

Historically Speaking

With Eastchester Historian
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Greatness on the Gridiron



The 1944 Tuckahoe baseball team that went undefeated for two consecutive years in the Southern Westchester Athletic Conference.

There is a very strong argument that the football fields of Eastchester and Tuckahoe High School produced the most famous athletes to come from our town. Starting in World War II, many high school players went on to play major college football; some went on to play in the National Football League, and two achieved All-NFL status.

Jack Vecarelli, the great boxer, was the first athlete to win a football athletic scholarship, attending Michigan State in the early 30s. Washington Serini, who played at Eastchester High School at the start of the war, went off to play at Kentucky and became an All-NFL lineman for the Chicago Bears in 1948.

Other graduates of Eastchester High School and veterans went off to play Division I collegiate football. In 1950, Frank Smith became a star halfback at the University of Miami, racking up 10 touchdowns in five games and leading the nation in scoring before his season was shortened by a devastating head injury. All four of his brothers went on to play at Miami and the youngest of the brothers, Russell, played five seasons as a halfback for the San Diego Chargers.

Bob Ferri went on the play fullback and punt at Syracuse University, participated in the Blue Grey Cup game, and played professional football for the New York Yankees of the All American Football Conference. In 1947, Jim Hefti was drafted and played for the Philadelphia Eagles.

But the greatest football player of the era who still lives in town is Al Carapella. Al

Carapella was strong, fast, and big. His storied career explains why so many great athletes came from this community. Al credits his success and the success of others both on the ballfield and in life to three factors: hard work, his faith, and his family.

Al, now 83 years old, grew up in a coldwater flat in Tuckahoe with three brothers and two sisters during the Depression. In that building, there were 10 other families like his own. "I had 10 mothers and 10 fathers," he said.

Al and all the people he grew up around knew what was right and wrong, because there was always some neighbor who pointed them in the right direction. His faith then and now is a very important part of his life. Nothing came easy; everyone had to work hard, even in high school. Hard work, reverence, and discipline were all part of the fabric of the Tuckahoe and Eastchester community that paved the way for success.

Al played football and baseball at Tuckahoe High School. There were only 38 people in his graduating class. In 1942, he made the All-County team in football with 11 other players. The baseball team went undefeated in 1943 and 1944 in the powerful Southern Westchester Athletic Conference against schools that were two and three times the size of tiny Tuckahoe.

In the summer of 1944, his older brother signed a waiver to allow the 15-year-old Al to play minor league ball in the Giant organization. He finished the year at Richmond.



Al Carapella was first team All-County when there were only 12 who made the team.

When he returned to Tuckahoe, he was informed that he would be ineligible to play any sports his senior year. In his 1945 high school yearbook, Al wrote that his dream was to play college sports. But World War II would put that dream on hold.

Al was drafted before the end of the war and sent to Germany. He was asked to play football for an army team called the Berlin Bears during the allied occupation. After the completion of his service, Al asked his former high school coach, Bob Smith, for help. He arranged for Al to receive a football scholarship to the University of Miami.

In the fall of 1947, Al arrived on campus after an exhausting train ride and met his roommate, Frank Smith from Eastchester. In 1951, Al Carapella became the first All-American in the annals of the University of Miami, playing both offense and defense. He was also a catcher for the University of Miami and had an opportunity to play professional baseball under Pepper Martin from the old gashouse gang in the St. Louis organization.

Al would choose football over his favorite sport, baseball, because of the length of the season. Football allowed him to pursue his desire to continue his education and eventually teach and coach after his playing career.

Al was drafted by the San Francisco 49ers. He played in the annual college all-star game where they were beaten badly by the

Cleveland Browns, quarterbacked by Otto Graham and coached by the legendary Paul Brown. Al played five seasons for the 49ers from 1951 to 1955, achieving All-Pro status in 1954.

Professional football teams at that time only carried 33 players and there was no taxi squad. Players had to play hurt. Al played both guard and tackle on offense and on defense; he played both on the line and line-backer. Sometimes he played both ways as he was extremely fast. In college, he could outrun the backs, but because he was 6 feet tall and 230 pounds, he was moved to the line.

The 49ers were a good football team with a million-dollar backfield. In 1954, the quarterback was Y.A. Tittle, the fullback was Joe Perry, and the two halfbacks were John Henry Johnson and Hugh McElhenny. Al Carapella, along with the million-dollar backfield, won All-NFL honors that year. The record of the team was 8-3-1.

Al has a great story about the first time he played against Washington Serini, the All-Pro lineman of the Chicago Bears who played football at Eastchester High School: When they first lined up from scrimmage, Washington punched Al and knocked him out. On the next play from scrimmage, Al returned the favor. The NFL official, Sam Giangreco, from Pelham, got in between them asked what the hell were they doing and to cut it out.

After the 1955 season Al went on to play one year in Canada. There he had a serious knee injury. He retired from active play and went on to college coaching and teaching. He met his wife at Reva in Indiana and continued to coach and teach health and physical education on the collegiate level. When his first child was born, he decided to move back home and work first as a teacher and then as an administrator in the Mount Vernon school system.

Al Carapella typifies not just the great athletes, but other successful people from our community who achieved success through hard work, natural ability, discipline, and love of family, church, community, and country. People like Al Carapella give the term "Old School" a good name.

This is the 10th installment in a series on the sports legacy of the town. "Historically Speaking" runs biweekly.



Al Carapella, wearing No. 45, blocking for the San Francisco 49ers. Al played both offense and defense.