George Cafego: Never Take Guff From Anybody

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Editor's Note: George Cafego was a star running back at the University of Tennessee during the seasons of 1937-1939. During his college career he rushed for 1,589 yards and passed for another 550, and Cafego earned All-SEC and All-American nods for the seasons of 1938 and 1939. In November 1997 the former Volunteer gridiron great sat down for an interview with Peyton Manning — then a student at Tennessee — and Professor Andy Kozar — another prominent Tennessee football name. The first half of the conversation appeared in the CFHS issue of May 2008, and following is the last part.

Manning: Did you use the “fake pass and run play” in the Tennessee offense?

Cafego: Yeah, I ran the “fake pass and run” play a lot. That gave me the opportunity to find the slots in which to run, especially on the sweeps. We had several plays: one to strong side, two to the weak side and the option pass or run. And, the first option was the pass and if nothing was there, we took the ball, tucked it, and ran with the ball. In doing this, I wasn’t running up the middle of that line trying to hit anyone or everybody wasn’t trying to hit me. It put me in more of an open area.

Manning: Did anybody ever give you a hard time about being slow?

Cafego: Oh yeah, they kidded me about that all the time. I told them, I might be slow, but by golly, that is what you all are up there in the line for – so I can run and you block for me.

Manning: Did you ever try to improve your speed?

Cafego: No, when you got through our tough practices, we were lucky to have the energy to get back to the dressing room.

What I worked on a great bit was quicker feet. I watched the basketball coach [Blair Guillon 1936] at UT teaching his basketball team to take shorter steps, to move quicker. So, I began taking shorter steps, just like playing hopscotch, but only on a smaller scale. I thought that was a pretty effective technique. I believe it helped me to be a better runner.

Manning: You didn’t sound like you were very pleased about playing wingback with the NFL Brooklyn Dodgers?

Cafego: No, I didn’t mind playing wingback. My problem was I just couldn’t figure out why they played me there. As I said, since I was so slow, especially if they were going to throw the ball to me. At UT the coaches, in my junior year, wanted to make a blocking back out of me. Actually, Barnhill and Britton, Neyland’s assistant coaches wanted to make a blocking back out of me. They tried to talk Neyland into the change. Neyland said “no, no, no.” Neyland continued with, “Cafego’s a good blocking back and he’ll hit you, but who’s going to make the first downs and help us control the ball? And who’s going to call the plays?” You see, I called the plays just like today’s T-formation quarterbacks. In 1937, 38, 39 the quarterback always called the plays. The plays rarely came from the sidelines. We played ball
control and played field position. When occupying bad field position, we punted the ball, at times, on first down trying to kick the ball back into our opponent’s territory. When this happened our defense knew immediately that it was their responsibility to hold the other team and get us the ball or better field position. With the ball and better field position we’d try to score and if not, we’d punt it back and the process repeats throughout the game, until we score.

Manning: Did you ever play defense?

Cafego: Yes! I think playing defense was the strength of my game. I intercepted passes, made tackles, played well down on the goal line. Yeah, I loved to play defense.

Kozar: Did you win most of your games in high school?

Cafego: Oh yeah. And in junior high, too. They called us the RAR - Red Ass Rangers - we played where cows grazed; you would “waller” [roll around] around on the ground and have cow manure all over you. But we did win. Once, we went from Scarborough to Kingston [in West Virginia], just across the mountain. We were supposed to play a ball game at 4 o’clock - we got to Kingston, and found they had a field just about like ours [a cow pasture]. You had to touch a fence to indicate you had scored. The fence served as the goal line. We waited till 4 and the game didn’t start. Then at about 4:30 a town whistle blew and on the field came some men, their players, from in the coal mines. Most of their players were coal miners. Upon their arrival we started the game.

Manning: Why, as a back did you wear the number 72?

Cafego: Because in those years, numbers on the jersey didn’t relate to the position one played. I was assigned number 72 which was available. Actually, freshmen players got numbers that were left.

Kozar: Peyton, fifteen years after Cafego played I wore number 86 on my jersey even though I played at fullback. So in the 1948-1952 years numbers still didn’t indicate a player’s position. [Editors Note: The rule that dictated jersey numbers be assigned to denote a player’s position to easily determine eligible receivers was enacted by the NCAA in 1967. Players wearing numbers 50 – 79 are ineligible to receive forward passes.]

George, I read where you wanted to play football for Jock Sutherland [in professional football]. Right?

Cafego: I did play for Jock Sutherland.

Kozar: Did you like Coach Sutherland because he coached much like Neyland?

Cafego: He was a whole lot like Neyland, in fact he came down here to see us play Alabama [Editors Note: Most likely the 1939 game – Tennessee beat Alabama 29-0]. Sutherland told me, he always wanted that kind of player (Editor’s Note – referring to Cafego).

Kozar: Was he the coach of the Brooklyn Dodgers pro football team?

Cafego: Yeah, he coached the Brooklyn Dodgers pro football team and as I said, he coached a whole lot like General Neyland.

Kozar: You played for Neyland on that All-Star East Army Team in 1941.
Cafego: Yeah, well I played for Brooklyn [Dodgers] and moved to Boston and became a Boston Yank. When I got out [of the Army] they hollered for me to come on up there, so I went to the Boston Yanks, and then I played eight games with Boston. Then Sammy Baugh got hurt at Washington [Redskins], so they wanted a single-wing tailback, so they brought me [to Washington] from Boston; I went down there and [played] five more extra games. I finished out the season down there. By that time I had suffered a darn knee injury that was very painful, just about killing me.

