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# Rozelle

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**Jerry Izenberg**

# Rozelle

**A BIOGRAPHY**

**Foreword by David Stern**

**UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS  
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Set in Janson Text by L. Auten.

*For Anne Marie (Rozelle) Bratton, clearly her father's daughter*



# Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
Foreword by David Stern	xi
Acknowledgments	xv
Prologue	i
1. In the Beginning	7
2. Moving On	28
3. The Accidental Coronation	43
4. The Boy Wonder Takes Center Stage	52
5. How Do You Tell Vince?	62
6. Heads They Win, Tails He Loses	81
7. The 100-Yard Armageddon	90
8. Sex, Lies, and Bringing Up Baby	105
9. Ain't Gonna Study No War No More	126
10. Bringing in the Sheaves	141
11. The Failed Coups	162
12. Power to the Tackles	177
13. Another Day, Another Dragon to Slay	196
14. At War with the Counterculture	210
15. Davis Again: Feud without End	222
16. Never Take a Knife to a Gunfight	234
17. The Final Battles	254
18. Death Be Not Proud	272
List of Interviews	285
Notes	287
Index	297





## Illustrations

*Following page 140*

1. Pete Rozelle and Jane Coupe on their wedding day
2. The young Rozelles and daughter Anne Marie
3. Rozelle and his daughter, Anne Marie
4. Rozelle at the office
5. Rozelle with Nixon and Bebe Robozo
6. Rozelle awarding the Super Bowl XXI trophy
7. George Halas and Pete Rozelle in the press lounge
8. Hall of Fame committee meeting
9. Pete Rozelle opens pro football's Hall of Fame
10. Rozelle and Carrie Cooke, whom he married in 1974
11. The Rozelles and the Cookes merge
12. Pete and his friends at his surprise birthday party
13. Thelma Elkjer and Anne Marie Rozelle Bratton  
at Anne Marie's wedding
14. Rozelle and Tex Schramm
15. Pete Rozelle at the Hall of Fame banquet
16. The Hall of Fame Class of 1985
17. Alvin Pete Rozelle



# Foreword

*by David Stern*

During my career I have had the great fortune to know and work with many talented and creative sports executives. Pete Rozelle was unique among them. Pete was a passionate and knowledgeable fan, an extraordinary communicator and marketer, and a visionary commissioner. He also had a keen wit and a generosity of spirit that were on display to all who knew him.

Pete was the iconic commissioner for those who came after him, a complete package. He excelled in all key areas of commissioner-ship, including league administration and the relationship between the league and its teams, where his efforts transformed the National Football League (NFL). With his background in public relations (PR), Pete was an extraordinary marketer, becoming the first sports “brand manager,” with a broad understanding of all that would entail. Under his guidance, the strength of the NFL brand led to a bond with the American public that has only grown in subsequent years.

And, of course, he was legendary for his negotiations with the television networks over his league’s broadcast rights. Before Pete assumed his commissioner-ship, interest in individual NFL teams was local. Recognizing competitive balance was the key to the league’s success, Pete convinced the owners that forming a strong partnership was in their best interests, and they started by combining their games into one television package and splitting the revenues equally. Revenue sharing was only one of Pete’s innovations. Confident there was an audience for a primetime week-night game, Pete pitched the idea, and *Monday Night Football* was born. Pete also had a concept for the NFL’s championship game.

He turned that vision into the Super Bowl, America's preeminent sporting event and perennially one of the most watched programs on television.

Like any chief executive officer (CEO), Pete had his share of challenges, and there, too, he met them head-on. He was only thirty-three when he became commissioner, but he established his authority quickly, earning the trust and respect of the league's owners and players. Understanding that the NFL's integrity was vital to its reputation, Pete early in his tenure fined the legendary George Halas for abusing officials, and a year later he suspended two of the league's biggest stars, Paul Hornung and Alex Karras, for betting on NFL games. Decades later, Pete led the way in combating the use of steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs. In speaking out publicly on the issue, Pete expressed great concern about the dangers the drugs posed to players who used them.

Pete was also politically savvy, twice petitioning Congress successfully to grant the NFL exemptions to the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. He believed the NFL was strongest when its franchises acted in concert for the best interests of the sport, and the first exemption allowed the teams to sell the television rights to their games collectively. The second, long rumored to have been assisted by the grant of the Saints franchise to Senator Russell Long's beloved Louisiana, allowed the NFL to merge with the American Football League (AFL), a major building block of today's immensely successful NFL. When the teams stopped cooperating, Pete's enthusiasm for his job waned, as the Oakland Raiders sued the league. It bothered Pete terribly that his league was being torn apart by one of his teams—to say nothing of the endless depositions.

