

LEO SUGAR:

All-American and NFL Pro Bowl End

By Jim Sargent

A talented, hard-working, modest athlete who was an All-State fullback in high school in Flint, Michigan, in 1947, Leo Sugar earned All-American honors as a defensive end at Purdue University. After a hitch in the Army, he made the Chicago Cardinals roster in 1954. A starter every year except for his final season, Leo was a standout defender in the National Football League through 1962, twice earning trips to the Pro Bowl.

Some of Sugar's enduring memories are about how guys had to play tough day after day and week after week with the management-dominated NFL clubs of the 1950s. He also has fond memories of the camaraderie which many players shared during that era.

Born on April 6, 1929, Sugar grew up in a family of immigrants during the Great Depression. Michael and Mary Sugar, the parents of Leo, both emigrated from Poland in the 1920s, although they never met before arriving in Flint. Mike Sugar spent years working at the Buick Foundry, one of the major General Motors plants in Flint.

Neither parent had any understanding of sports. But their youngest son, who was quick, strong, and aggressive, gravitated naturally toward all three major sports by the time he reached junior high school.

Forthright and enthusiastic, Leo Sugar walked up to Guy Houston, the longtime head football coach at Flint's Northern High School, the summer before practice began in 1947.

"Hey, I'm going to be your fullback this year," the 6'1" 195-pound senior told the surprised coach. Sugar turned and walked away.

Standing near Houston was Dexter Manley, longtime director of the Flint Community Schools.

LEO SUGAR

"What is he doing, talking to you like that?" Manley asked Houston.

"Because he's probably good enough to be my fullback," replied Houston, who related the story to Sugar years later. In fact, Leo made All-State at fullback in 1947, his senior year, but he also started at defensive end.

By the time Sugar graduated in February 1948, he had starred as a forward and served as captain of Northern's 1947-48 state championship basketball team. Also, the previous summer he patrolled left field for the Buick Post American Legion baseball team which won the state championship.

Sugar, however, was recruited as a football player by the University of Notre Dame, Michigan State College (now University), and Purdue University. After a visit to Purdue, Leo liked the campus and was impressed by Coach Stu Holcomb and his line coach, Jack Mollenkopf.

During Sugar's sophomore year the coaches switched him from fullback because he became a regular at end. Later, Stu Holcomb called Sugar "the best defensive end I've ever coached." Purdue's players agreed, voting him co-captain in his senior year.

Sugar, who graduated in 1951 with a Bachelor's Degree in Physical Education, has sweet memories of many games, notably Purdue's 28-14 defeat of Notre Dame in 1950. At that time the Irish were riding the crest of a 39-game winning streak.

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Football players, coaches, and writers recognized Sugar's achievements. His postseason honors included:

first team All-Big Ten, 1951
the players' All-American first team, 1951
the AP All-American second team, 1951
the Chicago Tribune's All-American first team, 1951
starter in the 1952 East-West Shrine game
defensive captain for the 1952 College All-Star game

For the College All-Star contest, Sugar was named the starter at defensive left end, despite an injured foot. The Flint native gave it his best shot. But the NFL Champion Los Angeles Rams pulled out a fourth-quarter victory on Bob Waterfield's 24-yard field goal.

By then Sugar was the 11th round draft pick of the St. Louis Cardinals. He signed for \$4,500, a typical salary for a defensive lineman in the early 1950s. At first he held out for a bonus. Leo recalled asking for \$200, but he got only half of that!

Laughing about it, Sugar recalled, "So I signed for \$4,500 and got a one hundred dollar bonus. The last year I played with the Lions I played for \$18,000, which was more than Alex Karras made."

But before the NFL's regular season started, he was drafted by Uncle Sam's Army, which sent him to Fort Lee, Virginia. The fighting in the Korean conflict had ended in mid-1951, but the peace talks were stalemated until mid-1953. By early 1954 the Army was discharging many drafted men, following the previous year's armistice. Sugar was mustered out in the spring, and he reported to the Cardinals' training camp in August.

