

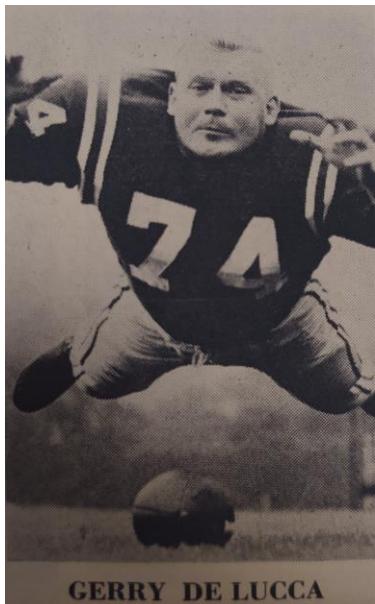


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Jerry DeLucca

This article is by Budd Bailey.

Under different circumstances, Jerry DeLucca might never have had much reason to leave his hometown of Peabody in suburban Boston. He was born there, grew up there, worked there, and died there. The only thing that kept DeLucca away from his family and friends in the region was football, which allowed him to see the continent. But even though he must have loved the game – no one is good enough to play at that level without a great deal of enthusiasm – he probably loved coming back home more.



Gerald Joseph DeLucca was born on July 17, 1936 in Peabody, Massachusetts. That's one of the suburbs on "The North Shore" northeast of Boston, located fairly close to the ocean. Peabody used to be part of Salem; three of its residents were killed during the famous witch trials of the 1600's. The area became Peabody in 1868, and was named after George Peabody, a wealthy man who is considered something of the father of philanthropy. Peabody was first known as farm country, but manufacturers took advantage of waterpower to build factories in the region. The city became known for leather manufacturing, and after 1900 about a third of its population consisted of immigrants.

That's where the DeLuccas enter the story. Jerry's father, Anthony, was born somewhere in Massachusetts in 1908. Since there's no word on the birthplace of Anthony's father on



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ancestry.com, we can guess that he was born outside of the United States – and probably Italy. Jerry’s mother, Stella Kozicki, was born to Polish parents in Massachusetts in 1913. Jerry is listed as the only child of the DeLuccas.

Jerry stayed in Peabody through childhood and attended high school at Peabody Veterans Memorial. There he was part of the Tanners, the nickname of the sports teams, but you’d have to say the school wasn’t a football factory when it comes to outstanding players. Only two other players from there have reached the pros: Jack Donahue of the 1926 Providence Steam Roller, and Tom Alberghini of the 1945 Pittsburgh Steelers. The town’s most well-known athletic alumni might be hockey players: Bobby Carpenter and Reggie Lemelin. On the other hand, Peabody Veterans Memorial has six state football championships to its credit, so some talent must have passed through its front doors over the years.

DeLucca must have been one of the biggest players on the team when he was there in the early 1950s, and settled in to duty on the line. As a senior he played for coach John Bezemez on the 1952 team which went 7-2. Bezemez was one of the great names in college football history in that region. In 1942, he led Holy Cross to a memorable 55-12 win over Boston College, the top-ranked school in the nation. Bezemez went on to play for the Philadelphia Eagles. That ’52 Peabody team featured the future mayor of Peabody, Pete Torigian, at quarterback.

Jerry graduated from Peabody in 1953, and it was time to leave the nest of Massachusetts and head South. He arrived at the University of Tennessee to play football that fall. DeLucca probably thought he was going to be playing for the legendary coach of the Volunteers, Bob Neyland. The General had been around the school since 1926, and had a 173-31-12 record with four national championships. But before the 1953 season, Neyland resigned from the job due to health issues. He stayed as athletic director until his death in 1962. In the meantime, Henry Robinson took over as head coach. Robinson had been an assistant coach for the Vols under Neyland since 1946.

DeLucca’s first look at the Tennessee varsity in the fall of 1953 must have been a little shocking. The team lost to Mississippi State, 26-0, in the opener. The Volunteers went on to a 6-4-1 record, below their recent standards. DeLucca joined the varsity in 1954, and lettered for that team. He was named a second-team all-sophomore pick by the SEC for his play that season. Tennessee finished with a 4-6 overall record, but 1-5 in the Southeastern Conference. You can imagine how well that went over. Neyland decided the program needed a change and he fired Robinson – which he later described as “the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do.”



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Neyland raided Arkansas to hire Bowden Wyatt as head coach. The Razorbacks had an 8-3 record to win the Southwest Conference in 1954 and reached the Cotton Bowl. Sure enough, Tennessee improved a great deal in 1955. The Vols went 6-3-1 that year, led by a halfback named Johnny Majors who finished second in the Heisman Trophy voting a year later.

But DeLucca wasn't around to see Majors finish his career. He had transferred to Middle Tennessee State. Charles Murphy was in the middle of a long run as the coach there, and the Blue Raiders enjoyed a successful season by any standard. They went 7-2 to win the Ohio Valley Conference title and qualified for the long-forgotten Refrigerator Bowl in Evansville, Indiana. Evansville called itself the refrigerator capital of the nation, since it was a center for manufacturing that particular product. Sam Houston came away with a 27-13 win in that bowl game, which was the last one ever played with that name.

The star of that Middle Tennessee team was Terry Sweeney, who was named a Little All-America at halfback. DeLucca was named an all-conference pick at tackle, one of five Blue Raiders to be selected. He was later called one of the best linemen in the school's history.

