

CHAPTER 5

LOOKING BACK WITH GUS CARDARELLI

How old are you?

That's a simple question, right?

It isn't if the person you are asking is Gus Cardarelli of Republic.

"I was born in Italy on December 31, 1912," Gus told me during an October conversation at his Redstone Street home. "That means I will soon be 93. That's in Italy, of course. I'll be 92 here."

His answer befuddled me.

"I don't understand," I said.

"In Italy," Gus explained, "as soon as you're born, you're one. Here in America, you aren't one until you complete your first year."

"So you're a year older in Italy than you are here?"

Gus smiled. "That's right."

That method of determining one's age was new to me. I pondered how a person could take advantage of this method when seeking to obtain a driver's license, register to vote, or buy a drink at the local bar.

So yesterday was Gus's 92nd birthday . . . here in America.

Who is Gus Cardarelli? Anyone who attended Redstone Township High School between 1939 and 1966 or was a student at Brownsville Area High School from 1967 to 1975 knows the answer to that question.

Gus Cardarelli is a former teacher and coach who left an indelible impression on his students and his co-workers. His colorful life began in the hills of northern Italy in 1912, a year in which the headlines were



dominated by the sinking of the Titanic.

“My parents, Mariano and Olivia Cardarelli, were from Perugia,” Gus told me, “which is about seventy miles north of Rome.”

“And when you were born, they gave you a rather unusual name, did they not?”

Gus nodded. “Your name means something, you know. My name is Augustus Caesar Cardarelli, because I was the first born of the family and Augustus Caesar was the first emperor of Italy. And your last name means something too. For example, D’Amico means ‘my friend,’ and LaScala means ‘the steps.’”

“And what does Cardarelli mean?”

Gus laughed. “I had been telling people that Cardarelli means ‘like a rock,’ but when I visited my relatives in Italy in 1980, they told me it means ‘sheep herder!’ I didn’t hear the end of that for a while!”

“What do your friends call you?”

“My friends in my college days called me Gus, Augusto, or ‘Gusto’ . . . or ‘Ducky.’”

“Ducky?”

“From the way I ran,” smiled Gus, who was a squat, powerful football lineman in his younger days.

“When did Augustus Caesar Cardarelli emigrate to America?” I asked.

“My father came over here first. He got a job working in the coal mine at Thompson #2, where he earned a dollar a day. Then in the summer of 1913, when I was eight months old, my mother and I came over on the ship *Santa Maria*. We were ten days on the ocean, then spent more time at Ellis Island.

“My mother later told me that when we left Italy, I weighed 7½ pounds, but after the time we spent on the ship and at Ellis Island, I was down to 3½ pounds. She was afraid I was going to die.”

“What was wrong with you?”

“A doctor there advised her that I needed more water,” Gus said, “because although she was breast feeding me, it was not enough. So she drank more water and I survived.

“We came to Thompson #2 to be with my dad, and then our family moved to Republic, where I have lived ever since. In 1922 my dad built this house where I live today, and we added on to it later when it became a store.”

“Your dad was a businessman as well as a coal miner, right?”

“My dad sold grapes to make wine,” Gus said. “In 1927, we built a garage out back, and that is where we put our grapes. We would go to Pittsburgh in a horse and wagon and buy grapes from California, then

bring them back here and sell them to people to make wine.”

“This was during prohibition?”

“Yes. If there was one person in the family, he was allowed to make one barrel. If there were two in the family, two barrels.”

“So you grew up in this house in Republic. Where did you go to school?”

“I went to Republic grade school. It was right up on top of the hill here in Republic, where there is now a church. I attended Redstone Township High School, which is still there.”



Redstone Township High School as it appeared in 1946

“And it was at Redstone Township High School that you became an excellent football lineman, despite your size?”

“I played football for Redstone for four years under Coach Clyde Smith, who was one of the best. In my freshman season (1929-30), we lost our first game to Uniontown, 7-0, then won nineteen in a row.”

That winning streak lasted until the team suffered a 19-0 loss to Clairton. Gus became a premier guard on a team that included future professional player Frank Filchock, Sam Meloni, Willie Dileo, George Dileo, Jim Freeman, and Al DeFigio. Despite his small stature, Gus was named captain of the Black Hawks and made the Fayette County All-Star team as a lineman.

“I was 5’ 5”, 175 pounds, but I was strong,” Gus said. “My dad told me, ‘Don’t lift weights, I’ll make you strong.’ I got strong by unloading crates of grapes from boxcars that would come down to DeGregory’s lumber yard. Each boxcar held 1,100 22-pound boxes of grapes.”

