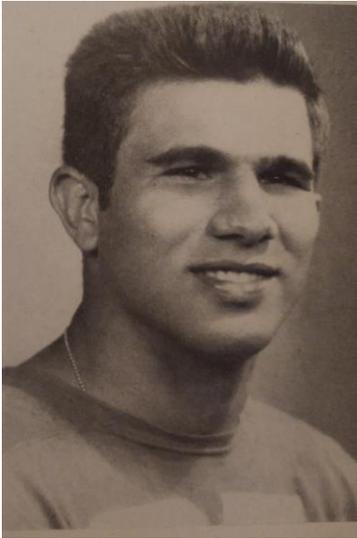




Sam Palumbo

This article was written by Greg D. Tranter.

Sam Palumbo played three years of professional football, winning an NFL Championship with the Cleveland Browns in 1955. He was a four-year starter at Notre Dame under legendary coach Frank Leahy, earning All-American recognition in both his sophomore and senior seasons.



Samuel Frank Palumbo was born June 7, 1932 in Cleveland, Ohio. He grew up in the Collinwood neighborhood on the east side of Cleveland and attended Collinwood High School. Seven other NFL players came from his high school - most notably, Tony Adamle, a two-time NFL Champion with the Cleveland Browns in the 1950's; Cecil Shorts, who had a six-year NFL career as a wide receiver from 2011 to 2016; and former Oakland Raider and Buffalo Bill Joe Cannavino.

Palumbo played football and basketball during his high school days, lettering in each sport three times. He captained both Railroader teams his senior year of 1951. At the conclusion of his high school football career, he was named to the first team Associated Press and Internal News Service All-Ohio teams and second team on the UPI All-Ohio team as a guard for his solid and rugged play. He had an outstanding senior year, contributing four blocked punts and two interceptions, returning one for a TD.



He entered Notre Dame as a midterm freshman in the spring semester of 1951. Palumbo gave up playing in the Cleveland city basketball championship game so that he could enroll at Notre Dame early. He began his Irish football career that fall.

Palumbo immediately became a starter for Frank Leahy's troops at defensive left tackle. He acquitted himself extremely well throughout his freshman campaign. He wore jersey #67 for the blue and gold.

Palumbo made his college football debut in Notre Dame's 48-6 victory over Indiana on September 29. He provided an early spark for Notre Dame on October 13 by blocking Pittsburgh's punt on the first possession of the game. The Irish went on to a 33-0 victory. In Notre Dame's 12-7 win over North Carolina on November 17, Palumbo and teammate Dick Szymanski were the defensive heroes. The South Bend Tribune reported that, "These two combined for the major share of Irish tackles."ⁱ

Though Notre Dame had a disappointing season with two losses and a tie, it achieved a memorable 19-12 upset of Frank Gifford and the USC Trojans in the last game of the season. The Irish finished with a 7-2-1 record and Palumbo had an excellent first season in contributing significantly to a stout ND defense.

Notre Dame faced a brutal schedule during the 1952 season as it played four of the top five ranked teams in the country and two other schools rated in the top 12. After opening the season on September 27 with a 7-7 tie against No. 12 Penn, the Irish upset No. 5 Texas 14-3 as the defense stifled the Longhorns' ground game. Palumbo was a key defender throughout the contest. Notre Dame also defeated No. 4 Oklahoma 27-21, and No. 9 Purdue 26-14. The Irish saved their best performance for the final game of the season against No. 2 USC Trojans (9-0). Palumbo was lauded for his defensive line play as well as a key fumble recovery in the upset victory.

Notre Dame finished the year ranked third in the final Associated Press poll. Michigan State was rated No. 1 and the Irish lost to them 21-3 early in the season.

Palumbo's performance for the season was described by the Notre Dame Scholastic Review this way: "highly rated by the press for his outstanding work all season, Sam was instrumental in smashing the Texas ground game and spent most of the MSC game in the state backfield."ⁱⁱ Following the season, he was named to the Central Press Captains' All-American third team at tackle. He was also named third team All-Midwest.

