Alumni

Smoke Rising

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Sam Dana had been listed as dead for nearly 34 years before the National Football League realized that he was alive. By then, the former professional football player was 100 years old.

The next four years would all but make up for his premature death in the record books.

The origins of the error go back to February 1945, two decades after Dana played alongside Lou Gehrig on the Columbia football team and as a wingback for the 1928 New York Yankees in the fledgling NFL. Dana, a lady's man who was among the few people he knew who owned a tuxedo, was finally getting married at age 41 and he wanted a name for his children that didn't sound like salami.

No one ever told the NFL about the name change. Decades later, Dana's son, Bob, and grandson were flipping through the NFL encyclopedia, *Total Football*, when they saw an entry for Sam Salemi. "There's Grandpa," Bob Dana's son said. "Look, Dad. He's dead."

That Sam Salemi from Brooklyn died on July 9, 1969, three months before Sam Dana retired as a special agent for the Internal Revenue Service. In March 2003, Bob Dana faxed the Pro Football Hall of Fame to say that his dad was "most definitely not dead and, in fact, we're celebrating his 100th birthday on August 7."

"I just wanted to make sure the history books were corrected," Bob Dana says. "I wasn't looking for anything else, but lo and behold, everything went crazy."

Overnight Sam Dana became more famous than he'd ever been as a player. He was, it turned out, the oldest living alumnus of the NFL. The Buffalo Bills, his hometown football team since 1949, gave him a jersey with the number 100 on it. NFL Films

captured the moment. The National Italian American Sports Hall of Fame in Chicago said it would include him in its time line of famous Italian-American players.

A past that had been erased came back to life, and Dana enjoyed telling stories of football's early years to a wider audience.

In 1920, when football was fast growing from a sandlot game into a profession, Dana starred at New Utrecht High School in Brooklyn, where he earned the nickname Smoke. "I started running with the ball, sidestepping and twisting and turning," Dana recalled in an article by Jeffrey Miller of the Professional Football Researchers Association. "Sambo Scheher, one of our linemen, said, 'That's smoke for ya.' The name stuck."

According to the 1932 alumni register at Columbia, Dana was a nongraduate of the Columbia College Class of 1925, having entered in 1921, a year after the NFL was founded. Dana played two years of football at Columbia, staying close to home as a concession to his father, a Sicilian immigrant who worked his way from a bricklayer to own a dry-goods store. Dana made the varsity squad his sophomore year as a reserve running back. He adopted the technique of running with his knees high, mimicking his teammate Ben Roderick, who went on to play two seasons with the Buffalo All-Americans.

Once, Dana lent teammate Gehrig a dollar for a craps game, but Gehrig never repaid him. Another time, while playing on South Field, Dana tried to tackle the future Yankee first baseman.

"I was told that Gehrig was strong as an ox and that you should be careful how you tackled him," Dana said once. "Well, I was pretty cocky, so one day at practice I decided to try to take him headon. He hit me so hard he took a chip out of my shoulder and I couldn't play for two weeks."

Dana never graduated from college. He played pro football for the Hartford Blues under an assumed name because he was also a student playing for the St. John's University Red Storm. He then played one season for the Canisius College Golden Griffiths before dropping out to work in his father's store, D. Salemi & Sons, in Brooklyn.

Just before the 1928 season, Charlie “Cash and Carry” Pyle, a theater promoter turned sports agent and team owner, hired Dana as a halfback for his New York Yankees football team. The two struck a deal: Dana would keep $100 for every game and Pyle would keep $25 for expenses but would return the money at the end of the season.

Dana played in five games. He scored one touchdown in a 12–6 loss to the Providence Steam Rollers, sustained one concussion during a 19–0 win against the Chicago Cardinals, and intercepted one pass in a 34–0 loss to the Detroit Wolverines. After their 4–8–1 season, the team folded and Dana never saw the rest of his money.

“I would have played the next year but the Yankees went bankrupt,” Dana said. “I didn’t want to play away from New York, and the Giants were all filled up, so I forgot about it.”

Dana stopped playing but he continued to follow the game. On October 28, 2007, while watching an uneventful 13–6 win by the Bills over the Jets, he turned to his son Bob and said, “It’s a beautiful game. I always loved it, and I still do.”

He died the next day. His family buried him in his tuxedo bearing his NFL alumni pin. Hundreds of mourners attended his wake. Papers around the country covered the news. “Sam Dana, 104, Oldest Former NFL Player, Is Dead,” declared the New York Times. New Utrecht High held a moment of silence.

Dana’s family refers to the last four years of Sam’s life as his “resurrection.” Dana himself put it more modestly to a gathering of reporters just days before his 100th birthday.

“I didn’t even know I was missing,” he said. “But I’m glad they found me.”

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