

Ex-Giant Tom Longo dies, 73

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BY JIM HAGUE SPECIAL TO THE RECORD THE RECORD

Tom Longo, the former Lyndhurst High School great who went on to have a fine career at Notre Dame and later played in the NFL with the Giants and St. Louis Cardinals, died Thursday in a hospice near his home in Wayne after a two-year-long battle with cancer. Longo was 73.

"He was one special guy," ESPN's Dick Vitale, a longtime friend of Longo, said in a phone interview from his home in Bradenton, Fla. "We became really close when his son [Tomas] was at Notre Dame at the same time as my two daughters.

"We would get together every weekend of every football game. We didn't miss a single Notre Dame home game. He had a heart of gold. Tom Longo is a genuine solid gold Hall of Fame father, grandfather and friend and the best athlete to ever come out of Lyndhurst High School."

Longo played at Lyndhurst in the early 1960s, earning a football scholarship to Notre Dame, where he first played quarterback, then running back and defensive back for the Fighting Irish under legendary coach Ara Parseghian. Longo eventually became a standout at cornerback, playing on the same team with Heisman Trophy winner John Huarte.

Longo was drafted on the 14th round by the Philadelphia Eagles in 1965, then finally battled his way to make the Giants in 1969 as a defensive back and kick returner. In 1970, Longo was the starting strong safety for all 14 games, collecting two interceptions and three fumbles for a surprising Giants team that finished 9-5 and just missed making the playoffs.

Longo spent the 1971 season with the Cardinals, but saw action in only two games.

In his later years, Longo was very active with the NFL's Retired Players Foundation.

Funeral arrangements are still pending. Vitale said the Longo family has requested donations can be sent in lieu of flowers to the V Foundation, 106 Towerview Court, Cary, N.C. 27513.

Lyndhurst legend Longo dies at 73

JULY 7, 2015 BY JIM HAGUE | OBSERVER SPORTS WRITER



Photos courtesy George Schifano

The late Tom Longo is shown in a jumping and passing photo from his days at Notre Dame.

Dick Vitale, the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame announcer, perhaps summed up the passing of his friend Tom Longo the best.

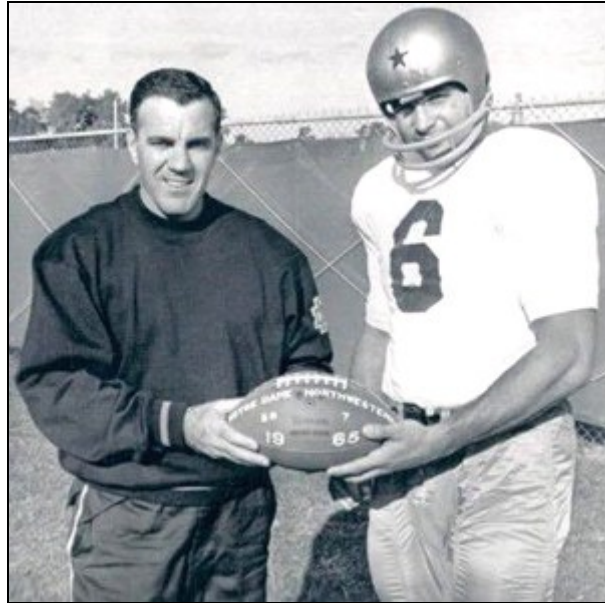
“Tom Longo is a genuine solid gold Hall of Fame father, grandfather and friend and the best athlete to ever come out of Lyndhurst High School,” Vitale said after the passing of his longtime friend last Thursday at the age of 73.

“He was one special guy,” Vitale said in a phone interview from his home in Bradenton, Fla. “We became really close when his son (Tomas) was at Notre Dame at the same time as my two daughters. We would get together every weekend of every football game. We didn’t miss a single Notre Dame home game. He had a heart of gold.”

Longo, the former Lyndhurst High School great who went on to have a fine career at Notre Dame and later played in the NFL with the Giants and St. Louis Cardinals, died last week in a hospice near his home in Wayne after a two-year battle with cancer, specifically mesothelioma.

“It was a courageous battle for 21 months,” Vitale said. “I spoke with him the other day and told him how much I loved him. We would tease each other about him being from Lyndhurst and me from East Rutherford. I’m going to miss my battles with him about the Giants and the Yankees. We would have incredible battles going back and forth. He will be remembered for his love of his family and his love of Notre Dame. He loved Notre Dame. Nothing even makes up for it.”

Longo had a brilliant high school career at Lyndhurst in the early 1960s, earning a football scholarship to Notre Dame, where he first played quarterback, then running back and defensive back for the Fighting Irish under legendary coach Ara Parseghian.



Photos courtesy George Schifano
Legendary Notre Dame football coach Ara Parseghian (l.) is shown with the late Tom Longo during their great 1965 football season.

After an injury forced him to learn another position, Longo eventually became a standout at cornerback, playing on the same team with Heisman Trophy winner John Huarte.

Longo was originally drafted in the 14th round by the Philadelphia Eagles in 1965, then finally battled his way to make the Giants' final roster in 1969 at age 27 as a defensive back and kick returner. In 1970, Longo was the Giants' starting strong safety for all 14 games that season, collecting two interceptions and recovering three fumbles for a surprising Giants team that finished 9-5 and just missed making the playoffs.

