Hall of Fame
Mister Hollywood
Jack Zilly was the first to reach the professional ranks

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Fans must have leaned forward in their seats at hall of fame sportscaster Bill Stern's radio voice began to crackle and hiss with excitement. It was 1947. There were no televisions broadcasting the Los Angeles Rams football game, so fans had to picture the scene in their minds as Southton native Jack Zilly sprinted 80 yards across the field. Stern spoke of the catch and Zilly's move to shake a defender. He talked about Zilly's pace and increased strides as he raced toward the end zone. There was nobody ahead of him. It was a certain score. Then, the incredible happened.

"Zilly's just thrown a lateral to Sticks," Stern screamed into his microphone. Unbelievable. What humility to give up his first career touchdown in the NFL.

Posthumous

It wasn't until the morning papers that most fans finally learned the truth. The play never happened. Stern had misidentified the ball and manufactured the ending to cover mistakes. Zilly was there, but he never set foot in the end zone.

Two seasons later Zilly finally scored, catching a touchdown pass from Bob Waterfield in the last seconds of the game to push the Rams to the Eagles, 28-28. The next day's headlines read, "Zilly Zilly Against Philly.

John Jynxs "Jack" Zilly was born in 1921, and he was the first Southton native to play his way to Notre Dame's famous field. He was the first to make an NFL roster, and the first to win a professional title. Yet few in town had ever heard of his name. Zilly played professional football long before it was polluted by money and spectacle. Still, his rugged good looks and Los Angeles home earned him more than just 15 minutes of fame.

In the 1949 film War Bride, he earned 14 lines as a sailor in the film, including "I Was a Male War Bride," and "Ship ahoi!" He had an uncredited speaking role in the movie "Twelve O’Clock High" and "Yes Sir, That's My Baby!"

"The reason he did that was because the pay was so low. He used the movies to supplement his income," Pat Zilly said about his dad. "There really wasn't a lot of money in football at the time."

For players like Zilly, the pre-Super Bowl era was about playing a game that they loved, and Zilly was one of the best at the time. He had accumulated two championship titles as a tight end for the Fighting Irish—the first in 1943 and the second in 1946 when he returned from World War II. Zilly was drafted in the fourth round of the 1945 NFL draft by San Francisco but settled with the Rams once his college days came to an end. His professional career spanned six seasons, beginning on the West Coast and ending in Philadelphia. Zilly caught 23 passes for 279 career yards with four touchdowns in 1948. Zilly's Rams captured the NFL championship in 1951. "When they won the national championship in the 1950s, the players got a gold watch, but I don't think it was even real gold," said his son, "It was really about football and two teams going out there to play the best game of their lives. It was just like today's Super Bowl, but they didn't have all the hype. And the money definitely wasn't the same."

Once his playing days ended, Zilly was far from finished. He returned to the college game, serving as an assistant at Montana State in 1955 before returning to Notre Dame as an assistant. His son, Pat, remembers his father for his commitment on and off the field. "He tried to get the most out of every individual, and he wanted them to play at 100 percent every game," he said, "but he always made sure that the student athletes got an education as well. That was always the most important thing for him. He wanted them to come out with an education, using football as a vehicle." Despite his professional career and his off-season antics on the silver screen, Zilly was a quiet man at heart who shrank from the spotlight. He settled in Rhode Island after his coaching career finished, and few neighbors had any idea about his story past. They didn't even know he was in the NFL until reading his obituary in 2009. Zilly died at 86.

"If you were sitting in a crowd and talking about football, he wouldn't tell anybody that he played for the Rams or the Eagles."

"Pat Zilly. Son"

Southton Sports Hall of Fame
Inside the Numbers
Jack Zilly
(Nov. 11, 1921—Dec. 18, 2009)

Notre Dame University
• Was tight end on 1943 NCAA championship and 1946 NCAA championship team.
• (Served in the Pacific for World War II)

National Football League (NFL)
• Drafted by NFL in 4th round (1945)
• Played for Los Angeles Rams (1947-51)
• Played for Philadelphia Eagles (1952)
• Won NFL Championship Game (Rams, 1951)

Coaching
• Asst. Coach at Montana State (1955)
• Asst. Coach at Notre Dame (1956-58)

Career Statistics (NFL)

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KICK RETURN STATS

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As the first athlete to make the jump to the next level, it's no surprise that Zilly was selected for the first class of the Southton Sports Hall of Fame. On Wednesday, Nov. 10, he will be inducted in a ceremony at the Aqua Turf in Plantsville.

For tickets, contact Jim Verderame, (860) 629-7335, or buy them in person at Bonterra Italian Bistro, Anthony Jacks Wood Fired Grill, or the Southton Chamber of Commerce.

"He would have been very proud," said his son. "He was not the type of person that he was in the limelight, but he knew what he did. He achieved everything on his own. It's not like today's athlete where they build you, basically. The athlete of yesterday—versus the athlete of today is night and day."

To comment on this story or to contact sports writer John Goralski, email him at goralski@southtonobserver.com.