He recalled that Chicago had a few classy older players in 1954, notably Charley Trippi. Trippi was a defensive back and a halfback who helped the Cardinals lead the NFL in 1947. His two touchdowns helped Chicago win the NFL Championship, 28-21, over the Philadelphia Eagles.

The Cardinals, however, had become doormats in the NFL's six-team Eastern Conference. Coached by Joe Stydahar in 1954, the Cards finished last with a 2-10 record, despite a 54-point season by Ollie Matson, the 6'2" 210-pound speedster from the University of San Francisco who later earned Hall of Fame honors.

Chicago lost the first five games behind rookie quarterback Lamar McHan. While Matson rushed for 506 yards and gained another 611 yards on receptions, the other big offensive threats were running back Johnny Olszewski, who gained 352 yards, and end Don Stonesifer, who grabbed 44 passes for 607 yards.

Defensively, only the Washington Redskins allowed more points, a whopping 432, but the Cardinals gave up 347 points. Sugar established himself as a solid defender in his rookie season. Also, he recovered two fumbles, returning one 5 yards for a TD.

After the season Sugar asked for a raise. Reflecting on those experiences, he told me, "I thought, 'The season's over and (I was analyzing myself), and I had a pretty good year, and I'm going to ask for a thousand dollar raise.'

"So I'm home in Flint and reading in the paper about what's going on in Chicago. I read every now and then that so-and-so signed for the Cardinals, and this was getting into April and I thought, 'Well, I'll just hang on a little bit longer and see what happens.'

"Here comes May, and I haven't heard from them or gotten a contract, and I thought, 'Man, maybe they're not even going to honor me with a contract.'

"I thought, 'Well, if they call I'll cut the raise to \$500. May went by and nothing happened.'

"I thought, 'What's going on?' So June came and I thought, 'Maybe I'd better call them. Maybe they forgot about me. Just before I decided to call, they sent me a contract and with it my thousand dollar raise.'

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"I was very happy--but probably I should have asked for more!

"Every year I received a raise someplace along the line. I can't even remember what they were.

"But there were a lot of guys who signed for \$4,500. I know some who signed for \$3,500. There was no minimum.

"In fact, I was one of the first guys with the Cardinals who helped start the players' union. I was the Cardinals' representative for organizing the union."

That position probably hurt him with the front office.

"The owners treated you however they wanted," Sugar said. "For example, for a home game they'd give each player two tickets. One for your wife and one if you had a child. If you had two children, you had to buy one ticket.

"The tickets would either be on the 20-yard line, or between the 20 and the goal--you'd be in that area all the time.

"The owners didn't want the wives to talk about salaries, you know, and they separated them all. The wives were scattered all over the field.

"You know, when I was playing the Cardinals and we weren't doing very well, if you had 20,000 people there in a 60,000-seat stadium, that left a lot of empty seats.

"Two tickets is all you got. If you had any friends come to see you for a home game, you'd have to buy tickets for them."

In 1955 new head coach Ray Richards led the Cardinals to respectability, including a fourth place finish (4-7-1) in the Eastern Conference. More experience and a tougher defense helped. The season's highlight came in the tenth game, when the Cards surprised the cross-city rival Bears, 53-14.

In 1956 the Cardinals enjoyed their best season during Sugar's seven years with the organization. Lamar McHan's passing led to four straight victories, as Chicago topped the Browns, the Giants, the Redskins, and the Eagles.

Thereafter, the club was inconsistent, winning three of the last eight games. Still, the Cards finished at 7-5, second in the East to the Giants who were 8-3-1.

In Sugar's last four seasons with the Cardinals, the team finished no higher than fourth, producing records of 3-9 in 1957, 2-9-1 in 1958, 2-10 in 1959, and 6-5-1 in 1960, which was the club's first season in St. Louis.

Still, Sugar contributed stellar performances. In 1957 he recovered three fumbles and scored two touchdowns--an NFL record until the 1980s. One recovery he returned 21 yards to pay dirt, which remains one of his biggest thrills in pro football.

Leo also grabbed the only pass of his career in 1957, good for a 14-yard gain.

