

Joe Muha

By John Maxymuk

Adapted from *Eagles By the Numbers*, Camino Books, 2005.

When Greasy Neale took over the Philadelphia franchise in 1941, the only player he inherited who would still be on the team when it reached the title game six years later was Tommy Thompson, a one-eyed slow-footed Single Wing tailback. What made Neale's task even tougher was that Uncle Sam started drafting all able-bodied men for World War II the next year. Slowly and steadily, Greasy assembled the team he wanted, but the final pieces wouldn't arrive until the War ended and such players as new ace T-Formation quarterback Tommy Thompson, halfback Bosh Pritchard, halfback Russ Craft, end Pete Pihos and fullback Joe Muha came home.

In 1943, Joe Muha was the Eagles first round pick and the second overall selection in the NFL draft, but instead he graduated from the Virginia Military Institute and went directly into the U.S. Marines as a second lieutenant. Muha was promoted to first lieutenant, fought with an artillery unit on Iwo Jima and later patrolled occupied Japan during his three years in the Corps. When he was discharged in April 1946, Joe signed a one-year contract with the Eagles.

That year, Muha won the starting fullback job from veteran Ben Kish as a 25-year old rookie. In Neale's offense, the fullback was similar in function to the fullback position today. Essentially he was the lead blocker for Steve Van Buren or Bosh Pritchard (his old VMI teammate); Joe never carried the ball more than 27 times in any season as an Eagle. However, Greasy considered him the best blocker in the league. Muha also played linebacker on defense in this era of two-way football. Actually, Joe had more interceptions, five, than receptions, four, in his career, and he scored twice off interceptions, but only once on a reception. When two-platoon football was instituted fully in 1950, Muha concentrated on defense and won second team All Pro notice. Greasy called him the NFL's greatest defensive linebacker, while teammates called him "Jolter" for his jolting tackles. Joe was also the team's punter and led the league in punting in 1948 – the only Eagle ever to do so. He still holds highest career punting average in team history. Finally, Muha handled kickoffs and the occasional extra point conversions and field goal attempts. In Shibe Park with the stands very close to the end zone, Joe was noted for often booting kickoffs into the upper deck.

Above all, Muha was well-respected and trusted by his teammates and coach. For example, after the 1948 championship game, the team awarded a game ball to Joe's brother George who had played ball at Carnegie Tech and was dying of Hodgkin's disease. When the team owners gave the players Zippo lighters for winning consecutive titles, Joe took it upon himself to design a championship ring he and his teammates could buy to commemorate their accomplishment. Joe was a reliable, level-headed man who later earned his Masters' in Economics and a doctorate in Education. Teammates took advantage of his wise counsel by regularly consulting him on personal and financial matters. Greasy thought so highly of him that Muha was one of only two Eagles (with Van Buren) he selected on his personal all-time team.

Neale's opinion demands respect. He took over a franchise that had never posted a winning record and by the end of the decade, the Eagles had won consecutive championship games by shutout – a feat that has never been duplicated. Until Andy Reid passed him in 2004, Greasy was the all-time team leader in games won with 66. He was the team's greatest coach.

While Greasy probably was loyal to his aging veterans a bit too long, it was a sad end to the greatest era in Eagle football. Greasy's place in the hearts of his players was expressed at the time by tackle Al Wistert who wrote in a letter to the coach that, "Greasy is fair, square and honest, he will never let a friend or player down when that person really needs help...My father was killed when I was five years old. For many years I wondered what sort of man my dad would have been. I know now. My dad would have been an awful lot like Greasy Neale. I'm sure – as strong in his convictions as the Rock of Gibraltar, as honest as the day is long, yet tolerant and forgiving...I'll never forget your teachings, Greasy for I feel that I'm a better man today for having known you." For his part, Joe Muha was grateful to call Neale as a close personal friend and continued to depend on his support even after his playing career ended.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 27, No. 6 (2005)

In fact, Muha went out the door at the same time as Neale, telling the *Evening Bulletin*, "I want to leave while I can still walk out of Shibe Park." Joe served as an assistant coach at USC and for the Chicago Cardinals, and then did some scouting before becoming an NFL official. He is one of seven former Eagles to serve as referees along with Joe Carter, Davey O'Brien, Don Looney, Adrian Burk, Merrill Douglass and Pete Liske. Muha served as an alternate on the officiating staff for Super Bowl II in 1968, but was fired in 1971 reportedly because he was calling too many holding penalties. It's hard to imagine what he would think of what blockers are allowed to get away with in today's game. After being dumped by the NFL, Muha devoted himself entirely to teaching Business at Pasadena City College until his death in 1993.

JOE MUHA

Muha, Joseph George

V.M.I.

B: 4 / 28 / 1921, Central City, PA

Drafted: 1943 Round 1 Phi

1946 Phi 10 1947 Phi 12 1948 Phi 11 1949 Phi 12 1950 Phi 11

FB-LB

6-1, 205

HS: Sto-Rox [McKees Rocks, PA]

D: 3 / 31 / 1993, Hemet, CA (71)