

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 as 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 Southington 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 Sitko," Stern screamed into his microphone. Unbelievable. What humility to give up his first career touchdown in the NFL.

Posthumous

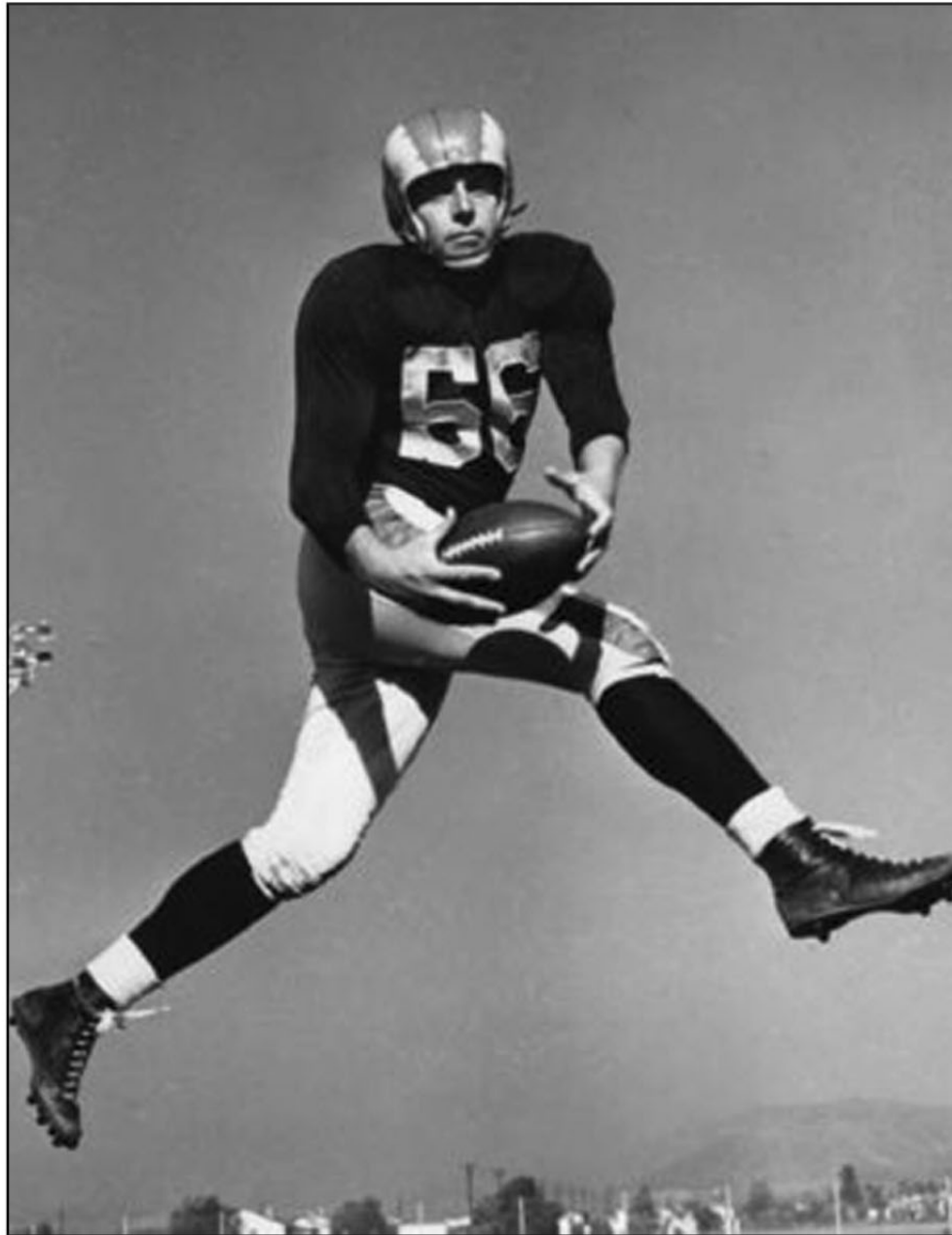
It wasn't until the morning papers that most fans finally learned the truth. The play never happened. Stern had misidentified the player with the ball and manufactured the ending to cover his mistake. Zilly was there, but he never set foot in the end-zone.

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

John Jynus "Jack" Zilly was born in 1921, and he was the first Southington boy to find 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 have even heard of his name. Zilly played professional football long before it was polluted by money and spectacle. Still, his rugged good looks and Lost 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 ahoy!" He had an uncredited speaking role in the movie "Twelve O'Clock High" and "Yes Sir, That's My Baby."

"The reason he did



WWW.LATIMESBLOGS.LATIMES.COM

Jack Zilly was the first Southington athlete to reach the professional ranks. Above is a press photos from the early 1950s.

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

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

Southington 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)

RECEIVING STATS							
Year	Team	G	Rec	Yds	Avg	Yds/G	TD
1952	Eagles	12	--	--	--	0.0	--
1951	Rams	4	--	--	--	0.0	--
1950	Rams	12	--	--	--	0.0	--
1949	Rams	12	3	35	11.7	2.9	0
1948	Rams	12	13	169	13.0	14.1	4
1947	Rams	12	7	75	10.7	6.2	0
CAREER TOTALS		64	23	279	12.1	4.4	4

KICK RETURN STATS							
Year	Team	G	Ret	Yds	Avg	TD	
1952	Eagles	12	--	--	--	--	--
1951	Rams	4	--	--	--	--	--
1950	Rams	12	--	--	--	--	--
1949	Rams	12	1	0	0.0	--	--
1948	Rams	12	--	--	--	--	--
1947	Rams	12	1	10	10.0	--	--
CAREER TOTALS		64	2	10	5.0	0	0

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 storied past. They didn't even know he was in the NFL until reading his obituary in 2009. Zilly died at 88.

"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 said. "He wouldn't give a background history on himself because he wasn't that type of a person. When people in the town of Narragansett read his obituary in the paper, they were shocked to find out what he had done."

As the first athlete to make the jump to the next level, it's no surprise that Zilly was selected in the first class of the Southington 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) 628-7335, or buy them in person at Bonterra Italian Bistro, Anthony Jacks Wood Fired Grill, or the Southington Chamber of Commerce.

"He would have been very proud," said his son. "He was not the type of person that liked to be 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 jgoralski@southingtonobserver.com.