After two seasons with the Giants, Longo spent the 1971 season with the Cardinals, but saw action in only two games.

In his later years, Longo was very active with the NFL's Retired Players Association.

Many of his friends and teammates were extremely saddened about Longo's passing, but still found the time to remember their good friend.

"We went back to kindergarten together at Roosevelt School," said Jim "Chizzy" Franchina. "He was my buddy, my brother, my best friend growing up. I remember all the teams we played on together. I think of all the teams we played on together. We were always so involved in sports: Little League, Babe Ruth, American Legion. We played football, baseball and basketball together at Lyndhurst. We were co-captains on the football team."



Photos courtesy George Schifano

LEFT: The late Tom Longo is shown in a pose from his days with the New York Giants.

CENTER: Longo spent two seasons with the New York Giants and always remained close to the Giants. RIGHT: Longo (r.) is shown with legendary Hall of Fame announcer Dick Vitale, Longo's close friend, in a recent shot with their grandchildren.

Franchina recalled growing up in the "Hook" section of Lyndhurst, where most of the families are from Italian-American origin.

"We were like brothers growing up," Franchina said. "We all had the Italian families taking care of us back then. He was a true friend, always dedicated and generous. When we were younger, we swam in the Passaic River. We had our own diving board down there. Tommy and I once swam across the river, against the strong tide, then swam back."

Franchina was still having a tough time coming to grips with the loss of his friend.

"I still can't get over it," Franchina said. "He was a true natural athlete. He was always the fastest, threw the ball the furthest, jumped the highest. He was always ahead of everyone. He was always so humble, always honoring the people and the town he knew as a kid."

Franchina was once the head football coach at Fairleigh Dickinson University. The first assistant coach he hired was Tom Longo.

Joe Sferruzza is a retired middle school principal in the Lyndhurst school district. He also had fond memories of his good friend.

"He was friends with people of all age groups, from kids to senior citizens," Sferruzza said. "He touched all groups. But he never forgot his high school friends from Lyndhurst. We were on the 1959 Lyndhurst football team together. We also did a lot of traveling with our Babe Ruth team, going to Virginia and the University of Michigan. We were able to meet people from all over the country."

In fact, Franchina, Sferruzza and Longo had a special name for each other.

“We called ourselves the best three outfielders,” Sferruzza said. “We still did that to the end. I visited with Tommy the day before he passed away. He was always there. He’s going to be missed.”

George Schifano grew up in the same neighborhood as Longo, admiring him and eventually became a close friend.

“He was a local hero to all the boys,” Schifano said. “He was the first big-time athlete we had from Lyndhurst. Every Monday night at the Knights of Columbus, he would bring a Giant player with him to talk to the young boys and sign autographs. I met Fred Dryer, Tucker Frederickson, a bunch of Giants because of him. He never forgot about Lyndhurst.”

Schifano said that he was part of a group of 10-to-15 guys from Lyndhurst who would travel to Notre Dame for a football game.

“We needed 15 tickets one year and Tommy said that he could get the tickets, but we couldn’t sit together,” Schifano said. “Imagine that. He was worried about us sitting together. We went to Notre Dame with him and you couldn’t walk 10 feet without someone knowing him.”

Schifano said that he relied on Longo quite often.

“I went to him for advice several times,” Schifano said. “We had a real brotherhood. He was a man’s man. Everyone loved him.”

Butch Servideo, the former Lyndhurst High School athletic director, had a special name for Longo.

“He was the governor of Notre Dame,” Servideo said. “I remember going to Notre Dame with him and we sat down to dinner with Dick Vitale, Rudy Ruettiger and Digger Phelps. He was treated like royalty. As a kid, Tommy lived right across the street from me. We all knew him as a great athlete. He would come out and play with us, throw the ball around. He could throw the football from telephone pole to telephone pole.”

Local football recruiting guru Dennis McCarthy, a fellow Notre Dame alum, was also a longtime friend. The pair attended Bordentown Military Academy together 55 years ago before going to Notre Dame together.

“He was a very loyal friend,” McCarthy said. “If you were his friend, you were a friend for life. He loved Notre Dame. He loved the Giants. He had one of the strongest arms I’ve ever seen. He could throw the ball through the wall. The NFL had him rated the No. 1 quarterback in the country ahead of Roger Staubach and Joe Namath. But he got hurt and his backup John Huarte won the Heisman (Trophy). It was Longo’s Heisman to win if he didn’t get hurt. But he never spoke bitterly about it.”

McCarthy said that he met his first wife and the mother of his sons through Longo. In fact, Longo was the godfather to McCarthy's second son David.

"One game with the Giants, he made 13 tackles with two broken hands," McCarthy said. "He came up the hard way. He played minor league football for three years before getting his chance to play in the NFL. He had to stick it out."

McCarthy also reiterated one point.

"Anyone will tell you that Tommy had such loyalty to his friends, especially his friends from Lyndhurst," McCarthy said. "He never said no when someone asked him for a favor. He was a terrific guy, the salt of the earth. He is loved more for his personal attributes than his athletic."

Funeral arrangements are still pending. Vitale said that the Longo family has requested donations may be sent in lieu of flowers to the V Foundation, 106 Towerview Court, Cary, N.C. 27513.