Gus Cardarelli’s outstanding high school gridiron career attracted the attention of college coaches at Waynesburg and Duquesne, but when

Kansas State coach Bo McMillan offered him a scholarship to play defense for him, Gus accepted, packed his bags and moved to Manhattan, Kansas.

Having grown an inch and gained a few pounds, he was a starter on the Kansas State defensive line at 5' 6", 188 pounds. In his freshman season, when Kansas State won the Big Six (now the Big Twelve) championship, Gus made the newspapers for a reason related to his Italian heritage. On December 10, 1934, United Press International ran this item:

"August Caesar Cardarelli is still playing guard for Kansas State College, but he well might have been lost to the team for war service. Cardarelli was born in Italy, and although he has lived 19 of his 21 years in Republic, Pennsylvania, it was not until a few months ago that he was naturalized. Wes Fry, his coach, is glad Cardarelli will do his fighting for Kansas State and not for Il Duce."

In 1937, Gus's final college season, he made the All-Big Six team as a guard. He still credits his success in football to his high school and college coaches. In fact, while he was still a player, he wrote a brief article that expressed his gratitude to his mentors. Perhaps some of today's showboating athletes would benefit from reflecting on Gus's sentiments.

"Nothing gets me more," Gus wrote, "than one of these boys who succeeds in sports and then suddenly gets it into his head that his success is his own. He thinks that he is self-made. It's foolish. A boy goes out for football totally green and unprepared. The coach takes him and trains him, works and studies his faults, explains and encourages, in fact does the really hard work in the making of a player. The player succeeds. The player takes the glory and the coach is forgotten. The player should put credit where credit belongs."

Gus graduated from Kansas State in 1937 with a degree in education, having specialized in history, science and health. After spending a year as an assistant coach at Bethany College in Emporia, Kansas, he accepted a teaching and coaching job at his alma mater, Redstone Township High School.

Seven years later, his promising teaching and coaching career was well underway when he found himself facing a potentially career-altering decision. In 1945, while still holding a teaching and coaching position at Redstone, Gus signed a contractual agreement with a certain gentleman from Pittsburgh's North Side who was anxious to acquire Gus's services on the football field.

That gentleman's name was Arthur J. Rooney.

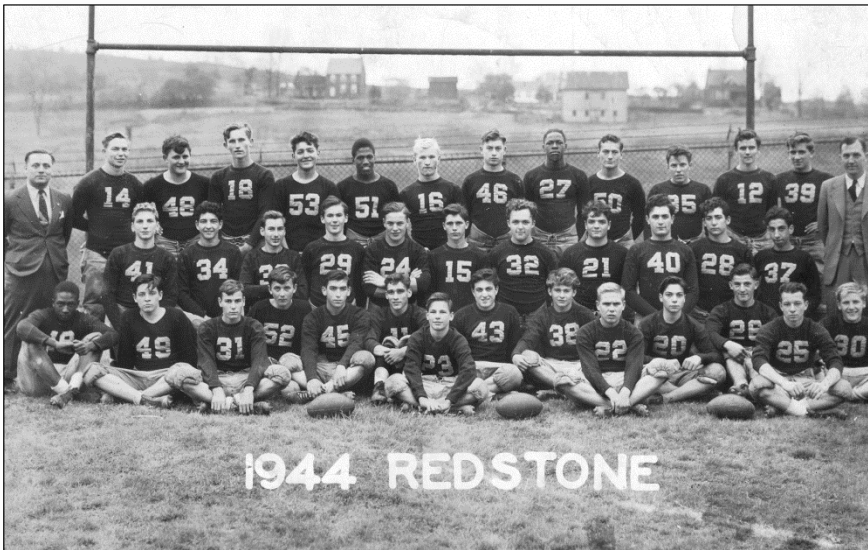
REPUBLIC MAN CHOSE TEACHING OVER PLAYING FOR THE STEELERS

“Gus, they want you to try out for the Steelers.”

Gus Cardarelli heard those words in the summer of 1945. After his stellar playing career as a defensive lineman at Kansas State, Gus had been teaching and coaching football at Redstone Township High School for seven years when the Steelers’ offer came from out of the blue.

“They wanted me to play defense,” the ninety-two-year-old Republic resident told me recently, “so I went in to talk to their front office people. Art Rooney said to me, ‘I’m offering you a contract for \$175 for every game we play.’”

