

# **JIMMY CONZELMAN**

By Bill Schubert @1997

It is difficult to find a person with a more varied life, successful in so many unrelated endeavors as Jimmy Conzelman. When Conzelman sadly left the good earth in 1970 at 72 years old, his spirit could certainly reflect on a full life.

More important than his list of accomplishments was Conzelman's passion for life. The epitome of the benefit of positive thinking, Conzelman was a born leader and a pursuer of perfection. This pursuit was tempered with a sense of realism and lofty but not unattainable goals. In a word -- attitude!

The best example of this axiom is evidenced by Jimmy's attitude toward his own early shyness when speaking in public. Attacking this perceived personality flaw in himself head on, he challenged himself and accepted every possible public speaking opportunity. Forcing himself to improve, Conzelman became so accomplished, that his address to Dayton University in 1942, titled "A Young Man's Mental and Physical Approach to War" was read into the U.S. Congressional record and was required reading by all students in Annapolis and West Point academies.

Conzelman's style was not to start at the bottom and work his way up, but rather start at the top and handle it. He would have been the ideal spokesman for the athletic shoe manufacturer so famous for using famous sports personalities, as he lived by their motto, -- "Just do it!"

He was an accomplished writer, authoring a syndicated column for the Hearst newspapers, while simultaneously editing his own newspaper. He also published articles in Look magazine and his article "I'd Rather Coach the Pros" in the Saturday Evening Post was judged the second best article of the year in 1946 by his writing trade association peers.

Jimmy Conzelman also had an artistic flair. He painted pictures and was an accomplished pianist. Exhibiting pure intuitive talents, Conzelman could not read music and needed the help of "technicians" to write the actual scores for the songs he created. Combining musical talents with those of a scribe, a half dozen of his songs were published including "Fools in Paradise" written with Jeremy Shaw, and the whimsical "I'm the Only Boy In the World Who Can Take Apart a Biscuit and Put It Back Together Again."

As an actor, Conzelman distinguished himself, playing the role of a football coach in the musical "Good News" which played at the St. Louis Municipal Opera and the manager of the Washington Senators in "Damn Yankees".

Paling all these accomplishments by comparison were his achievements in sports. Sports were the central focus of his life and held everything else together.

Born in St. Louis to James Dunn and Margaret Ryan, young Jimmy took his stepfather's name when his father died. Conzelman quarterbacked his McKinley High School Football team to a City Championship before enrolling in Washington (St. Louis) University as a freshman in 1916.

His family was not able to finance his education, but the industrious Conzelman achieved the funding for school by organizing a band. Shortly thereafter he dropped out of college to support his widowed mother.

Conzelman enlisted in the Navy in 1917. He won a Middle Weight Boxing Championship and played quarterback for the Great Lakes Naval Base team in his two Navy years. With teammates George Halas and Paddy Driscoll, Great Lakes went to the Rose Bowl in 1919. According to Conzelman's later recollections, "We had a pep talk from the Commandant before the game. He said if we won we'd go to the Rose Bowl and get our discharge. I was out in ten days." With Halas scoring a touchdown and Driscoll adding a field goal, Great Lakes won the Rose Bowl 17 to 0 over the Mare Island Marines.

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Returning to Washington University in 1919, Conzelman was the All-Missouri Quarterback. When the NFL (APFA) started in 1920, he joined his old mate Halas as quarterback of the newly organized Decatur Staleys. The next year Conzelman took advantage of his first coaching opportunity and became the player-coach of the Rock Island Independents. He may be the only player in history to be appointed Head Coach of an NFL team during a time out. Impressed by Conzelman's field generalship, the team owner sent a substitute on the field who pulled Jimmy aside and said "I was sent in to tell you, you're the new coach." Only 23 years old, Jimmy Conzelman, along with Curley Lambeau was the youngest coach ever in the NFL.

In 1922, after the Independents had finished their season, Jimmy joined the Milwaukee Badgers as a player-coach for their last four games of the year.

He coached the Badgers to a fourth place finish in a league that had grown to 21 teams in 1923. The next year, he played with Milwaukee on weekends but resigned his coaching duties to pursue a franchise of his own. In 1925, he received a franchise for Detroit which he named the Panthers. Details of the transaction are murky. Some accounts place the purchase price at \$500, others at \$400. And, according to some, the price was waived altogether because the league hoped he could establish a strong franchise in the motor city.

His Panthers finished third in 1925 in an NFL that contained 20 teams. Poor attendance forced him to sell the franchise back to the league after the 1926 season for \$1,200. "That shows what a smart guy I am, it's worth millions today," Jimmy said in later years after the Detroit Lions had become successful. Of course the Lions franchise had no actual connection with Jimmy's earlier Panthers, but the line always brought a good laugh.

Conzelman signed a contract to coach the Providence Steam Roller in 1927 and coached them to an NFL Championship in 1928. Although a knee injury severely limited his playing time, his team still voted him its Most Valuable Player because of the inspiration he provided. The same knee injury ended his playing career ended in 1929.

Having tired of the wandering life of a pro-football coach and no longer able to play, Conzelman returned home to St. Louis in 1932 and entered the publishing business. He kept his hand in football by coaching the semi-pro Gunners in a St. Louis city league. Jimmy also began an eight year stint as the coach of his Alma Mater, Washington University, leading them to three Missouri Valley Championships.

In 1940 Jimmy Conzelman returned to professional football. Charlie Bidwill wanted his winning ways to hopefully inspire his lackluster Chicago Cardinals. He brought spirit, excitement and humor to the locker room, as well as a Notre Dame style of play to Chicago's South Side, but World War II had robbed the Cardinals of more talent than even Conzelman could overcome.

After three years as the Cardinals coach Conzelman left football and returned to St. Louis as assistant to Don L. Barnes, President of the St. Louis Browns baseball team. Conzelman was an experienced baseball player having played minor league ball in the off season during his football playing career.

During his football respite, Conzelman kept in contact with Charlie Bidwill. In 1946 Bidwill was building the Cardinals into the powerhouse "Big Red" and convinced Conzelman to return as Head Coach. Finally, the Cardinals matched Conzelman's coaching skills with superb, but undeveloped athletic skills. His leadership brought the Chicago Cardinals to the NFL Championship in 1947 and Western Division titles in both '47 and '48. He was named Coach of the Year in 1947 by the NFL.

Jim Conzelman left football for good after the 1948 season, returning again to his hometown of St. Louis to take a vice presidency in the D'Arcy Advertisement Agency. When Gussie Busch bought the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team in 1953, Conzelman returned to baseball as a member of their Board of Directors.

When a player is inducted into the Professional Football Hall of fame, it is traditional to be introduced at the commencement ceremony by someone that can reflect on the inductee's career and life. Usually this duty is performed by an old peer or coach familiar with the new member. It is fitting that Jimmy Conzelman is the only member of the Hall of fame to be introduced by a Supreme Court Justice. Justice William O'Douglas performed the task when Conzelman was inducted in 1964. "We've been friends for 40 years, if anybody should know anything to keep me out, he should!", Conzelman exclaimed.

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Jimmy Conzelman passed away on July 31, 1970 at Missouri Baptist Hospital and was buried in Calvary Cemetery in his beloved hometown of St. Louis. Death has been defined as the end of the life process -- and what a life Jimmy Conzelman processed!

### **CONZELMAN, JIMMY**

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