

# FRANK VARRICHIONE:

## All-American and Pro Bowl Tackle

By Jim Sargent

Frank Varrichione, a first-class offensive tackle in the National Football League for 11 seasons, played on his best team ever as a junior at the University of Notre Dame. In 1953 the "Fighting Irish" finished with a 9-0-1 record, ranking second to the University of Maryland in the final polls. Coach Frank Leahy, however, called it his greatest team.

Varrichione later became a stellar performer in the NFL, anchoring the line at right tackle for the Pittsburgh Steelers from 1955 to 1960. Traded to Los Angeles in 1961, he maintained his Pro Bowl level of play and also served as captain for the Rams.

The aggressive Varrichione, who stood 6'1" and never weighed over 240 pounds, consistently gave an all-out effort but rarely won much publicity. Still, his strength, quickness, and excellent blocking skills carried him to four Pro Bowls with the Steelers, in 1956, 1958, 1959, and 1961, and one with the Rams, in 1963.

The youngest of ten children in a Catholic family, Frank was taught to work hard and achieve goals. His parents, Joseph and Mary Varrichione, emigrated to America from Italy in 1913. They settled in Boston, later moving their growing family to Natick.

"I started playing football in the ninth grade at Natick High School," Varrichione told me. "I was a pretty big kid. I showed a little bit of talent as a sophomore. But I was young, only 16 as a senior, just a big-boned kid."

Henry Plausee, Varrichione's high school coach, described him as big, quiet, and shy. As a 14-year-old sophomore, Frank was strong but clumsy. He had good strength and great determination, plus he had a great work ethic. As a senior he proved outstanding, both as a pass receiver and a defensive lineman.

### On to Notre Dame

After graduation, Frank attended a prep school, St. Thomas Aquinas, in Rochester, New York, for a year. His performance there earned him a scholarship to Notre Dame.

"While I was at St. Thomas Aquinas," Varrichione recalled, "Notre Dame got interested in me and Jack Lee. We played against a school coached by Bob McBride, who later became an assistant coach for Frank Leahy at Notre Dame and who coached me there. McBride highly recommended us to Leahy, and we both got scholarships."

In the fall of 1951 Varrichione enrolled at Notre Dame, where he was listed at 6-foot and 210 pounds. He became a standout offensive guard and tackle as a freshman and sophomore, and he played both offense and defense during his last two seasons.

"I played at Notre Dame from 1951 through 1954," Varrichione said. "I was All-American at Notre Dame, and the first-round draft choice for Pittsburgh in 1955. I played offensive right tackle for my whole NFL career."

### Pittsburgh in the 1950s

What was it like to play for Pittsburgh in the mid-1950s?

"When I came in 1955, Pittsburgh had Fran Rogel at fullback, and they brought in Sid Watson from Northeastern.

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"Lynn Chandnois was their most effective halfback. He was smooth, and he had great athletic ability. Jimmy Finks was the quarterback, and Ted Marchibroda was the back-up.

"The main difference in the two coaching staffs, which I saw after Buddy Parker came in 1957, is that coach Walt Kiesling, and assistant Nick Skorich, were from the old school.

"They believed in hard work and conditioning. We used to have two-hour scrimmages every day during training camp. So we were always in great condition when the season began. But when the cool weather came, the other teams would run over us.

"When Parker came, the first thing he did was push all these pieces of heavy equipment to the sideline of the football practice field.

"We took off our shoulder pads, and we started walking through our maneuvers, instead of going full speed ahead all the time. I think that made a difference in attitude and in some of the guys keeping their leg strength for a longer period of time."

Ernie Stautner, the Hall of Fame tackle for Pittsburgh, recalled, "In all the years Frank played for the Steelers, he was very seldom beaten outright. He had the respect of all the defensive linemen who played against him."

Pittsburgh, however, fielded only two clubs with winning records during Varrichione's six years, finishing at 7-4-1 in 1958 and 6-5-1 in '59.

### **Movin' West**

Despite his outstanding play, Varrichione was traded before the 1961 season, because Coach Parker wanted a better kicker, Lou Michaels of the Rams.

About the difference in playing for the Steelers and the Rams, Varrichione commented: "When I got there the Rams were lacking something in the coaching department. Bob Waterfield was the head coach in 1961. He wasn't a very good communicator with the players. They nicknamed him the 'Great Stoneface.'

"I almost decided to retire after my first year with the Rams, when we were 4-10, because the situation was worse than in Pittsburgh.

"After the 1962 season, where our record was only 1-12-1, the Rams brought in Harland Svare, who had been Waterfield's assistant. They began to bring in a pretty good nucleus, with Merlin Olsen, Deacon Jones, Roman Gabriel, Rosy Grier, Lamar Lundy, and Dick Bass at running back."

Former Ram Merlin Olsen, a longtime friend of Varrichione, recalled his favorite story about the former Notre Dame star, which occurred late in the 1962 season.

"Coach Svare was berating the team and it became an ugly kind of situation," Olsen said. "Svare was saying, 'You're a bunch of quitters and cowards,' when an ash tray sailed by his head, and Uncle Frank said, 'Are you calling me a coward?'