Gus opened a folder, pulled out his 1945 Steelers contract and



Coach Gus Cardarelli (left, last row) and his 1944 Redstone Township High School Black Hawks football team

handed it to me. I studied the signatures at the bottom of the single-page document. It was signed by Augustus Cardarelli and Arthur J. Rooney on August 21, 1945.

“I see you signed the contract,” I said to Gus, “but as it turned out, you never played for the Steelers. Why didn’t you?”

“I couldn’t,” he replied. “I realized after I signed that there would be problems getting back and forth to Hershey (the location of the

Steelers' training camp), and I knew I had a steady job at Redstone Township High School. So I decided not to play for the Steelers.”

THE NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE
UNIFORM PLAYER'S CONTRACT

The PITTSBURGH STEELERS FOOTBALL CLUB herein is called the Club,
and August Gardarelli of Republic Pa.
herein is called the Player.

The Club is a member of The National Football League. As such, and jointly with the other members of the League, it is obligated to insure to the public wholesome and high-class professional football by defining the relations between Club and Player, and between Club and Club.

In view of the facts above recited the parties agree as follows:

1. The Club will pay the Player a salary for his skilled services during the playing season of 1945, at the rate of \$ 175.00 dollars for each regularly scheduled League game played, provided he has not been released by the Club prior to the playing of the first League game. For all other games the Player shall be paid such salary as shall be agreed upon between the Player and the Club. As to games scheduled but not played, the Player shall receive no compensation from the Club other than actual expenses.
2. The salary above provided for shall be paid by the Club as follows:
Seventy-five per cent, (75%), after each game and the remaining twenty-five per cent, (25%), at the close of the season or upon release of the Player by the Club.
3. The Player agrees that during said season he will faithfully serve the Club, and pledges himself to the American public to conform to high standards of fair play and good sportsmanship.
4. The Player will not play football during 1945 otherwise than for the Club, or in games contracted for by the League, except in case the Club shall have released said Player, and said release has been approved by the officials of The National Football League.
5. The Player will not participate in an exhibition game after the completion of the schedule of the Club and prior to August 1 of the following season, without the permission of the Commissioner of the League.
6. The player accepts as part of this contract such reasonable regulations as the Club may announce from time to time.
7. This contract may be terminated at any time by the club giving notice in writing to the player within forty-eight, (48), hours after the day of the last game in which he has participated with his club.
8. The Player submits himself to the discipline of The National Football League and agrees to accept its decisions pursuant to its Constitution and By-Laws.
9. Any time prior to August 1st, 1945, by written notice to the Player, the Club may renew this contract for the term of that year, except that the salary rate shall be such as the parties may then agree upon, or in default of agreement, such as the Club may fix.
10. The Player may be fined or suspended for violation of this contract, but in all cases the Player shall have the right of appeal to the Commissioner of The National Football League.
11. In default of agreement, the Player will accept the salary rate thus fixed or else will not play during said year otherwise than for the Club, unless the Club shall release the Player.
12. The reservation of the Club of the valuable right to fix the salary rate for the succeeding year, and the promise of the Player not to play during said year otherwise than with the Club, have been taken into consideration in determining the salary specified herein and the undertaking by the Club to pay said salary is the consideration for both the reservation and the promise.
13. In case of dispute between the Player and the Club the same shall be referred to the Commissioner of The National Football League, and his decision shall be accepted by all parties as final.
14. Verbal contracts between Club and Player will not be considered by this League, in the event of a dispute.

Signed this 21 day of August A. D. 19 45

Witnesses:

John A. Laughlin
Augustus Gardarelli

PITTSBURGH STEELERS FOOTBALL CLUB
(Club)
By Glenn Tunney
Augustus Gardarelli
(Player)

Duplicate copy to be held by Player

Pointing to his own signature on the contract, Gus chuckled, “I started to sign it in the wrong place, so Mr. Rooney had to sign a bit higher than he should have.”

The agreement, printed on a single sheet of yellow paper, is titled “Uniform Player’s Contract.” I scanned the uncomplicated terms of the contract. Its language made it clear that in those days, NFL team owners could do just about anything they wanted with their players.

Times have certainly changed in the world of professional football since Gus Cardarelli flirted with joining the Steelers sixty years ago. I wonder if an agent for a modern NFL player would agree to contract language that reads, “The player accepts as part of this contract such reasonable regulations as the Club may announce from time to time,” or “the Club may renew this contract for the [following] year, except that the salary rate shall be such as the parties may then agree upon, or in default of agreement, such as the Club may fix.”

