



Firsts in Sports:

Winning Stories

Paul T. Owens



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by

Paul T. Owens

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Published by
Myron Publishers
4625 Saltillo St.
Woodland Hills, CA 91364
www.myronpublishers.com
www.paultowens.com

ISBN:978-0-9824675-1-0
Library of Congress Control Number:
Printed in the USA

This book is available for purchase in bulk by organizations and institutions at special discounts. Please direct your inquiries to sales@MyronPublishers.com

Edited by Jo Ellen Krumm and Lee Fields.
Cover & Interior Design, Typesetting by Lyn Adelstein.

What People Are Saying About *Firsts in Sports: Winning Stories*

“I like the way Paul included baseball with his story of football’s first lawsuit.”

—Joe DiMaggio, New York Yankees

“*Firsts in Sports: Winning Stories* is timely for today’s pro-football environment, since it explains how the players and owners deal legally. The author takes you “inside” through the eyes of the referee, with issues one can not get any other way. An interesting as well as educational read.”

—Dr. Jim Tunney, NFL Referee 1960-91

“My good friend and great writer.”

—Jim Murray, Los Angeles Times

Regarding the Torch Relay: “Wouldn’t it be great if we could do this more often. Everyone has come together for this moment, and no one wants it to stop. We’ve all got a beautiful sense of being one.”

—Bill Toomey, gold medal winner of the decathlon
at the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games

“People don’t realize this, but there’s more pressure on officials than there is on players.”

—Deacon Jones, 10 time All Pro Defensive Lineman, Los Angeles Rams, talking about John McDonough, NFL referee

About the author, Paul T. Owens

Paul T. Owens has written for the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times as a sports writer. He was coaching staff writer for the Dallas Cowboys with Tom Landry, and Senior Staff Writer with the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Committee for Peter V. Ueberroth. He also served as Public Service Coordinator for the United States Olympic Committee.

Paul wrote biographies of National Football League officials and coaches, and for the Victor Awards, one of the longest running sports awards television shows.

He is the author of several other books, which appear on his website:

www.PaulTOwens.com.

Mr. Owens received his bachelors and masters degree in business from the University of Southern California, and attended Columbia University Writer's Program.

*Joe Di Maggio and author
Paul T. Owens,
Victor Awards
Honoring the 50th Anniversary
of Joe Di Maggio's 1941
56-game hitting streak.*



Firsts in Sports: *Winning Stories*

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Introduction

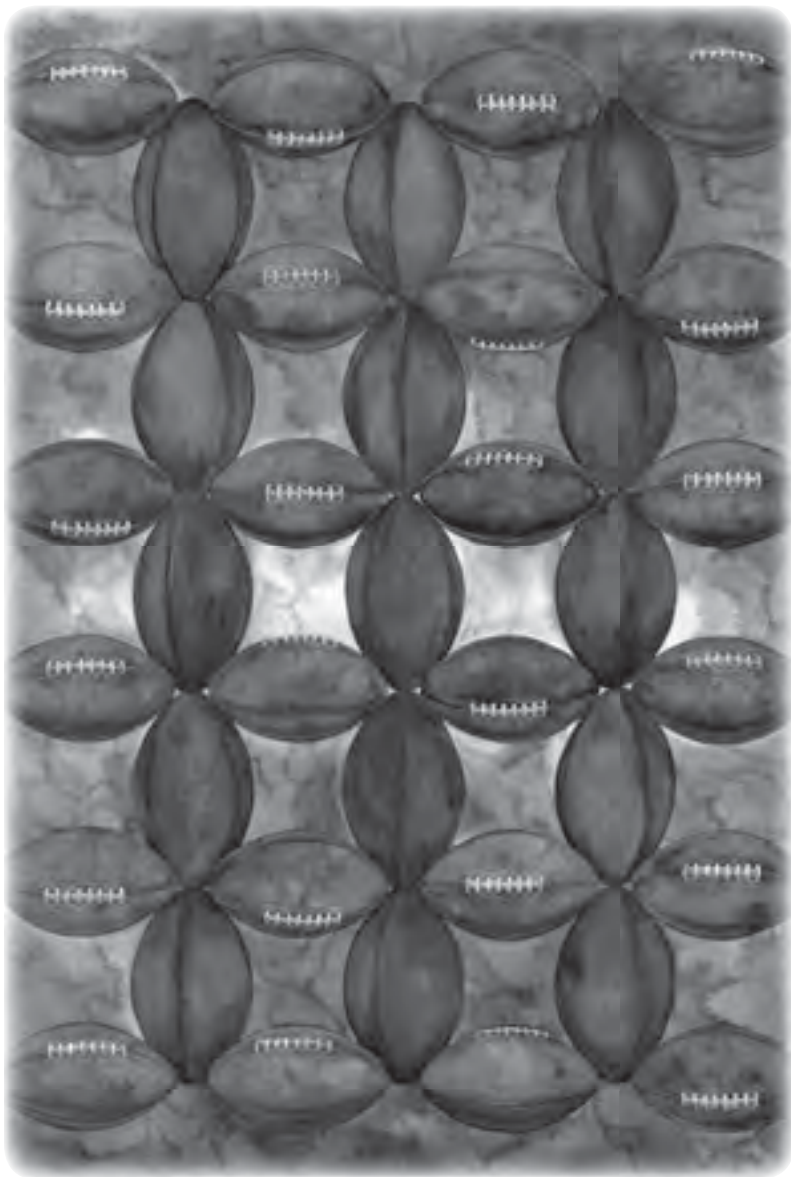
I was fortunate to have enjoyed the people I worked with as a writer for sports teams and events. From the first player in professional football who sued the NFL for his rights to the referee who ran a Super Bowl and the person who orchestrated the first Olympic Torch Relay in America, I have been involved with the excitement of great human victories and successful sport events.

