



Chick Maggioli

This article was written by Chad Moody

“Now doing nothing is the best thing I ever did for myself,” said retiree Chick Maggioli in an interview long after his football days were behind him. “And my best motto is to eat good spaghetti seven days a week.”ⁱ Indeed, with a well-traveled—albeit relatively brief—gridiron career and numerous injuries suffered on and off the field, no one could blame him for wanting to relax in his later years. During his tumultuous eight-year span in collegiate and professional football, Maggioli seemingly perpetually bounced from team to team and even league to league while somehow also finding time to serve his country in World War II’s Pacific Theater. Never a star, the halfback was nonetheless consistently recognized as a solid contributor at every level.

Achille Fred Maggioli was born on May 17, 1922, in Mishawaka, Indiana, a city just east of South Bend. His mother, Teresa (née Carabini), worked at a footwear factory and his father, Ferdinando, worked as a laborer and millwright. After emigrating from Italy just after the turn of the 20th century, the couple got married and planted roots in the Michiana region where they started a family. Maggioli was the second youngest of the family’s five children; Helen, Catherine, Victor, and Annette were his four siblings. When Maggioli was only 10 years old, Ferdinando passed away due to complications of chronic heart disease, leaving Teresa as a single parent.



Photo Credit: *Detroit Free Press*, 1949



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Raised on the “rough-and-tumble” ethnic south side of Mishawaka, Maggioli had this to say in a 2001 interview: “Tenth Street back then was sort of the unofficial line between the Belgians and the south side Italians. We were always playing each other [in baseball], but sometimes the games didn’t get past the sixth or seventh innings.”ⁱⁱ It was here that locals dubbed him “Chick”—a nickname that stuck throughout his life. “They said I ran around like a chicken when I was playing ball,” he recounted of his moniker’s origin.ⁱⁱⁱ This frenetic running style served him well during his time as a football and track athlete at Mishawaka High School. Called a “broken-field artist” on the gridiron for the Cavemen, the “shifty” halfback—and backfield mate of future Chicago Bear George Gulyanics—earned an All-State Honorable Mention as a senior in 1940.^{iv}

Plans to attend college as a football recruit were nearly permanently derailed, however, when Maggioli suffered an offseason injury. “I was hurt in a sandlot game the summer after my senior year in high school and schools interested in me crossed me off,” he recalled. “I was goofing off and doing things like shooting dice until I saw guys 10 years older than me doing the same thing. That didn’t look like the kind of future I was interested in.”^v Choosing a different path, Maggioli enrolled at Indiana University in 1941. After making the Hoosiers’ football team as a walk-on for the 1942 season, he transferred to the University of Notre Dame the following year to start Marine Corps officer training as part of the War Department’s World War II Navy V-12 College Training Program.^{vi}

As a reserve halfback on the 1943 Fighting Irish team, Maggioli—unable to regularly participate in practices due to his military training commitments—made minimal appearances for the national champions. Famed coach Frank Leahy “expressed both surprise and satisfaction,” however, over Maggioli’s brief performance in the fourth quarter of a blowout victory against the University of Illinois on October 23.^{vii} “And Chick Maggioli not only had the Illinois players in a state of confusion, but the crowd and press box as well,” reported the *South Bend Tribune* of his showing. “Chick hadn’t appeared in a game to date—he wasn’t even on the traveling squad for the three games played away from home—and when he went into the game yesterday, he was wearing the number of Charles Renaud, a guard. It took some time to figure out who he was, but the way he ran with that ball he won’t be an unknown anymore.”^{viii} Although Maggioli was not a factor in any other contests during that campaign, he intently studied the play of senior teammate Creighton Miller, the squad’s star left halfback and Heisman Trophy contender. “During my first year at Notre Dame, I played behind Creighton Miller and I don’t think I ever saw a better runner,” he said. “I could have been there for 20 years and I still would have been behind him. I learned something from him every day.”^{ix} This education helped Maggioli assume the team’s starting left halfback role vacated by the graduating Miller in 1944. His breakthrough year was cut short, however, after being required to report for duty with the Marines in midseason. Ironically, Maggioli’s biggest



