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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

**Lou ‘The Toe’:
*Before Kicking was King***

**By David Frew
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Lou Groza's 1957 football card

My Bayfront neighborhood was a loyal Cleveland Browns stronghold. Almost everyone was a Browns fan. In retrospect, this infectious support was probably due to the extreme difficulty in driving to Pittsburgh as opposed to Cleveland. Few people that I knew had ever been to a Steelers game or knew any of their players.

It was also decades before the Buffalo Bills had been established so there was no competition for fans from there either.

We knew the Browns players and they had dozens of star players: Otto Graham, Dante Lavelle, Marion Motley, and more. But our favorite tough guy and kicker was Lou Groza. Long before the era of soccer-style kickers and the now-common occurrence of field goals that are well in excess of 50 yards, kicking was almost a football afterthought. When we played, sandlot or organized football teams began with tackling drills, blocking drills, and scrimmages, and then there were cuts. It was after the final team composition was determined, following tryouts and cuts and after we had dedicated hundreds of hours to practices that coaches typically asked, "Can any of you guys kick?" For us and most other players in those days, the kicker was one of the players who just happened to be good at kicking or punting. For high schoolers and many college players back then, field goals were almost unheard of, and extra points were often an adventure.

Not so for our hero, Cleveland Browns place kicker Lou Groza. He was the team's left tackle and in addition to that important position, he was the best kicker in the league. As time went on, he stopped playing tackle but continued to kick off and attempt field goals (the operant term back then was attempt). Lou "The Toe" Groza was from our era. He was a player first who just happened to be the person on the team who was the best at kicking. He did not punt. Those duties were handled by one of the other players, notably Gary Collins, who was one of the team's leading pass receivers. As a boy, Groza had been encouraged to kick by his older brother and it was his kicking skills that helped him earn a scholarship to Ohio State, where he started on both the offensive and defensive lines as a freshman and kicked. Groza dropped out of college after a year to enlist in the Army during World War II.

Lou was "old school." He began his pro career playing both offense and defense but by the time we were watching in the mid-1950s he had transitioned to an offense-only player. He was also old-school famous for smoking both in the locker room and on the sidelines. While Lou Groza was not the only player or coach to smoke, he became famous for during-the-game cigars. When it was time for the offense to take the field, Lou would strategically place his perpetually lit cigar under the bench near his traditional position so that he could return to it when the defense moved back onto the field. Most of the sideline smokers, players and coaches, used cigarettes in those days but Lou was strictly a cigar man. He often said that cigars relaxed him for field goal kicking. What a role model for us impressionable kids!

Eventually, Lou Groza's days as a starting tackle ended but his kicking was so valuable that he returned to the team after the Browns had experimented with several others. Groza had retired for a year after a back injury convinced him that he was done playing tackle, but the team owner asked him to return just to kick.

During his final years, he remained as the team's specialty kicker and was instructed to run for the sidelines after he had kicked off, a strategy that he disliked and sometimes ignored. Groza played from 1947 until 1968, finally retiring at age 44. When he left the game he held several records, including total points scored, most extra points and total field goals. A traditional straight-on, as opposed to soccer-style kicker, Groza set a long-standing record with a 53-yard field goal.



Lou Groza in the locker room celebrates his 826th extra point.



Groza launches a field goal in the years before the soccer-style era.

The Cleveland Browns eventually replaced Groza with a kicking specialist who was drafted for both punting and kicking field goals – one of the first modern-era kicking specialists. Don Cockroft, who was born in 1945, graduated from Colorado's Adams State College, where he was a walk-on who kicked and played defensive safety for four years. The Browns drafted him to replace Groza in 1967

but he remained on the taxi squad (reserve players not on the active roster) for a year before moving into the regular lineup in 1968. Groza was hired to stay on as a coach and help Cockroft “learn the nuances” of kicking in the NFL.

I was a full-time doctoral student at Kent State University for three years during the late 1960s and one of my favorite haunts was the school’s football field and track. I used to go there almost every day to run laps and think about my studies. One day in 1969 I was surprised to see a large station wagon drive across the field and park near the goal posts. The driver opened the tailgate and tugged a huge net-bag out of the car. The bag was filled with footballs; at least 30. As the man continued this practice almost every day, I watched his ritual with great interest. After some stretching (Lou probably never did that), he would open the bag near the goal posts and punt each of the balls down the field. Then he would gather them at the 30-yard line, tee them up one at a time, and place kick them through the uprights. After the first round of punting and place kicking, he would run several laps and then repeat the procedure, each time moving his place kicking spot another five yards from the goalposts. He moved farther from the goal posts after each cycle, eventually teeing the balls up and kicking them from 60 yards. The mystery kicker showed up most days by mid-morning, kicked for a few hours, then gathered the balls and returned them to his car.