The following chapters speak of firsts in sports. I am glad I was involved.

Paul T. Owens



Author Paul T. Owens with Olympic Games Administrator, Hoodie Troutman, on the 1984 Olympic Torch Relay.



Stanley Silver, Artist



Ben Agajanian coaching the Dallas Cowboys.

The First National Football League Designated Kicker Only

Ben Agajanian was a college and professional football kicker from 1943 through 1964, the first designated kicker only player in professional football.

Although Ben lost the toes on his kicking foot in an elevator accident while in college, he went on to become one of the greatest kicking stars in the National Football League. He negotiated his own contract with a professional team and was the only player who ever played for no salary.

After he retired from kicking, he became a coach for the Dallas Cowboys for his friend, Tom Landry, and a kicking consultant for several National Football League teams.

*He is also co-author of the book, *The Kicking Game*, an instructional book for kickers at all levels of football, American style. This excerpt is from his autobiography “Who’s Kicking Now”. Both books were co-written with Paul T. Owens.*

I do not do anything without kicking. When I was a kid, it was kicking an empty can down an alley. Then it was kicking a football in college and for fourteen professional teams, including the New York Giants and the World Champion Green Bay Packers. Now, it is teaching young kids and professional players to keep their heads down and eye on the ball while they kick. No matter where I have been, or what I am always doing, I have had one foot on the ground, and the other flying through the air. And I have been lucky. Everything that has ever happened to me off the field has made my kicking life even better.

My legs have been my best asset. The milkman proved it. He ran over both of them one day while backing out of our driveway when I was four-years-old. It was a miracle—no broken bones, a few bruises and a fifteen hundred dollar settlement. My name was not even in the

program and my legs were already bringing in the money. The family used it to bring relatives to the United States from Europe.

My father was in business with my mother's brothers. Together they had interests in the rubbish and disposal industry, raising hogs, operating meat-packing houses and owning a transportation company.

As a kid I was restless and had virtually no attention span in school. I put all my energy into sports, and with my strong legs was always the best kicker. When we played kickball, I was a home run for sure. We did not call ourselves the Dodgers or the Yankees, the Lions or the Bears. We were either the Democrats or the Republicans at 15th Street School in San Pedro, California in the late '20's. Although I did not mind playing with others, I liked sports where I could compete one on one. I could not get with the team concept where you had to always hit and shove some other kid out of the way, just to show off your fourth grade "macho" skills. To me, there was nothing wrong being in the glee club either. There were not too many ways you could be hurt trying to kiss the closest soprano. And my dad always enjoyed my singing on or off key. He wanted me to be a performer.

After too many times being called too small to play on playground football teams, I decided to take up handball. I made it my business to beat everybody, and did so all through junior high school.

When I entered San Pedro High School, there was no handball team. I considered playing football but it seemed too rough for me. Besides, I could not try out for a team because I weighed one hundred and twenty-five pounds, which was too heavy for the 'C' team, and too light to be competing with one hundred and sixty pound seniors on the 'B' squad.

