

Elmer Angsman:

A Hero of the Last Chicago Cardinal Football Champions

By: Jim Sargent

Elmer Angsman, who played his final season of professional almost fifty years ago, remains a hero of the last Chicago Cardinal championship football team. The former Notre Dame star halfback helped lead the Cardinals to the franchise's last National Football League championship two years after World War II ended.

On Sunday, December 28, 1947, when the cold afternoon ended at Chicago's Comiskey Park, the Cardinals had used four big plays to defeat the NFL's Eastern Division champion Philadelphia Eagles, 28-21. On a day when the Cards opened the game wearing basketball shoes, Angsman scored two of Chicago's four touchdowns on 70-yard bursts through the line of scrimmage.

Rushing for 159 yards on a subfreezing day, Angsman broke the previous NFL playoff record of 109 yards in one game set by Bill Osmanski of the Chicago Bears against the Washington Redskins in 1940.

Philadelphia's Tommy Thompson, a NFL veteran since 1940, set playoff records for the most passes attempted and completed. The Eagle quarterback, who threw for 16 touchdowns in 1947, passed for 297 yards and one touchdown, going 27-for-44.

But in the end, Angsman's two touchdowns and two long scoring runs by Cardinal rookie Charley Trippi gave the NFL title to the Cardinals. While the club produced an even better regular season in 1948, going 11-1, Chicago lost the '48 league championship to Philadelphia, 7-0, under almost unbelievable snowy conditions.

By the time the 5'11" 200-pound Angsman hung up his cleats for the last time after the 1952 season, he had gained 2,908 yards lifetime on 683 plays, an average of 4.3 yards per carry. He scored 27 touchdowns rushing. In addition, Elmer caught 41 passes, gained 654 yards, and scored five times as a receiver.

But statistics don't tell Angsman's story. Friendly, talented, and tough, he was a rugged team player who gave the game his best shot whenever he stepped on the field. Proud of his championship ring, Elmer would rather talk about the hard-nosed way that football was played before it became part of today's entertainment business.

Born on Chicago's south side on December 11, 1925, Angsman grew up in a hard-working family. His father was a cattle trader in the stockyards. Coming of age during the Great Depression, Elmer learned to work hard and to value life's rewards.

He loved sports. At Mount Carmel High he played football for two Notre Dame alumni, head coach Wally Fromhart, an Irish quarterback in 1935-36, and line coach Fred Munde, Notre Dame's starting center at that time. A standout at halfback, Elmer graduated in 1943 and entered Notre Dame at age 17.

Notre Dame won the NCAA championship in 1943, but Angsman played little as a freshman. In 1944 he started at right half, teaming in the backfield with Bob Kelly, a friend from Chicago, and Chick Maggioli. In the last year of World War II, Kelly and Maggioli were drafted. But Angsman was rejected because of a broken eardrum.

In his junior year Elmer led the Irish in rushing, gaining 616 yards, averaging 7.1 yards per carry, and scoring seven touchdowns. Six backs in Notre Dame history have bested Angsman's 1945 average. The legendary George Gipp is the Irish leader at 8.1 yards per carry.

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Angsman was named second-team All-American in '45. Army's Glenn Davis and "Doc" Blanchard, playing for the service academy, were consensus All-Americans. The Irish produced good wartime seasons, going 8-2 in 1944 and 7-2-1 in 1945. But both years the powerful Army eleven blasted them, 59-0 and 48-0.

Since he would complete his Notre Dame classes in three years, Angsman was drafted by the Cardinals and the Cleveland Browns in 1946. When he signed with Chicago at age 20, he became the youngest player in NFL history. Angsman played seven seasons and retired at the age of 27.

In a 2000 interview, Elmer explained:

"When I was drafted by the Cardinals, I signed with them in January '46. Technically, I had another year of eligibility at Notre Dame, because they made freshmen eligible. But I got a little bonus for signing, and they sent me a couple of hundred dollars a month while I was in school. That was like manna from heaven, you know."

Angsman enjoyed a good rookie season for Chicago. Averaging 6.8 yards a carry, he rushed for 328 yards in 48 attempts over 11 games. The Cardinals, however, were not yet a great team. Under coach Jimmy Conzelman the club went 6-5 and placed fourth of five teams in the NFL's Western Division.

The Cardinal backfield featured Paul Christman, the former Missouri All-American, as the starting quarterback. Ray Mallouf of Southern Methodist was the backup. Christman, an excellent overhand passer who turned sidearm in 1948, completed 100 of 229 passes for 1,656 yards and 13 scores. Pat Harder of Wisconsin played fullback, kicked field goals and extra points, and led the team in rushing with 545 yards (5.1 avg) and four touchdowns.