"Svare quickly replied, 'Not you, Frank,' and he decided to abandon his critical attack."

### **Memories**

What does Varrichione remember as career highlights?

"Before I went to Pittsburgh, I played in the College All-Star game in Chicago. We beat Otto Graham and the Cleveland Browns. We had quite a team. We had Ralph Guglielmi of Notre Dame, who started at quarterback, George Shaw was another quarterback, and we had Rosy Grier of Penn State, Jim Ray Smith of Baylor, and Hank Bullough of Michigan State. Tad Weed of Ohio State kicked a field goal with less than a minute to play and we won, 30-28."

Asked about other memorable events, Frank replied, "I made All-American at Notre Dame, and that was a real thrill. Also, one of my biggest thrills was being selected to play in the Pro Bowl after my rookie year of 1955. That sticks out in my mind as quite an accomplishment. I went to the Pro Bowl four times with Pittsburgh, and I played in the Pro Bowl on the West Squad after the 1963 season."

How has blocking and line play in the NFL changed since the 1950s?

"Back in my day, you were expected to move the defensive lineman out of his position. A lot of straight-ahead blocking was used and we had to move the lineman out of his area.

"In fact, I was known as a 'holder.' But if you got your hands more than six inches from your body, the referee would throw the flag and say, 'That's illegal use of the hands.'

"You were allowed to bring your fists up in front of your chest and have your arms extended, but you couldn't use your hands.

"I recall that when I was at the training camp for the Chicago All-Stars in 1955, an old offensive line coach with the name of O'Neal, 'Stout Steve' O'Neal, told us, 'Boys, if you're going to play in the NFL, you are going to have to learn to hold, or you will never get by.'

"In other words, you had to hold, but it couldn't be obvious. On pass blocking, my technique was to put one fist on each side of the defensive end or tackle's chest. That way if he tried to throw you to one side or the other, you had your arms to keep your balance. That kept him from pushing you to the side.

"Now they could throw the flag on every play. But they only call the penalty on the most flagrant plays, where someone grabs a guy and throws him to the ground."

### **Face Guards**

Regarding face guards and blocking, Varrichione recalled, "When I was at Notre Dame, we didn't use face masks. Frank Leahy and his staff stressed to the offensive linemen that you hold your head up when you're blocking someone. You hold your head up and put your face into his chest and keep moving your feet and that was the best way to block.

"But it was difficult for you to keep your head up, because your instinct said you were going to catch a blow in the face. So the Notre Dame coaches actually tied the back of your helmet to the back of your shoulder pads. That would force the player to keep his head up, until you perfected the technique. When I learned to block with my head up, I became pretty effective at it. That is part of the reason I excelled as a blocker. But I never used a facemask all though college."

On the first day of Pittsburgh's training camp in 1955, coach Walt Kiesling told Varrichione to wear a face bar. Frank reminisced, "While I was at Notre Dame, I had my nose broken maybe half a dozen times, but I never lost a tooth, for some reason. But after I put that facemask on, we were playing Detroit. A guy by the name of Darris McCord hit me with an elbow and broke two of my teeth, right through the bar!

"As I got older, I got wiser and used more protection. Later, I went to the double bar and even later I used the birdcage. As you get older, you want to protect your face more."

The Massachusetts native proved to be a very durable athlete: he missed only two games in 11 seasons:

"You have to be lucky, number one. You have to be an aggressive player, too, if you're going to avoid injury. Even at the NFL level, all players are not necessarily aggressive. Today you see these linemen trying to use 'shield blocks,' instead of aggressively trying to drive somebody out of position.

"When I played in the 1950s, I weighed 230 or so, and later as much as 240. But I was quick, and that makes the difference. Toward the end of my career, though, I was considered smallish for a tackle.

"But I think back to Frank Leahy and Bob McBride at Notre Dame, and all those hours we spent doing blocking drills, with the helmets tied to the shoulder pads. We used the split-T in those days. They taught us to fire out and get to your man, and keep him tied up, and keep your legs going. We became pretty proficient at blocking. So if I was a good lineman, the credit goes back to those coaches and those drills at Notre Dame."

### **Faintin' Frank**

Varrichione is famous for another highlight. In 1953 Notre Dame won nine games and tied one, the Iowa game--which included a fake injury:

"We were undefeated coming up to the end of the season against a very good Iowa team coached by Forest Evashevski. Note Dame was a 21-point favorite.

"Iowa was leading 7-0 just before the first half ended, when we were driving down near their end zone and we were out of timeouts and the clock was ticking.

"All the schools used it, the fake injury. They even practiced it. You would go throw a block and if you were the player designated to fake the injury, you would stay down in the pile-up. The official would come out and check you and they would carry you off the field. That would stop the clock and allow your team another play.

"The reason I became so famous, or maybe infamous, was that during the Iowa game, we had reached the 20 or 15-yard line and I was the designated injury man. I threw a cut-off block, as Guglielmi ran an option play to the right. I glanced up and saw Guglielmi at the sideline and the ball bouncing out of bounds. Thinking that would stop the clock, I got up and walked back to the huddle.

"Guglielmi comes trotting back to the huddle and said, 'Why didn't you fake the injury?'