There was not a whole lot to see at first. I barely made the third string football team. We were so bad that even the guys sitting on the bench could not stand to watch the game. During one game the first string kicker could not get the ball off his foot. I went to the coach and offered my services. Previous experience: NONE. Well, I connected with my first one, and had to stay in the game as guard. Back then, you

could not substitute unless there was a time out. I kicked a few more times before our short season ended, and spent the rest of that year on the tennis court or at the local dances.

In high school I would only dance if the girl asked me. I could not stand the rejection if I had asked someone, and she said no. It would have tarnished my winning image. But in junior college I lost my shyness and pride. I loved to jitterbug and do the New Yorker. The reality was setting in that the best girl dancers had to be asked. They were not running around, chasing after me to dance.

I made the tennis team that spring, and beat almost everybody. The following fall I went out for the football team. Head coach Tay Brown asked me what position I was going to play. I told him on the line, guard or tackle. After two plays on the line, he asked me, "What else can you do?"

"I think I can kick," I said.

"We've already got a kicker. And don't ever tell anyone you think you can. Say you can and then go out and do it."

That was high school. College at the University of New Mexico brought me more experience as a football kicker, but without the use of the toes on my kicking foot. I lost all of them in a warehouse elevator accident. I kept kicking, though, any and everywhere I could.

WHILE THE WAR WAS ON

When my linebacker friend went to Santa Ana, California to enlist in the Air Force, he asked me to come along.

When he found they needed a kicker for the Air Base team, he recommended me. It was illegal to play for the service teams as a civilian, but I did. In my first game I set a Los Angeles Coliseum record, the first civilian to play for a service team in the stadium. A week later, November 11, 1942, I was the first person inducted into the armed services without having to take off my shoes. I was inspired to join the troops by

a captain who scared me with the news, “Now that you’ve played for us, you have to join the armed service.”

They did not need another athletic director so I enlisted as a cabinet-maker and a regular on the Santa Ana Flyers football team. Ten days later I received official notice from the Navy. They had changed their minds and were ready to accept me. The doctors had probably seen too many guys who could not walk straight. But I stayed in Santa Ana, playing out the rest of the season with the team.

The following year the team disbanded. Paul Schissler was in charge of the March Air Force football team in Riverside, California, about fifty miles from Santa Ana. He wanted me transferred to his base so I could kick for him.

Merle Hapes was with us at Santa Ana. He had joined the service after a celebrated year with the New York Giants of the NFL. When Paul asked him about me, he told him I was not worth a damn as a kicker. I put Merle up to it. Why would I want to leave Santa Ana?

The air base in Santa Ana was almost a country club. Besides, if I had left the area I would not have been able to go to San Diego on the weekends and play for the Bombers. They were paying us seventy-five dollars a game. Players from all services played. The team had players from the Marine Corps, the Air Force and the Navy. Yes, guys with three day passes were on the team. There were not too many full team practices, as the only day most of the players were all together was Sunday.

During that year I became an athletic instructor, in charge of getting cadets enthused about doing sit-ups, deep knee bends and crawling under bobbed wire fences before they were shipped overseas to battle. On Sunday, Merle Napes and I would drive down for Bombers games. It was the beginning of my career as a fly-in for the game only player.

How would you like to play with somebody else’s number? Somebody else’s jersey? Instead of the program saying you were six feet, three inches and weighing two hundred and forty pounds, it read that you

were five feet, eight inches and weighing one hundred and seventy five pounds. For many servicemen athletes this was how it was during the Second World War. Some did not want it known that they were playing for pay. They had not received permission to play any kind of pro ball. Others were playing one weekend in San Diego, catching passes and making tackles, and the following week were being dropped onto European fields to fight real battles.

Owners of teams were not in the business of updating programs each week. "Country Austin," No. 88, had many identities under his shoulder pads, but fans only 'thought' they knew for sure who he was. They would look at the program and see his name there and say, "They must have made a mistake. It doesn't look like him but that's him, 'cause it says so right here in the program. That's his number. Last week he was 68."

NFL teams were combined during those years because so many players were in the service. In 1943 there was the Philadelphia Eagles and Pittsburgh Steelers, known as Phi-Pitt Steagles. Both teams split their home schedules, and both coaches Greasy Neale and Walt Kiesling shared their time as team leaders, working with players from both squads. The following year the Chicago Cardinals combined with the Steelers, as the Eagles had enough men to make it alone.

College teams also played service teams, and allegiances were tested. Many of the Notre Dame players who graduated in 1943 were playing for the Navy's Great Lakes Service Club in August. One of the first games on their schedule was Notre Dame.

