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Bruno Banducci

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

Bruno Banducci was most known for his years in San Francisco when the 49ers franchise was founded as part of the All-America Football Conference (AAFC) in 1946. At offensive guard, he demonstrated excellent run and pass blocking abilities that aided the club's high powered 49ers offenses in the 1940s and 1950s.¹ The 49ers teams he played on featured talent at the skill positions that included quarterbacks Frankie Albert and, Y.A. Tittle, backs John Henry Johnson, Joe Perry, Norm Standlee, Hugh McElhenny, and ends Billy Wilson, Len Eshmont, and Gordie Soltau. In its AAFC days, San Francisco posted a 38-14-2 mark, finishing with the second most wins in league history, along with the most points scored at 1,597.²

The 49ers had a shot at the 1949 AAFC title, but lost to the Browns, 21-7. Behind Banducci, Joe Perry won the AAFC rushing title in 1949 with 783 yards and the NFL rushing title twice in 1953 and 1954. He also led the league in rushing touchdowns three times (1948, 1949, 1953).³ Perry, McElhenny, and John Henry Johnson are all members of the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Banducci's skill as a run blocker came from his sound, fundamental technique. He relied on the x's and o's because he was relatively undersized for an offensive lineman at 5'11" and 216 pounds.⁴ Football historians Matt Reaser and Ken Crippen studied him, writing, "Banducci was a very good run blocker. He showed ability to pull and trap block. He showed excellent instincts ..."⁵ As a result, Banducci earned all-AAFC honors in 1946 and 1947. He was a consensus first-team choice in both 1946 and 1947 by the *NY Daily News* and the UPI.⁶





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Banducci was one of the original 49ers hand selected by owner Tony Morabito. Morabito was a local, wealthy businessman who earned success in the lumber industry. Most of the team's roster consisted of players who played college football in the Bay Area.⁷ For instance, 19 of the 34 players hailed from the likes of Stanford, Santa Clara, San Jose State University, the University of San Francisco, and St. Mary's College. Compared to his peers, Banducci ended up being the longest tenured original 49er, spending nine seasons (1946-1954) in San Francisco.⁸ His impact was felt immediately when he started in all 14 games in 1946. San Francisco rushed for over 100 yards as a team in 11 of the 14 contests that included three 200+ yard rushing outputs. The 49ers tallied an 8-3 mark in those games, finishing the season at 9-5, good enough for second place behind the AAFC champion Cleveland Browns.⁹

Robert Cohen, author of *The 50 Greatest Players in San Francisco 49ers History*, regarded Banducci, “Capable of pulling off the line of scrimmage or engaging his opponent at the point of attack, Banducci proved to be equally effective as an in-line and downfield blocker, with his superior blocking helping the 49ers lead the league in rushing six times.”¹⁰ The 1947 club ran the ball most in the AAFC, 587 times, totaling over 100 yards in 13 of 14 games, including an impressive 295 yard output against the Brooklyn Dodgers on November 27. Johnny Strzykalski ran for 114 yards on just 11 carries and Eshmont nearly topped the century mark with 95 yards rushing on 10 attempts.¹¹ It was arguably one of Banducci's best seasons as he earned consensus first-team All-AAFC honors.

- 1 “San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [San Francisco 49ers Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 2 “San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [San Francisco 49ers Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 3 “Joe Perry,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [Joe Perry Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 4 “Bruno Banducci,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [Bruno Banducci Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 5 Crippen, Ken, and Matt Reaser. “Scouting Report: Bruno Banducci,” March 21, 2016, accessed May 25, 2023, [Microsoft Word - Banducci Bruno.docx \(kencrippen.com\)](#).
- 6 “Bruno Banducci,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [Bruno Banducci Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 7 “1946 San Francisco 49ers Roster & Players,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [1946 San Francisco 49ers Roster & Players | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 8 “Bruno Banducci,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [Bruno Banducci Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 9 “1946 San Francisco 49ers Roster & Players,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [1946 San Francisco 49ers Roster & Players | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).
- 10 Cohen, Robert W. *The 50 Greatest Players in San Francisco 49ers History*, (Guilford: Lyons Press, 2021), 327.
- 11 “1947 San Francisco 49ers Roster & Players,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [1947 San Francisco 49ers Roster & Players | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).