The relative assurance of a job at Redstone Township High School versus the tenuous promise of a position on the Pittsburgh Steelers convinced Gus that in the best interests of his family, his future lay not at Forbes Field but much closer to home. Gus continued teaching Science (for his first six years) and Health at Redstone Township High School and Brownsville Area High School for a total of thirty-six years until he retired in 1975. During those years, Gus’s unique classroom style left an impression on thousands of students.

In 1967, Redstone Township School District and the John A. Brashear School District, longtime rivals on the athletic field, merged into a single school district. Gus found himself teaching Health in the newly-constructed Brownsville Area High School near Hiller. A rivalry still simmered among students from the two former high schools, even though they were now members of a single student body. Gus recalls the day a female student in one of his classes remarked that Redstone teachers were not as tough as Brownsville teachers.

That was the wrong comment made to the wrong man.

“I’ll show you how tough I am,” Gus declared to the young lady, who was sitting at a front desk. Reaching to pick up a baseball bat that was in the room, Gus flexed his left bicep and broke the bat over his arm.

“Oh, my God!” the astonished student shrieked.

“You broke a baseball bat over your own arm?” I said incredulously to Gus, interrupting his story.

“Yes,” he replied matter-of-factly. “I have done that a few times. It started when I was in sixth grade. They paddled my sister and I got mad. They used slats as paddles in those days, so I went ‘bing’ on my bicep and broke those slats so they couldn’t paddle my sister anymore.”

Gus continued, “As time passed, I started breaking broom handles over my bicep, hundreds of them over my lifetime. Then in the early 1950s, we had some sort of celebration in the gym at Redstone, and a kid

brought a baseball bat. I broke it over my bicep in front of 300 fans.”

“Which part of the bat would break?” I asked him.

“The handle,” he said. To clarify, Gus stood up from the couch where we were talking, picked up a nearby cane, and in slow motion, obligingly demonstrated his handle-breaking technique for me.

I shook my head in amazement.

Gus was a tough guy in his heyday, and he worked hard to maintain that reputation among his students. There were years at Brownsville Area High School when he had seventy students in a classroom.

“I could handle that many,” he assured me. But Gus was not above using a little razzle-dazzle to keep his students guessing about what he would say or do next.

“When I was teaching Health at Brownsville Area High School,” Gus said, “the principal was Alex Barantovich, an old friend of mine. One day, I told the class that I was so tough, I could command the classroom door to open! I knew that Barantovich and another fellow named John Marcolini were standing in the hall outside my classroom.

“What the class didn’t know was that I had tied a string to the door, and I had instructed Marcolini, ‘When I say ‘Open, door’ a third time, you pull that string.’”

Gus declared to the class “I’m so tough,” then turned toward the door and intoned, “Open, door.”

Nothing happened.

“Open, door!”

Another pause. Still nothing.

“OPEN, DOOR!!”

The classroom door swung open obediently. There was no one there.

Pandemonium erupted in the classroom as Gus grinned broadly. And of course, from the front row came the predictable “Oh, my God!”

When Gus wasn’t bedazzling his students or educating them about social diseases and the hazards of a careless lifestyle, he was running Gus’s Sporting Goods, a family business that he started in Republic in 1948.

“I was a top dealer for Nike,” boasted Gus, “before Nike was as successful as it is now.” One newspaper reported that “in 1981, the tiny store sold over 16,000 pairs of Nike athletic shoes, more than any single establishment in the U.S.”

As Gus and I were wrapping up our conversation and I was gathering my notepad and tape recorder, I asked him when he finally gave up the sporting goods business.

“I still dabble in it a bit,” he laughed as we stood up from his couch.

Then his face took on a more serious expression. He looked down at my feet and studied my shoes with a professional eye.

“I have a nice Converse,” he said to me, as he has probably said to thousands of people over the past half century. “I don’t know if it would fit you or not. What size are you?”

That’s Gus Cardarelli – at ninety-two, still the sporting goods entrepreneur. This former dynamo of a football player, near-Steeler, and educator of thousands of local boys and girls is still a friend to many folks whom he has charmed over the years with hundreds of tales and his great sense of humor.

Gus and his late wife, Jean O’Brien Cardarelli, who passed away in 1978, raised two sons and three daughters in the Redstone Street house where Gus still lives today. He spends time most days at the senior citizens center in Republic. When he is at home, his loyal dog, Shawnee, is always at his side. At the drop of a hat Gus will tell a story, often sprinkled with Italian phrases that remind his listener of this first-generation American’s colorful background.

Thanks, Augustus Caesar Cardarelli, for allowing me to share some of those stories.

Ciao!