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highlight that season came only two days before departing the team when he “saved the undefeated Irish from humiliation” in the fourth quarter after he “skirted the sidelines [for 65 yards on a lateral] in a blazing dash to pay dirt” and then added the subsequent extra point on a goal line plunge to lift Notre Dame to a 13–7 victory over Illinois on October 28.^x

In active duty with the Marines from 1944 to '46, Maggioli saw action in Okinawa, Japan. There, he earned a Purple Heart after he was blown off a bridge in an explosion. The incident caused him to lose hearing in his right ear. Of the 250 men in his unit, Maggioli was one of only 49 that survived. “They were the true heroes,” the World War II veteran later said.^{xi} And prior to coming back home, he spent nearly a year also serving in China.^{xii}

Despite having been out of the game for well over a year, Maggioli nonetheless still attracted suitors in the football world. In addition to being drafted by the Washington Redskins in the 11th round (99th overall) of the 1946 National Football League draft while still serving in the Marines, Maggioli was heavily recruited by the University of Iowa when he returned stateside later in the year.^{xiii} Ultimately, however, the former Fighting Irishman decided to enroll at Illinois where he spent the 1946 and 1947 seasons. “I grew up loving Notre Dame, but thought I had a better chance of playing at Illinois after the war,” he explained.^{xiv} Indeed, Maggioli made an immediate splash with a 75-yard punt return touchdown in the team’s 1946 opener. The “hipper-dipper” halfback was never able to crack the starting lineup, however, but nonetheless was a strong contributor to the Fighting Illini—even ranking among the scoring leaders in Big Nine games during the 1947 campaign.^{xv}

During his time with Illinois, Maggioli received off-the field media attention when he was used as an unwitting pawn in a stock swindle immediately following the team’s 1947 Rose Bowl victory. The scheme was hatched by a well-to-do con artist who hosted a swanky celebratory dinner at his mansion in Altadena, California, at which Maggioli and some of his teammates were used as celebrity “window dressing” to help perpetuate the fraud.^{xvi} After learning of the criminal charges against his host, Fighting Illini guard Ralph Serpico had this to say of the fateful evening that involved transportation via a large Cadillac and a lavish meal provided by servants: “Good gosh. We thought he was a millionaire. He sure gave us a good dinner.”^{xvii}

The newly minted Illinois graduate set his sights on professional football after his disjointed college experience finally came to a close. “When they start playing school songs, I have to stand up for an hour,” Maggioli quipped in a 1977 interview of his three university affiliations.^{xviii} While also being pursued by the Los Angeles Rams of the NFL, Maggioli opted to join the Buffalo Bills of the All-America Football Conference for the



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1948 season. The decision was in part aided by the prospect of a reunion with one of his old Notre Dame coaches, Clem Crowe, who had taken a line coaching position with the club.^{xxix} Utilized as a reserve two-way back, the 5-foot-11, 178-pounder had an injury-plagued year (eventually necessitating offseason surgery) and found himself in and out of the lineup—even being released at midseason before being brought back.^{xxx} Although Maggioli only appeared in seven regular season games for the Bills, he did see action in both of the club’s postseason contests, including the championship game loss to the Cleveland Browns. And despite being “expected to contribute plenty of yardage” in the running game, he finished his rookie campaign seeing only minimal touches on offense but did tally an interception in both the regular and post-seasons.^{xxxi}

After only its third year in existence, the struggling AAFC had a turbulent offseason involving roster limit cuts, schedule reductions, and team mergers.^{xxxi} And with rumors of Buffalo relocating its franchise, Maggioli jumped to the more established NFL by signing with the Detroit Lions for the 1949 season.^{xxxi} Initial media scouting reports for the “hustling halfback” were favorable, with the *Detroit Free Press* writing that he had “shown impressively in defensive assignments.”^{xxxi} Indeed, as camp progressed, Maggioli found himself in a battle for a starting position in the backfield after having been “outstanding on defense on several occasions.”^{xxxi} Although he ultimately did not win the starting job, the 27-year-old was nonetheless a strong contributor to the Lions as a defensive back. Maggioli appeared in all 12 of the club’s contests, finishing the season with three interceptions and a league fifth-best four fumble recoveries. On November 20, he returned one of his fumble recoveries for his first and only career touchdown to help secure a victory over the New York Giants.

