

“Cup of Coffee” Players: JACK SHAPIRO

By Mel Bashore

Jack Shapiro has the distinction of being the all-time Tom Thumb of pro football -- the smallest player to ever play in the NFL. In a game dominated by big men, Shapiro weighed in between 119 and 126 pounds. His Army discharge papers listed him as 5 feet ½ inches tall, but Shapiro always liked to say that he was 5 foot 1. In his words, this gave him “a better chance with the beautiful girls and it just sounded better.” His stint in the NFL was as brief as his diminutive size.

Although football historians list him as playing in just one regular-season game with the 1929 Staten Island Stapletons, he remembers differently. He is still very sharp and quick-witted at age 92 and in his memory, he was on the Stape's roster for five games, playing in two regular-season games and one exhibition game. The regular-season games were late in the season against the Minneapolis Redjackets and Orange Tornadoes. After the Stape's quarterback was hurt in the first two minutes of the exhibition game, Shapiro played for 58 minutes, scoring a TD on a 35-yard run. The injured quarterback was replaced by Hinky Haines, relegating Shapiro to the substitute role.

Born in New York in 1907, Jack was the only one of his family born in America. His parents immigrated to America with four boys and four girls -- one of the girls being a cousin who lived with them. His father earned \$9 a week and two of his brothers did odd jobs to help feed the family. He attended Evander Child High School in the Bronx. His mother gave him 20 cents a day -- 10 cents for subway fare and the other 10 cents for a Coke and some french fries. She made a liver sandwich for his lunch. In those days, butchers gave away cuts of liver to their paying customers.

He was a starter on the high school football team for three straight years. Except for his last game in his senior year when he got hurt and had to go out of the game for a substitute, he had been a 60-minute player. His playing weight was 85 pounds.

His father was dead set against him playing high school sports because two of his brothers had broken their legs playing football and soccer. In order to play, Jack forged his father's signature on the injury release form. Jack says, “When I get to heaven I'll tell my father what I did and I know he will forgive me.”

Not being offered a scholarship, he was a walk on at New York University. His mother had scrimped and saved money for him to pay his tuition. His first day on the practice field, he approached coach “Chick” Meehan and expressed his desire to go out for the team. Coach Meehan smiled and shouted, “Get this man a uniform.” The uniform he was handed was meant to fit a tackle or a guard. Of course, even an average-sized football uniform would have been extra large for Shapiro. After his freshman year, he didn't think he would be offered a scholarship. At spring ball, he asked Meehan if he couldn't help him get a scholarship to Hobart, a small college in New York. To his surprise, Meehan offered him a scholarship and put him on the varsity squad. They only had 30 scholarships to divvy up among the varsity players. Jack contended, “They were hard to get.” During spring training he got to meet Knute Rockne. During his sophomore year, he got in most of the games and went on all of the trips. He played in Yankee Stadium in a game against Fordham before a record-setting crowd of 87,000. He garnered a varsity letter.

After one game, he was approached by a man who told him he represented a town football team in Meridian Connecticut. Shapiro was offered a deal. Shapiro said that offers to play “Sunday ball” for pay were common in the 1920s, but they normally weren't offered or accepted by college stars. Shapiro rounded up two other NYU backs who were paid \$25 apiece. For playing and rounding up the other two players, Jack was paid \$50 plus transportation lodging, and meals.

Before the game, Jack was asked if he would visit one of the team's biggest rooters who happened to be in jail. Shapiro visited the fan in jail and received a pep talk by the enthusiastic rooter. The team was sponsored by the Sons of Italy. Following the game, the sponsors gave the NYU players a bottle of wine

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to help celebrate the win. They played the game on an open field and passed the hat among the crowd. Shapiro played under the assumed name of Murphy. He recognized another college player on the opposing team, too.

Before graduating from NYU, he decided to try out for the Stapes. He reasoned, "Nobody had any money." He did it because he "wanted to make a few bucks." There were quite a few players on the team from NYU. In Jack's recollection, Ken Strong was the only contract player. Strong signed for \$5,000 and a rent-free apartment. Shapiro had an enduring friendship with Strong and he often stayed with Ken and his wife, Mabel, when he visited New York on business. He and Strong would stay up late "talking football" after Mabel went to bed. Shapiro went back to NYU after his year in the pros and graduated in 1931.

Shapiro has recently received recognition from the Guinness Book of Records organization as being the shortest player on record in NFL history. He hopes that he will be mentioned in a forthcoming edition of that popular book.

In 1995, the NFL Alumni awarded him the Norm Van Brocklin Award for Outstanding Achievement. In presenting him the award, Pete Brown, a 49er from the early 1950s, said, "Jack Shapiro is the all-time Tom Thumb in the history of pro football." Brown added that Shapiro's accomplishments proves "each of us can achieve a dream, no matter what it is."

Although appreciative of these recognitions, my reading of Shapiro is that he doesn't take these sentiments too seriously. For him, his short stint in the NFL was just one of the pages out of the book of his life -- and a way to "make a few bucks" and to "have a better chance with the beautiful girls." Just a regular guy.