

A Conversation with Hank Luebcke

by Richard Topp

For the last few years my father-in-law was living at a retirement complex in suburban Chicago. The last years of his life were happy ones; there were many good friends he made. One was Henry Luebcke.

When the end came for Dad, my wife and I cleaned out his apartment. I donated the "adult beverage" stock to his best friend Henry. After a little talk with the huge hulk of a man I put two and two together - he was an ex-pro player!

Sure enough, there he was listed in the Gill & Maher book *The Outsiders*, on the roster of the Buffalo Tigers in 1941...

"Hank Luebcke...T 6'2" 328 Iowa"

The next time I saw him, my tape recorder was running and "adult beverages" were poured. I sat across the table from a 74-year-old man talking about his days at Iowa blocking for Nile Kinnick, his tryouts with the Packers and Cardinals, and his one year in the third AFL.

He was born Henry Otto Luebcke in Chicago on November 10, 1916. He played for Schurz High School in his senior year along with Erwin Prasse, who was sought after by many colleges. A politically connected judge talked Prasse into going to Iowa, and the judge also paid for Henry to tag along.

His days at Iowa were riddled with injuries. He made the team in his second year, but after the opening game in 1937, a 14-0 loss to Washington, Hank was side-lined with a broken leg. His big year and Iowa's was 1939 under coach Eddie Anderson. That was also the year Kinnick won the Heisman Trophy. By the way, Erwin Prasse was the team captain.

The season started out very well with an old-fashioned whipping of North Dakota 41-0. Hank was a 60 minute player. He played most of the next week against Indiana in a 32-29 win. He took this brother to the train station after the game and doubled over with a hernia -- a delayed injury from the game. Iowa finished 6-1-1 including a 7-6 win over Notre Dame.

The Packers drafted him after 1939, about 33rd down on the list, but Hank passed that up to complete college. He asked and received another playing year at Iowa because of his injuries.

At the Packer training camp in 1941 he was awed by the presence of Clacke Hinkle, Cecil Isbell, Tony Canadeo and Don Hutson. After three exhibitions Lambeau cut him. Old Curley used him as a late game replacement with no chance to prove himself.

Hank came back to Chicago and started looking for a job with his college degree. Another Packer who was let go early was Tiny Engebretsen who called after a few weeks. Tiny was named coach of the new Buffalo team in the AFL and was recruiting warm bodies to fill the roster. The Buffalo Indians of the 1940 AFL were sinking in red ink when a coal magnate from Pennsylvania named Fiore Ceasre assumed the debts and the new Buffalo Tigers were born.

Hank told Tiny that he was out of shape and Tiny told him to be in Cincinnati for the first game. Hank was assured that he would only play five minutes. The playbook was simple; all plays were copied from the Packers so Hank was familiar with them.

Hank arrived a few hours before game time at Xavier Stadium, the five minutes turned out to be a 58 minute stretch on a field where the grass was so high balls were being "lost." Hank was mad at Tiny for leaving him in so long.

The next morning he awoke when the train pulled into Buffalo. He roomed with the team at the Ford Hotel. I asked Henry what kind of pay did he receive, and he said it was \$90 per game. Then he thought

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for a minute and remembered that he never signed a contract. As a matter of fact he thinks nobody had a contract.

I then asked about Hall of Famer Johnny Blood. He said Tiny heard about Kenosha having two games cancelled with the Packers and he quickly signed Blood, Dolan and Wheeler for the open dates. About a day later when Blood and his wife walked into the hotel, the players comment that Tiny must be scraping the bottom of the barrel when they saw this old gray-haired man.

Andy Karpus was obtained from New York, and during a game Blood was back around the Buffalo five-yard-line blocking and the receivers were open downfield, Karpus threw to Blood who ran about fifty yards and fumbled. Later, Henry asked Andy, "what the hell did you do that for?" Karpus replied, "Johnny Blood was my boyhood idol, and I wanted to see him run 100 yards for a touchdown."

Hank recalls the visit to Yankee Stadium: "It was like a church." The lockers and monuments were hallowed artifacts to him. That game on October 26th saw fullback John Kimbrough running wild in the rain. Hank remembers Kimbrough was so tough that he blocked one of the Buffalo ends so hard that the end broke his ankle when he hit the ground. Hank had only one confrontation with Kimbrough during that game. He said he felt like he was hit by a bulldozer and pushed back eight yards.

I asked about a teammate that stood out in his mind. Hank told me that so many players were coming in and out during the season that we hardly got to know them before they were gone. Some of the players, he recalled never had a uniform on before. He suspects they were coal miners working for Ceasre. Also some were local high school stars.

Hank hung around with Ernie Wheeler and Fred Mastriola after hours at the Ford Hotel bar. But one player that stood out was Alec Shellogg, and he was not well liked. Shellogg had the habit of heaping verbal abuse at the other team on the line. One game Hank remembers is that on one play he received a broken nose, Mastriola received a black eye and another player, who was married the day before, lost three teeth! Thanks to Alec and his language.

He said he heard a rumor about Shellogg, that he was kicked off the Notre Dame team because of his abusive language.

Henry closed out his AFL career playing sixty minutes in every game, except the first one, where he played 58! It seems fitting for a member of the "Iron Men" of the 1939 Iowa team. They were called that because of their long playing times due to the small roster.

I asked him to reflect back over a half-century and compare the pro players of today with the players of the past. He said the players today are better and specialized in their talents. The AFL of fifty years ago was a patch-work. Buffalo was a slap-together franchise, with no direction. Just field a team and collect the gate revenue. The Packers, fifty years ago, were coming off championship seasons and were a class act. They even had a handbook for rookies. Sure Curly Lambeau was a little tight with a buck, so was George Halas, but they produced class teams loaded with talent.

He went on to say players fifty years ago played for the love of the game, and a few bucks. Today the roles are reversed. The colleges are nothing more than farm clubs to the pros. He said kids are cheated today by not playing both sides (offense and defense).

"Hell! this dancing after a touchdown didn't happen when we played, we were too damn tired."

I asked about training facilities provided by the Buffalo Tigers. Hank said it was sparse. We were given T-shirts, broken down lockers and trained at a local golf course. Hank was given a pair of shoes, a size too small for the first game. Adhesive tape was taken from home clubs on road trips. Sort of different from training camps of today.

The hotel rate in 1941 was \$9 per week with the bathroom down the hall. The Ford Hotel catered to wrestlers, strippers, and in 1941 to pro football players. Hank was given no release, everyone was given a good-bye after the last game.

Henry drifted back home to Chicago and with football still in his blood tried out with Jimmy Conzelman's Chicago Cardinals for the 1942 season.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 13, No. 1 (1991)

"The training camp almost killed me!" said Hank.

"Marshall Goldberg had me in a sweat-box twice a day to trim my weight down, I became so weak!" He was grateful when Conzelman cut him.

I asked him about his weight in 1941, he is listed at "328" that would make him an easy candidate for the top-ten list of largest players. He then showed me a newspaper clipping from Iowa City. There he was on a scale clipping 275 in college! Henry today is about 400 but moves around quite well.

Our conversation lasted a few hours and included many things I could not print. So it goes when I speak to vets from another era.

At the wake for my father-in-law my wife asked Henry to be an honorary pallbearer, and he accepted. I took his place the next day at the funeral. I like to remember it as subbing for a "60- minute" man.