That leads us to the fabled 1957 NFL draft, which was held in November 1956 (first four rounds) and January 1957 (remaining 26 rounds). You might recall that four Hall of Famers went in the first eight picks, including Paul Hornung, Len Dawson, Jim Brown and Jim Parker. Speaking of players inducted in Canton, Gene Hickerson went in the seventh round to Cleveland that year. Six players later, the Bears took DeLucca with the 84th pick overall. Jerry was listed on the MTSU roster as a junior during the 1956 season, but he must have been eligible for the draft because he transferred.

Jerry never played a game in Chicago. It was reported that DeLucca joined the military in 1957-58, but the dates of service are quite uncertain. The lineman was said to have talked with the Toronto Argonauts of the Canadian Football League in November 1957, but never signed there. About a year later, he turned up on the roster of the Argonauts, and played four games there. It's not known how he came to play in the CFL; it could be assumed that the Bears waived his rights at some point. One of his teammates on that '58 Toronto team was, oddly enough, Sam DeLuca, who turned up on the New York Jets in the 1960s.

The Bears signed Jerry to a contract in June 1959, and invited him to come to training camp. Then on September 23, Chicago traded him to the Eagles just before the start of their season. There's no available record of what the Bears received in the transaction; it sounds as if Philadelphia simply added a player who probably was going to be cut anyway.

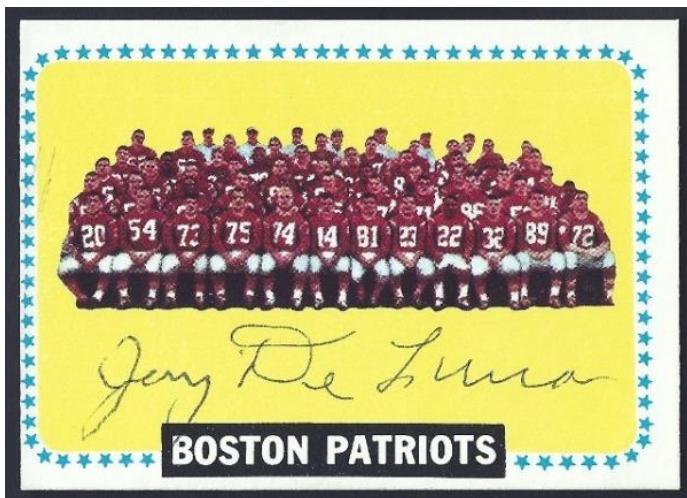


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In any event, the Eagles got a bargain in the deal. The 6-foot-2, 247-pound DeLucca played 12 games that season and started nine of them – mostly at left tackle, although he switched positions at times when necessary. Jerry had the chance to play with such names as Norm Van Brocklin, Chuck Bednarik and Pete Retzlaff that season. Philadelphia finished 7-5, building toward its 1960 NFL championship.

But there was no glory waiting for DeLucca after New Year's Day. On March 13, 1960, the Dallas Cowboys took the tackle in the NFL Expansion Draft. Alas, he didn't make it through the end of training camp and was cut by the first-year team. In most years, that would be a sign that it was time to move on with life. However, Jerry had a "Plan B" waiting for him in this particular year. The American Football League had started operations in 1960, and Boston had a team. DeLucca signed with the Patriots on September 23 – allowing him to return to his old neighborhood. Jerry slid into the starting lineup for the Patriots' first year, and started 11 of his 12 games at right tackle. The team went 5-9 under coach Lou Saban, but life must have been pretty good for DeLucca at that point.



It was even better in 1961. Saban was shown the door in favor of Mike Holovak in midseason, and the Patriots turned a corner by finishing with a 9-4-1 record. DeLucca started all 14 games for Boston, and was a second team all-AFL selection. It looked as if Jerry had found a home. But those good feelings didn't last. On the eve of the 1962 season, DeLucca was traded to the Buffalo Bills for a future draft choice. At least Jerry was reunited with Saban, who was named as the coach of the Bills early in 1962. DeLucca played in 14 games for Buffalo that season but didn't start a contest. The Bills went 7-6-1.



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Jerry probably was dizzy by the time April of 1963 was over. The Bills sent him to the Dallas Texans on April 11 for a draft choice – a 12th-rounder, based on a look at the 1963 lottery. But the Texans held on to him for less than two weeks – not long enough for the veteran to go house-hunting. Dallas traded him back to the Patriots for a draft choice on April 23 – probably another 12th rounder. DeLucca was home again. (Footnote: the Texans moved to Kansas City in May of that year.)

Then it gets confusing. DeLucca was cut by the Patriots on September 3, but apparently he was brought back at some point because of an injury to lineman Milt Graham. He played in three games for Boston that season, starting two of them. Pro Sports Transactions does have the Patriots cutting him on November 8 – thus he missed a trip to the AFL Championship game against San Diego. Jerry also turned up on the Buffalo roster for a couple of games somewhere in 1963.

DeLucca gave pro football one more shot in 1964, but was cut in training camp. Even so, the Patriots used him for a couple of games after signing him on November 27. And that was it. The final totals for the veteran: 59 games played with 37 starts, with three kickoff returns to his credit (on one for the Patriots in 1960, he ran for eight yards).

What was next for Jerry? Of course he stayed in the Boston area. DeLucca sold insurance for Allstate for a while, and then opened up his own insurance agency. No doubt he enchanted customers with tales of the original Boston Patriots. Jerry also used his size to his advantage in working on the security unit at Suffolk Downs racetrack.

DeLucca died on January 8, 2017. He had been married for more than 60 years to wife Mary. They had two children, Darrell and Cheryl.



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