

Abbruzzi - Superback:

He's still chunky, still has a smile for everyone, and he made a trip back to Canada for the '73 Grey Cup game, just to reacquaint himself with the Canadian football scene. It doesn't seem so long ago when number 83 was bowling them over as he stepped over goal lines in every major city in Canada.

The chunky little man with a big smile is Hall of Fame material—Canadian Football Hall of Fame. He was born Pasquale Joseph Abbruzzese and he played his football as Pat Abbruzzi. He rejected Baltimore Colts, who drafted him twice, to put in four years with Montreal Alouettes.

"It was a move I never regretted," he said while here as a special guest of Schenleys. He was the third winner of the Schenley award as Canada's Most Outstanding Player. That was in 1955 and he set a touchdown-scoring record that has been surpassed only once. He surpassed it himself in 1956.

He was some football player, Pat Abbruzzi. He scored 19 touchdowns for Montreal in his rookie year—and the Eastern Conference played only a 12-game schedule in that 1955 season. They jumped to 14 games in 1956 and Abbruzzi scored 20 touchdowns. Only Gerry James of Winnipeg Blue Bombers threatened his mark. In 1957 Gerry, playing a 16-game schedule, tied Pat's second-place mark with 19 TDs.

Rival players went nuts trying to figure a way to stop him. He went between 210 and 215 pounds, and he stood only 5 feet 9 inches high. He was like, in his own words, a fire hydrant. Hit him low and it was like hitting the stump of an oak tree. Hit him high and it was like bumping into a fast-moving battering ram.

He played in a glamorous era of Canadian football, and because his stay was a short four years, people are inclined to forget his great achievements. It's too bad, really. Only two Eastern Conference players have ever surpassed the 1,248 yards Abbruzzi rushed in 1955. Dave Thelen and

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George Dixon exceeded that figure twice but they played 14 game seasons, Abbruzzi did it in 12 games.

Abbruzzi came along as a replacement for Alex Webster, who had rushed into Canadian football with the Alouettes in 1954, spread-eagled the field in rushing, then jumped to New York Giants of the National Football League. Abbruzzi was not only cast in the role of successor to a living legend, but he was only a part of a magnificent Alouette machine that was destroying Canadian football offensive records with the great passing of Sam Etcheverry, the exceptional receiving of Red O'Quinn and the fantastic all-round performance of Hal Patterson.

In his brief four-year fling with the Alouettes, Pasquale scored 50 touchdowns, rushed exactly 700 yards for a 5.4 yard average and caught 84 passes for 884 yards. His total rushing-passing yardage amounted to 4,633—an average of 1,158 yards per season.

Abbruzzi gave up a chance to play in the National Football League to play in Canada, and looking back, he has no regrets. As a halfback at Rhode Island State University, he had gained more than 3,500 yards in a four-year college career. In one game against the University of New Hampshire, in his sophomore season, he gained 306 yards.

Baltimore Colts were deeply interested in him. Because of some academic misunderstanding—Abbruzzi had played a year of prep

school football before going to college—the Colts actually selected Abbruzzi illegally in the draft one year. They rectified the error the following season by selecting him again—on the fifth round.

Banging his head against enemy lines certainly hadn't weakened Pasquale's mental condition. Although he felt flattered by Baltimore's attentiveness, he also noted that the Colts had picked Alan (The Horse) Ameche on an earlier round. The Wisconsin fullback was almost an automatic starter in the Baltimore backfield. Where, wondered Abbruzzi, did that leave him.

"I had played with Ameche in the North-South game, and I had no illusions about what the Colts intended. I wanted to play football. I didn't want to sit on the bench, and that was a pretty good possibility with Ameche around." Abbruzzi felt that way even though he impressed the pro scouts in that Bowl game with a touchdown off a passing play.

"I had a chance to go with Hamilton too. This real old-timer contacted me and wanted me to sign with Hamilton. I forget his name but he was a well-known name in the South." Was it by chance Carl Voyles? "That's the name, Mr. Voyles. He wanted me for Hamilton." Carl Voyles, who joined Hamilton Tiger-Cats in 1950 as coach and general manager, is still a diligent scout for the Tiger-Cats.

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New York Giants. I knew there was a job open there, so I signed with Jimmy Dunn." Jimmy Dunn was assistant coach to colorful Douglas Clyde Walker—Peahead to his friends.

"The fondest memory I have of my football in Canada," says Abbruzzi, "is of Peahead Walker. He was a great man. I just loved that man."

Walker had that affect on some athletes. Outwardly he was a gruff, uncommunicative man, with a caustic tongue. At other times, with people he knew and liked, he was a delightful humorist and a social asset. The late Vern DeGeer, then sports editor of the Montreal Gazette used to write weekly reports on how close Peahead had come to losing his trousers during his sideline pacing, as they slipped perilously below the paunch line, unchecked by a pair of braces that had long since lost their firm elasticity.

There was a day he noted tackle Herb Capozzi wandering around a practice session, apparently with nothing to do. "Capozzi," asked Peahead, "what is your assignment with this team." Capozzi was quick with his answer. "I'm second-string defensive tackle for Tex Coulter, second-string offensive tackle for Jim Staton, second-string centre for Tom Hugo and second-string middle guard for Juan Sheridan. I also play on the kickoff and punt teams."

Walker stared at him without expression, then slowly drawled: "Capozzi—what would we do if we ever lost you?"

That was the man who had such an influence on Abbruzzi's life, and for whom Abbruzzi had such an affection. He was one reason the rugged back enjoyed his time in Canadian football so much. "And the fans in Montreal were simply fantastic," he says.

The greatest thrill he ever got out of football was winning the Schenley award in 1955. "That was the greatest award in all my life," he says. He also has some fond memories of Toronto.

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"The first year I was up here, I was still a bit skeptical about my ability to make the team. After all, I was a rookie, and I was trying to fill the shoes of a great player like Alex Webster. Then in the third or fourth game we played Toronto and I scored four touchdowns and I felt pretty good about that."

The record book bears out the accuracy of Abbruzzi's memory on one count. He did score four touchdowns against Toronto. But it wasn't his first big game. Before that, he had scored four touchdowns in one game against Hamilton. As a matter of fact he followed up his freshman success with a four-touchdown game against Hamilton the following year—1956. Three of them came in the third quarter. In his relatively short tour of Canadian football, Abbruzzi had seven games in which he scored three or more touchdowns.

Abbruzzi played through what might have been the greatest era in Canadian football—certainly the greatest growing area. When he was closing out the fourth and final year of his brief playing career, a young quarterback was just starting out with Ottawa, name of Russ Jackson. His production from 93 passes was only two touchdowns, but there was a hint of the future in the five touchdowns he scored running.

Dave Mann was breaking into the CFL picture too, and he was to add some lines in the record book—for punting and the longest punt return in CFL history. People like Dick Shatto and Jackie Parker and Leo Lewis, Bernie Faloney, Earl Lunsford, Johnny Bright and great Canadian stars like Gerry James and Bob Simpson were just getting their feet wet, or starting to roll up the record pages.

After 1958, it was all over for Pat as a player. He went back to where it all started for him, in Warren, Rhode Island where today he is coach of an extremely successful high school football team, president of the area Coaches' Asso-

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ciation, and proud father of six fine young Abbruzzis—five girls and Michael.

Michael is 14. "He's just like me," says the fond father, "He's built like a fire hydrant." His father must

be as good a coach as he was a player. The Warren High School team went undefeated last year, 8 and 0, their second straight undefeated season. Pat Abbruzzi hasn't lost the winning way. ●



Abbruzzi accepts his Schenley Award—Vancouver 1955.