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The following year in 1948, San Francisco turned in its best record to date at 12-2. Their only defeat was a sweep at the hands of the Cleveland Browns. Behind impressive pass blocking, quarterback Frankie Albert led the league with 29 touchdown passes and a 58.3% completion percentage.¹²

That season may have been the team's best shot at the AAFC crown. The 49ers steamrolled their first ten opponents, winning by an average of 21.7 points per game.

Week 11 was arguably the greatest game of the season versus the Browns in Cleveland.¹³ The Browns also entered the game undefeated at 10-0. In front of over 82,000 fans at Cleveland Municipal Stadium, the Browns broke a 7-7 deadlock in the third quarter on a four-yard touchdown run by Edgar Jones to take a 14-7 lead. Their defense completely stifled the 49ers offense, forcing six turnovers, including three interceptions thrown by Albert. The 49er offense managed just 177 total yards.¹⁴

The next week, the 49ers handled the Brooklyn Dodgers easily, 63-40, in a shootout. Up next was a rematch with the Browns. Trailing 10-0, the 49ers scored three unanswered touchdowns to take a 21-10 lead in the third quarter. Alyn Beals had a marvelous game, accounting for two of those scores, on four and 29-yard touchdown receptions from Albert. At this point, the bottom appeared to fall out for San Francisco. Otto Graham tossed three scores to give the Browns a 31-21 lead they never relinquished. Cleveland ended up finishing the year 12-0 for their fourth straight AAFC title.¹⁵

The 1949 season showed early signs of promise for the 49ers. A 3-0 start with convincing wins over the Baltimore Colts, Chicago Hornets, and Los Angeles Dons was off-set by a stunning defeat at the hands of the Buffalo Bills in Buffalo. The 49ers responded with another three game winning streak that featured a 56-28 demolition of the Browns.¹⁶ They rolled up over 500 yards of total offense, 256 of which were on the ground. San Francisco lost the rematch two weeks later in Cleveland, 30-28, finishing the year at 9-3. For the first time, the AAFC adopted a playoff format with the top four teams qualifying.

1 2 “1948 San Francisco 49ers Roster & Players,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [1948 San Francisco 49ers Roster & Players | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/rosters/1948-san-francisco-49ers-roster-players).

1 3 “1948 San Francisco 49ers Roster & Players,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [1948 San Francisco 49ers Roster & Players | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/rosters/1948-san-francisco-49ers-roster-players).

1 4 “San Francisco 49ers at Cleveland Browns – November 14th, 1948,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [San Francisco 49ers at Cleveland Browns - November 14th, 1948 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/games/san-francisco-49ers-at-cleveland-browns-november-14th-1948).

1 5 “1948 San Francisco 49ers Roster & Players,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [1948 San Francisco 49ers Roster & Players | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/rosters/1948-san-francisco-49ers-roster-players).

1 6 “1949 San Francisco 49ers Roster & Players,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [1949 San Francisco 49ers Roster & Players | Pro-Football-Reference.com](https://www.profootballreference.com/rosters/1949-san-francisco-49ers-roster-players).



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As the No. 2 seed, San Francisco matched up against the New York Yankees, defeating them 17-7 at Kezar Stadium in the Divisional Round. The victory set up the rubber match with the Browns in Cleveland. Once again, the Cleveland defense stole the show. The 49ers managed just 247 yards of offense and Albert completed just 9 of 24 passes. Meanwhile, the Browns' offense scored three rushing touchdowns in the 21-7 victory.¹⁷

The following year, 1950, was the 49ers first in the NFL. They regressed to 3-9, but boasted two Pro Bowl players in Albert and Strzykalski. Joe Perry led the team with a 5.2 yards per rush, five rushing touchdowns, and 647 rushing yards. Strzykalski added 612 yards on the ground.¹⁸ From 1951 thru 1954, the team improved greatly, winning at least seven games per season thru 1954. The acquisitions of Y.A. Tittle to go along with Albert at quarterback, and running backs McElhenny and Johnson boosted the offense from middle of the league to among the best.¹⁹

