

GORDY SOLTAU

By Andy Piascik

Gordy Soltau grew up in Duluth at a time when college football was king and the pro game was struggling to gain a foothold with the American public. In fact, after several NFL franchises failed in Minnesota in the 1920's, it would not be until the formation of the Minneapolis Lakers in 1946 that major league sports would return to the state. But that's not to say that the state was not a sports hotbed; Soltau himself is proof of that. He played sports year round – his favorites were football, basketball, and hockey. His high school even had skiing and Soltau was a member of that team as well.

In the years before the Vikings, football in Soltau's homestate meant the University of Minnesota. And the years of Soltau's youth – the 1930's and early 1940's – were a golden age for the Gophers. They regularly finished at or near the top of the Big Ten standings and won an incredible five national championships in an eight season span. The Gophers were very popular throughout the state, and of all the players who played for the school under head coach Bernie Bierman during those years, halfback Bruce Smith, the 1941 Heisman Trophy recipient, stands out in Soltau's mind.

"Oh, a great player," Soltau said recently in recalling Smith's exploits as the top player on the last two of those five national championship teams. "He was one of those very unusual kind of guys that can just get it done. Wonderful talent. It was almost effortless for him to run the football."

After a hitch in the military, Soltau went to Minnesota and became a member of the football team. He played two ways as an end and was also the placekicker, and he counted among his teammates a number of players who would go on to play in the NFL. Among them were Wayne Robinson and Clyde Tonnemaker and two future members of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, Leo Nomellini and Bud Grant. Soltau recalled that as soon as Grant finished the last football game of his senior season, he signed to play in the National Basketball Association for the Lakers, a team that was in the midst of a dynasty of their own.

Soltau was a bit of a multi-sport man himself, as he played hockey and basketball as well as football for the Gophers. He was drafted in the third round by the Packers but was only in Green Bay's training camp for a matter of days before he was traded to the Cleveland Browns. The difference was like night and day, and Soltau marveled at Paul Brown's organizational skills and at the fact that the Browns had such talented players at virtually every position. As thrilled as he was to make the team as a backup to Mac Speedie and Dante Lavelli, Soltau was equally disappointed when Brown told him San Francisco 49ers coach Buck Shaw was eager to acquire him in a trade. Soltau was reluctant to go, but the trade went through when Brown and Shaw assured him that he would be in the 49ers starting lineup.

Although Soltau's stay with the Browns was brief, the impression it made was a lasting one, especially where Brown was concerned. "I was always thankful that I had those two weeks because I learned more about how to play football in those two weeks than I think I had the rest of my playing time." And while he has wondered over the years about missing out on the many championship games Cleveland played in during the 1950's, Soltau did not regret getting traded. For one thing, the Bay Area became home and remains so to this day. For another, he did, in fact, move right into the San Francisco starting lineup. And finally, he joined a team that, while never as successful as the Browns, was one of the most exciting and colorful to ever grace a football field.

Frankie Albert. Hugh McElhenny. Alyn Beals. College teammate Nomellini. Hardy Brown and his famous shoulder tackle. Y.A. Tittle. Joe Perry. Bob St. Clair, the 6'9" tackle who

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ate raw meat. Billy Wilson. John Henry Johnson, whose arrival completed the Million Dollar Backfield. Visco Grgich. R.C. Owens and the Alley Oop. These are just some of the men Soltau played with in his nine seasons in San Francisco. The 49ers faithful may not have experienced the joy of a championship, but they can never say that Sunday afternoons at Kezar Stadium in the 1950's weren't entertaining.

Soltau had first seen McElhenny in college when he kicked off to him when Minnesota played the University of Washington in 1949. McElhenny proceeded to do with that kickoff what he would do so many times over the next 15 years – break off an electrifying touchdown run of 100 yards in which he ran every which way, eluding tacklers, some of whom, Soltau recalled, had more than one shot at him.

Teaming at end first with Beals and then with Wilson, Soltau also became very familiar with Albert and Tittle. Soltau remembered Tittle as outstanding and as the possessor of a tremendous throwing arm who took over the quarterbacking job full-time in 1953 and went on to set a number of passing records. But he also had fond recollections of the little lefthander from Stanford.

“He was a great quarterback,” Soltau said of Albert. “He had great courage. He was a gamer. Loved to run the bootleg. And he was a wonderful punter. He was one of the only punters that could punt for the sidelines and be consistent with it. And he was a wonderful guy.”

And then when it came to keeping the team loose, there was Grgich, the team's middle guard. Never was that more evident than when San Francisco played Los Angeles in what quickly developed into one of the best rivalries in sports. Soltau recalled with a laugh how Grgich and the Rams Norm Van Brocklin would go at each other verbally and physically all game long whenever the two teams played.

By his second year, Soltau was one of the top receivers in the league. He caught 157 passes good for 2,220 yards and 20 touchdowns in the three year period beginning in 1951, and was named to the Pro Bowl all three years. He finished second to Elroy Hirsch in receptions in 1951 with 59 and was fourth behind Speedie, Grant, and Elbie Nickel in 1952 with 55. He was a unanimous first team all-pro in 1952 and made UPI's second team the other two years.

Soltau also excelled as one of the game's best placekickers. In an era when a success rate of 50% on field goals was outstanding, he was good on 60% or better four different times. His 67% mark on 10 of 15 field goals in 1953 was his career best percentage, while the 13 he made in 1956 on 20 attempts (65%) was his highest single season total. Soltau was the NFL's leader in points in 1952 with 114 and in 1953 with 94, and he finished fifth in 1951 and fourth in 1954.

The 49ers were contenders in each of Soltau's best years. They finished 7-4-1 and in second place in 1951, 7-5 and third in 1952, and 7-4-1 and third again in 1954. Their best season of the decade was 1953 when they finished 9-3, but they were second that year as well, finishing behind the 10-2 Lions. The three losses were against the two best teams in the league, Detroit and Cleveland, and came by a combined nine points. The 49ers finished strongly that year, winning their last four games and six of their last seven, but they were still chasing the Lions at the finish line.

After tailing off in 1955 and 1956, the 49ers rebounded to 8-4 in 1957, the year they came closest to winning a conference championship. San Francisco rallied to beat the Colts and the Packers in the final two games of the season to force a tie with the Lions. That set the stage for the second and final playoff game ever at Kezar. As had happened so often in their history, the 49ers were good but not quite good enough. They built a 27-7 third quarter lead, only to have the Lions rally to win 31-27. Soltau remembers the game all too well, saying with a laugh that he can practically go through it play by play.

Soltau has followed the fortunes of the 49ers in the years since his retirement. Like San Francisco fans everywhere, he cheered the team on during the great years of the 1980's

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and 1990's. The franchise's success had the added benefit of giving the 49ers of Soltau's era a good reason to stay in touch with each other. Many were the Sunday mornings when he and former teammates like Perry would gather in the Candlestick Park parking lot before home games.

In addition to talking about the fortunes of the franchise's more recent teams, Soltau, Perry and the others swap stories about an earlier generation of 49ers players and games. And while the San Francisco teams of Soltau's nine pro years may not have had the success of those of more recent vintage, they will long be remembered as a supremely talented group with more than their share of outstanding players and colorful personalities. As both an excellent pass receiver and placekicker, Soltau was a key contributor throughout his years with San Francisco.