That Pete was able to accomplish so much has much to do with his business acumen and vision. But he was also extraordinarily well prepared; few people knew as much about the issues or were as adept at reading people and situations as Pete. When you are in a position of leadership and are able to accrete experience, facts, and knowledge, there comes a time when you know more about the key topics than most everybody else. Simply stated,

there were no questions on any sports-related subject where Pete was not comfortable.

On a personal note, for me Pete was more than simply the archetype of what the modern sports commissioner could and should be. When I became commissioner of the National Basketball Association (NBA) in 1984, Pete was wonderfully helpful. He could not have been more giving of his time, sharing his experiences and expertise, no matter the subject. I was fortunate to get to know him. There was, over our years, a fair amount of tennis played on Sundays—Pete was as competitive on the tennis court as he was in the boardroom. When Pete announced he was stepping down, he and I had lunch together; I wanted to personally thank him for the example he had set and the help he had provided. I also attended his retirement party. It was there that he told a couple of saucy jokes, which I have embraced as my own in later years. That was Pete, though. He was warm. He was genuine. He was funny.

There is nobody better able to tell Pete's story than the acclaimed veteran sports journalist and columnist Jerry Izenberg. Jerry has reported on many of the key sports figures and events of the past sixty years. He is one of only a handful of reporters to have covered every Super Bowl, and few people, if any, are as knowledgeable about the sport of football and the NFL as he.

As one of the most highly respected professionals in his field, Jerry's body of work is extraordinary and his knowledge of the subject unparalleled. Having long been a fan of his writing, I have no doubt readers will find his telling of Pete's story to be complete, insightful, witty, and well written.



## Acknowledgments

I am indebted to numerous people for the extraordinary amount of time they gave me during this four-decade search for the many dimensions of Pete Rozelle. There were many, far too numerous to mention here, but the ones to whom I owe a particular debt of gratitude are Pete's daughter, Anne Marie Bratton; former NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue; Joe Browne; Ernie Accorsi; Art Modell and Wellington Mara, both of whom sadly passed away before this book was finished; Anson Christian; Colleen Smith-Grubb; Aileen and Bob Izenberg; and, finally, my long-suffering agent, Peter Sawyer.





# Rozelle

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# Prologue

It was the year when we all reached the undeniable conclusion that Pete Rozelle had put a golden lariat around all of professional football and brought it peace in our time at last. Al Davis was merged and deceptively (but temporarily) silenced. College All-Americans, once wooed by the NFL and the AFL with money, women, and more money, had been dumped into the new common draft. Now, with the end of the war between the two leagues, the most talented college football players on the planet were lucky if they could get a scout to buy them a cup of coffee.

It was January 1969, and we were in Miami Beach, at the Doral Beach Hotel, the media and league headquarters for Super Bowl III. This would be the Super Bowl of “Joe Willie” Namath and his “guarantee of victory” that rocked America’s 100-yard world. It was the game that finally breathed credibility into the notion of one football universe indivisible and bankable under the benevolent dictatorship of one man.

His name was Pete Rozelle.

Subsequent events would stamp him as the man who, above anyone else, gave America a brand-new national game. Nobody—not Kennesaw Mountain Landis (who scrubbed the Black Sox scandal white as snow), not Walter O’Malley (who opened the West Coast to the high-powered business of sports), not David Stern (who saved the NBA from banishment forever as a cable-TV sport), not Avery Brundage (the International Olympic Committee dictator)—had the impact on sports in the twentieth century that Pete Rozelle did.

He never played the game. He never owned a franchise. He

never went to law school. He never even was a serious candidate for the job that would ultimately catapult him into the role of lord high architect of every new artistic and economic advance that made the NFL the trailblazer for all of sports in the second half of the twentieth century.

The men who owned the National Football League didn't even think of him as the combination of George Halas (the football maven), George Preston Marshall (entertainment genius), and Moses (the parter of a sea of red ink) necessary to keep them artistically and economically afloat. At the time they weren't even sure what they wanted. But Rozelle, a reluctant candidate, knew what they needed once he became the commissioner. Time and again he would surprise them, to the point that they eventually rarely questioned his wisdom.

