

AL DEMAO

By Michael Richman, Redskins Insider Correspondent

The 70 Greatest Redskins, a special list compiled to commemorate the 70-year anniversary of the franchise this season, features three centers: Jeff Bostic of the powerhouse teams of the 80s and early 90s, Len Hauss of the Sonny Jurgensen era in the 60s and George Allen in the 70s, and a man whose name is not as resonant – but who left his own sizeable legacy in Redskins annals.

Al DeMao played nine seasons for the burgundy and gold (1945 to 1953), a period when he was a fixture on the offensive and defensive lines in the days of single-platoon football. The 6-2, 215-pound center said he never missed a game until his last season, dedication and durability that earned him immense respect from peers and media.

“From 1945 till the last few weeks, DeMao has been the Redskins No. 1 center, and no Washington player ever has given more of himself,” sportswriter Dave Slattery wrote in the *Washington Daily News* on Dec. 10, 1952. “Throughout his career, Al has been a player’s player.”

DeMao, 82, said he feels honored to be one of the 70 Greatest Redskins, who will be recognized during a ceremony at FedEx Field when the Skins host the Indianapolis Colts on Oct. 27.

“I didn’t expect or anticipate it, but I was certainly happy,” he told *Redskins Insider* from his home in Bowie, Md. “I thought I possibly had a chance, but those things you never know. There were three centers, and the other two only played offense. I played offense, defense and special teams, so in the preference that we were selected, I should have been there, if they picked us by position.”

The Redskins drafted DeMao, a native of New Kensington, Pa., and an All-American lineman at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, in the ninth round in 1942. But like many pro athletes of his era, he opted to fight for Uncle Sam in World War II. He spent almost four years in the Navy and rose to the rank of Lieutenant, commanding an amphibious landing ship during the Normandy invasion on June 6, 1944.

DeMao joined the Redskin in mid-season 1945, when Ki Aldrich was the regular center. The rookie soon broke into the starting lineup and helped carry the

Skins to their fifth Eastern Division championship and a showdown with the Cleveland Rams in the NFL title game. The Redskins lost, 15-14, to begin a demoralizing period when they posted only four winning seasons and no playoff appearances over the next quarter-century.

DeMao’s teams had a combined 38-54-3 record in his final eight years, and he acknowledges that it was tough competing for the Redskins in those dreary times. But he said unequivocally that playing with and snapping the ball to the man he calls the best quarterback of all time offset any hardships.

“I played with the great Sammy Baugh for eight years, so I couldn’t have asked for anything more,” DeMao said. “I talk to him once every couple of weeks at his ranch in Rotan, Texas. We’ve kept track of each other ever since I retired and he retired. We’re very close friends.”

DeMao and Baugh were co-captains for several seasons. During training camp in 1951, the pair approached Redskins owner George Preston Marshall to request that the entire team be paid for exhibition games. Known for being frugal, Marshall compensated only for regular-season play at the time.

“We said, ‘The Bears are getting paid for it, other teams are getting it, why can’t we get it?’ ” DeMao remembered. “Marshall said, ‘I don’t know if the Bears are getting it, I don’t know if anybody else is getting it, but I know you’re not getting it!’ Then he told us to get everyone together before practice because he wanted to talk to us. He came out and said, ‘You’re not going to get paid (for exhibition

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 24, No. 6 (2002)

games), so if anyone doesn't like that, feel free to leave right now.' He pointed to the gate in the practice field, so that was the end of that."

DeMao also endured the frustration of playing for six different coaches – four alone in his last five seasons – largely because the iron-fisted and impatient Marshall spun a revolving door with coaches. DeMao's last coach was the one-time Green Bay Packers legend Curly Lambeau, who led the Redskins only to a 4-8 mark in 1952 and a 6-5-1 mark in 1953 before he was gone.

"The coaches we had, I can't say too much about them," DeMao said. "Lambeau might have been a good coach when he was in Green Bay. But he suddenly forgot a lot of it. He wasn't much of a coach when he got here. I guess he and Marshall were both very temperamental, especially if things went wrong. But they had a job to do, and Mr. Marshall was the owner of the club, and I guess he wanted things to go the right way – his way."

DeMao played during the days when defenses regularly attacked offenses with six- and seven-man lines. But his trickiness kept many defenders at bay, as one teammate recalled.

"Al was not that big, but he would out-fox you," said Jim Ricca, a Redskins middle guard from 1951 to 1954. "He'd lead block in a certain direction, and the defense would think the runner was coming that way, but the runner was going the other way. He used your body to block you. Whatever direction you were going in, he took you. He was very smart, very intelligent."

DeMao was immensely popular with teammates, among whom he also carried a distinct identity. He was nicknamed Jimmy Durante after the famous entertainer with the protruding nose. DeMao's nose was, and still is, much the same way, only it is also twisted to the side because he broke it as many as five times at Duquesne. But he discarded any kind of facemask protection in the pros, where he donned a leather helmet though players were gradually switching to plastic helmets. His helmet is now encased in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio.

He was a favorite in the community, too. Someone Marshall called a "great athlete and a great citizen," he was regularly invited to speak at civic, club and church meetings. He was also a favorite of the sports media, which could rehash a game with him and come up with an intelligent and interesting story. When DeMao retired after the 1953 season, everyone was sorry to see him go.

There are "many who believe we ought to be retiring the president instead of DeMao," Marshall said.

AL DEMAO			C-LB					
DeMao, Albert Marcellus			6-2, 214					
Duquesne			HS: Arnold [PA]					
B: 2 / 29 / 1920, New Kensington, PA								
Drafted: 1942 Round 9 Was								
Year	Tm	GM	Year	Tm	GM	Year	Tm	GM
1945	Was	5	1946	Was	11	1947	Was	12
1948	Was	9	1949	Was	12	1950	Was	12
1951	Was	12	1952	Was	12	1953	Was	12

Michael Richman is a frequent contributor to Redskins team publications, with a concentration on retired players. His articles on Redskins nostalgia have also appeared in *Sports Illustrated* magazine.