Notre Dame had an outstanding 1953 campaign, finishing 9-0-1 and was ranked second. The Irish reeled off seven victories in a row to start the season, including wins over four ranked opponents. Their streak ended with a 14-14 tie with Iowa that dropped Notre



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

Dame to No. 2. The Irish finished the season with routs of USC and SMU, but the tie with Iowa cost them the National Championship. ND halfback Johnny Lattner won the Heisman Trophy.

Palumbo's playing time was reduced in 1953 because the collegiate game went back to single platoon football and he played behind All-American Art Hunter. The Notre Dame Football Review said about his 1953 season, "Sam Palumbo suffered more than any other Irish player because of the sudden return to the one-platoon system. At the end of last year, Sam was rated as a potential 1953 All-American defensively, but he had a hard time adapting to offensive play. Sambo saw a lot of action and there was no better tackler or harder man to move on the ND team."ⁱⁱⁱ Despite less playing time, he was named to the 1953 Indiana All-State third team.

Legendary head coach Frank Leahy retired at the conclusion of the 1953 season for health reasons and 25-year old Terry Brennan was named the head man of the Irish. Notre Dame had a loaded team in 1954. The Irish won their opening game but then were upset by Purdue, ultimately costing them the National Championship. Notre Dame then won its final eight games to finish with a 9-1 record and a No. 4 national ranking.

Following Notre Dame's 21-0 opening day victory over Texas on September 24, Brennan said, "Sam Palumbo played a great game!" Against Pittsburgh on October 9, Sam played another excellent game and recovered a Panthers fumble in ND's 33-0 victory.

In Notre Dame's 6-0 defeat of the Naval Academy on October 30, Palumbo made the play of the game that spurred the Irish to victory. As the Chillicothe Gazette described the play, "Palumbo hit Navy's Bob Craig with such force the ball popped from his grasp and continued into the end zone, where it was pounced on by Ralph Guglielmi for a touchdown."^{iv} It was the only score of the game.

At the conclusion of the season, Palumbo was named to the Third Annual Tablet Catholic-college All American first team. He was also recognized on the Players All-Midwest first team, the Associated Press All-Midwest third team and the Indiana All-State first team.

Palumbo played as a regular at Notre Dame throughout his four-year career. He played in all 40 of the team's games during his career, starting 28. He lettered all four of his years at the school and helped lead the Irish to a 32-5-3 record and three top-five finishes. At the end of Palumbo's Notre Dame career, "former Irish Coach Frank Leahy described Palumbo as the greatest defensive lineman to play at the school"^v as reported by the Associated Press.



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

Palumbo and fellow ND tackle Frank Varrichone played in the Mahi Shrine Temple College All-Star game for the North squad on Christmas night 1954. The North lost to the South, 20-17.

He finished his academic career at Notre Dame in January 1955, having completed all his requirements for a bachelor's degree in Business Administration.

The 1955 NFL Draft was held on January 27 and 28 at the Warwick Hotel in New York City. Palumbo was selected by his hometown Cleveland Browns in the fourth round with the 49th selection.

He was invited to play in the College All-Star Game versus the defending league champion Browns. The game was played August 12, 1955. The All-Stars – playing before 75,000 at Soldier Field in Chicago - upset Cleveland 30-27. Palumbo played an excellent game for the All-Stars. It was one of only nine wins by the All-Stars in the 42 games played in the history of the College All-Star Football Classic. In a bit of irony, the following year, Palumbo played again in the All-Star game, this time for the Browns. Cleveland won 26-0, so Palumbo was 2-0 in the Classic.

He made his professional debut on special teams in the Browns' 27-17 loss to the Washington Redskins on September 25, 1955. Palumbo dislocated his right shoulder in the Browns' 41-10 rout of the Packers on October 23. He missed three games, returning to the lineup on November 20 in a 41-14 drubbing of the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Palumbo, wearing jersey No. 50, played primarily special teams with an occasional relief appearance on the line throughout the 1955 season. He backed up Frank Gatski at center on offense and Bob Gain at middle guard on defense. In all he appeared in nine regular-season games. The Browns finished with a 9-2-1 record and the Eastern Division Championship. They earned a date with the Los Angeles Rams for the 1955 NFL Championship on December 26 at the Coliseum in tinsel town.