Back on that evening in Miami Beach (Super Bowl III minus three days), I was sitting in the hotel bar with Jim Kensil, who would put in sixteen years in the NFL office under Rozelle before he became president of the Jets in 1977. Rozelle repeatedly referred to him during his tenure as “my offensive and defensive coordinator,” and with good reason.

Recruited out of the Associated Press (AP) sports department to serve as Rozelle's director of public relations, he ultimately became the commissioner's sounding board, friend, trusted lieutenant, and point man. His effectiveness was matched only by his loyalty to his boss.

We had each drunk a great deal that evening. Now Kensil—a good friend—was pissed at me because I was reminding him that his boss was simply a czar of 100-yard jocks and not a man for the ages. My belligerence was not his fault. My first marriage was already rocketing toward disaster, and the alcohol was not helping my mood. Ironically, when we talked later, those very circumstances and our shared experiences as “single parents raising children” would give Rozelle and me a common bond.

“You think you know the guy,” Kensil, clearly annoyed because I was not yet ready to canonize his boss, insisted, “but you really don’t know him. Very few people do. He is capable of anything he sets his mind to. I really think that this is a guy who could find a way to settle the war in Vietnam if he were a diplomat.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Clearly, in that moment we were both tipsy and pissed off.

I began to stagger off toward my room. A long line had formed outside the elevators, and at the rear Pete Rozelle had joined it. “Great,” I mumbled to myself. “Don’t tell me this freakin’ elevator stops at Saigon.” And then I waved and he nodded back, and I walked over and said something very pithy like, “You got a minute?”

“From the size of this line, I’ve got an hour,” he said and laughed. So we walked back to the lobby and sat on a low bench, and I thought, hyperbole aside, what if Kensil is right about this guy? What will be his next move?

“It’s none of my business,” I said, “but what the hell is a nice guy like you doing in a place like this? I mean, why don’t you get the hell out of the football business and do something interesting?”

“I thought about that,” he said. “A lot of people have talked to me about running for public office, but that’s really out of the question. But, yes, I thought about making a change for some of the reasons you said, but then I had to make a much more serious personal decision. I wanted to put together enough investments and things so that my daughter would never have to worry. And then I wanted to get other parts of my own life straight.”

Having worked hard to raise his daughter from a previous marriage, he would ultimately remarry. With that possibility in the back of his mind, he added, “I think now I just want to sit back and enjoy life.”

The Pete Rozelle I knew and the Pete Rozelle I would discover more than thirty years ago when I first decided to write this book always enjoyed life. But sit back? That would have been like telling the Mississippi River not to roll.

I never did ask him if he planned to go to Vietnam. Kensil being

Kensil, he never would have forgiven me for that. But it was on that night that the notion of this book began to take shape.

Why I didn't begin to write it then was very simple. After the merger I figured he would not occupy as much of my time anymore. In private I had found him to be shrewd, willing to concede a point, inquisitive on his own, and not afraid to tell an anecdote (which was invariably usable). And never after the fact did he append, "Of course, that's off the record."

I thought that our relationship from that point forward would be casual and that I would miss the way it had been. It seemed to me that all he had to do was sit back and let the good times roll. I was wrong. There were more worlds left to conquer for him than either of us knew. There would be more head-knocking with Al Davis . . . major labor troubles . . . and, of course, the United States Football League (USFL) lawsuit. I think the latter wore him down the most.

As a syndicated columnist I had continued to write about the man, the workings of his inner sanctum, and the trials and perils of the NFL. But in 1977 I began to do serious research for a book I knew I would one day write.

That was the year I told Pete what I planned to do, and he said he'd rather I didn't. He wanted to keep his private world private. I reminded him that whether he wanted it or not, somebody would write one, and then, as we sat in his office, I told him, "It's going to happen, but the truth is that nobody who would write one really knows who you are. At the bottom, I sure as hell don't. Give me the names of the people nobody knows . . . the people I should interview beyond the obvious football names . . . the people who shaped you. I want to start with them."

A week later Kensil called me with the message that Pete had thought about it and he would do it. We were to meet in his office. After that meeting I set out to find another Pete Rozelle to fill in the blanks on the public one I already knew.

