



The 1946 Fighting Irish were more loaded than a cannon with true "veterans." From left to right: Paul Limont, Jack Zilly, George Sullivan, John Lujack, George Connor and Jim Martin.

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Ziembra, Joe "Captain Bligh" McArdle, Bernie Crimmins, Marty Brill and Bill Earley — all of whom, like the majority of the players they would coach, had served in World War II.

It was after the 1943 national title that Krause urged Leahy to accept a Naval commission because once the war would end, the dynamics would be different. Those who returned from the "real trenches," not merely those in football, would remind any coach that would dare to chide them, "Where were you during the war?"

One of the myths during the post-war years was that Notre Dame "signed all the football talent." The reality is that approximately 2.2 million men returned from World War II and enrolled in college on the GI Bill. Excellent football talent was dispersed at schools throughout the nation, but Leahy and his staff made them jell collectively better than anyone.

Unlike Army in 1944-45, which hoarded the most talent while other schools had to cancel their programs temporarily or had their best players go off to World War II, there was

IRISH DYNASTY

Seventy years ago, Notre Dame built a juggernaut after World War II

BY LOU SOMOGYI

On Nov. 15, 1945, Notre Dame head coach Frank Leahy received his discharge from the United States Naval Reserve after a year and a half of active duty in World War II.

About a couple of weeks later, he signed a 10-year contract to be the athletics director and football coach at his beloved alma mater. Leahy graduated from Notre Dame in 1931 after playing as a tackle on Knute Rockne's last two national title teams (1929 and 1930), and he assumed the duties as head football coach at age 33 in 1941.

Upon signing the 10-year deal, Leahy established a preposterous goal: finish unbeaten all 10 years.

"I think we could have done it had we not cut back on scholarships," Leahy would say years later of a late

1940s move in which Notre Dame reduced football grants-in-aid by about 15 per year.

Given what transpired from 1946-49 when the Fighting Irish never lost in those 38 games (36-0-2), won three consensus national titles and finished No. 2 in 1948, one would doubt Leahy only at his own risk.

Prior to going overseas, Leahy's first three seasons at Notre Dame already provided a harbinger of dominance. His first Fighting Irish team in 1941 finished unbeaten (8-0-1) — after he had led Boston College to a perfect 11-0 mark in 1940 — and his 1943 edition defeated the teams that finished Nos. 2, 3, 4, 9, 11 and 13 en route to the school's first national title since his senior year.

When that 1946 Notre Dame team came together 70 years ago, Leahy re-assembled a staff that included Ed "Moose" Krause, Wally

immense talent all over the post-war years signing with different schools.

The 1946 Notre Dame official roster included 69 names. Among them, 48 were war veterans and 21 had not yet been called into military service.

Because football was played primarily with 11 "starters" back then — lining up on both offense and defense — the surplus Notre Dame had was astounding. There were 42 players on the 1946 team who had previously won monograms for the Irish, about half of them who had been shipped overseas after the 1943 season. Thirteen of them had been starters.

Upon their return, only four of those 13 were able to make the first 11 in 1946: quarterback John Lujack (who would win the Heisman as a senior in 1947), fullback Jim Mello, tackle Zygmunt "Ziggy" Czarowski and guard John Mastrangelo. Among the 42 returning monogram men in

1946, only seven (including the aforementioned four) made the first team, leaving unparalleled depth.

Meanwhile, joining the already deep roster as four new starters were military veterans who had not previously played at Notre Dame but were recruited by Leahy overseas:

- Tackle George Connor, who had played at Holy Cross in 1942-43, is in both the College and Pro Football Halls of Fame.

- Halfback Emil "Red" Sitko, a star on the semi-pro Iowa Pre-Flight war-time team that handed national champ Notre Dame its lone defeat in 1943 on a Hail Mary pass.

- Center George Strohmeier had previously played at Texas A&M and earned All-America accolades for the Irish in 1946 — only to be beaten out for the starting role by Bill Walsh, who had lettered as a Notre Dame freshman in 1945.

- "Jungle Jim" Martin was a larger-than-life figure at end and tackle who enrolled as a 22-year-old freshman with a huge tattoo in which a sword goes through a dragon with the words "Death Before Dishonor."

As a member of the Marines' Fifth Amphibious Reconnaissance Battal-

ion (a past version of Navy SEALs), he was awarded a Bronze Star for his role in the Battle of Tinian, among other heroics. Swimming in hazardous waters, he and his three-man unit discovered a string of sea mines where Allied forces were scheduled to land, prompting the invasion to switch to safer landing havens.

And end Leon Hart, the 1949 Heisman winner, led a prominent freshman class and was able to make it to the second unit.

With only 36 players allowed to travel on road trips, well over a dozen monogram men or former starters on top-10 teams could not even make the travel roster.

Lineman George Tobin was eligible for a fifth season in 1947, but Leahy in all seriousness told him he wouldn't play and would have a better shot of seeing action professionally. He started at guard for the New York Giants in 1947.

Art Statuto was the No. 4 or 5 center in 1946 and in 1947. He couldn't get on the field enough to earn a monogram. He then started in the 1950 NFL Championship Game for the Los Angeles Rams.

- Seven of the 11 starters on that

1947 team are in the College Football Hall of Fame: ends Leon Hart (Heisman) and Jim Martin, tackles George Connor (Outland) and Ziggy Czarobski, guard Bill Fischer (Outland), quarterback John Lujack (Heisman) and running back Emil Sitko. No single team in college football can match that.

In college football history, only the 1946 and 1947 Notre Dame teams have had seven Hall of Famers on the field at the same time.

The results spoke for themselves:

- The 1946 Notre Dame team is one of four in college football annals to finish No. 1 nationally in both total offense (441.3 yards per game) and total defense (141.7, a now unbreakable school record). It also allowed only 2.7 points per game.

- In 1946 and 1947, Notre Dame never trailed in a game, a mind-boggling achievement in itself.

- The No. 1 rushing attack (340.1 yards per game) had 13 different players gain more than 100 yards, and 12 averaged at least 4.5 yards per carry.

A combination of true veterans and youth created the great Fighting Irish football dynasty of the late 1940s. ♦

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