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Commentary /By Larry Felser

Book on Johnny U. ranks as one of best ever

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You say the football season can't come soon enough? That you yearn to watch a deep sideline route unravel, and then a rocket of a pass end up softly in the hands of the receiver?

Until the real thing arrives, my suggestion is to read one of the best sports books ever written, "Johnny U, The Life and Times of Johnny Unitas" by Tom Callahan. Callahan's distinguished byline has been found in Time Magazine, the Baltimore Evening Sun, Washington Star, San Diego Union and Cincinnati Enquirer, but he is most at home in gritty cities like Pittsburgh, Unitas' hometown, and Baltimore, the stage upon which Johnny U. performed most brilliantly.

The football portion of Unitas' story began in Olean's Forness Stadium, against St. Bonaventure. It was midway through the 1951 season when he was a 145-pound freshman at the University of Louisville, then a "streetcar school." He had been a Notre Dame fanatic all during his youth and received a tryout by the Irish after a good career at St. Justin's, a small high school in Pittsburgh. Bernie Crimmins, an assistant coach, conducted the tryout and afterward said that if he put the then 137-pound Unitas in a Notre Dame uniform, "We'd be sued for manslaughter."

Louisville, far less particular, gave him a scholarship and told the freshman to watch on the bench. After winning their opening game against Wayne State, the Cardinals lost four consecutive games, 39-7 to Boston University; 38-0 to Cincinnati; and 47-6 to Xavier.

With offensive production so puny, the Louisville coaches were willing to try anything, even a skinny freshman as quarterback. That's how Unitas began his college career. The Bonnies' quarterback was a proven dazzler, Ted Marchibroda, later to become head coach of the Colts — twice — as well as offensive coordinator of the Bills when he put Jim Kelly into the no-huddle offense and on his way to the Super Bowl.

Near halftime in the cold, rainy conditions of late October, Marchibroda had pushed the Bonnies to a 19-0 lead. When Unitas was in grade school, a nun used a play on words with his Lithuanian surname to identify her new student. "Unite-us," she said. "That must mean you're the leader." What a prophet.

In the second half “Unite-us” completed 11 consecutive passes, three for touchdowns, to push Louisville ahead, 21-19.

As time apparently ran out, the Louisville players stormed the field to celebrate, but a few more seconds were found, allowing Bona to try a field goal. It was missed. Another Louisville celebration. More time was found. Another field goal was attempted. This time it was good and the Bonnies won the game.

Long afterward Marchibroda reminisced. “Not until about ten years later did I hear a story about a student manager who ran the clock that day,” he said. “Maybe it’s only a story, but it did take an awfully long time for those last few seconds to run off.”

It would not be the last time Olean and St. Bonaventure would figure prominently in Unitas’ fate.

Pro football was a 12-team league in the ’50s, a part-time job for the players and coaches. Today college prospects are analyzed and re-analyzed, timed, weighed and given an IQ-type test. In 1955, when Unitas came out of school, the best available information many of the pro teams brought to the draft was a copy of Street and Smith’s College Football Annual.

The man who was to become one of the greatest pro quarterbacks ever was the 102nd selection in the ’55 draft. His hometown Steelers took him in the ninth round. He rode to the Steelers’ training camp in Olean with two ex- Bonnies — Marchibroda, who finished his college career at the University of Detroit after Bona dropped football, and Jack Butler, the driver, who was to become an all-pro defensive back.

There was more bitterness for Unitas in Olean. The Steelers’ coach was Walt Kiesling, a crusty old-timer who once had been head coach at St. Bonaventure. “Keez” was an enemy of the forward pass. Unitas was barely used in training camp and Kiesling cut him. Unitas called him every name he could think of and that nearly had consequences.

“He told Weeb Ewbank (his future coach in Baltimore) that I was too dumb or couldn’t keep the plays straight in the huddle,” said the quarterback.

Years later Ewbank said that “John learned a lot from me in his first two years. Then I learned from him.”

Larry Felser, former News columnist, appears in Sunday’s editions.

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