

Mini-Bios of Forgotten Men

Two More Stars Who Made Their Marks outside the NFL

By Bob Gill

HARRY MATTOS (The Toe, The Horse) HB-QB
6-0, 185 St. Mary's (Cal.)

Harry Mattos may have had the most all-around talent of all the “career minor leaguers” of the 1930s and '40s. In fact, that may have been his main problem with regard to the NFL: He didn't have one outstanding skill to impress everybody with. He was just good at everything.

Coming out of little St. Mary's in 1935, Mattos signed with the Hollywood Braves of the American Legion Football League, a four-team Los Angeles circuit that was better than it sounds. He served mainly as a passer, throwing for two TDs (a league-leading total!) in three games before a broken leg ended his season.

Mattos started the next year in the NFL, but the Green Packers, on their way to a championship and not needing backfield help, dropped him early in the season. He bounced back with the Cleveland Rams in the AFL, a competing major league. There he did little passing, but shone as a runner, a receiver (two TD catches – two-thirds of his career total) and a kicker, leading the league in scoring as the Rams battled the Boston Shamrocks to the wire before finishing second.

This was probably the year he earned the nickname “The Toe.” And he earned more than that from one Boston sportswriter, an early-day Chris Berman, who spiced up his account of Mattos's heroics in one game by using a different nickname each time he mentioned our hero. My favorite was Harry “Nothing” Mattos.

In 1937 the Rams moved into the NFL, and Mattos went with them. But the magic wasn't there any more, and in midseason he went back to the AFL, where he finished the season with the Cincinnati Bengals, doing most of his work as a passer.

The AFL folded in the offseason, but Mattos hooked on with the New York Giants. Their talented backfield proved hard to crack, and he was dropped just before the season started. Tim Mara sent him to the Giants' new farm team in Jersey City, where he starred in the backfield with Ken Strong as the Little Giants swept to the American Association title. Mattos ran well, led the league in touchdown passes and finished second to Strong in the balloting for the team's MVP, though he somehow failed to make the league all-star team.

A year later, again a last-minute cut by New York, he relinquished his role as a passer, played mostly as a running back, and made the second all-league team as the Giants rolled to a 7-3-1 record but failed to repeat as champions.

In 1940 Jersey City found itself well-stocked with runners but short of passers, and so Mattos shifted his role again. The team got off to a slow start, and when Ed Danowski came on board there wasn't much need for Mattos. As a result he was traded in midseason to Paterson, where he led the Panthers in a late drive that earned them second place, behind the Danowski-led Giants. He finished third in the league in passing yardage and earned an honorable mention on the all-star team.

The following year may have been Mattos's best. Playing the full season with Paterson, he led the AA in completions and passing yardage and made the first all-league team as the Panthers repeated their second-place finish of a year earlier. But the coming of World War II closed down the AA, and even though Paterson fielded an independent team in 1942, Mattos wasn't among those who turned out. It must have appeared to all concerned that his career was finished.

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But in 1944 he resurfaced with the Hollywood Wolves of the Pacific Coast Football League. A new team formed in the midst of the wartime manpower shortage, the Wolves failed to win a single game, but no one blamed Mattos. In fact, his passing earned him a spot on the all-league first team – not bad for a 33-year-old who hadn't played since 1941.

Harry Mattos didn't make much of a mark in the NFL. But any time a team needed a passer, a runner, a kicker, or any combination of the three, he was willing and able to tackle the job. That's not a bad epitaph for any player.

			Att	Co	Yds	TD	Att	Yds	TD	XP	FG	Pts
1935	Hol	ALFL	-	-	-	2	-	-	0	0	0	0
1936	GB	NFL	12	4	32	0	1	2	0	0	0	0
	Cle	AFL	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	5	2	29
1937	Cle	NFL	22	5	94	1	26	16	1	2	0	8
	Cin	AFL	-	-	-	2	-	-	0	0	0	0
1938	JC	AA	-	-	-	3	54	139	0	2	0	8
1939	JC	AA	-	-	-	0	42	156	3	2	1	23
1940	JC-Pat	AA	88	42	424	2	-	-	0	0	0	0
1941	Pat	AA	135	65	894	6	39	123	1	0	0	6
1944	Hol	PCFL	-	-	-	3	-	-	1	4	0	10

(1938 rushing attempts and yards cover five games; 1939 figures cover four.)