Along with football, I played on the Santa Ana Air Base's tennis team, as its first singles player. The only player to beat me in the southern California area was Gene Mako from the Los Alamitos Naval Air Station. Losing to him was not my biggest setback. He just happened to be my partner on the national doubles championship team, even when he 'barely' beat me in matches of 6-1, 6-love.



All I cared about was that I was released on weekends, with a captain's permission, to drive to Los Angeles so I could play for the Hollywood Rangers in the newly organized American Pro Football League. No toes and all!

Our first game was against the San Francisco Clippers. We beat them 20-9, but the team lost one of its most valuable players—me. On one play I tried tackling Kenny Washington, the U.C.L.A. All-American and Clipper quarterback. I misjudged him, and my footing. My cleats planted in the grass, my legs locked, I twisted around to grab him and his elusiveness left me spinning, empty-handed. Just as I tried to regain my balance I was hit by somebody from the side. I watched the rest of the game from the bench.

The following week we played in San Diego, with my bad knee. I scored a touchdown and made two conversions. And, no, the touchdown was not made from a fumbled snap picked up for an end around kicker option. I played end, and made our quarterback look good by catching one just as it was on its way out of the end zone. The score was 31-6. Interesting to note: San Diego supported two pro teams then, the Gunners and the Bombers. They did not draw the crowds like the AFL Chargers did when they came in the '60's, but the community supported both teams at the same time during the war. The NFL has rules that try to prohibit two teams from setting up business within a seventy-mile radius. In our league there were the Los Angeles Mustangs, the Los Angeles Wolves and the Hollywood Rangers. In the other pro league on the Pacific coast during that time there were also two Los Angeles based teams—the Hollywood Wolves and the Los Angeles Bulldogs, and no one said how the competition for fan support was detrimental to the game or the league.

The inter level of play of the war years had very interesting combinations of teams playing against each other. The Cleveland Rams of 1944, later to be the Los Angeles Rams, played the Sampson Naval Base. March Air Force Base, with Paul Schissler at its football controls, played the Washington Redskins, with Dud De Groot as their coach. Coach Schissler used to tell his players, "Don't hurt the star players on the other team. We need them for the gate." It was a practice he used when he owned one of the local pro teams I played with after the war.

March Air Force also played the Bombers during 1944. I had been traded from Hollywood to San Diego after my injury and was on that Bomber team which lost 56-7 to Schissler. I could barely kick the ball. Some of the reverberations of the booing that the local populace graced me with, can still be heard today in San Diego. But there I was with a loser, contributing the shortest kick-off—an unintentional twelve yarder made with a knee of torn cartilage.

After the game I returned to the base in Santa Ana for a program of no strenuous exercise. The pain in my knee persisted and in January I had surgery. The operation was a success until the assistant surgeon cut the cruciate ligament. Every time I walked the knee popped in and out. I had gotten over the toes not being there to help me kick. Now I had to picture myself kicking without the help of any knee action. I could not picture it, nor could I begin thinking how I was going to change to the other foot.

Just as I began thinking of being a coach I received a call from my old coach, Coach Shipkey. He was stationed at Santa Ana and worked for the service recruiting athletes for different bases. He asked me if I wanted to go with him to a southern base to help coach a team. I think he also thought I would kick for him. Whatever his intentions and whatever thoughts I had about coaching, I did not want to be transferred out of southern California. I told him I wanted to stay home with my family. He said, fine, that he understood, but still tried to convince me how easy it would be for me if I went with him. I listened, told him how appreciative I was, but would not go.

His understanding of my position and feelings, though, did not keep him from trying to get me. In June I received a transfer notice from the top general at his base in South Carolina. And when a general asks, you go unless you have a good enough medical reason.

I went right to the officer on our base who was in charge of transfers and told him in an overdramatized case of pleading and hysterics:

“All my life, all I’ve wanted to do is be a coach. All my life, that’s all I’ve wanted to do. But how would it be for me to be coaching and

running a football team from a wheelchair? Look at this.” I popped out my knee for him.

“But, Aggie, your orders have been requested by a general. The only way you can get out of being transferred is if you’re in the hospital.”

I went right to the hospital and gave the same drama about wanting to be a coach. I happened to mention that the cruciate ligament had been severed. That did it. “Hold it, Agajanian. You’re not going anywhere.” One doctor called the transfer officer and I told him he would write out the necessary papers that would negate the Southern General’s command.

“You’re going to stay with us in the hospital, too, Ben. We want to give you ten days of O and D.”

“What’s that?”

