



## **Bob Pifferini**

This article was written by Chad Moody

During his time as a football coach, Bob Pifferini put a sign on the wall that read, “If you don’t play to win, why keep score?”<sup>i</sup> This simple phrase provides good insight into the man once described as a “bearcat” on the gridiron.<sup>ii</sup> Although Pifferini’s professional football career was brief, he nonetheless dedicated his life to sports—helping to inspire a second generation of successful athletes that carried the family name.

Robert Mareico Pifferini was born on October 1, 1922, in Oakdale, California, a town about 15 miles northeast of Modesto. During his formative years, Pifferini’s father, Joseph, was a farm laborer and his mother, Katie, worked in a cannery. Both parents were born in Switzerland and spoke Italian as their native tongue before immigrating to the United States while in their mid-20s—albeit 25 years apart from one another. The couple also had four other children: Hilda, Lili, May, and Ray. All the children were American born.



Photo Credit: Detroit Free Press, 1949

Growing up in Modesto, Pifferini displayed athletic prowess as a standout in baseball, basketball, and football at Modesto High School, then duplicated the feat as a three-sport athlete while a student at nearby Modesto Junior College in the early 1940s. And with World War II well underway, the 20-year-old enlisted in the US Army. Between 1943–1946, Pifferini was a technical sergeant in the South Pacific, receiving many commendations for his wartime service.<sup>iii</sup>



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Despite planning on a career in baseball, Pifferini enrolled at San Jose State College (now University) on a football scholarship upon his honorable discharge from the Army in 1946.<sup>iv</sup> Picking up right where he left off prior to his time in the military, he lettered on the diamond, court, and gridiron for the Spartans. A team captain for the strong San Jose State football program, Pifferini was rated by “many sports scribes as the best center on the Pacific Coast” for his aggressiveness on offense while being called a “mountain on defense.”<sup>v</sup> Indeed, in his final season for the Spartans, “Piff” was an honorable mention at the center position on the 1948 Associated Press All-Pacific Coast team. Additionally, he was named to the West all-star squad in the prestigious East–West Shrine Game held on New Year’s Day 1949.

Upon the recommendation of former Detroit star Ernie Caddel, Pifferini was drafted by the Lions in the 15<sup>th</sup> round (142<sup>nd</sup> pick) of the 1949 National Football League Draft. Initial media scouting reports called the 6-foot, 210-pounder a “rugged line-backer and good blocker.”<sup>vi</sup> With Detroit trading Merv Pregulman to the New York Bulldogs in August, there were no veteran centers on the club during the preseason, creating a wide-open battle for the starting job.<sup>vii</sup> Although Pifferini “stood out” and was described as “impressive” during training camp, the Lions awarded the starting center position to the slightly more experienced Jack Simmons, who had a season of professional experience under his belt as a reserve lineman on the Baltimore Colts of the All-America Football Conference.<sup>viii</sup> Appearing in all 12 games as a reserve center for Detroit, Pifferini finished the campaign with three interceptions and one fumble recovery. The rookie’s best performance of the season came in a victory over the New York Giants in the Polo Grounds on November 20. “In fact, a defensive player, freshman center Bob Pifferini was the star of the contest,” reported sportswriter Bob McClellan of the game. “He intercepted two Giant forwards [off rising star quarterback Charlie Conerly] and a lateral, each of which led to a score, and made tackles all over the lot.”<sup>ix</sup>

At season’s end, Lions coach Bo McMillin reportedly opined that Pifferini was “definitely on the upgrade.”<sup>x</sup> Nevertheless, he was waived by Detroit just prior to the opening of training camp in 1950. The reasons for Pifferini’s release purportedly involved possible disagreements with coach McMillin and/or over salary.<sup>xi</sup> Unable to latch on with another NFL club, he did not play at the professional level during the 1950 season.

