

ACE BYERLEIN: A GESU GEM

By M.B. Dillon

In 1949, first-year football coach Donald “Ace” Byerlein and his buddy Bill Leoni led the Gesu Giants to a Detroit city championship. Given Byerlein’s sharp recall of his players and their winning season you’d think the 97-year-old was talking about a current team; not a squad that lit up the gridiron 74 years ago,

“Bill Leoni and I had Eddie Piesik, Terry Nagle, Mike Higgins, Terry Roberts and Tony Ruggirello, who was one heck of a running back,” said Byerlein, who played football himself for Gesu, Catholic Central and the University of Detroit.” That was a fun year for Bill and I. Many of our players turned out to be wonderful young men who were quite successful.”

Gesu’s West Division title victory over St. Theresa aired on WXYZ-TV. “It was the first grade-school game ever televised,” said Byerlein. “It happened because at that time, Don Wattrick, sports editor for WXYZ, was in our parish and his kid was on the team.” Gesu celebrated with a parish-wide “Victory Banquet.” Roast turkey dinner tickets sold for \$2.75 and Wattrick emceed.

Byerlein served as administrative officer for the Michigan Court of Appeals. But he could have starred as a sportswriter, as evidenced by his *Gesu News* articles. When Gesu captured the city and suburban championship crown, Byerlein penned in part, “The first score of the ballgame came early after the opening kick-off when Ed Piesik hit Terry Roberts with a 35-yard pass. Roberts ran 3 yards to score. A minute later, Piesik tossed another touchdown pass to Tony Ruggirello, who gathered it in on the Grotto 30-yard line and scampered over the goal untouched.”

Piesik – an aerospace engineer and inventor interviewed recently by the *Gesu Alumni & Friends Newsletter* – said that while he hardly recalls the games, he does remember the coaches. Coach Byerlein and Coach Leoni were those big guys who told us what to do and how to play. They were like God, so you just did what they told you to do,” said Piesik.

Byerlein was born Aug. 22, 1926 in Saginaw, MI, one of Vincent and Blanche (Kirsch) Byerlein’s seven children. “My parents met after serving in World War I,” he said. “Mom was a nurse and Dad was in the infantry.” Patrick was born first, followed by fraternal twins John and Donald, Ann, Irene, Mary Elizabeth and Kay. The family moved to Detroit when Vincent became director of advertising for Lee and Cady. “I entered Gesu in 3rd or 4th grade. Our first house was 7 or 8 blocks from Gesu, at 16254 Linwood,” said Byerlein, who with his siblings walked to and from school, and home for lunch.

“Everything was really good at Gesu. I liked the school and everything about it. I had Mrs. Roy for 8th grade; she was a good teacher,” Byerlein said. “My twin brother and I were both on patrol. We were in charge of making sure children were able to cross the street safely at Oak, Warrington and Quincy.”

Byerlein describes his late twin John, a former U.S. Coast Guard captain, as “the brainy one.” Speaking of himself as a grade-schooler, Byerlein said, “I was able to graduate and get out of there in 1939. We moved from Gesu parish down to Trowbridge in Blessed Sacrament,” two blocks from Catholic Central.

As teenagers, Elmore “Dutch” Leonard and Byerlein became good friends, having met in Blessed Sacrament parish. “Dutch had a great sense of humor and was a fantastic all-around athlete,” Byerlein said of the late renowned author and Hollywood screenwriter. “We played a lot of ping pong too.”

Byerlein acquired his nickname while at CC. “One of the priests started calling four of us ‘Ace.’ I guess he thought we were all good guys and that we were all going to be priests,” he said. “The nickname stuck with me. I’m 97 and it’s still with me.”

Byerlein was drafted into the service during World War II after graduating in 1943 from CC. “I had a blind spot all my life in my left eye, so I really could only see 100 percent out of the right eye,” he said. “I got an honorable discharge from the Great Lakes Naval Station in Chicago. I always felt bad that I wasn’t able to stay in the service a lot longer. I knew a lot of fellows who served, and a few of them were killed.”

While studying business at U of D on a baseball and football scholarship, Byerlein landed a job at the race track and met the love of his life, Phyllis Lyons, also a U of D student. "Lou Hathaway and I were in class at U of D together," Byerlein said. "His dad was city editor of the Detroit News, and he got me a job at the track. Phyllis got a job there through a friend of hers at Visitation. Phyllis was the only girl in her class at Visitation who went to college and graduated. We met and thought we'd make a good couple."

Ace and Phyllis, who celebrated their 70th anniversary in June, are the parents of Nancy, Ellen, Anne, Peter and Bob, grandparents of six, and great-grandparents of three. For 65 years, they've been active parishioners at Holy Name in Birmingham where they reside.

After working 18 years in insurance, Byerlein was hired by Gesu's T. John Lesinski as court administrator for the state Court of Appeals, a position he held from 1969 until his retirement in 1997. He did such a superb job that in 1998, then-Chief Judge Maura Corrigan established the "Ace Award," bestowed annually to an exemplary court staffer.

Retired from the Michigan Supreme Court and other posts, Corrigan congratulated Ace on 97 years of age, and 70 years of marriage to Phyllis. "Amazing! Ace Byerlein was an outstanding administrator of the Court of Appeals, full of heart and brains," Corrigan said. "He helped to establish the court as a respected institution in our state. It is wonderful that his contributions continue to be recognized with the Ace Award to an outstanding Court of Appeals employee."

Byerlein also was active with the U of D alumni club and served on the alumni board. "I was president when Dave DeBusschere was playing for us and we got invited to the NIT tournament in Madison Square Garden," he said. "We hosted a reception for alumni in the New York area before the game. We got beat by Dayton, but at least I got that trip out of it."

From 2002-2008, Byerlein was a starter at Oakland Hills Country Club. "I worked the US Amateur, 2004 Ryder Cup, and a US PGA Championship. My son Bob was already employed there as director of golf operations. I loved golf and all the interactions with the members," Byerlein said. "It was lots of fun at club tournaments, getting volunteers and announcing the players."

"Faith, marriage and family have been my life," said Byerlein. "My Catholic faith has been guiding me through all my years."

It gladdens his heart knowing Gesu continues to make the same thing possible for others. "Gesu has good teachers, good participation in athletics, and a very fine reputation. It says an awful lot that almost 12,000 students have graduated from Gesu over the years," he said. "Catholic education is very, very important. It's great that alumni and donors contribute to scholarships so that families can afford to send their children to Gesu today."