

A President's Return

By John C. Hibner

On January 1, 1991 at the famous Tournament of Roses Parade some of the attention was focused on an elderly gentleman riding on the Anheuser-Busch float. He was standing and waving to the crowd as the float moved down Colorado Blvd.

The man on the float was 91-year old judge Ralph Vince, who hadn't been in California since Jan. 1, 1922. Then he was a member of the Washington and Jefferson Presidents football team which battled the University of California to a scoreless tie in the Rose Bowl on a muddy, rain-soaked field.

Judge Vince had been invited as a member of the board of Trustees at Washington and Jefferson to represent the school at the induction of his late teammate Russ Stein into the Rose Bowl Hall of Fame in August of 1990. Stein was the captain of this amazing team from Pennsylvania. Herb Kopf, the other living survivor was not able to attend because of a long illness. Vince was then asked to ride on the float.

Who is Ralph Vince? He was brought to this country when he was six years old and was raised in the town of Jefferson, Ohio. He got into football at Martin Ferry High and for a boy born in Italy was very good at the sport.

Vince had an illustrious life and career as an athlete, football coach, football official, lawyer, Cleveland municipal judge, husband and father. In an article which appeared in the Sunday News-Register October 6, 1991, Bill Van Horne writes this of him: "Vince is a remarkable man, still sharp as he can be and still busy. The evening he and I talked this past week, he had been in the law offices of Burke, Haber and Berick in Cleveland, the city which adopted him many years ago. He retired from active law practice last year as a senior partner, but still has his office and spends time there with other attorneys who want his vast experience and knowledge."

Horne also asked Vince about his recollection of the 1921 W&J team coached by Earle (Greasy) Neal. "We opened up the season against Bethany Bison, who we defeated 14-0. Other teams that we defeated were Bucknell, West Virginia Wesleyan, Carnegie Tech, Lehigh, Syracuse, Westminster, Pittsburgh, West Virginia, and Detroit. That doesn't sound like a back breaking schedule today, but those were different times. W&J shut-out six of its opponents and only allowed two points in its last three games."

After his ride on the Anheuser-Busch float, Vince was interviewed by Tom Timmerman of the Los Angeles Times on Jan. 2, 1991. He was asked what his attitude was now almost seventy years later:

"California was supposed to be 'The wonder Team.' Maybe they underestimated us. I know they were a heavy favorite, but we were ready to play. We had a lot of respect for their team. We expected a tough game. I don't know about their frame of mind, but I knew our team. We certainly were not cocky or over confident; maybe Cal was."

Remember, California had a very impressive record going into the game. They had won 18 straight games and had scored 794 points against only 47 across two seasons. Yes, their record was impressive and so were their players.

Timmerman asked Vince if W&J should have won the game. "Yes, I feel that W&J

Should have won. We (the team) were disappointed. you must remember, we crossed the goal line once. That play went to the left side, and it was someone on the right side who didn't figure in the play who was offside. I'm not complaining about the officials, but that player didn't figure in the play. California never came close enough to even attempt a field goal. I'm not trying to minimize their accomplishment, but were were at least as good."

Vince returned to Washington and Jefferson and played football on the 1922 team. He also played on the varsity baseball team. He received his Bachelor of Science degree and then went on to Western Reserve University in Cleveland. While he was attending law school, Vince was hired by St. Ignatius High School to be a part-time teacher and football coach. During his four years as head football coach, he produced two undefeated teams and had a 15-game winning streak.

Vince also played professional football with the 1924 Cleveland Bulldogs which had a record of 7-1-1. He also went on to coach at John Carroll and was there for nine seasons (seven as football coach with a 31-23-11 record, and two years as athletic director).

Because of the demands of his law practice, Vince gave up coaching football in 1935, but took time out on weekends to officiate at high school, college and pro games. In 1935 he ran as a Republican for the state senate, but lost in a landslide. He later became the law director of University Heights, judge of the Cleveland Municipal Court, and also University Heights councilman. He also helped found the Cleveland Touchdown Club and has been on numerous boards of civic groups.

But Vince still remembers the game against California on Jan. 1, 1922. He still likes to talk about his team. "We didn't embarrass ourselves. Football hasn't changed much. If you rush the passer, you've got a good defense. If you don't hurry the passer, those receivers are going to get open."

Grantland Rice wrote in his column the day after the 1922 Rose Bowl, "The game was close to a defensive miracle." This statement was very true. Vince indicated his team was very defensive minded as taught by coach Neal. The presidents allowed only six first downs in their last four games.

One must remember the game was well played by both sides on the rain-soaked field. Southern California coach Elmer Henderson wrote his comments for a newspaper. "It was the greatest East vs. West game that has ever been staged at Pasadena. The Washington and Jefferson eleven may not be the best team in the East, but it played the best brand of football of any of the eastern teams that have seen action in the annual New Year's Day tussle." Vince believed W&J was the better team, and many who saw the game would agree.