

ARDA'S EXCELLENT ADVENTURE

Arda Bowser '23 Honored As "The Oldest Living Ex-NFL Player" At Tampa Stadium Game

By Jim Campbell

Arda Bowser passed away on September 7, 1996, in Winter Park, FL. at age 97. Two years earlier, in the NFL Film 75 Seasons, he was identified as the oldest living ex-NFL player. As it turned out, this wasn't correct. Ralph Horween who played for the Chicago Cardinals in 1921-23 turned 100 in '96. Neither Bowser, the NFL, nor apparently any pro football historian realized Horween was still alive. Though Bowser was not the oldest ex-player, the recognition he received was certainly deserved on many other counts. An outstanding player in his day, he remained alert and vigorous to the end.

Jim Campbell wrote the following in 1994.

When you are age 95, even though you were a football All-America at Bucknell and a member of your alma mater's Athletic Hall of Fame, you are very likely far removed from any sports spotlight. In the case of Arda Bowser '23, an All-East and All-America mention fullback and an accomplished kicker, the spotlight shown brightly recently (August 6) at an NFL preseason game at Tampa Stadium when the home-standing Buccaneers played the Cincinnati Bengals.

Some time ago, Bowser, a retired insurance executive and resident of Florida since 1947, was brought to the attention of the NFL as its "oldest living `graduate.'" With the NFL embarking on its 75th season, suitable celebrations are in order. What better way to link the "rag days" of pro football's beginnings with the current slickly-packaged game of today than to involve the man who played in the first official NFL game. Arda was a member of the fabled Canton (Ohio) Bulldogs on October 1, 1922 when they defeated the Louisville (Kentucky) Brecks 38-0. The League as we know it today was organized in 1920, but was known for its first two seasons as the American Professional Football Association. The present name was adopted for the 1922 season.

After a stellar career at Bucknell, as a member of the 1919 and 1920 teams and captain of the 1921 team, Bowser stayed on to finish his degree requirements and assist head coach Pete Reynolds in 1922. While visiting Canton, Ohio, he sought out Ralph Hay, the manager of the NFL's Bulldogs. Hay and Bowser agreed on a sum of \$250 a game. Bowser says, "Before I finalized the contract I wanted to check with Pete (coach Reynolds) to see if he would release me from my coaching assignment to play on Sundays.

But in the meantime the Frankford Yellowjackets (representing a section of Philadelphia) also contacted me. They were a team that would eventually play in the NFL, but were not league members then. The Bulldogs played on Sunday, and, because of Pennsylvania "blue laws", the Yellowjackets played on Saturdays."

The fit and alert nonagenarian continues, "I asked Pete which offer I should take once he gave me his blessings. He said, 'Why not take both?' So that's what I did. I played in Philly on Saturday, rode the train all night to Canton, got in at six a.m., grabbed a couple hours sleep, played the game, and rode all night back to Lewisburg. I did that for two seasons."

Bowser related this and other tales on the recently-televised special, *75 Seasons: The Story of the National Football League*, produced for Turner Network Television by NFL Films. Phil Tuckett, the Emmy-winning producer of the special, called Bowser "one of the easiest interviewees to work with." He mentioned "Bowser's sense of history and his ability to stay focused on the subject at hand." Bowser's

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segment of the special ran longer than any other individual, according to Tuckett. Future NFL Films' shows will incorporate other parts of the Bowser interview.

Tuckett, with a keen cinematographer's eye, thought that the ideal way to tie together the beginning and the present of the pro game would be to have an opening shot pan down present-day players standing for the national anthem and at the end of the line would be the pioneering Bowser, shoulder-to-shoulder with one of today's pros. It was decided that a Tampa Bay Buccaneers' game would be the easiest for Bowser, now a resident of Winter Park, FL, to attend.

Arrangements were made with the team for the filming to take place just before the kickoff of the Bucs vs. Bengals game. Bowser also agreed to the hour-and-a-half trek from central Florida to the west coast of the state. More than just allowing the opening shot to be made, the Buccaneers turned it into a special event.

Bowser was greeted by Bucs head coach Sam Wyche, All-Pro line-backer Hardy Nickerson, winning quarterback Casey Weldon, and other members of the team and coaching staff. As Bowser shook hands with each, he mentioned how he'd like to "trade places." Game officials and Pro Football Hall of Fame quarterback Otto Graham were others who took the time to meet and greet the hardy 95-year old. Even members of the Swash-BUC-lers (the team's cheer-leaders) came over to Bowser and were pleased as he gallantly kissed their hands. When he stepped onto the field, the huge in-stadium TV screen was filled with one of Bucknell's finest and the mention of his name brought a loud and warm ovation from the crowd.

Bowser said, "I was probably introduced before more people tonight than I played before in my entire career. I can't get over how mammoth the stadium is and how noisy the crowd is. We could never have dreamed that the games we played on the dirt fields would evolve into this."

With the singing of "The Star-Spangled Banner," the NFL Films crew began making their shot. Bowser, who played at 6'-3" and 200 pounds, stood erect and tall for what was to be the opening of the NFL 75th season special.

When told that he could retire from the field, Bowser said, "I want to stay on the sidelines just to see the kickoff -- then we can go."

The kick went to only the 20 yard line. Bowser, who once made a 72-yard field goal, wasn't that impressed. "H-m-m-p, that wasn't very deep."

As he was waiting to return home, many fans came up to the pioneer pro, offering congratulations, getting autographs and handshakes, posing for pictures, and just wishing him well.

Perhaps a gate security guard spoke for all of us when he said, "Man, I wish I was a legend."

ARDA CRAWFORD BOWSER

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Bethany (WV); Bucknell

b: 1/9/99, Danville, PA - d: 9/7/96, Winter Park, FL (97)

1922 Canton Bulldogs; 1923 Cleveland Indians