In the championship game, Chuck Noll of the Browns was injured on the opening kickoff, and Palumbo was his replacement at linebacker. Sam played well and contributed an interception off Rams quarterback Norm Van Brocklin in the Browns' 38-14 victory.



During the winter of 1956, Palumbo played on the Browns' celebrity basketball team to help him stay in shape. They played various school faculty teams in the Cleveland area and raised money for charity.

The 6'2" 226 pound Palumbo was back with the Browns in 1956, though he switched jersey numbers to No. 54. He again backed up Gatski and Gain. Gatski was enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1985 and Gain was a five-time Pro Bowler, so there was no shame in playing behind those great players. Palumbo played in all 12 games and started one, but the Browns finished with a disappointing 5-7 record.

At the conclusion of the season, Hall of Fame head coach Paul Brown made changes to rebuild the browns' roster. One of his moves was an eight-player trade with the Green Bay Packers on April 18, 1957. Palumbo was one of six players traded by the Browns to acquire linebacker Roger Zatkoff and quarterback Bobby Garrett from Green Bay. The other Browns included in the deal were quarterback Babe Parilli, defensive backs Billy Kinard and John Petitbon, guard John Macerelli, and defensive end Carlton Massey. Palumbo signed his contract with the Packers on May 14, and he was slotted to play linebacker for Green Bay.

Palumbo made an immediate impact with the Packers. He scored his first career NFL touchdown in a preseason game on August 28. Teammate Bill Forester recovered a Philadelphia Eagles' fumble and lateraled the ball to Palumbo, who carried the pigskin into the end zone for a touchdown. It was a key play in Green Bay's 16-13 victory.



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

He was inserted as the teams' starting middle linebacker and played there throughout the season, except when he missed games with an injury. Palumbo played in nine games and started eight of them.

Green Bay opened the season with a surprising 21-17 win over the Chicago Bears. Palumbo snared his first (and only) career regular season interception and returned it for 10 yards in the victory. The upset win was followed with three consecutive losses, but on October 27, the Packers stunned the Baltimore Colts 24-21 behind some stellar play from Palumbo. He was all over the field, making 15 tackles. Three more losses followed and in the final game of that stretch, a 31-27 loss to the Los Angeles Rams, Palumbo injured his leg. He missed three games and played in a reserve role in the Packers' final game of the season, a 27-20 loss to the San Francisco 49ers. Green Bay finished the 1957 season in last place in the Western Division with a 3-9 record.

That Packers team featured Max McGee, Bart Starr, Paul Hornung, and Jim Ringo. All would play for Vince Lombardi and win several NFL championships with Green Bay and the latter three are in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Palumbo only played one year with the Pack and it was two years before Lombardi arrived and turned the franchise around.

Palumbo was back with Green Bay in 1958, but he was a late training camp casualty. The Packers released him on the eve of the regular season opener against the Chicago Bears. Shortly after being let go, Palumbo signed with the Ottawa Rough Riders in the Canadian Football League. His signing with Ottawa was late in the season and thus he did not get into a game. However, he was getting acclimated to the Canadian game with the thought that he would be back with the Rough Riders in 1959.

However, Palumbo arrived at Ottawa's 1959 training camp with a pulled hamstring muscle from a workout. Palumbo was sent back home to Cleveland for a week to rest and get treatment from his personal physician. After returning home and working on his leg injury, Palumbo decided not to go back to Ottawa, and he gave up football. Palumbo never appeared in a game for the Rough Riders.

Palumbo got the itch to play football again a year later, and the new Buffalo Bills of the American Football League were in need of help. He signed with the Bills on August 26, 1960, following a series of preseason injuries to key Buffalo players including Joe Schaffer, John Scott, Wray Carlton and Richie McCabe.