Eventually, I introduced myself and learned that the mystery kicker was none other than Don Cockroft, the Cleveland Browns’ new kicker and punter. He told me that after several hours of kicking, punting and cardio, he would continue his workout inside the university gym, working with free weights and stretching. Who knew what the training of a kicking specialist entailed? Cockroft was encouraged to use the Kent State University facilities by his friend, teammate, and Cleveland Browns’ all-pro wide receiver Paul Warfield, who was working on a master’s degree on campus during off-seasons. That is a seemingly heroic pursuit given today’s football players and their contemporary off-field antics. Warfield was a Kent State practice field regular, as well, circling the running track in a seemingly effortless, gliding style. I would be trudging along, dutifully recording nine-minute miles while he lapped me repeatedly, without breathing hard or breaking a sweat. Paul Warfield was an amazing athlete.

Against his wishes, Warfield was traded to the Miami Dolphins in 1970 and disappeared from Kent State University’s practice fields. At Miami, he played for the famous 1972 undefeated team coached by Don Shula – a feat never repeated in NFL history. Paul Warfield eventually earned his master’s degree in telecommunications from Kent in 1977 and he was ultimately elected to the NFL Hall of Fame.



Hall of Famer Paul Warfield in Cleveland Browns colors

Warfield's friend, Don Cockroft, played for the Browns for 13 years from 1968 until 1980 and retired as their third leading scorer of all-time. When his playing days were over, he continued to live in the Cleveland area, where he was a businessman, consultant, motivational speaker, and author. He wrote a best-selling book about the Browns' exciting years as the "Cardiac Kids," known for their late-game, "heart-stopping" finishes.



Kicker Don Cockroft in action

Sadly, after spending his entire adult life in the Cleveland area, Don Cockroft was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 2022 and moved back to his hometown in Colorado. Lou "The Toe" Groza, like Cockroft, remained in the Cleveland area (Berea), working as a businessman and enjoying his role as a Cleveland Browns

ambassador until he passed away in 2000. Groza was inducted into the NFL Hall of Fame in 1974.



Don Cockroft at age 76 with his family



A lasting tribute to Lou "The Toe"

My friends grew up and stopped playing football, even the relatively mild, two-hand tag sandlot games that we continued into young adulthood. Many even abandoned their loyalty to the Browns. When I see them these days, they are sometimes wearing Steelers or Bills paraphernalia. How could that have happened?

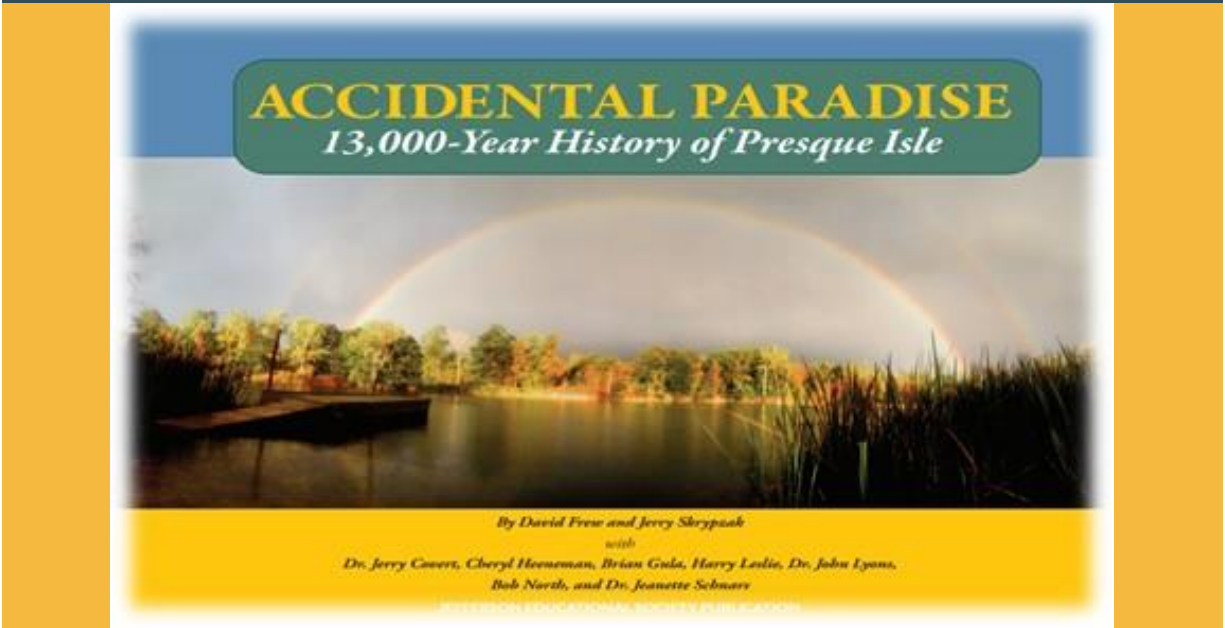
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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