

Football and Fast Food: The Gino's Story

By Harold Aurand Jr.

When I was a boy growing up in Northeastern Pennsylvania no fall was complete without a bus trip to Philadelphia to see the Eagles play. Motor Transportation Company of Hazleton ran the trips. My father and I got on there, then the bus would wind through the rest of the coal region, picking up passengers as we went along.

Being an Eagles fan in the early 1970s wasn't easy. There were some good players, like Harold Carrichael, but the team usually lost. Even when it was new or how far away from the field we were sitting, there was always one good thing about an Eagles bus trip. After every game we stopped at a Gino's to eat.

Gino's was the franchisee for Kentucky Fried Chicken. They also had a line of burgers topped off with the Gino's Giant, a sandwich they called "a banquet on a bun", and were one of the first fast food restaurants with a salad bar. Nothing today can really compare to it for quality. As a kid I would have eaten there every day.

Although I didn't know it at the time, Gino's was also symptomatic of the way professional football was changing. Today top draft choices receive signing bonuses of millions of dollars. If they invest the money wisely, they are assured financial security for life, even if they never play down. Fifty years ago, playing professional football was a part time occupation. Players sought business opportunities, off-season jobs, and even in-season second jobs not as investments, but as a necessary means of supporting themselves and their families. That is how Gino's got its start.

In 1957 three Baltimore Colts, Alan Ameche, Joe Campanella, and Lou Fischer, opened a hamburger stand in Maryland. The next year Gino Marchetti bought into the company. He used his \$4674 from that year's championship game, and the business adopted his name.

Colt players had an advantage over others in the league when it came to getting into business. Team owner Carroll Rosenbloom actively supported their efforts. As Rosenbloom said: "One of my great convictions was that a player should make his home wherever he played. That made for better team play, better exposure with the town and more opportunity for the player. I set up an office with the Colts where they could come and talk about what they wanted to do when they were through playing football, and we'd help them get jobs and set them up in business." By helping players financially Rosenbloom expected more team loyalty, and a better team.

Rosenbloom's tactics seemed to work. Marchetti thought he was different from other owners, who "wanted to keep you poor so you'd play harder." To this day many former Colts live in Baltimore, owning businesses and contributing to the community.

Marchetti was actually one of the more reluctant Colt success stories. According to Rosenbloom Gino's only plans for the future were to return to Antioch, California, and work in his family's gas station. He had to be talked into becoming a restaurant owner. Surprisingly, even though all the owners of Gino's were Baltimore Colts they didn't trade much on their athletic image. Much like McDonald's uses Ronald McDonald, Gino's had a mascot named Gino the Genie. Dom DeLuise played him on TV. You could eat in a Gino's, especially one around Philadelphia, and never know the football connection.

At its peak there were 359 Gino's restaurants along the east coast. The company also branched out, opening Rustler Steak Houses, complete with fake western buildings, and staffs dressed as cowboys. In 1982 Marriott Corporation bought the chain. They converted some of the Gino's to Roy Rogers's and closed the rest. For lovers of quality fast food it was a step back. Eagles games were never the same.