Kozar: Peyton and I read about your knee injury. How bad was it?

Cafego: I had it wrapped up like a mummy. (Editor's Note: Pointing to his leg well above his knee to a point on his lower leg.) I thought, even with the bad knee, I was a good defensive player.

Kozar: What can you remember about the All-Star East Army loss to the Bears? Especially after, beating the New York Giants and Brooklyn Dodgers?

Cafego: We beat the Giants first, then we beat the Brooklyn Dodgers next on a Wednesday. We beat the Giants on the Sunday before we beat Brooklyn on the following Wednesday night. Then we went to play the Chicago Bears.

Kozar: Where did you play the Bears? In Chicago, or up East? Yankee Stadium or somewhere like that?

Cafego: It seems to me like we played the game in Massachusetts, but I'm not sure.

Kozar: Do you remember how the Army All-Star - Chicago game went? Any obvious reasons the Army All-Stars lost? Were the Bears that good, or did you guys just go flat, or were too tried? You did play three games in one week.

Cafego: Well, I wasn't tired, I played a lot, but the rest of the team seemed tired, I guess. A lot of those players, in the pros and the army drank alcohol all the time. Hell, they weren't in shape. Things have not changed, it looks like today's pro players are not in shape. If I were their coach I would guarantee everybody would be in great physical condition, even if I had to put a lock and key on their doors. They are paid big salaries and they ought to get into shape and play. The current players, in general, frustrate me the way they play and don't stay in shape.

Kozar: I read that during the Army All-Star practices [Herman] Hickman wrote Neyland a note and he, in essence, wrote, "Dear General Neyland, I either have to be your drinking buddy or your assistant coach, I can't do both." Supposedly, because he couldn't keep up with Neyland's ability to handle drinking alcohol. Any observations on this statement?

Cafego: Nobody could keep up with Neyland in that activity!

Kozar: What made Neyland and his staff's task difficult is they had to get these players together, in a
short time, to learn a new system and play together for three games against pro teams. The pro teams had all been playing together, and for Neyland’s Army team to beat the Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers was remarkable. How did you guys accomplish this?

Cafego: The press, newspaper and radio reporters, helped us some. Up East the press was writing, “it’s a shame to spend all this money on Neyland and his single wing East Army team. They’re not going to do well playing these pro teams. The pros are too strong for them. And, it’s just a waste of money.” Then, after the first game, they started writing differently.

Kozar: They got on your bandwagon?

Cafego: And by the second game, they were ALL on our bandwagon.

Peyton: Did Neyland coach the Army team in the same way he did at UT?

Cafego: Exactly the same.

Peyton: Including the same discipline?

Cafego: Yeah.

Kozar: Did the non-Tennessee guys like Neyland?

Cafego: Oh yeah.

Kozar: It makes sense, the single-wing and Neyland’s strict discipline was fairly prevalent in colleges and universities at that time. Most of these men experienced a similar style of coaching. There were many coaches doing the same thing. Although the Bears were playing the T, most of the teams were playing the single wing, double wing, or short punt.

Cafego: Well, what the press and radio people wrote about our losing the Bears game was that it was due to my getting hurt in that game, on about the third play.

Peyton: Was that the reason why the East Army All-Stars lost?

Cafego: Well, I can’t say that, I don’t know whether that is so, but that’s what the writers wrote, that “If Cafego had been in there the outcome of the game might have been a different story.” They wrapped my knee up and the injury nearly got me out of the Army.

Kozar: You indicated you went to the Washington Redskins. Wasn’t the great Sammy Baugh there?

Cafego: Baugh was there and that was why I went there, he was injured.

Manning: What did you do in the summers while at Tennessee?

Cafego: You could attend two quarters and earn 24 credit hours, and after I earned these credits I went to play baseball for my home county in West Virginia.

Peyton: While you were at UT, you spent summers at home?
Cafego: I had to go home because I had a job. I had to make some money. I didn’t have a nickel when I was in school. So I had to make some money to buy toothpaste or anything else. When I came here I didn’t have much. So going home to a job was the only way I had to make it at UT financially.

Peyton: Did your family come to see you play at Tennessee?

Cafego: I had no family. I didn’t have a family since I was four or five years old. My mother died when I was about three years of age, and my father died when I was about eight.

Kozar: Who reared you George?

Cafego: I was just moved around. I stayed with my sister a while, then I stayed with my junior high coach for a while, and after that I stayed at a boarding house with my brother, Boyd.

Kozar: George, did all your teammates at UT generally come from the same background?

Cafego: Most of them did. All of us were about the same economic background.

Kozar: In those years the players were really tough and the games were rough, physically. If you watch film, if available, it is apparent the games were less finesse and more roughness. Is this a fair description of the games in which you played?

Cafego: I’ll tell you what, that darn Orange Bowl game we played in was rough.

Kozar: Are you referring to the January 1, 1939, Orange Bowl Game?

Cafego: Right, that Orange Bowl game, where UT beat Oklahoma 17-0. Some people who attended claim that this was the best ball game that’s ever been played. Maybe it was because these people liked fighting on the football field.

Kozar: George, our time is about up, so let me ask you one more question. What did you think you learned from Neyland or what impressed you most about Neyland?

Cafego: I think the most important thing I learned from Neyland, was determination. How to be kind and considerate when dealing with people, but still be stern. And I think these are two important behaviors. I also learned to never take any “guff” from anybody. I noticed he didn’t.

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The first official intercollegiate football game for the University of Tennessee was played on November 21, 1891, at Chattanooga, where the Orange and White tumbled to a 24-0 defeat at the hands of Sewanee.