“That’s for Observation and Disposition. We want to look at that leg. Give it some stress. See what it can and cannot do. You might be able to coach some day, but if you were planning to make a living kicking footballs, you better start looking around for something else to do.”

I loved it. I was not going to the South, and the doctor apparently had not seen me the day before practicing my kicking. I did not do too well on all the tests they put me through, though, and ten days later on the Fourth of July, 1945, I was honorably discharged from the service. I was considered injured in the line of duty. Playing football in a stadium with servicemen watching was considered entertaining the troops. I was released with a pension from the Veteran’s Administration. I had friends who had returned from the service without eyes and missing legs, and they received less compensation than I did for trying to tackle some errant quarterback on a twisted knee play.

What I liked about the story was that my college coach, the one who had convinced me and my family that I would play for him in college, was the guy who had unintentionally made it possible for me to be released to try out for the 1945 pro football season.

KICKING THROUGH THE PHI-PITT STEAGLES

During my Army football days I met Jack Banta and Mel Bleeker. Both of them became members of the Philadelphia Eagles. They encouraged me to try out for the team and convinced me to write to the team's General Manager, Harry Thayer.

The team sent me a contract for two hundred dollars a game. Banta and Bleeker told me to send it back. "Ask for more."

"Why? Two hundred is good enough for me."

"Sure it is, but send it back. We always do, whether or not it's enough."

I sent it back and they sent it right back with a note attached. "Mr. Agajanian, when you make the team then you will have a chance to make more money per game."

I did not send a reply. I just boarded a plane for Philadelphia. A rookie. A nobody, and I wanted to be the best in practice. I doubled what everyone did in calisthenics. If they did twenty push-ups, I did forty. If they did ten pull-ups, I did twenty-five. I worked out with the ends, but on one day went to practice with the kickers.

The coach, Greasy Neale, came over and told me, "You're no kicker. You played end in college and did some kicking for some dingy league in California, but you're playing with the pros now. You're an end. Besides we got a kicker. Now get over there and practice your patterns."

I played in the pre-season game, and well enough I felt, to make the team. When the regular kicker was at a Sunday Army meeting, I took his place for my first pro field goal. It was also my first taste of the hatred towards kickers. On a fourth down play, instead of going for a long first down, the coach sent me in to try for a twenty-three yard three pointer. When I reached the huddle, I got a welcome reception.

"What are you doing?" one player asked.

“We don’t need you. We’re going for it,” another said.

“I am going to kick.”

“The hell you are. Now get your ass back to the bench.”

I turned and ran back to the bench. The coach met me and I said, “They don’t want me in there. They said they’re going for it.”

“You just get in there and worry about kicking the ball. Don’t worry about them.” He pushed me back towards the hostile group.

When I returned, one of the disgruntled players leaned back out of the huddle and announced to everybody, “It’s a field goal. We’re not going for it.” Steven Van Buren, one of the most fabulous players during that time, grabbed the guy by the jersey and told him bluntly, “And you better block for him, too.”

They all did, and I made it. But in the paper the next day another player received the credit. I could live with that. I was more concerned with the fact that the player who did not want me to try it did not even come over to say he was glad I had made it. I was out there to make the points, sure, but more than that I wanted to feel like I was appreciated by the guys I was making them for.

Even though the coach sent me in, and I made it, I did not think he liked me enough to keep me on the team. Some of the other players though got me quickly to believe otherwise. As one of them told me, “If he doesn’t yell at you he doesn’t like you.” And, he was yelling at me, so my confidence went right up. I wired Arleen, “I got the team made. If you want to marry me wire me—YES.”

She wired back, “YES—send money”. I showed the telegram to a reporter and a headline read, “ROOKIE PROPOSES BY TELEGRAM.” Arleen flew out from Los Angeles and we were married on September 28, 1945—the night before the first league game. The team’s publicity man wanted to make it a goal post wedding—before the game or at half

time—me in uniform, and Arleen dressed in a cheerleader outfit—but I said no thanks.



I am sure some coaches would like to cut a player right in the middle of a game. After a kick wide to the left which ‘lost’ the game, after an unrecovered fumble, an intercepted pass which was returned for a touchdown. Yes, there have to be a few who would like to stop the game and kick the player off the team or trade him to the other side.

With the Eagles in the 1940’s, the message came with intrigue. The team owner’s chauffeur would deliver the notice to you personally at the hotel where the players stayed. The Tuesday following the first league game, he came into the lobby where the players were waiting to go to practice. He had a few envelopes in his hand. White and edged in black. I saw him approach one of the players in the group I was in and held my breath. As he went to hand an envelope to him he looked at the name on the front of it and quickly turned and handed it to me. It was a game he played. He knew damn well who I was.