Palumbo was immediately inserted into the lineup. He appeared in the Bills' final tune-up before the regular season against the New York Titans on September 4, a 52-31 loss. Palumbo started at linebacker in the first regular season game in team history on September 11 in the Polo Grounds. Buffalo lost to the Titans 27-3. Two days following



Professional Football Researchers Association

www.profootballresearchers.com

the game Bills head coach Buster Ramsey released Palumbo. He said, “Sam is a fine boy, but he’s lost the speed necessary for pro ball.”^{vi} And just like that his career was over. He retired from football, this time for good. His only game with the team just happened to be the franchise’s first regular season contest.

Following his football years he went into the Insurance business carving out an extremely successful post-football career and retired in 2001. But football had always been a big part of his life and after his retirement from professional football he joined the Cleveland Football Officials Association. He spent 40 years as an official at the high school and collegiate level and he became the dean of Northeast Ohio’s officiating ranks.

He married his high school sweetheart Catherine and they have been married for more than 60 years. The couple raised five sons and a daughter. They reside in Lyndhurst, Ohio.

Palumbo was selected for enshrinement in the Collinwood High School Hall of Fame in 1992. He has also been honored with the Cleveland Touchdown Club Bobby Brown Service award in 2002 and was selected as a member of the first class of the Greater Cleveland Football Officials Hall of Fame in 2009. And most recently he was enshrined in the Greater Cleveland Sports Hall of Fame in 2016.



Bibliography

Newspapers/magazines

Associated Press, Ex-Pro Tutors Avenged as All Stars Drop Browns, *Lancaster New Era*, (Lancaster, PA), August 13, 1955

Associated Press, Irish Star Palumbo Joins College All-Stars, *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (St. Louis, MO), June 30, 1955

Associated Press, Two Irish Tackles, End on North Team, *The Miami News* (Miami, Florida), December 12, 1954.

Johns, Walter L., Ameche Fullback on CP All-American 11, *The Oshkosh Northwestern* (Oshkosh, Wisconsin), December 1, 1952.

Loney, Aaron, E., UPI Names All-Ohio Team, *The Tribune* (Coshocton, Ohio), December 4, 1950

The Notre Dame Scholastic Football Review, December 7, 1951, University of Notre Dame

The Notre Dame Scholastic Football Review, December 5, 1952, University of Notre Dame

The Notre Dame Scholastic Football Review, December 11, 1953, University of Notre Dame

Towner, Bob, Carolinians Yield Close 12-7 Victory, *The South Bend Tribune* (South Bend, Indiana), November 18, 1951

United Press International, Bills Sign Sam Palumbo, *The Morning Call* (Paterson, New Jersey), August 27, 1960

UPI, Pro Grid Bills Release Palumbo, *Democrat & Chronicle* (Rochester, New York), September 13, 1960

Wilks, Ed, Navy's Don Beagle Named Lineman of Week by AP, *Chillicothe Gazette* (Chillicothe, Ohio), Nov 3, 1954

Zirkle, Don, The Sports Circle, *The Tablet* (Brooklyn, NY), December 4, 1954



Books

Steele, Michael R., *The Fighting Irish Football Encyclopedia Third Edition*, Sports Publishing, LLC, c 2003

The Dome, University of Notre Dame, c1954

Websites

[Sam Palumbo Stats | Pro-Football-Reference.com \(pro-football-reference.com\)](http://pro-football-reference.com)

[Notre Dame Fighting Irish Football Record By Year | College Football at Sports-Reference.com \(sports-reference.com\)](http://sports-reference.com)

End Notes:

ⁱ Towner, Bob, Carolinians Yield Close 12-7 Victory, *The South Bend Tribune* (South Bend, Indiana), November 18, 1951

ⁱⁱ Tackles, Sam Palumbo, *The Notre Dame Scholastic Review*, December 5, 1952

ⁱⁱⁱ Sam Palumbo, *The Notre Dame Scholastic Review*, December 11, 1953

^{iv} Wilks, Ed, Navy's Don Beagle Named Lineman of Week by AP, *Chillicothe Gazette* (Chillicothe, Ohio), Nov 3, 1954

^v Associated Press, Irish Star Palumbo Joins College All-Stars, *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (St. Louis, MO), June 30, 1955

^{vi} UPI, Pro Grid Bills Release Palumbo, *Democrat & Chronicle* (Rochester, New York), September 13, 1960