

Vince BANONIS

By Andy Piascik

The ultimate achievement for virtually every player who has ever played pro football is to play on a champion-ship team. Only a small minority ever obtain that goal. Far smaller still is the number who have played on championship teams with two different franchises.

Vince Banonis is one of those select few. He played for the Chicago Cardinals during their glory years in the late 1940's and for the Detroit Lions when they began their great run in the early 1950's. In all, Banonis played in four NFL Championship Games and was on the winning side three times. A center and linebacker, Banonis often toiled in the obscurity that is the fate of those whose job it is to block and tackle, yet his contribution to his teams was significant, as any number of his teammates will attest.

Banonis's career did not begin quite so gloriously, however. He signed with the Cardinals in 1942 at a time when the team had been floundering for more than a decade, and they proceeded to finish 3-8 and in fourth place. Banonis went into the Navy the following year and missed most of the next three seasons. He was able to get away to play two games while on leave in 1944, however, and thus became a part of one of the worst teams in history, the amalgamation of the Cardinals and Steelers that became known as the Car-Pits and went 0-10.

Before he was discharged, Banonis reached an agreement to play with the Cleveland Browns in the newly formed All-America Football Conference. Like many of the players Paul Brown signed at the time, Banonis was to receive a monthly stipend for as long as he was in the service. When Cardinals owner Charlie "Sonny" Bidwill got wind of the deal, however, he convinced Banonis to rejoin the Cardinals by matching Cleveland's salary terms. Banonis returned the money he had received from the Browns and Bidwill made up the difference.

"Salaries kind of doubled and tripled," Banonis said recently of the four year war for players between the AAFC and the NFL. Before that, "the money wasn't much, maybe a few hundred bucks a game." No sooner did Banonis return to the Cardinals than the team began to assemble the talent that would lead them to the top of the NFL. In 1946 Marshall Goldberg, Elmer Angsman, Pat Harder, and Paul Christman made up the famous Dream Backfield, and when future Hall of Famer Charlie Trippi joined the team in 1947, he moved into a starting halfback spot and Goldberg became primarily a defensive player. Other key players were Banonis, tackle Chet Bulger, guard Buster Ramsey, and end Mal Kutner.

The Cardinals went from a 1-9 record in 1945 to 6-5 in 1946, their best record since 1935. They then finished first in the Western Division in 1947 at 8-4, capping the season with a dramatic season-ending 30-21 win with the divisional title at stake against the Bears, their long-time tormentors from the North Side. Two weeks later Chicago defeated the Eagles 28-21 on a frozen Comiskey Park turf in one of the more exciting championship games of that era.

"We were a cohesive bunch," Banonis said, "a fun-loving bunch." In addition to a core of good players, Banonis gave head coach Jimmy Conzelman and assistant Buddy Parker much of the credit for the team's success.

"Conzelman would show up at this bar and play the piano for us and sing," Banonis recalled. "He was a good entertainer and a good story teller." Parker, on the other hand, "was the brains behind it. Buddy was a good strategist. He would really give you the reasoning behind it."

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Banonis was named to the second unit on the *New York Daily News* all-NFL team in 1946 and to the UPI's first team in 1947. He also scored the first of two career touchdowns in 1947 when he picked up a fumble and ran 83 yards against the Giants. "I was tired for a week," Banonis said of his moment of glory at the Polo Grounds. "I was looking for somebody to lateral to."

The Cardinals posted the best record in their 85 year history in 1948 with an 11-1 mark, and they made a return visit to the championship game against the Eagles. Banonis was named to a number of all-NFL teams and was also named to the second unit of the combined AAFC-NFL team picked by *The Sporting News*. And although the 1948 title match was as devoid of action as the 1947 game was exciting, it, too, was a memorable game because of the severe weather conditions under which it was played at Philadelphia's Shibe Park.

"Saturday we got there and we practiced in our shirt sleeves," Banonis remembered. "It was like 50, 60 degrees. We went to bed that night, we got up the next morning, there was two feet of snow. It snowed, it snowed, and it snowed during the whole game.