Angsman ranked second in both rushing and scoring. Veteran Marshall Goldberg, the great Pitt halfback, ran for 210 yards (4.9 avg) and scored three TDs. Fourth-year back Frank Seno of George Washington and Jimmy Strausbaugh, a rookie from Ohio State, also ran the pigskin.

The Cardinals had a strong nucleus, but they needed a few more fine players. In 1947 the club drafted and signed Charley Trippi, the triple threat All-American from Georgia.

Angsman recollected what it was like to be drafted in the NFL during the postwar era:

"The thing was that when you signed a contract, you signed with an iron-clad option. If you didn't want to play for the amount of money they were going to pay, you had to sit out the next year. They wouldn't play you, and they wouldn't trade you.

"The owners had absolute total control. If you got involved in anything the owners didn't like, they traded you out through the league. You went from one team to another to another to another. You just had a flag on you. Things weren't really legit insofar as the league was concerned.

"There were three guys who really controlled and ran the league. They were Curly Lambeau of the Packers, George Halas of the Bears, and George Preston Marshall from the Redskins. Their 'guy' was the commissioner. Bert Bell was entirely on the side of the owners.

"It was the old-time owners who really ran the league. Halas had Charley Bidwill behind him, and Charley died in the spring of 1947. There was Marshall, the Mara brothers of the Giants, and Art Rooney of the Steelers.

"Those were the facts of the league in those days. When you signed a contract, you were stuck with whatever team you signed for."

The next year Jimmy Conzelman, an innovator who liked to get an advantage over his opponent, added a few players. Owner Charley Bidwill died suddenly on April 19. But Conzelman rallied the players and coached the Cardinals to the championship.

"By 1947 we had Buster Ramsey and Lloyd Arms and Plato Andros at guard," Elmer recalled. "We had Vince Banonis and Bill Blackburn at center. We had Chet Bulger and Joe Coomer and Stan Mauldin at tackles. We had Billy Dewell and Mal Kutner at the ends. We just hadn't jelled in 1946.

“A lot of those guys had just gotten out of the service. Mauldin joined the Cardinals after fifty missions over Europe as an Army pilot and captain. He joined our camp with his uniform on about halfway through our training camp. He weighed about 220 pounds. He ended up being a 255-pound tackle that ran the sprints with the halfbacks.

“We knew what we had, but we just hadn’t put it together.

“In 1947 we drafted Charley Trippi and brought him up, but Charley didn’t play a great deal in 1947. Charley came to us from the double-A Atlanta Crackers baseball team.

“Charley joined our camp in September. His weighed about 175 pounds. He was tired out from playing baseball all summer long. We kind of spot-played him. Trippi didn’t come on as a halfback until near the end of the season.

“We had Bill deCorrevont and Red Cochran as left halfbacks. We had a young guy named Jimmy Strausbaugh who was from Ohio State, but he got cut before the season was over.

“The ‘Dream Backfield’ was Christman, Trippi, Harder, and myself.

“Marshall Goldberg came off the bench. He got recognition because he played a free safety and he was an old-timer with the Cardinals. Marshall started playing for the Cardinals in 1939.”

In 1947 the Cardinals finished with a 9-3 record. The club lost to the Los Angeles Rams, 27-7, and, in two straight weeks, fell to the Washington Redskins, 45-21, and the New York Giants, 35-31. After beating the Bears, 30-21, for the second time in 1947, the Cardinals got ready to play for the NFL title against the Philadelphia Eagles, winners of the East with an 8-4 record.

Conzelman, recognized as one of the game’s best offensive coaches, devised a strategy to beat Philadelphia and Earle “Greasy” Neale, one of the league’s best defensive coaches. Neale’s Eagles played a 4-4-3 defensive scheme.

“They dared you to pass,” Conzelman later told writer Robert L. Burnes, “because it looked so inviting. They only had three men spread out to protect against the pass...but the rush of the line was so strong that you had trouble getting the ball in the air.”

Knowing that Neale’s Eagles believed the Cardinals could not run against their defensive front, Conzelman and his assistants, Phil Handler, Buddy Parker, and Dick Plasman, decided to test the middle of the opposing line with quick openers. Once Cardinal running backs got into the secondary, they had only three defenders to beat.

“When we played the Eagles in 1947,” Angsman recalled, “they used to take their center, who was Alex Wojciechowicz, and put him head-on on the receiver who was flanker. The other linebacker would go out on our other flanker.

“That left the Eagles without anyone up the middle. They would play either a five-man spacing or a tight six-man spacing, and they’d try to shut everything off up the middle.

