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125 Years of Fordham Football

Football got off to a shaky start at Fordham in 1882. Uniforms were bought, goals put up, boundaries drawn and practice was begun. Seven games were played and Fordham won six of them. The teams played were Seton Hall (2 games), St. Francis Xavier College (3 games), New York Latin School, and the American Athletic Club. But according to the *Fordham College Monthly* the team fell apart “owing to the want of a little push and patience and to the disposition of a few to turn everything into ridicule.” (October, 1883, p. 110) In 1883, however, a new team was formed, and football became a continuous presence at Fordham.

It was not until the 1920’s and ‘30’s that Fordham became a national football power. In 1927 Frank William Cavanaugh came to Fordham as Head Coach. He had served in World War I and was nearly blinded by shrapnel wounds, but he was tough and determined. He earned the nickname “The Iron Major,” which became the title of a 1943 movie based on his life and starred Pat O’Brien. Cavanaugh began his coaching career at Dartmouth in 1911, moved to Boston College in 1919, and went to Fordham eight years later.

From 1882 to 1927 Fordham had never been a football power. In two years Cavanaugh had an undefeated team. In 1930 he lost only one game. In his last four years at Fordham his record was 27-4-4. By 1932 he was virtually blind from his war wounds. Aided by William Joy, his assistant, he continued to attend practices and games more as a counselor than as coach. He died in 1933 at age 57. He was the first coach to use the T formation.

In the year Frank Cavanaugh died a young man from Brooklyn named Vince Lombardi received a football scholarship to Fordham. Under coach “Sleepy” Jim Crowley Lombardi became one of the “Seven Blocks of Granite.” This team won 25 consecutive games frequently holding the opposing teams scoreless. In 1937 Fordham was ranked number three nationally. Alex Wojciechowicz, the center, became an All American and went on to play professionally in Detroit and Philadelphia. Lombardi was not as strong a player, but went on to become the best professional coach in American history. In 2005 John Druze, the last surviving “Block of Granite” died at the age of 91.
Vince Lombardi, when he left Fordham, tried law school for a while but gradually fell into coaching football at several high schools, at West Point, and with the New York Giants. But in his heart he knew that he would only be happy back at Fordham as head football coach. Finally in 1954 the position opened, and Jack Coffey, Fordham’s Athletic Director, offered him the job. The offer, however, was contingent upon Fordham’s decision whether or not it would continue to fund big-time football. On December 15 the President of Fordham, Rev. Laurence McGinley, S.J., announced that Fordham could no longer afford to support a football program. Lombardi went into an emotional slump, but eventually decided to continue working with the Giants. In 1959 he took the Head Coach job with the Green Bay Packers and went on to a legendary career in which the Packers never had a losing season, won the NFL championship in 1965, ’66, and ’67, and won the first two Superbowls.

Before he went to Green Bay, Fordham and Lombardi seemed destined for each other, but, of course, it never happened. But it is fascinating to speculate what kind of a place Fordham would have been if he had been hired. Thanks to him, Green Bay went from a place that nobody knew to a name everybody recognized.

At any rate, after 16 years Fordham reinstated football as a varsity sport in 1970 in Division III of the NCAA. In 1989 the Rams moved up to Division 1-AA. In 1990 Fordham joined the Patriot League, a small group of northeastern colleges that does not fund athletic scholarships. In 2003 Fordham won the Patriot League championship.

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