"Conzelman said, 'You guys want to postpone this game?' We said, 'Hell no, let's go and play. It's gonna be just as tough for them as us.' It was the craziest game I ever played in my life. But it was fair for both teams." Neither team was able to move the ball much and the Eagles won 7-0 on a Steve Van Buren touchdown in the fourth quarter after a Chicago fumble deep in their own territory.

The Cardinals two successful seasons were also marked by heartache. Owner Bidwill died just months before the championship season of 1947 and Stan Mauldin, a tackle who had received all-league honors in just his second season, was killed in a plane crash after the team's first game in 1948.

"Then the wheels fell off," Banonis said. Conzelman resigned unexpectedly in 1949, a new ownership group headed by Bidwill's widow Violet and her new husband Walter Wolfner took over, and Parker left to become the head coach of the Lions after a brief and unhappy stint as Conzelman's successor. What followed was a decade of lousy football and small crowds, one that would end with the Cardinals leaving Chicago, and Banonis, seeing the writing on the wall in 1951, wanted out.

Parker engineered a trade for Banonis and he again joined a team that had not known success for many years. Not only was the Detroit native and University of Detroit graduate going home, he was joining a young and supremely talented team that would, much as the Cardinals had after the war, quickly shoot to the top of the league. Harder also joined Detroit that same year, and together the two veterans proved a steadying influence on Doak Walker, Bobby Layne, Leon Hart, Dick Stanfel, Jack Christiansen and their other teammates.

Linemate Lou Creekmur, a future Hall of Famer, remembered Banonis as "a steady ballplayer who never missed a block. Just an old, steady, Rock of Gibraltar ballplayer." Charlie Ane remembered Banonis as the leader of the offensive line in his three seasons in Detroit, someone who helped shape the careers of a number of fellow linemen. The unit as a whole was one of the best of the era, and two of Banonis's proteges, Creekmur and Stanfel, were among the best linemen of the 1950's.

As the Lions began their rise to the top, Banonis, Harder, and Jim Martin were the only members of the team to have previously won a championship. After finishing in fourth place in 1950, the Lions improved to 7-4-1 in 1951 and were edged out of a conference title by a Y.A. Tittle touchdown in the dying moments of the last game of the season. The next two seasons were also dogfights in the West, and the Lions prevailed both years, posting records of 9-3 in 1952 and 10-2 in 1953. They capped both seasons with hard-fought victories over the Browns in the league championship game. Having grown up a Lions fan, Banonis was more aware than any of his teammates that the 1952 title was the team's first in 17 years.

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Banonis has lived not far from Detroit since his retirement. He spoke of teammates Harder and Ramsey with special fondness, and remembered Cleveland's Bill Willis and 300 pound Ed Neal of the Packers as two of the toughest nose guards he faced while playing center. Banonis is also proud of the fact that he was the signal caller on defense as a linebacker with the Cardinals, and that he was captain of the defensive squad in 1948.

And although he has had little contact with the franchise since his playing days, Banonis was delighted to be able to attend a reunion organized by the Cardinals a few years ago for the surviving members of the 1947 team. He had attended several such reunions organized by the Lions, but as far as he or anyone else knew, the Cardinals gathering was the first and only one ever held for that group of players. 57 years have passed and the Cardinals have relocated twice, but that team – a team that Banonis was an invaluable member of – remains the last in franchise history to win a championship.

VINCE BANONIS					
Banonis, Vincent Joseph	6-1, 230		C-LB		NFF HOF 1986
Detroit Mercy					HS: Catholic Central [Redford, MI]
<u>B: 4 / 9 / 1921, Detroit, MI</u>					
Drafted: 1942 Round 4 ChiC					
1942 ChiC 11	1943 dnp	1944 ChPt 2	1945 dnp	1946 ChiC 11	
1947 ChiC 12	1948 ChiC 12	1949 ChiC 12	1950 ChiC 12	1951 Det 12	
1952 Det 12	1953 Det 12				