

Ralph Conrad

Gained confidence through football, at Pitt

By NEIL RUDEL

Mike Ditka, the NFL and University of Pittsburgh legend, felt he had a lot in common with former Panther teammate Ralph Conrad.

Ditka grew up in Aliquippa, and Conrad came from Altoona. Both were known, particularly in the 1950s and '60s, as tough, blue-collar towns where resolve counted almost as much as talent.

"He was a good man," Ditka said. "He was like the rest of us. He played the game hard. We grew up with the same background, just like my dad taught me, he was taught the same things - to have a strong work ethic and give your all every day. It was a pleasure playing with him."

Foge Fazio, another famous Panther alumnus, played alongside Conrad in 1960. Fazio was a senior when Conrad cracked the starting line-up as a sophomore.

Fazio will be on hand to present Conrad for induction into the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame.

"I remember the first time I met Ralph," Fazio said. "I was already there, and the coach was giving me prospects to show around the sights. I liked him right off the bat. He had a great smile and I took him under my wing. Anyplace we went, he came along."

Like Ditka, Fazio quickly recognized and appreciated Conrad's toughness. Fazio started at center, and Conrad played guard. On defense, Fazio was a linebacker, and Conrad played nose tackle.

"We had a lot of drill time together," Fazio said. "He was a tough guy, and he was a smart player. You didn't have to worry about telling him what his assignments were. We had a lot of good relationships both on and off the field."

Conrad appreciates his

Ralph found a home on the Pitt line early in his Panther career.

friendship with Fazio the most.

"He accepted me and treated me better than anybody on that line as a sophomore," Conrad said.

It was always important to Conrad to feel comfortable. In Little League and in the early baseball years, he never found a comfort zone enjoyed by many of his friends like Jim Rose, Norman Hatfield and Howard Mills.

"There were some kids down there I ran around with that were good in baseball, and I was kind of a Johnny come lately," Conrad said. "It was kind of a source of frustration."

Conrad said he had "a little depth perception problem" with his vision, and when it came time for neighborhood baseball games in his days growing up in Juniata, "they'd get picked, and I wouldn't. I guess I grew up with an inferiority complex."

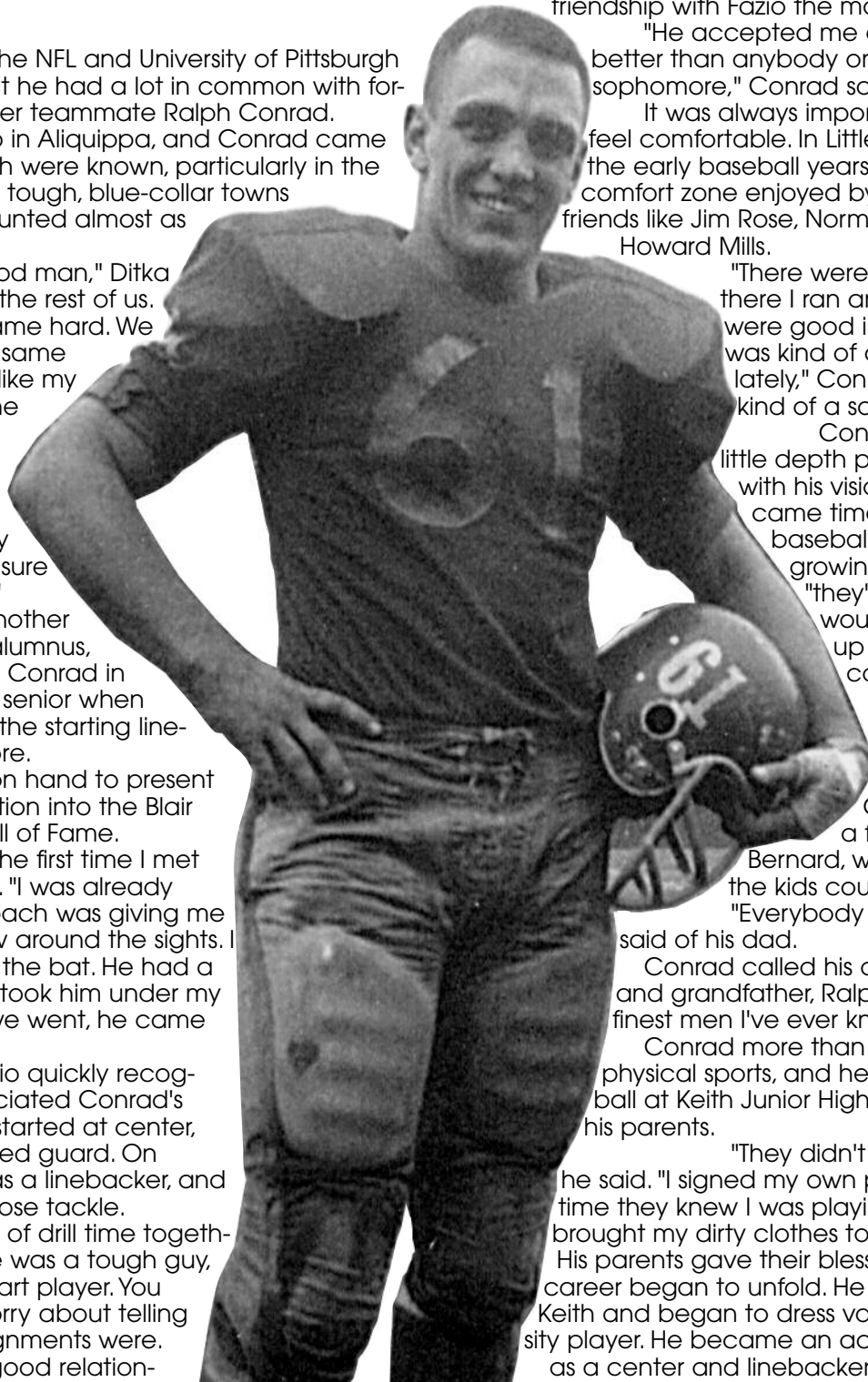
Football, though, was a different story. Across the street from Conrad's home was a field that his dad, Bernard, would often mow so the kids could play.

