

JACK FERRANTE: EAGLES GREAT

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In 1933, Bert Bell and Lud Wray formed a syndicate to purchase the Frankford Yellowjackets' N.F.L. franchise. On July 9 they bought the team for \$2,500. Bell named the team "The Eagles", in honor of the eagle, which was the symbol of the National Recovery Administration of the New Deal. The Eagles' first coach was Wray and Bell became Philadelphia's first general managers. In 1936, Bert Bell purchased sole ownership of the team for \$4,000. He also disposed of Wray as head coach, and took on the job himself. From 1933 until 1941, the Philadelphia Eagles never had a winning season. Even Davey O'Brien, the All-American quarterback signed in 1939, could not get the Eagles out of the Eastern Division cellar.

Bert Bell finally sold the Eagles in 1941. He sold half the franchise to Alexis Thompson of New York. Before the season, Rooney and Bell swapped Thompson their Philadelphia franchise for his Pittsburgh franchise. The new owner hired Earle "Greasy" Neale to coach the team. In 1944, the Eagles really started winning. They finished with a record of 7-1-2 and ended the season in second place in the Eastern Division.

From 1944 until 1950, the Philadelphia Eagles enjoyed their most successful years in the history of the franchise. They finished second in the Eastern Division three times and also won the Eastern Division championship three times. The Eagles played in three consecutive N.F.L. Championship games and won two consecutive N.F.L. championships by shutting out both opponents. The 1940's was truly the decade of the Philadelphia Eagles. In later years, the Professional Football Hall of Fame Selection Committee chose All-Pro squads from each decade. The All-Pro squad from the 1940's included seven players from Philadelphia: Steve Van Buren, Alex Wojciechowicz, Al Wistert, Vic Sears, Frank (Bucko) Kilroy, Pete Pihos, and a player who would later coach Msgr. Bonner High School's football team to its first city championship. That player was Jack Ferrante.

Jack was born in Camden, New Jersey, in 1916. His family later moved to South Philadelphia in 1923, when he was six years old. By the time he entered junior high school, his family had moved to West Philadelphia. During his sophomore year in high school, Jack dropped out and began working for A&P Supermarkets. He later went to a trade school, and in 1933 the family moved again. This time they settled in the Overbrook section of Philadelphia. It was during this time that Jack began playing football. In his neighborhood, there was a team called, "Rockne," which was coached by "Tarzan Papa." Papa was also the team's quarterback, and he really had a striking resemblance to the legendary Knute Rockne. Jack played end on that Rockne team for one year.

In 1934, he signed to play with Seymour in the Eastern Pennsylvania Football Conference. The Eastern League was composed of teams such as: Magnolis, Passyunk Square, Conshohocken, Sun Oil A.A., Seymour and Norristown. The league's commissioner was Eddie Gottlieb, who later coached the Philadelphia Warriors to the N.B.A. Championship. For the next five years, Jack played end for Seymour. During his first year with the team, he was paid \$7 a game. A few years later his salary increased to \$25 a game.

At that time, the big rivalry in the league was the Seymour and Passyunk Square game. Seymour's home field was an old converted coal yard at 10th & Washington Sts. For this particular rivalry, there were sometimes as many as 15,000 fans at the game. The Seymour-Passyunk game would draw more spectators than the Philadelphia Eagles.

In 1939, Jack was given a try-out with the Philadelphia Eagles. He didn't make the club, but he was picked up by the Wilmington Clippers, who were the Eagles farm team. At that time, all of the clubs in the N.F.L. had farm teams. The Chicago Bears had the Newark Bears and the York Giants owned the Patterson Panthers. As a member of the Clippers, Jack was paid \$75 for home games and \$50 for away games.

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In 1939, his first season with Wilmington, he won the American Association Scoring Championship, by beating out Ozzie Simmons of Iowa University. Jack played end for the Clippers from 1939-1943. He got his second opportunity to try out for the Eagles when they drafted him in 1941. Again, he didn't make the club, although he played in the team's first three games. In 1942, the Eagles played the Clippers, and Jack scored three touchdowns, as Wilmington tied the Birds, 21-21.