In 1954, they ranked first with 2,498 rushing yards and first with 28 rushing touchdowns. During this stretch, McElhenny was a first-team All-Pro twice (1952, 1952) as was Perry (1953, 1954), while Johnson was a consensus second-team All-Pro (UPI, *New York Daily News*, Newspaper Ent. Association) choice in 1954.²⁰ From 1951 thru 1954, Banducci was an All-Pro choice each season. He was a consensus second-teamer in 1951, 1952, and 1953 by the Associated Press, UPI, and *New York Daily News*. He was a unanimous first-team All-Pro in 1954 by every major selector.

Banducci retired from the NFL after the 1954 season, playing in 103 games with San Francisco, 80 of which were games he started. Prior to his time in the Bay Area, he started his career with the Philadelphia Eagles when they selected him in the 1943 NFL Draft.²¹ Banducci's first season as a pro was 1944. The Eagles were en route to their best season since their inception in 1933, finishing at 7-1-2. Philadelphia was primed to play for the NFL title, after starting with a 5-0-2 record, but suffered a 28-7 defeat to the Chicago Bears on November 26.²² That defeat cost them a shot at the title.

1 7 "Championship – San Francisco 49ers at Cleveland Browns – December 11th, 1949," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [Championship - San Francisco 49ers at Cleveland Browns - December 11th, 1949 | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 8 "1950 San Francisco 49ers Roster & Players," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [1950 San Francisco 49ers Roster & Players | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

1 9 "San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [San Francisco 49ers Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

2 0 "San Francisco 49ers Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [San Francisco 49ers Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

2 1 "Bruno Banducci," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [Bruno Banducci Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

2 2 "Philadelphia Eagles Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [Philadelphia Eagles Team Records, Leaders, and League Ranks | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).



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Banducci was a starter at guard in his two years with the Eagles. He created running room for first-team All-Pro and future Hall of Famer Steve van Buren. Van Buren was the NFL's leading rusher in 1945 in both yards (832) and rushing touchdowns (15), and total touchdowns (17).²³ Banducci made 17 starts in 19 games with Philadelphia prior to being cut.

In his pro career, he made a total of 97 starts in 122 games. The 49ers failed to offer him a contract for the 1955 season, so he played one season professionally in Canada for the Toronto Argonauts.²⁴

After football he remained in the Bay Area where he worked as a mathematics teacher at local Sonoma High School. Banducci died on September 15, 1985 at the age of 63.²⁵

He was born on November 11, 1921 in Tassignano, Italy. Banducci immigrated to the United States less than a year later, eventually settling in Richmond, California. He attended nearby Richmond High School, where he was a natural both in the classroom and on the athletic field. Banducci starred most in football, accepting a scholarship to Stanford.²⁶ Stanford football was in a period of regression in the late 1930s after reaching three consecutive Rose Bowls from 1934 to 1936 under head coach Claude Thornhill. He was fired after the 1939 season when the team went 1-7-1, the worst record in program history to date. Replacing Thornhill was the legendary Clark Shaughnessy, who previously demonstrated coaching success at Tulane University, going 59-28-7.²⁷

Shaughnessy led Tulane to Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association and Southern Conference championships. At Stanford, he installed the T-formation which turned into a large success. Initially, the players did not take the system seriously. Milt Vucinich said, "We'd been reading about all those beatings Shaughnessy's men had taken, so we were joking among ourselves that wasn't it just like Stanford to hire somebody like this to coach us."²⁸ Even Glenn "Pop" Warner was suspect saying, "If Stanford wins a single game with that crazy formation, you can throw all the football I ever knew into the Pacific Ocean."²⁹ Shaughnessy's Stanford team featured suitable talent for the system

2 3 "Steve Van Buren," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [Steve Van Buren Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

2 4 Cohen, Robert W. *The 50 Greatest Players in San Francisco 49ers History*, (Guilford: Lyons Press, 2021), 327.