ANDY KARPUS
6-0, 190

HB-QB
Detroit

In a five-year career just before World War II, Andy Karpus played with *nine* different teams in four different leagues, not to mention a trial or two with NFL teams. He probably never made much money, and he sure didn't make a lasting name for himself; but if they gave points for persistence and love of the game, he's high on the list.

Karpus began his pro travels in 1937 with the Brooklyn Dodgers of the NFL, but he was cut before the regular season started and hooked on with the New York Yankees of the AFL. Though Karpus probably led the team in total offense by a good margin, there's not much of a record to go on: He threw a couple of touchdown passes, but Ole Nesmith, a receiver and kicker, did most of the scoring.

I mention this lack of statistical evidence because it's a continuing problem throughout Karpus's career. A good passer, he always accounted for a lot of yardage, but the touchdowns – often our only records – usually went to other guys who were better suited to punching the ball over from a couple of yards out.

Anyway, after the Yankees had played their last game, Karpus was sold to the Los Angeles Bulldogs, the AFL's best team. His touchdown pass in their last game proved to be the final scoring play in the two-year existence of the AFL.

Karpus returned to the West Coast for the 1938 season with the Salinas Packers of the new California Football League. After a few games he moved on to the Fresno Crushers of the same league. He led the league in touchdown passes with only two. The CFL folded after the season.

In 1939 he resurfaced with the Union City Rams of the American Association. He played very well, making the all-league second team. I have his passing record for three games, and it's typical of his career: 79 attempts, 37 completions, 366 yards. That's a good completion percentage for the era, but he obviously threw mostly short passes.

The highlight of the season came in the final game against the Paterson Panthers, champions of the Northern Division. (Union City was in the Southern.) Karpus completed 17 passes and booted a fourth-quarter field goal, the only one of his career, for a 3-0 win.

For the first time in Karpus's career, his league didn't fold in the offseason – but his team did. A few of the Rams' top players, Karpus among them, caught on for 1940 with a new AA team, the Long Island Indians. The Indians won their first two games, but the bottom fell out when the Boston Bears of the new AFL stole several of their stars, including Karpus.

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Many people also consider this AFL a major league, but I don't think I agree. Still, it was an excellent league, and with Karpus at the helm the Bears were in the title hunt until fading late in the season to a third-place finish. Karpus led the AFL in completions and passing yardage, and that earned him a first-team berth on the all-league team.

The Bears folded in the offseason, keeping Karpus's streak intact, but he caught on with the New York Americans of the same league for 1941. He threw three touchdown passes in three games before his contract was acquired by the struggling Buffalo Tigers. I don't have his record this time, but Buffalo apparently led the league in passing yardage after Karpus arrived, and that was no coincidence. Karpus led the league in touchdown passes, but Buffalo finished 2-6, and nobody took much notice.

Just before the 1942 season started, the AFL suspended operations for the duration of World War II. Since it never reorganized afterward, you might as well say it folded, which gives Karpus a perfect record: Each year either his team or his league (or both) disbanded after the season.

Still not ready to abandon football, Karpus returned in 1946 with the Newark Bombers of the reorganized American Association, now called the AFL (those names could get confusing). But he was 30 years old, and may not have played since 1941. Whatever the reason, he failed to survive the final cut. But a year later he popped up with the Providence Steam Roller of the New England Pro Football Conference. Providence, managed by PFRA's own Pearce Johnson, won the league title with an 8-2 record. I have no other records of this league, and it was a notch below Karpus's prewar level, so it's not included in his record given below.

Bill James, in his *Historical Baseball Abstract*, wrote a lengthy appreciation of minor league players from the era before the majors achieved complete control of organized baseball. In describing these players he might have been describing the non-NFL football players of the same era, including Andy Karpus, Harry Mattos, and many more.

James wrote: "Maybe they were not great players; maybe they were not even as good as I think they were. But they were professional players, and they played it to the best of their abilities. They had careers ... and those careers have been largely forgotten about."

So let's take just a moment to remember.

	Att	Co	Yds	TD	TD	XP	FG	Pts
1937 NY-LA AFL	-	-	-	3	0	1	0	1
1938 Sal-Fre CFL	-	-	-	2	1	0	0	6
1939 UC AA	79	37	366	1	1	1	1	10
1940 LI AA	-	-	-	1	0	0	0	0
Bos AFL	126	60	685	3	3	0	0	18
1941 NY-Buf AFL	-	-	-	5	2	1	0	13

(1939 passing attempts, completions and yards cover three games; 1940 figures cover seven.)