Finally, in 1944, Jack was drafted again by Philadelphia, and this time his try-out was successful. As mentioned earlier, the Eagles were coached by Earle "Greasy" Neale. Neale arrived in Philadelphia in 1941 after coaching at Yale, Virginia, Washington and Jefferson, West Virginia and Marietta. Greasy had played professional football for the Canton Bulldogs and also played major league baseball for Cincinnati, New York and the Phillies. His greatest claim to fame in baseball was his .337 average and 10 hits in the 1919 World Series. That was the famous Series where eight players from the Chicago White Sox were barred from baseball for fixing the games. It has been referred to as the Black Sox Scandal.

Greasy was the second N.F.L. coach after George Halas to adopt the T-formation. He also devised the Eagle defense, which was one of the forerunners of the four-three.

Not only did Jack make the Eagles, but he became their starting left end. That year, the Eagles also selected a halfback from Louisiana State University in the first round of the college draft. His name was Steve Van Buren, and he would be instrumental in the Eagles road to the Championship.

That season, the Birds went unbeaten through seven games before losing to the Chicago Bears 28-7 at the Shibe Park. They finished the season 7-1-2, the Eagles' best record ever. However, they finished second behind the New York Giants in the Eastern Division.

In 1945, they again finished second in the Eastern Division, but this time it was the Redskins that won the division. Van Buren led the N.F.L. in rushing with 832 yards and scored 110 points. It was also a great year for Jack. He was the Eagles' top receiver, after hauling in 21 passes and scoring seven touchdowns.

The 1946 season again brought the Eagles another second place finish in their division. However, coach Neale added some impressive talent to the team when he signed Alex Wojciechowicz and running backs Joe Mucha and Bosh Pritchard. Previous to the 1947 season, Jack had played both offense and defense. However, because of the popularity of the new two-platoon football, he began to play only offense.

With the addition of end, Pete Pihos, the Eagles won their first Eastern Division title in 1947. Before they captured the title in 1947, they had to meet the Pittsburgh Steelers in a play-off game. In that game, the Eagles beat the Steelers, 21-0. Van Buren and Bosh Pritchard each scored once, and Jack caught a 28-yard touchdown pass from Thompson. That day, Jack caught 5 passes for 73 yards. The 1947 Steelers, coached by Dr. Jock Sutherland were the last single-wing team to reach the N.F.L. playoffs.

The Eagles playoff win gave them the opportunity to play in their first N.F.L. Championship game. In that game, the Chicago Cardinals defeated the Eagles, 28-21, on a frozen field at Comiskey Park. Each Eagle player received about \$900 for their losing effort. In 1947, Steve Van Buren became the second man in the N.F.L.'s 28-season history to rush for 1000 yards.

The Eagles won their second Eastern Division title in 1948. They finished the season with a 9-2-1 record. Quarterback Tommy Thompson ran the T-formation to perfection. He completed 57% of his passes and threw for 25 touchdowns. At the receiving end many of those passes was Jack Ferrante.

On Dec. 19, the Eagles were again matched with the Cardinals for the Championship. The morning of the game, Jack woke up, saw snow, and just assumed there would be no game. However, the game was played anyway. A protective tarpaulin was not removed from the playing field in Shibe Park until 30 minutes before the kickoff, but snow blanketed the entire field by game time. Of the 36,000 people who bought tickets and assured a sellout, a total of 28,600 were on hand.

The first time the Eagles had possession of the ball, Thompson combined with Jack on a 65-yard pass play for a touchdown. When the Eagles realized the play was going to be called back because of an

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offside violation, Jack asked the official which player had gone offsides. "You did," said the official. Three plays into the fourth quarter, Van Buren scored on a five-yard run. That touchdown was the only score of game, and the Eagles won the Championship, 7-0.

On Jan. 15, 1949, Thompson sold the Eagles to a syndicate of 100 local business men, organized by James P. Clark for \$250,000. Vince McNulty was named general manager, and the team selected Chuck Bednarik in the first round of the draft. The Birds rolled through the regular season, winning 11 games and losing only one. They won the Eastern Division title for the third straight year, and Van Buren set another league record, rushing for 1,146 yards.