Back with Detroit for the 1950 campaign, Maggioli suffered a shoulder injury in a camp scrimmage causing him to miss some time during the preseason. And as the team trimmed its roster to league limits just prior to the first regular season contest, Maggioli became one of the victims; contract wrangling initiated by Lions coach Bo McMillin was purportedly behind the release of the third-year pro.^{xxxi} About a month later, the Baltimore Colts were seeking help for the “thin ranks” in their secondary following four straight losses to open its first season as a member of the NFL after the league absorbed the club in a merger with the AAFC.^{xxxi} “Just when we get our pass defense working we lose our key men,” said Colts head coach Clem Crowe said of his depleted defensive backfield.^{xxxi} As a remedy, the dreadful Baltimore club signed the veteran free agent Maggioli in mid-October—once again reuniting him with his old coach. Quickly pressed into starting duty after only two days of practices, he “had a nightmare trying to cover the Rams” in a 70–27 drubbing by Los Angeles.^{xxxi} Despite this rough beginning, Maggioli was a Colts mainstay for the rest of the season—at one point even being called a “threat” to opposing teams’ passing games.^{xxxi} And although only appearing in eight games (all as



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a starter), he finished the year with eight interceptions and 165 interception return yards, good for sixth and fifth place in the league, respectively.

“With war clouds gathering and the Colts facing another rebuilding job after yesterday’s 51–14 loss to the Yanks in New York left them with 1–11 record for the second year in a row, the players’ future abounds in uncertainty,” reported the *Evening Sun* (Baltimore) after the Colts’ dismal 1950 season finale.^{xxxix} Facing this uncertain future, Maggioli took an offseason job with a trucking company in Detroit. And even though the Green Bay Packers had interest in acquiring his services for the following campaign, he decided to leave the game and remain in the business world.^{xxxix}

Moving back to Mishawaka for good in the 1950s, Maggioli owned a restaurant. In the early 1960s he also got involved in the early stages of what is now the Ziebart International Corporation when he opened an automobile rustproofing business in his hometown. “Ziebart was just invented then,” Maggioli recalled. “I didn’t make a penny for two years because no one wanted a new item so we charged \$29.95 and lost money just to get in on the market.”^{xxxix} Outside of his business ventures, he spent time attending local high school football games at his alma mater and counted tennis and handball among his hobbies.^{xxxix} Additionally, Maggioli was an active member of several organizations including the American Legion, Marine Corps League, Notre Dame Monogram Club, St. Joseph Catholic Church, and Veterans of Foreign Wars.^{xxxix} He never married, but “did come close twice.”^{xxxix}

In 1964, Maggioli narrowly escaped death after being accidentally struck in the head with the ball while playing jai alai during a vacation in Acapulco, Mexico.^{xxxix} The injury required brain surgery to remove bone chips and stop bleeding. “Just before they put me under for that one, I asked the doctor my chances,” Maggioli recounted. “He said 20-80. That wasn’t the best news I ever heard.”^{xxxix} The incident left him with a dent in his forehead and some problems with his memory.^{xxxix} And damage sustained on the gridiron also plagued Maggioli in his later years, causing him to undergo as many as 17 operations including surgeries on his back, hips, and neck. “I might be back down to my playing weight of about 184 pounds, but I think I’m mostly marshmallow and Jell-O these days,” he joked after a back operation in 2001.^{xl}

On December 20, 2012, Maggioli passed away in his hometown at the age of 90. He was interred locally at St. Joseph Catholic Cemetery. The native son of the Hoosier State was inducted into the Mishawaka High School Athletic Hall of Fame in 1986 and the Indiana Football Hall of Fame in 1988.^{xli}



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