"Everybody loved him," Conrad said of his dad.

Conrad called his dad, a railroader, and grandfather, Ralph Rollo, "the two finest men I've ever known."

Conrad more than held his own in the physical sports, and he went out for football at Keith Junior High - only he didn't tell his parents.

"They didn't want me to play," he said. "I signed my own papers. The first time they knew I was playing is when I brought my dirty clothes to get washed." His parents gave their blessing, and Conrad's career began to unfold. He made his mark at Keith and began to dress varsity as a junior varsity player. He became an accomplished player, as a center and linebacker, and wrestler (Conrad later wrestled Ditka for Pitt's inter-fraternity title; he lost, 5-2, but was the only oppo-



ment Ditka didn't pin).

"It just seemed like I took to the contact sports," he said.

Conrad played for Earl Strohm at Altoona.

"I liked Earl, and Earl liked me," he said.

Ron Rickens, a former guard at Michigan State, joined the Mountain Lions' staff shortly after Conrad's senior season in 1958. Rickens said Conrad was at the forefront of a wave of Division I players including John Kerns, Howard Keys, Lou Glashauser, Jim Curry, Geech Gutshall and Ed Flanagan.

"Earl felt Ralph and Ron Nicewonger were two one of the better guards they had at Altoona," Rickens said. "That's the era when things started to turn around for Altoona football."

Conrad never projected himself to the collegiate level and was somewhat stunned when recruiters came calling.

"It always seemed like I made the first team, but in my mind, it was a fluke," he said. "It never dawned on me I was good enough. I think the biggest reason I went to Pitt is they started talking to me so early. It was before my senior year, and I was so flabbergasted. I wasn't thinking about going to college at that time, and I was just blown away a major college team would be interested."

Conrad got more offers as the year went on, but he felt a loyalty to Pitt. His parents and younger brothers Dave and Michael could see him play.

Conrad started on the freshmen team and then as a sophomore found himself pressed into action in an early-season game at the Los Angeles Coliseum against UCLA following an injury to a starter.

"I was so frozen, I never left my three-point stance on the first play," he said. "After that, I was fine."

Conrad started the next eight games. He was hurt in the third game in '61 then regained his two-way starting position as a senior. During Conrad's three-year run at Pitt, the Panthers went a combined 12-15-3 and beat the likes of Notre Dame, UCLA, USC, Miami



Ralph wrestled Mike Ditka for the inter-fraternity title at Pitt.

and Syracuse.

"We were respectable," he said. "It was a lot of fun. It was smash-mouth football and it was a point of pride because it was so tough. We went all over and played the toughest teams in the country."

The Panthers' old-school mentality, Conrad felt, may have hurt them at times. Conrad played for John Michelosen, who was mentored by the great Jock Sutherland.

"We'd go to camp for three weeks and hit, hit, hit and the scrimmages were so tough and we'd get so many guys hurt by the time we opened the season," he said. "Then after each game, on Mondays, we'd have a big scrimmage with the guys that didn't play in the game, and they'd beat the daylights out of each other. It hampered our opportunities to have a good season."

Even Fazio admitted, "sometimes even on Friday, we'd go after it. You couldn't wait for the games to start."

At 5-foot-11, 215 pounds, Conrad was undersized for an NFL lineman.

"I was actually pretty small for the Pitt," he said.

Conrad, who coached briefly at Altoona and then at Uniontown before joining Scott

Paper in St. Louis, said he's "thrilled" about his Hall of Fame induction.

"I'm overwhelmed," he said. "I can't tell you how proud I am to be selected."



Conrad bio

Sport: Football.

Hometown: Altoona.

College: Pittsburgh.

Hall of Fame achievement: Ralph was a two-year, two-way starter at Pitt on the offensive and defensive lines.

Current residence: Wildwood, MO