

A LION ON DEFENSE

by Don Smith

For the Detroit Lions, who dominated the National Football League through most of the 1950s, Yale Lary was the kind of do- everything player who comes along once in a generation.

During an 11-year tenure that began in 1952 Yale's primary task was to play right safety for Detroit's talented defensive corps. The Lions couldn't have found a better man for the job.

Lary also was a superb punter, one of the best two or three in history. His booming long-distance kicks kept opponents in consistently poor field position for more than a decade. When he got his hands on the ball on an interception, a kick return or an occasional rush from punt formation, he was a game-breaking threat to go all the way.

In recognition of these unique contributions, Lary was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1979, along with Johnny Unitas, Ron Mix, and Dick Butkus.

At the time, Lary was only the fifth defensive back to be elected to the Hall. Of the five, Jack Christiansen and Dick "Night Train" Lane were Yale's teammates during part of his career in Detroit. The other two were Larry Wilson of the St. Louis Cardinals and Emlen Tunnell of the New York Giants and Green Bay Packers. None, however, were as multi-talented as Lary.

To be sure, Yale belongs in the Hall on the basis of his defensive play alone. Taking only his defensive skills into account, he was named to the all-NFL team four times and he played in nine Pro Bowl games. His career record showed 50 interception, a mark surpassed by only four others at the time of Yale's retirement in 1965.

Yet Lary today is probably better remembered for his punting skills than for his high-quality defensive performances. There are plenty of good reasons why this may be true.

He punted 503 times for a 44.3 yard average and that mark is only 8/10 of a yard short of Sammy Baugh's career record. His 48.9 record in 1963 was the second highest seasonal average ever. He won punting championships in 1959, 1961 and 1963 and missed a fourth in 1962 by a razor-thin average of only 3.6 inches!

It was the hang time on Yale's punts, as well as the length, that provided the Lions such a lethal weapon for so many years. In 1960, for instance, Detroit opponents averaged less than a yard per return on Lary's punts.

"Kicking from the end zone, he invariably put the ball across midfield with enough hang time to let us cover the kick," team captain Joe Schmidt, a Hall of Fame linebacker, remembers. "He made our defense look good because he gave us room to work."

For the first six years of his playing career -- after his first two seasons Yale spent 1954 and 1955 in the Army -- Lary was also the Lions' busiest punt returner. Three times he scored on long distance punt returns, the longest a 74-yarder in Yale's second season.

Whether it was a key tackle, an interception or a long run, making the big play in a close game became a Lary trademark. In the 1952 divisional championship play-off with Los Angeles, Yale recovered two Rams' fumbles to pave the way for a Lions' victory. His recovery of a Lenny Moore fumble in the fourth period of a 1957 contest with Baltimore sparked a Lions' comeback that produced a key victory on the way to another NFL title. One of his favorite ploys was a run from punt formation. He carried the ball only 10 times during his career for a sparkling 15.3 yard average but the mere threat of a Lary run from punt formation kept opponents constantly on edge.

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Born in Fort Worth, Texas, on November 24, 1930, Yale played prep football at Fort Worth's North Side high. He moved on to Texas A&M where he was an all-Southwest Conference defensive back in both 1950 and 1951. He was also an outstanding baseball player -- Yale did play minor league baseball for four seasons --and many felt he would pass up pro football.

But the Lions picked him in the third round for the 1952 draft and Yale signed a \$6,500 contract. There were no bonus clauses and he got paid only if he made the team. Since he had scored on a 67-yard run and a 20-yard pass reception in his final college game as A&M upset arch-rival Texas, 23-21, the Lions opted to try him as an offensive back. That experiment ended quickly.

"Leon Hart (6-4, 250) was playing defensive end in a scrimmage and I was supposed to block him," Yale remembers. "After making a fool of myself a couple of times, Buddy Parker (Lions' coach) suggested I give defense a try."