“We figured if we could two-time one guy in the middle and one-time another guy, the hole would open left or right, at an angle. So the running back could either go inside or outside, depending on how that single block went.

“So we busted up the middle, and it was ‘Katie bar the gate’ from there on out.

“I made two 70-yard runs based on that strategy. I wasn’t really touched on either run. But it was a matter of how we were setting the block up, and how quickly we could get through the hole that made the play work.”

The quick opener worked to perfection three times. With 30,759 fans shivering in 28-degree temperatures, the teams produced a close, hard-fought, exciting game—a contest called by the *New York Times* a “rock-’em, sock-’em struggle with a fair share of thrills.”

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But the Cardinals came through with more big plays at critical moments. With 6:27 to go in the opening period, Charley Trippi burst over left tackle and sprinted 44 yards for a Chicago touchdown.

With 6:54 remaining in the second period, Angsman took Christman's handoff, broke over left guard, and ran 70 yards for another Cardinal score. When Pat Harder converted, Chicago opened a 14-0 lead.

Philadelphia standout Steve Van Buren was slowed by the tough Cardinal defense. But quarterback Tommy Thompson, the former Tulsa ace, completed a 53-yard TD pass to Pat McHugh. Cliff Patton kicked the point after. At halftime the Cardinals led, 14-7.

Neither team made much headway until the middle of the third quarter. Philadelphia's Joe Muha punted, and Trippi hauled in the football at his own 25. Side-stepping to elude three tacklers, the Georgia All-American carried the ball 75 yards for a touchdown. Harder's kick made it 21-7.

The Eagles responded by going 73 yards in 15 plays, with Van Buren crashing over from the 1-yard line. With a lead of 21-14, the Cards attempted to grind out another score in the fourth period. Trippi, however, fumbled at the Eagle 17.

A few plays later Thompson completed a 35-yarder to end Pete Pihos, giving Philly a first down on the Chicago 23. When a holding penalty nullified the play, Muha quick-kicked the pigskin to the Cardinal 10-yard line. Christman began the drive by passing (he completed 3-of-5 in the game) to Trippi for a 20-yard gain.

As suddenly as before, Angsman burst up the middle for another 70-yard TD. After Harder's PAT, the Cardinals held a 28-14 lead.

But the Eagles soared with Thompson's passing. Finally, halfback Russ Craft scored on a 1-yard plunge with 4:30 remaining. Thereafter, Chicago's backs rose to the occasion, blasting away for short gainers and running out the clock for the 28-21 victory.

Although the Cardinals produced an even better season (11-1) in 1948, Philadelphia got a measure of revenge in the championship game. The Eagles won, 7-0, on Steven Van Buren's touchdown. Ray Mallouf led the Cardinals late in the season, after Christman injured his ribs with three games remaining.

But the Cardinals could accomplish little in the blizzard conditions at Philadelphia on December 19, 1948. When the tarpaulin was removed from the field 30 minutes before the kickoff, two feet of snow had fallen. The yard lines were wiped out. Officials' calls on first downs and out-of-bounds plays were judgments. Before the end of the first period, several inches of new snow blanketed frozen gridiron.

Thompson threw a 65-yard bomb to Jack Ferrante on the Eagles' first play from scrimmage. But an offside penalty nullified the score. When the Cardinals got the ball back, they used smashes by Trippi, Angsman, and Harder to move to the Eagle 29. There the drive stalled. Harder tried a field goal, but on the slippery field the kick went wide.

The Eagles had a chance in the second quarter after they recovered Angsman's fumble on the Cardinal 21. But Chicago intercepted a Thomson aerial on the 7-yard line. Mallouf punted to the Chicago 45, but Pat McHugh returned it to the 21. When Chicago's defense held at the 7, Cliff Patton's field goal missed. The half ended with no score.

Philadelphia got the game's biggest break near the end of the third quarter, recovering a missed handoff from Mallouf to Trippi at the Chicago 17-yard line. After one play, the teams switched ends. Two more runs moved the football to Cardinal 5. Then Van Buren scored the game's only touchdown. The Eagles dominated the ball through the fourth quarter, winning 7-0 and claiming the NFL title.

"The Cardinals had a helluva season in 1947," Angsman remembered, "but our best team was in 1948.

"We played the Eagles for the championship in 1948 in a blizzard. We had beaten them twice already. We beat the Eagles a preseason game, and we beat them during the regular season. We played them in a damn blizzard. They wouldn't play it today.

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"We played because the television money was \$37,000, and we would have had to wait three weeks to play the championship game and get the television money. So we elected to play on that day.