For the championship game, the Eagles met the Los Angeles Rams at the Memorial Coliseum. A thunder storm dropped almost two inches of rain before game time. A crowd of more than 60,000, which would have set a playoff record, was expected before the storm. Only 22,200 people actually attended the game. The muddy field did not slow the Eagles' running attack, which rolled up 274 yards. Van Buren rushed for 196 yards to lead the Birds to their second consecutive championship, 14-0.

Because of the rain causing many no-shows, the Eagles' players only received a little over \$1,000 for their victory. In 1950, three teams from the All-American Football Conference merged with the N.F.L. They were: the Cleveland Browns, San Francisco 49ers and the Baltimore Colts.

In the first week of the 1950 season, the Champion Eagles played the Browns. Before a record 71,200 fans at Philadelphia's Municipal Stadium, the Browns pulled a stunning 35-10 upset. The Eagles won six of their next seven, but lost their last four games. They finished the season, 6-6, and a third place finish in the Eastern Division.

A feud between coach Neale and owner Clark erupted late in the season when the players had to pull Neale off Clark in the Polo Grounds' locker room. Neale was fired following the seasons.

It was also the last season for Jack. At the end of the year, he was sold to the Detroit Lions. After not receiving the salary he requested from Detroit, Jack retired from professional football at the age of 34. In Jack's last year with the Eagles, he was paid a salary of \$7,500. In 1949, he also secured a job as a salesman for Ortieb's Brewing Company.

After his retirement from football, he began to officiate high school football in the Catholic League. Jack officiated for two years, and then in 1953 he was selected to coach Msgr. Bonner High School's very first football team. The first years were really rough. Bonner had no field and the team had no uniforms. It took help from various organizations, who donated money, equipment and uniforms, to field a team. From 1953-1957, Jack did not even receive a salary for coaching.

In a matter of just six years he had developed Bonner into one of the area's football powerhouses. In 1959, they won their first Catholic League Championship by beating La Salle and then crushed Central High for the City Championship, 54-0. Even to this day, that victory is the largest winning margin by any team in a city championship series.

In 1960, they lost a heartbreaker to St. James, which kept them out of the playoffs. With not too much time remaining, the Gallagher brothers combined to score the winning touchdown for St. James. Bonner won the City Championship again in 1961. They beat La Salle and then defeated Southern, 14-7.

After the 1961 season, Jack retired from coaching. While at Bonner, he produced some outstanding players. Some of those players included: Tony Dolceamore, Russ Hendricks, Chappy Moore and Al Atkinson.

After working 28 years for Ortieb's, Jack retired in 1977. He is very active in the Eagles Alumni Association, and in 1987 he was honored by being chosen as the "Eagles Great of the Past." It is an award given annually to a former great Eagle player. Just recently, Jack's former teammate, "Bucko Kilroy," stated, "I think the glory days of the N.F.L. were the late 1940's and early 1950's. The Eagles then were like the Raiders today. We were tough and we intimidated teams. We had a different mentality. It was survival of the fittest."

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Jack Ferrante sure did survive; for seven seasons he started in every Eagles game except one. He also played on three consecutive Eastern Division championship teams and two consecutive N.F.L. Championship teams.

His success as a player also carried over into coaching, when he led Bonner to two City Championships in five years.

We as a country must not forget individuals such as Jack Ferrante, who have contributed much to our sporting past.

FERRANTE'S NFL RECEIVING RECORD

YEAR	GM/ST	NO	YDS	Avg	TD
1941 Philadelphia Eagles NFL	3 / 0	2	22	11.0	0
1944 Philadelphia Eagles NFL	10 / 4	3	66	22.0	1
1945 Philadelphia Eagles NFL	9 / 8	21	474	22.6	7
1946 Philadelphia Eagles NFL	11 / 9	28	451	16.1	4
1947 Philadelphia Eagles NFL	11/10	18	341	18.9	4
1948 Philadelphia Eagles NFL	12 / 0	28	444	15.9	7
1949 Philadelphia Eagles NFL	12 / 8	34	484	14.2	4
1950 Philadelphia Eagles NFL	<u>12/11</u>	35	588	16.8	3
8 years		80/50	169	2894	17.1
					31

GM/ST = Games/Games Started