He stood there and waited for me to reach for it. When I did not, he just dropped it. It fell between my legs onto the floor. My heart went right with it. I was sick.

My ego came crashing down on top of me. I had told everyone how I was going to play ball and the first chance at it, I was told NO. My God! My dad would be right. “Football doesn’t need you, and you don’t need it,” he had said. And now I had just been married. I was overly confident of how well I could do as a player, and I now would not have the chance.

As I stared out into the reality of cold dead space, another player said, “Don’t worry about it, Aggie. Somebody’ll pick you up.”

“Yeah, Ben, you got a chance somewhere. Try not to take it too bad. Remember, it’s just a game of big kids, a game that everybody makes too big a thing about, anyway,” another player said.

“If you’re not suppose to play with us, it only means you’ll be with somebody else. And, probably come back to beat us one day. That’s the only way to make things even.”

I listened to them, but I was not ready to accept it. Playing pro ball meant too much to me. I was destroyed for a week. My wife kept things in perspective and made me believe that it was not the end of the world. I had not disappointed her, and that meant a lot to me.

Two football friends, Chuck Fenenbock and Bill Radovich, were playing with Detroit. They had told me earlier during the pre-season that if I do not make it with Philadelphia, they would see about having the Lions pick me up on waivers. I called them at the encouragement of Arleen.

Bert Bell, a part-owner of the Pittsburgh Steelers at the time, asked me if I wanted to play for Pittsburgh. I told him I was on waivers and was waiting to hear if Detroit would take me. I did not know what waivers meant at the time, but if I was on waivers, I was on waivers.

A few days later I found out I was not on waivers, and when Mr. Bell came by, I told him. He said I was free then to go with whatever team I chose. And, since no one else was standing around asking me to play for them, I went with Mr. Bell.

I found out later that I could not have been placed on waivers. The reason was the Steelers had drafted me out of college. Before the Eagles signed me, they had made an agreement with the Steelers when they were the Phi-Pitt Steagles that if I did not make the team I would belong to Pittsburgh. Mr. Bell did not volunteer the information when I was thinking about going to Detroit. I do not think he wanted to make it appear that he was forcing me to go to the Steelers.

In those days no player wanted to go to Pittsburgh. It was not just the weather. The team just lost and lost. My consideration, of course, was just to play. I did not have to play for a winner, and I was not even of the rah-rah thinking that I would or could make a team into a winner.

“All right, Mr. Bell, when do I go to Pittsburgh?”

“When can you be ready?”

“All we need is an hour to pack.”

“That’s good enough. I’ll be back and take you to Hershey.”

Arleen and I rode with Bert right to the corner of Cocoa and Chocolate Streets. The whole town smelled of sweets. It tasted good the first few days, but became boring very soon, as did everything else. The local movies changed features once a month, and the players’ only release from football was more violence—the local hockey games. The players and their families lived in Hershey during the entire football season.

The 1945 Steelers gave nobody in the city anything to cheer about. We won two games and lost eight, and had the distinction of not throwing one touchdown pass the whole season. In the third game I broke my arm playing defensive end. My career was through again until they told me I could still kick for them.

“But I got a broken arm,” I complained to the assistant coach.

“You’re not going to kick with your arm, Agajanian. You’re going to use your foot.”

It turned out to be a perfect kicking season. I kicked four for four and led the league in percentage of success—1,000. I made two before the broken arm, two with it. When Bill Dudley returned to the team from the armed services, he took over some of the kicking.

I do not know if the players of that day were tougher than those playing the game now, but they sure played in more banged-up condition. Most every lineman had false teeth. The uniforms were no more protective than wearing two or three pieces of cardboard under a heavy sweater. I emerged from the season though with a blessing from that broken arm.

BECAUSE OF IT, I WAS THE FIRST PLAYER IN THE NFL TO APPEAR ON THE ROSTER AS A KICKER ONLY.

The broken arm and the loss of my toes probably made it all that more possible for me to be accepted as a kicker.



During the war and the year after it the West coast had very interesting football. The competition mixtures were unusual. The team from the San Diego Naval Base played U.C.L.A. (The line average of U.C.L.A. was one hundred and ninety, backfield one hundred and seventy pounds.) The U.S.C. Trojans played the St. Mary's Preflight Airdevils. The Fleet City Blue Jackets, a service team from northern California, played the Hollywood Rangers.