Despite this setback, the 1951 campaign brought renewed hope to Pifferini when he was signed by the San Francisco 49ers during training camp. And things seemed to be looking up for the 28-year-old after he was praised by assistant coach Phil Bengtson for his good linebacking play in a preseason victory over the Green Bay Packers.<sup>xii</sup> Suffering an injury two weeks later, however, Pifferini was among the club’s final roster cuts prior to the



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opening of the regular season.<sup>xiii</sup> This ended his brief tenure with the 49ers—and his career in the NFL. The Green Bay Packers had rumored interest in Pifferini after his release, but the native Californian reportedly “was not eager to return to the cold Eastern fall and winter climate.”<sup>xiv</sup>

Sports remained an integral part of Pifferini’s post-NFL life. In a curious turn of events, he was accused of suiting up for the San Jose Packers under the pseudonym “Mike Hammer” in the fall of 1951 to circumvent Northern California Amateur Conference rules that barred former professionals from participating in the semipro football league.<sup>xv</sup> In addition, Pifferini toyed with the idea of giving professional baseball a try after receiving some offers; he was an excellent pitcher during his time at San Jose State and also played for semipro clubs in the late 1940s.<sup>xvi</sup> Instead, however, he was “happy he turned to coaching” at the high school and collegiate levels.<sup>xvii</sup> After spending seven years near his hometown at Lodi (California) High School, “Coach Piff” headed about 100 miles southwest to the San Jose area where he settled in for several decades at the affiliated Foothill and De Anza Colleges.<sup>xviii</sup> Along the way, he worked as a decorated coach, athletic director, and tenured instructor during his service there.

On a personal level, Pifferini wed his wife, Gaynell, in 1949 after having met while students at San Jose State where she was a sorority member and homecoming queen. The couple had five children—four of which received Division I college athletic scholarships.<sup>xix</sup> Son Bob Jr. played football at UCLA before spending five seasons in the NFL as a linebacker and long snapper with the Chicago Bears and Los Angeles Rams during the 1970s. Son Jess played football at De Anza prior to transferring to the University of Arizona to play baseball. Son Roc was a long snapper at San Jose State; like his brother Bob Jr., he learned the special-teams skill from his father, who handled long-snapping duties while with the Spartans.<sup>xx</sup> Roc’s twin sister, RaeAnn, was a decorated four-sport high school athlete who played softball at Fresno State. And while daughter Trina was the only of the children who did not play sports, she was an accomplished dancer, pianist, and cheerleader. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the *Santa Cruz County Sentinel* had this to say of the family in 1999: “Holidays with the Pifferini family are not for the meek. The competition can be fierce, and a quick glance reveals a lineup worthy of any Santa Cruz County all-time family sports team.”<sup>xxi</sup> Indeed, Pifferini’s tenaciousness from his days on the gridiron seemed to manifest itself in how he pushed his children to excel athletically. “He’ll criticize us a lot, but it’s constructive,” then-high schooler RaeAnn said of her father. “That’s the way we learn to do better.”<sup>xxii</sup> And Pifferini himself realized that he displayed a tough demeanor toward his children. “Maybe I don’t do that enough [show emotion and affection] to my own kids,” he admitted in a 1986 interview. “Maybe that’s one of my weaknesses. Maybe I haven’t shown my affection like I should. I am not that type of guy. Maybe I should do more of that.”<sup>xxiii</sup>



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In his free time, Pifferini attended Grace Bible Church in Campbell, California. He was also an active member of SIR (Sons in Retirement), a California-based organization promoting social activities for men. And the Bay Area resident was an avid golfer until he was 91 years of age.<sup>xxiv</sup>

On December 9, 2017, Pifferini passed away at the age of 95. Prior to his death, he was the second and sixteenth oldest living alumnus of the Detroit Lions and NFL, respectively. The military veteran was interred at San Joaquin Valley National Cemetery in Santa Nella, California. As a testament to his impact as both a player and coach at the collegiate level, Pifferini is a member of four athletics halls of fame: Modesto Junior College, San Jose State University, De Anza College, and the California Community College Athletic Association.<sup>xxv</sup>



## Sources

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## End Notes:

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<sup>ii</sup> Demar Teuscher, “Dry Field Predicted for San Jose Game,” *Daily Herald* (Provo, Utah), November 7, 1947, 4.