2 5 "Bruno Banducci," ProFootballReference.com, accessed May 25, 2023, [Bruno Banducci Stats, Height, Weight, Position, Draft, College | Pro-Football-Reference.com](#).

2 6 Hegler, David. "Homegrown Heroes: The Original 49ers," [thegoldnugget.com](#), April 24, 2021, [Homegrown Heroes: The Original 49ers \(thegoldnuggett.com\)](#).

2 7 "Wow Boys Dazzle the Coast," *SI.com*, September 19, 1966, [WOW BOYS DAZZLE THE COAST - Sports Illustrated Vault | SI.com](#).



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which consisted a large part of the success: backs Norm Standlee, Hugh Gallarneau, and Peter Kmetovic; quarterback Frankie Albert, and a solid offensive front that centered around Banducci. Shaughnessy commented on his team, “I saw the ideal college backfield for the T formation. I saw in Albert a daring fellow with the ball, one who could handle it deftly, could bootleg when necessary, could pass well and kick quickly. Pete Kmetovic couldn't run to his left, but as a man-in-motion and a runner to his right he was marvelous. For sheer straight ahead power, Norm Standlee was the finest fullback in the country. And then we had Hugh Gallarneau, a versatile back, who could run to his left or to his right and was a fine man-in-motion. ... As I fitted these pieces together, I felt I would be a poor coach if I couldn't find a way to get the most out of them.”³⁰ It took but a single victory for Shaughnessy's system to be accepted. Going into week 1 against the University of San Francisco, Stanford was supposed to be overwhelmed and overmatched by the Dons. *Sports Illustrated* wrote, “a sportswriter said USF 'might be the best team in our section, the young, green and inexperienced line the [Stanford] Indians present may break at times under the pressure of the Don forwards.”³¹ In the 27-0 victory, Oregon head coach Tex Oliver, who was in attendance stated, “That Stanford team is the most spectacular, trickiest, and most colorful team on the coast, I believe. I believe they are as strong as the Southern California team was last year, and they have an excellent chance of fighting it out with USC and Washington for the Rose Bowl.”³²

The next week, Oregon traveled to Stanford and was blanked, 13-0. It was a preview of what was to come for the rest of the Pacific Coast Conference (PCC). Stanford rolled through the regular season with a perfect 9-0 record, knocking off four ranked opponents (Washington, Washington State, Oregon State, USC), en route to the PCC championship. They squared off against a top ten ranked Nebraska team in the 1941 Rose Bowl, a game which Stanford prevailed, 21-13, capping off a perfect 10-0 season. Stanford was recognized by major NCAA selectors – the Billingsley Report, Helms Athletic Foundation, and the Poling System - as national champions, despite finishing second in the final Associated Press rankings. The university also recognizes this season as a national championship. The success earned the team the name, the “Wow Boys.”³³

2 8 Johnson, James W. *The Wow Boys: a Coach, a Team, and a Turning Point in College Football* (Lincoln: Bison Books, 2006), 17-19.

2 9 “Clark Shaughnessy,” footballfoundation.org, accessed May 25, 2023, [Clark Shaughnessy \(1968\) - Hall of Fame - National Football Foundation](#).

3 0 “Wow Boys Dazzle the Coast,” SI.com, September 19, 1966, [WOW BOYS DAZZLE THE COAST - Sports Illustrated Vault | SI.com](#).

3 1 “Wow Boys Dazzle the Coast,” SI.com, September 19, 1966, [WOW BOYS DAZZLE THE COAST - Sports Illustrated Vault | SI.com](#).

3 2 “Tex Oliver Rates Stanford on Par With 1939 U.S.C. Champs,” *The Register-Guard*, September 30, 1940, 6.

3 3 “Wow Boys Dazzle the Coast,” SI.com, September 19, 1966, [WOW BOYS DAZZLE THE COAST - Sports Illustrated Vault | SI.com](#).



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