"When I broke in," he recalled, "I think we only had 31 guys on the team, so you always had to fill in offensively or defensively.

"Every now and then, when an offensive end would go down or get hurt, you'd move in and play offense, or defense, whatever they needed. Sometimes you went both ways for a couple of series."

When asked about his only career pass reception in 1957, Sugar laughed, and replied, "I had a great year, didn't I?"

"I don't remember what game I caught the pass. But I do remember that I went up in the air and caught it, and while I was up in the air, a halfback hit me in the back, and man, I hit nothing but dirt!"

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"I was out of breath. I mean, the wind was really knocked right out of me. Of course, I got right up like nothing was bothering me, but I had a tough time breathing. Oh, did that hurt!"

"I think that was the worst blow I've ever had in pro football!"

Even though he could care less for the glory of pass receiving, Sugar showed his alert play around a loose ball, covering three more fumbles in 1958. In seven seasons with the Cards, he recovered 12 fumbles and scored three TDs.

Sugar also made the Pro Bowl twice: he was selected to play as a reserve in the 1959 Pro Bowl, and he won the same honor in 1961--although he suffered a broken jaw in that game.

Asked about his Pro Bowl seasons, Sugar said, "Joe Stydahar, who was coaching the Cardinals in the early 1950s, used to say, 'You guys want to make All-Pro? When you go to New York and play the Giants, just have one helluva game, because there's more press there than in anywhere else we play.'

"But being named All-Pro was quite an honor."

Sugar played for only one winning team with the Cardinals, so his chances of winning postseason recognition were slim. Further, it did not help that the Chicago newspapers and most Chicago fans liked George Halas' Bears better than the Cards.

Why was he traded in 1961? When the NFL expanded from 12 to 14 teams, Leo asked for a raise. Instead, the Cardinals sent him to Philadelphia.

The result helped Sugar's career. The Flint standout longed to play for a winner:

"My best year, the one I enjoyed the most, was 1961 with the Philadelphia Eagles. I was traded to them, and they came up with an 'almost' championship team."

"I didn't know what to expect just going on the team, and all of a sudden those guys just accepted me--just like I was there for ten years."

"I couldn't believe it--they were a loose club. They had Tommy McDonald, Sonny Jurgensen, and Chuck Bednarik. They just were a hard-hitting, fun-loving football team."

With the second-place Eagles (10-4), Sugar suffered a knee injury late in the season, which led to surgery. In 1962, after retiring briefly, Leo was persuaded to play for the Detroit Lions, partly because he could live in Flint and drive to Detroit for the practices and games.

Also, Detroit had championship hopes, and the club wanted more experience at defensive end. So at age 33, the veteran of starting 98 consecutive NFL games received a big (for those times) contract: \$18,000.

Under Coach George Wilson, the Lions made a strong bid for the Western Conference title, finally taking second place behind the Green Bay Packers with an 11-3 mark. While Sugar did not start, he played in the last 12 games. After the season, with his hope for a championship ring gone, he retired from the NFL.

Returning to Flint, Sugar worked at several positions with the Flint Schools through 1969. He began as director of the voluntary work education program, which gave training to high school dropouts. He also served as Community Program Director at different schools. Leaving that, he worked for Palmer Concrete for several years, and later for Modern Concrete.

The quality of Sugar's career led to a major honor: in 1982 he was inducted into the Flint Area Sports Hall of Fame.

Others may have had more prominent names, but few linemen played football with more toughness, enthusiasm, and durability than Leo Sugar. His stellar career illustrates the kind of quality athletes and first-class people which the NFL was all about.

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Leo Sugar

Sugar, Leo Tateusz
Defensive End 6'1 214
College: Purdue
High School: Northern [Flint, MI]
Born: April 6, 1929, Flint, MI
Drafted: 1952 Round 11 Chicago Cardinals

Year	Team	Gm
1954	ChiC	12
1955	ChiC	12
1956	ChiC	12
1957	ChiC	12
1958	ChiC	12
1959	ChiC	12
1960	StL	12
1961	Phi	14
1962	Det	6
9 Yrs.		104