U.C.L.A. All-Americans Tom Fears played for the 2nd Air Force, and Kenny Washington played for the Hollywood Bears. Elroy Hirsch—Crazylegs—of the future Los Angeles Rams was scoring for the El Toro Marines, and Bob Waterfield was the highest paid National Football League player with an annual salary for running, passing and kicking a football of twenty thousand dollars. The Rams were still in Cleveland and though they won the 1945 league title, owner Dan Reeves lost fifty thousand dollars running the ball club. And so, 1946 was the first year of the Los Angeles Rams.

The Hollywood Rangers played in the Pacific Coast League at one time. They were managed by my friend Bill Shroeder of the Citizens Savings Sports Library, and coached by Paul Schissler, who had coached in college as well as the armed services. The Signal Oil Company sponsored the club with a twenty five thousand dollar advance to begin the franchise.

Los Angeles had an abundance of local and national teams to take up fan interest in the game. More than enough. Along with the Rams and the Los Angeles Dons of the All American Football Conference, the Pacific Coast League had the Hollywood Rangers, the Los Angeles Bulldogs and the Long Beach Giants. Close by were the San Diego

Bombers. The Oakland Giants and the San Francisco Clippers were the other California teams.

In the opening game of the 1946 season we beat the Salt Lake City Seagulls 35-27 at Gilmore Stadium in Los Angeles. No field goals. I just did the extra points. For home games, attendance ranged from twenty-five hundred to six thousand. The following week we beat San Diego 28-14 at home, then we went to Salt Lake to play the Seagulls again. We lost, but the front line gained a bonus player—me. I was given the chance to play right end. I was considered big by the program roster—six feet tall, weighing two hundred pounds.

It was not until December that I had a chance to show off, though. We played the Tacoma Indians and beat them with three field goals, 9-6. One of the kicks was forty yards, another forty-seven. All of a sudden I was named the “Toeless Armenian” and the “Field Goal Artist,” and I started reading my own press clippings and taking myself seriously.

One of the players on the team told me he saw one of the owners pump some helium into the ball before the game. I did not believe him. The following week, when I kicked the winning field goal to beat San Francisco 17-14, the ball barely got over the crossbar. Maybe he was right—helium was in the Tacoma game ball.

The next week we lost 10-6, but our points were scored on my kicks. One field goal was for forty-four yards, the other from forty-one yards out. After I made the first one, the thought of “helium” popped up in my mind, and I went right over to the referee and asked him if he was sure there was only air in the ball. He threw the ball up right in front of me and when he caught it, said, “What’s wrong with you, Agajanian? Nothing’s wrong with this ball.”

During the week before the next game—the last game of the season—our coach told the press that every time we got within the forty yard line he was going to bring me in for a field goal try. I had two chances—made one and missed one. The game gave me a chance to display my talent as a multi-threat to the opposition. I scooped up an attempted lateral and ran it in for a fifty-yard score.

Because our league games were played until the end of January, some players from other pro leagues joined a few of our teams. They were not allowed to, however. The most honest play of the year in any league came when an owner of one team found a ‘ringer’ in his team’s locker room when he came to congratulate the players on a victory. He immediately called the league’s office and had the game forfeited.

Twenty-five years later I learned something else that would also have changed the standings of teams in the league. One of the owners of the Rangers was at my house for a football Sunday. When we started reminiscing about the ‘46 season, he told me:

“Dummy, you weren’t that good. I filled the ball with half helium, half air, for one game. Their quarterback was so good I thought he’d overthrow his receivers if helium was in the ball. And he did, didn’t he? It sure as hell helped you. Look how far you kicked that day. Hell, everyone thought you were a great kicker.”

LOVE A KICKER OR LOVE ME NOT

The long field goals got the attention of a few pro teams. The Los Angeles Rams and the Los Angeles Dons, along with the Washington Redskins, contacted me after my ‘helium’ season. The Rams and the Redskins were in the National Football League. The Dons belonged to the All America Football Conference.

The AAFC originated in 1946 to challenge the hold the NFL had on pro ball. The new conference did quite well for a while. All America Football Conference teams signed as many as one hundred NFL players, outdrew the NFL by almost ten thousand fans per game, and forced the rival existing league to pay higher player salaries.

Arch Ward, a newspaperman from Chicago, was the creator of the league. He was also director of the annual all-star game, played by the college all stars and the championship team of the NFL. Ward envisioned an expanded football country—with pro teams stretching from coast to coast. He also wanted an annual world series of football, and was aggravated that a few of his friends could not obtain NFL franchises.