If the move was a good one for Lary, it was a master stroke for the Lions, who won NFL titles in 1952, 1953, and 1957 with Yale playing a leading role by utilizing all three of his specialties.

The strength of the Lions' famed defensive units of the 1950s was Chris' Crew, a backfield foursome molded around Christiansen.

Lary played right safety and held his job longer than any other member of the original Chris' crew. He also won the lasting admiration of his teammates.

"If I had to pick one defensive back who had everything," quarterback Bobby Layne said years after he had left the Lions to play in Pittsburgh, "it would have to be Yale. He was the smartest and it took him a long way. But the big thing was his quickness, his ability to make a quarterback think he had an open receiver, then recover and intercept. A lot of passers would avoid his area. He didn't get the chances for interceptions some backs do."

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the truly remarkable Yale Lary was his consistently high-quality performance year after year.

"Lary seems to be at his peak every game," George Wilson, who took over as Detroit's coach in 1957, once remarked. He is always in great condition. He likes to play. After eight years, many of the good ones are on the way down. In Yale's case, he just keeps going at a peak performance level."

Still Yale had to continually adjust his play to keep up his all-pro standards. A comparatively small man at 189 pounds on a 5-11 frame -- a weight he comes within a pound or two of matching even today (ed:1979) -- Lary had to constantly learn new techniques to maintain his efficiency.

"Toughest to defense for me was Raymond Berry of Baltimore. Sonny Randle of St. Louis also gave me a bad time," Lary recalls. "But I thought I had most of the receivers in the NFL pretty well figured until Monty Stickles (6-4, 235) came along. That gave me new and bigger problems."

A hallmark of Yale's career was his ability to excel even in new and tougher situations, but it wasn't easy. Playing right safety in the Lions setup meant operating from one field position rather than shifting from side to side to shadow one particular receiver.

"You have a lot more duties now," Yale said in his next-to- last NFL campaign in 1963. "Really you're almost like a linebacker. Offenses have changed so much. It used to be that a tight end played tight end. There was only one split man. Not any more."

Yale's on-the-field versatility is matched off the field as well. His original plans called for a school teaching career but, in 1958, he challenged a well-entrenched Democratic incumbent in Fort Worth's Tarrant County for a seat in the Texas state legislature. Lary not only scored an upset victory but he easily won a second-term bid two years later. He opted not to try for a third term in 1962 because he felt there wasn't enough time for both politics and football.

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Instead he joined a boyhood friend to purchase an automobile agency in the Fort Worth suburbs. It was the time required to get this new business off the ground that prompted his retirement from football before the 1965 season began.

Just recently Lary sold his car agency and now is in the investment business, dealing in real estate, oil and gas leases and production of oil and natural gas. He still lives in the Fort Worth area with his wife Janie and two college-age children (ed.: again, as of 1979).

There's no telling what Yale may try next -- but it is certain, whatever it may be, he will do it in typical Yale Lary fashion--better than almost anyone else!

YALE LARY'S RECORD

YEAR	TEAM	GM	NO	YDS	AVG	TD	NO	AVG	BK
1952	Detroit	12	4	61	15.3	0	5	36.2	0
1953	Detroit	11	5	98	19.6	0	28	39.7	0
1954-55				(In Military Service)					
1956	Detroit	12	8	182	22.8	1	42	40.4	0
1957	Detroit	12	2	64	32.0	0	54	39.9	0
1958	Detroit	12	3	70	23.3	0	59	42.8	1
1959	Detroit	10	3	0	0.0	0	45	*47.1	0
1960	Detroit	12	3	44	14.7	0	*64	43.8	*2
1961	Detroit	14	6	95	15.8	0	52	*48.4	0
1962	Detroit	14	8	51	6.4	0	52	45.3	1
1963	Detroit	10	2	21	10.5	1	35	*48.9	0
1964	Detroit	14	6	101	16.8	0	67	46.3	0

11 yrs. 133 50 787 15.7 2 503 44.3 4

*-Led league