"I said, 'I saw the ball go out of bounds and I figured that stopped the clock.'

"He told me that the official saw him toss the ball out of bounds on purpose, so the official spotted the ball and they let the clock run. So the clock it ticking down to 10, 9, 8 seconds while we were in the huddle, and Guglielmi called a quick play and we started back to the line of scrimmage.

"I knew we couldn't get the play off, so I just dropped to the ground--nobody touched me! We were at the line waiting for the play and I just fell to the ground. So they stopped the clock and carried me off the field.

"On the next play, Guglielmi threw a touchdown pass to Dan Shannon, and we tied the game, 7-7.

"The same thing happened at the end of the game, when Art Hunter pulled the fake injury. But he disguised it much better than I did. Again, in the last few seconds, Guglielmi threw another touchdown pass and that tied the game, 14-14.

"That was our only blemish all year, the tie with Iowa. We went on to beat Southern California by a big score, 48-14, and SMU by 40-14. We made Number One in a few polls, but the AP and UPI put Maryland in as Number One, which they used to do just as soon as the season ended--they didn't wait for the bowl games.

"But they still talk about that fake injury. In fact, Merlin Olsen, in some of the games he announced in recent years, when someone got hit near the end of a half and went down, Merlin would say, 'He pulled a Varrichione!'"

### **High Finance**

Varrichione worked hard and excelled on many gridirons, ranging from Natick to the Golden Dome, from Pittsburgh's Forbes Field to the Los Angeles Coliseum. For his efforts the offensive tackle earned a good income, but the big bucks were not yet being paid in the NFL.

Frank signed for \$8,000 in 1955, a figure considered a good salary for an offensive lineman. His best contract for the Rams paid him \$20,000. But he was married and raising a family, so he worked in the off-season, running a drive-in restaurant in Natick and later selling real estate in Los Angeles.

By 1965 Varrichione knew the time had come to give up the game he loved, although he had not been seriously injured. After retiring, he worked for three years in Michigan as a sales representative for Artim Trucking. Then he moved his family back to Natick, where he helped run the family's paint contracting business. He retired in 1986, came back to operate a coffee shop with his wife Mitzi two years later, and retired again in 1992.

### **Best Game**

Does he have a favorite game that stands out in his memory?

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"Probably the best game I ever played came with Pittsburgh in 1957," Varrichione recollected, "when Buddy Parker was coaching, and we beat the Colts, 19-13. A guy by the name of Gino Marchetti was tearing everybody up. Johnny Unitas was passing everybody crazy, and they had Alan Ameche and Lenny Moore as great running backs.

"Buddy Parker was so worried about stopping Marchetti that he was having two or three linemen alternate at right tackle in practice that week. That was my position, and I was required to block Marchetti. To make a long story short, it became quite a challenge to me to block Marchetti.

"I had a terrific day. Marchetti didn't touch our quarterback, Bobby Layne, once. I got a pretty good writeup in the Pittsburgh paper after the game.

"Later on, I heard more about it at the 1958 Pro Bowl game, from one of the Cleveland players, tackle Mike McCormack.

"Frank,' he said, 'We were playing Pittsburgh the Sunday after you played the Colts. When Paul Brown got out the film to show us that week, he said, 'Gentlemen, I'm going to show you one of the greatest exhibitions of blocking I have ever seen in my life. I want you to watch the right tackle of the Steelers, the kind of job he did on Gino Marchetti.' McCormack said that was the first time Paul Brown ever announced, before a game film was shown, to watch the performance of a particular player. I'll never forget that."

### Witnesses

Although not in Canton's Pro Football Hall of Fame, Frank is proud of his selection in 1995 to the Boston Chapter of the Italian-American Sports Hall of Fame.

Lynn Chandnois, who played two seasons of his seven Steeler seasons as a teammate of Varrichione, remembers him as a first class player and a first class person. "Frank was every bit as good an offensive tackle as any in the league," Chandnois observed.

Commenting on Varrichione's greatness, Hall of Famer and longtime friend Merlin Olsen said: "I respected Frank's leadership and his courage on the field, and also his knowledge of how to hold without getting caught. Frank had the 'best hands in the business.'"

"I never made the Hall of Fame," Frank Varrichione remarked recently, "but for a short while they used to have a film clip in Canton to demonstrate how to pass-block, and I was the blocker. I had a good friend who told me about it.

"I do have some very good memories, and I wouldn't trade those for anything."

Frank Varrichione's quickness, toughness, and skills illustrate why he became a five-time Pro Bowler, despite the fact that most of his NFL clubs endured losing seasons.

### Frank Joseph Varrichione

Offensive Tackle

6'1" 234

Notre Dame

Drafted 1955 Round 1 Pittsburgh

Year	Team	GM	Year	Team	GM
1955	Pittsburgh	12	1961	Los Angeles	14
1956	Pittsburgh	12	1962	Los Angeles	12
1957	Pittsburgh	12	1963	Los Angeles	14
1958	Pittsburgh	12	1964	Los Angeles	10
1959	Pittsburgh	12	1965	Los Angeles	11
1960	Pittsburgh	12	11 years		133