends, they were both Creighton Miller."

A personable, modest gentleman, Jerry enjoys his work with the Leahy Fund, and he loves reminiscing about his college friends and teammates.

An excellent team player and an outstanding linebacker and center at Notre Dame and with the Chicago Cardinals, the Iowa hero represents the kind of values and all-out effort that Frank Leahy used to build Notre Dame into a national football powerhouse. If the Chicago Cardinals of the 1950s had been able to sign more talented, dedicated athletes like Jerry Groom, the NFL club could have been a winner.