"We had a choice. The commissioner appraised us in the locker of what we could do. As a team, we voted to play. We'd beaten 'em twice, and we were going to do it again, you know."

Despite the tough loss, Chicago played for two NFL championships in two straight seasons, winning the first on long gainers and losing the second in a blizzard. After that, the Cardinals declined for several years.

In 1949 under co-coaches Buddy Parker and Phil Handler, the club fell to 6-5-1 and third place. Paul Christman and Jim Hardy split the quarterbacking duties, while Angsman and Trippi carried the burden of the ground game.

Angsman, who scored eight TDs in 1947 and nine in 1948 (including one each season as a receiver), scored six times in 1949 while leading the team in rushing with a career-best 674 yards (5.4 avg). The versatile Trippi gained 553 yards (4.9 avg) and scored three times on the ground, plus he caught 34 passes for 412 yards and six more TDs.

But as Angsman pointed out, many of the veteran players got old together:

"In three years, on war-weary legs, they got old overnight, and they got fat. Some of those guys ate themselves out of the league. They came out of the service lean and mean. They put on a few pounds to play, and the next thing you knew, they put on 40 or 50 pounds. You try to go both ways with that weight on you, and you can't do it. Your legs give out.

"Christman went from an overarm passer to a sidearm passer. We didn't get Bobby Layne in the draft, remember that. Ray Mallouf was Christman's backup. Ray was a helluva guy. Ray won the championship for us, because Christman had three broken ribs and was out for three weeks. Mallouf stepped in and won all those games as a second-string string quarterback in 1948. But in 1949 Ray was traded to the Giants."

Angsman played for three more seasons, but the Cardinals continued to slide. In 1950 under coach Curly Lambeau, Chicago was 5-7 and finished fifth in the new five-team American Conference. The NFL had merged with the best teams of the old AAFC, led by the Cleveland Browns. In 1951 Lambeau's Cardinals ended in last place with a 3-9 record. After Chicago finished 4-8 in 1952 under coach Ray Kuharich, Angsman retired from the game.

The former Notre Dame star operated a successful manufacturers' representative firm for years. Also, from 1960 to 1975, he provided color commentary for the new American Football League.

The Cardinals are no longer in Chicago, but many of the old-timers who live there still love to go to reunions. Elmer is a leading force in those reunions. He particularly enjoys talking about how tough the game of football was during the 1940s.

For example, during the first quarter of the 1945 Notre Dame-Navy game, Angsman caught an elbow that knocked out his upper four teeth and jammed the bottom four into his jaw. Spurting blood, he went to the sidelines. While the trainer was still working on him, Elmer demanded to return to the game. He went on to play 54 of the 60 minutes.

Talking about toughness in the NFL, Angsman reminisced, "The hardest I've ever been hit was by Dick Hoerner of the Rams. He was playing linebacker and I cut back right into him. I don't think either of us saw the other coming.

"They carried Hoerner [6'4" and 220] off the field. I wouldn't let anyone carry me off a football field, but I fell down three times getting to the sideline."

Asked about his former teammate, Hall of Famer Charley Trippi observed, "Elmer Angsman was a very durable running back. I can never remember that Elmer missed a game due to injury.

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“Elmer was a tough inside runner and although he didn’t have blinding speed, he was still capable of going the distance.

“The only way I could describe Elmer as a football player is to say that he was a winner.”

One of the best running backs to emerge from Notre Dame, the Chicagoan continued to prove his talent, determination, and class in the National Football League. Despite his excellent career mark in rushing of 4.3 yards per carry, Elmer Angsman will always be known for his shining performance when the Chicago Cardinals won the franchise’s last-ever NFL championship.

ELMER ANGSMAN

HB

Angsman, Elmer Joseph Jr. (Bud)

5-11 200

College: Notre Dame

High School: Mt. Carmel [Chicago, IL]

Born: 12 / 11 / 1925, Chicago, IL

Drafted: 1946 Round 3 Chicago Cardinals

Year	Team	Gm	RUSHing				RECEIVING			
			Att	Yds	Avg	TD	PC	Yds	Avg	TD
1946	ChiC	11	48	328	6.8	2	2	44	22.0	0
1947	ChiC	12	110	412	3.7	7	5	138	27.6	1
1948	ChiC	12	131	638	4.9	8	9	142	15.8	1
1949	ChiC	12	125	674	5.4	6	5	57	11.4	0
1950	ChiC	12	102	362	3.5	1	7	56	8.0	1
1951	ChiC	12	121	380	3.1	3	9	195	21.7	1
1952	ChiC	12	48	114	2.5	0	4	22	5.5	1
7 years		83	683	2908	4.3	27	41	654	16.0	5