<sup>iii</sup> “Robert M. Pifferini Sr. 1922 – 2017,” Legacy.com, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/mercurynews/obituary.aspx?n=robert-m-pifferini&pid=187543220&fhid=8818>.

<sup>iv</sup> Carl Underwood, “Once a Flame Foe Pifferini Now Coach Here,” *Lodi (California) News-Sentinel*, September 18, 1952, 6.

<sup>v</sup> Teuscher, “Dry Field Predicted for San Jose Game”; Art Rosenbaum, “It Now Becomes Quite Safe to State, There’s Been No Rain on Grids to Date,” *San Francisco Chronicle Sporting Green*, November 30, 1948, 1H.

<sup>vi</sup> “Lions Sign 2 West Coast Grid Hopefuls,” *Detroit Free Press*, February 6, 1949, C3.

<sup>vii</sup> Bob Latshaw, “Bo Takes Inventory—and Smiles,” *Detroit Free Press*, August 7, 1949, C2.

<sup>viii</sup> Bob Latshaw, “Maceyko, Thigpen Star,” *Detroit Free Press*, August 6, 1949, 14; Robert Cromie, “Word from Bo—1949 Lions Bigger and More Talented,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 5, 1949, Part 3-2.

<sup>ix</sup> Bob McClellan, “Lions, 45, (a New High) Beat Giants, 21,” *Detroit Times*, November 21, 1949, C-23.

<sup>x</sup> Bob McClellan, “Sees Contender for Title,” *Detroit Times*, December 16, 1949, C-44.

<sup>xi</sup> “Searcy Miles, Great Fullback, Paces San Jose Packer Attack,” *Santa Cruz (California) Sentinel*, November 10, 1950, 7; Underwood, “Once a Flame Foe Pifferini Now Coach Here.”

<sup>xii</sup> Don Selby, “49ers Strike in Third Period to Win, 20–0,” *San Francisco Examiner*, September 13, 1951, 35.

<sup>xiii</sup> “49ers Riddle Trippi-Led Chi Cards, 37–17, as Perry Dashes 80; Albert, Beals Click,” *San Francisco Examiner*, September 24, 1951, 34; “49ers Cut 4 Linemen,” *San Francisco Examiner*, September 27, 1951, 31.

<sup>xiv</sup> Underwood, “Once a Flame Foe Pifferini Now Coach Here.”

<sup>xv</sup> “SSF Says Packers Went Pro,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, California), November 6, 1951, 8.

<sup>xvi</sup> Bill Frier, “Atwater Packers Play Harrah’s this Weekend,” *Reno Evening Gazette*, July 1, 1948, 18.

<sup>xvii</sup> Underwood, “Once a Flame Foe Pifferini Now Coach Here.”

<sup>xviii</sup> “Robert M. Pifferini Sr. 1922 – 2017.”

<sup>xix</sup> “Gaynell Pifferini,” Legacy.com, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/santacruzsentinel/obituary.aspx?n=gaynell-pifferini&pid=123521029>.

<sup>xx</sup> Ed Vyeda, “An Upside-Down World,” *Santa Cruz (California) Sentinel*, December 6, 1990, B1.

<sup>xxi</sup> Fitch, “Rae Ann Pifferini’s Drive Comes from Strong Family Ties.”

<sup>xxii</sup> Alan Arakelian, “Fitting Finish to Year for Pifferini,” *Santa Cruz (California) Sentinel*, June 11, 1986, B3.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxiv</sup> “Robert M. Pifferini Sr. 1922 – 2017.”

<sup>xxv</sup> Ibid.