

CARL KARILIVACZ - "A GOOD FOOTBALL PLAYER"

By Gregory Kukish

This is a story of a good football player. He played on two of the greatest defensive teams in the history of the N.F.L. Although you won't find his name among the enshrinees of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, Carl Karilivacz epitomizes the foundation of the pro game because he loved the game and gave it everything he had.

Carl was drafted out of the Syracuse University as a wide receiver in 1953 by the Detroit Lions as a low round draft choice. Just to be drafted by the team that had on its roster players such as Jim Doran and Bob Hoernschemeyer, made Carl as happy as if he had been No. 1 choice. In camp Carl was switched to the defense.

Teammate Jim David, who also made a similar change in position, recalls "Carl had good speed. It was difficult at first because everything was new, but Carl worked hard and was very intense about his job and made himself into a good back." Another teammate Yale Lary adds "Carl was a good tackler. Regarding the Lions' defensive strategy of the day, we played a basic zone or man coverage. With Carl at the corner and me at safety, we would make decisions on the coverage. For example, if there were two wide receivers on our side, we'd work out that he could take the inside or outside man or that I could play that short or deep man." Sometimes, just a nod or a glance would set the defensive scheme into motion.

The Detroit Lions of the early fifties, coached by Buddy Parker, were a team of fun-loving, hard-playing pros. They all shared the same desire to win and loved the game. You were a Detroit Lion, a teammate, a friend, whether you played offense or defense. "All for one, and one for all" may sound corny by today's standards, but it brought the Lions success on the football field.

There were several big games during Carl's career with the Lions. The championship games against the Browns, the playoff game in 1957 against San Francisco, when the Lions trailed at the half 24-7. Then, during halftime the Lions overheard the 49ers celebrating in their locker room as if they had forgotten that there was another half of football left to play. The final score was Detroit 31, San Francisco 27, with Carl making an interception late in the game.

Pro football theory in the deployment of manpower started to change with the Lions. League wide thinking, at the time, was to put your best players on offense, for obvious reasons. However, Buddy Parker decided that since the offenses of the day were loading up on talent, he would start emphasizing the defense, primarily the defensive backfield to offset the modernization of the passing game.

Sporting the moniker of Chris's Crew." The Lions defensive backfield consisted of greats, over the years, such as Yale Lary, Jack Christenson, Jim David, Terry Barr and Dick Lane. Carl, a good player was a victim of the numbers game. Pro team rosters only carried 33-35 players at the time. As Jim David recalls, "We were having a few beers and talking about things when Carl hints that he might be on the trading block."

At this time Tom Landry, then player-coach of the New York Giants, was looking for someone "for that right corner back spot. It was, I believe, the year before we got Dick Lynch and due to injuries and such, we had a concern over these." A trade for Carl Karilivacz was made.

The trade was a good news-bad news development for Carl. The good news was that the trade would be a home coming of sorts, since Carl was from Glen Cove, L.I. The bad news was that Carl would be leaving "family". It would be a different situation with the Giants. The team was divided, quite dramatically, between the offensive players and the defensive players. There was a camaraderie on the different units among its members, but the defense knew that it was the principle factor in the Giants success at the time and they carried that with them on the field.

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The '58 regular season for the Giants ended in back to back hard fought victories over the Browns, which enabled them to meet the Colts for the championship. As for Carl, this meant a face to face confrontation with his old nemesis, Ray Berry. For most of the game Carl held his own, but during that famous drive of the Colts that resulted in the tying field goal as time was running out, Unitas, time and again went to Berry for crucial gains. True, the Giants were in a prevent defense, playing deep and to the outside to protect against an out of bounds, clock stopping pass, but Carl's "good" was just not good enough that day.

In 1959 The Giants acquired Dick Lynch from the Redskins. He would become an all-pro fixture at corner for the Giants for a long time. Carl went to the Rams the same year.

In training camp the following year, he made a decision that every pro player has to eventually make. The small nagging injuries, that are so much a part of the game, were taking longer to heal. In those days, players almost never sat out with injuries, being concerned that if they did they would lose their jobs. These badges of courage took their toll. Carl, also wanted to spend more time with his wife and four children. He returned home to Glen Cove and moved into a large house and entered into the printing business. He still loved football and did some scouting and helped coach a local high school team.

Carl's life was cut short by a heart attack in 1969. As Jim David recalls, "Joe Schmidt, myself and a couple others had just returned from a fishing trip. We were at Joe's house when the phone rang and a caller told us that Carl had passed away."

One day, as I was eating lunch in a diner mulling over a suitable ending to this story, I overheard three old-timers discussing a friend of theirs. One of them said, "Yeah, Joe was a good steelworker." At that I introduced myself and asked them exactly what they meant by "good". I mean, why not describe Joe as a "super" steelworker, or "great" steelworker.

They all slowly stared down at the lunch counter and then one smiled slowly and said, "Well, I suppose there are great and super steelworkers, but Joe you could depend on, always would be there to punch in on time, no matter what. Always gave it a go no matter what they asked him to do and most of the time held up his end too." Then he looked at me with watery eyes and spoke, "He was a 'good' young fella. In a steel mill that has it's own special meaning." I suppose in pro football "good" has the same special meaning.

Karilivacz' Interception Record

1953	Detroit Lions	.....	N	0
1954	Detroit Lions	.....	N	2
1955	Detroit Lions	.....	N	2
1956	Detroit Lions	.....	N	1
1957	Detroit Lions	N	5
1958	New York Giants	...	N	3
1959	Los Angeles Rams	..	N	0
1960	Los Angeles Rams	..	N	0
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	8 years			13