With the many football players available to play after World War II, the AAFC had no trouble manning their rosters. The competition between the two leagues for players was quite stiff. The AAFC did not hold a draft their first year. The NFL in that year held its draft in secret to avoid giving the AAFC a ready-made list of players that were available for signing.

Commissioner of the AAFC, Jim Crowley, said that pro salaries increased between one hundred and two hundred percent during the competition between the two leagues and that “Should the two leagues ever agree on a common draft and hands-off policy, the figures will drop somewhat, but they will never go back to the days when a good lineman played for only \$100 to \$150 a game.”

Rams’ owner, Dan Reeves, wanted me to kick the long field goals and kickoffs. Quarterback Bob Waterfield was to do the short field goals and extra point attempts. I told Mr. Reeves, “I think I can do extra points and short field goals, just as well as Bob can,” but he was just adamant about his star player doing some of the kicking. For five or six years after that meeting, I always felt a coldness with Rams management.

KICKING ONLY

The Los Angeles Dons was a team owned mostly by Ben Lindheimer. The Dons were named after his partner, and actor, Don Ameche. The theme was Hollywood. At half time young players from the elementary schools played. Four teams played each other in the junior league—under the names of Bob Hope, Mickey Rooney, Jimmy Durante and Al Jolson. I met with Mr. Lindheimer at his home and negotiations were straight and simple. “You’ll be a kicking specialist. Kicking, that’s all. You don’t have to do anything else.”

That’s what the contract said, too. “Kicking—ONLY.” I did not have an attorney or agent represent me. My playing football was not that important to me that I could not do my own negotiating. I was a realist. I figured if I did not do well enough to be on the team, they would send me home anyway. No owners could accuse me of trying

to milk them during contract talks. I never wanted to be in a position where I was forced to be with them; just like I did not want them to feel that I was forcing them at any time during the season to keep me on their team.

The day after I signed with the Dons I called the Redskins and told them the sad news. I am sure they got over it, soon, if not immediately, but somehow I felt that I was letting them down.

The emphasis on “Kicking only” fitted me perfectly. All the players—the other players on the Dons—had double digit numbers. I did not want two. I wanted to stand out with one. Number 3 was exact enough. I was a specialist. Exclusive to the point of not even considering myself a player.

I signed with the team in March and practiced four times a week by myself until training camp opened in August. During the second week of camp I told the coach I had to leave to take care of my business. The office was only seventy miles away from camp. I was gone only two days when my roommate called.

“Hey, you better get back up here.”

“What for? The coach knows I’ll be there at the end of the week in time for the Saturday scrimmage.”

“You might have told him that, but there’s six guys out here with kicking shoes on and they’re all practicing. The coach made an announcement that you left camp and that we need a kicker.”

“I’ll be right up.”

The next day at practice the coach came up to me and asked in front of most of the team, “Are you a businessman or football player? We’re dedicated to winning football games. That’s the only business you have to know while you’re playing for us.”

I had told the coach why I had left, and he said it was all right, but pro football was a very, very cold business. They did not give a damn. They figured maybe I was gone for good, so they needed another kicker.

In those days there were a lot of players who chose business over a pro-football career because football did not pay that well. When the coach told the team that I was gone, everybody grabbed their shoes and started kicking. They wanted to kick and maybe earn extra money for doing it. Though I was the only player hired just to kick, there were five or six players on the team who had experience kicking with NFL teams. They did not have to worry about kicking for the Dons though. I quickly had my shoes out in time to show off for the coach and get my job back as “Kicker, only.”

The season opened in late August with an Intrasquad game. I kicked for both sides. Half of the team wanted me to make every kick. The other half wanted me to miss each time I tried. On my first kickoff against another team, my whole team was against me. The player making the kickoff return went right past me. I faked an effort to get him as I tried to reach the side lines. The coach saw me and grabbed me, “Why didn’t you make that tackle?”

“I don’t make any tackles. I am only here to kick.”

“Not on this team.”

“It says so in my contract. I only have to kick.”

“Well, you better look like you’re doing something else besides just kicking. Running away from the guy who’s got the ball sure isn’t the way to do it.”

Mr. Lindheimer had the most specialized specialist in the league. He had ten players on the field after a kick, not eleven like the other side. How was life on the field going to be safe for me if I had to be part of the group that went down to try to bust the wedge of the kickoff return. Besides, the coaches had not signed me. The owners had.