For openers I got to interview people who have since passed away and without those meetings would never have been on the record about Rozelle. That side of it began as though I were trying to unravel a mystery. The football people I knew were already part of my work. They were easy.

But finding the past that became the prologue that would shape him into the dominant sports administrator of our time was not. The key to understanding that for me was light-years from the Sunday world in which Rozelle was king. I found it in the lush vineyard country of Sonoma, California, from a man named Myron De Long, who shared a critical slice of that past with him.

De Long and Rozelle grew up together in Lynwood, a suburb of Los Angeles. They went to the same schools, played on the same teams, and dated the same girls. They each went off to World War II, met again afterward, founded something called the Compton Junior College (JC) News Bureau, and later finished their educations at the University of San Francisco (USF), where they worked in the Athletic Department.

When De Long became an educator and Rozelle became football's leader with the golden touch, they remained friends. As Rozelle moved from one opportunity to the next—always on an upward path—most saw his growth as the residue of incredible luck. But De Long understood what Branch Rickey meant when he said, “Luck is the residue of design.”

All along De Long felt that Rozelle was destined for something special. He explained it to me like this: “I’ve had a lot of people tell me that all his life Pete happened to be in the right place at the right time. That would seem to indicate that most of which happened to him happened out of sheer luck. That could be true except for one thing. Every time . . . and I mean *every* time it happened . . . he knew exactly what to do. I mean, every time he was ready every step of the way. That wasn’t luck. That was Pete.” It was the stuff of which giant footprints were made.

David Stern, the commissioner of the National Basketball Association, knew exactly where the quality De Long spoke of led



Rozelle. “Baseball is America’s pastime,” he told me when discussing Pete. “Basketball is America’s game. But Pete Rozelle made football America’s passion.”

If you doubt that, then find me the president who would dare schedule a national television address to coincide with the kickoff on Super Bowl Sunday.

# 1

## In the Beginning

Just as the twig is bent, the tree's inclined.

—Alexander Pope

Now that I think of it, I can honestly say that we never once discussed his personal goals. He had a lot of friends, but to my knowledge he never had a confidant.

—Myron De Long, longtime boyhood friend

What Pete Rozelle was was the product of a classic, traditional small-town American upbringing. If there hadn't been a Lynwood, California, Norman Rockwell would have invented it. It was virtually an all-white town, an insular place that was home first to hardscrabble farmers and later known as one of America's first suburbs—just nine miles southwest of Los Angeles and home to more than a few workers at the Alcoa plant in nearby Vernon.

Across the line that was Alameda Street lay the crazy-quilt sprawl of Watts, even then an Afro-American enclave. Lives on either side of that line rarely mingled back then.

Looking through the prism of history, Lynwood was not just a dot on the expanding map of California. It was a kind of movie-lot definition of small-town America. The Lynwood of the 1930s and 1940s was Jimmy Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life* and Mickey Rooney in *Love Finds Andy Hardy*.

And why not? According to Bill Cunningham, a contemporary of Rozelle who served for years on the town's parks and recreation commission, Lynwood “may have been the place where the idea of the drive-in restaurant was born. We had one on Long Beach

Boulevard,” he says, and you get the idea that teenage Pete and his buddies went there as much for the carhops as the burgers.

“Growing up in Lynwood was a lot of simple but terrific things,” the late Myron De Long once told me. Theirs was a friendship that lasted beyond Lynwood and beyond the University of San Francisco, where they later worked in the sports information department.

De Long was the perfect source to reconstruct the way it was for the two of them and their friends in a Lynwood boyhood. When I met him it was in his home in the Sonoma wine country, where he had become a respected educator.

Remarking on the difference between their Lynwood days and the way it had become for that whole generation, he said, “The kids, they grow up too fast now, get sophisticated too soon. They’ve got all the answers right away—they think. The world has to be boxed and organized for them. They have never had the pure fun of just being young.”

In reaching into the back roads of his mind to re-create the way it was and what they shared during those years, he had the recall of a man who knows who he was and what that did for him and his friends. He did not let the calendar deceive him. Steve Owen, the old New York Football Giants coach, used to say that the more years a player is retired, the faster he thinks he used to run.

But Myron De Long still clearly saw the way it was. I asked him what Lynwood was to him and Pete, and the answer came right on the money.

Lynwood was a man named Bill Schliebaum [years later hired by Pete as an NFL official] who ran the playground and coached Duke Snider [later a great Dodgers center fielder] in three sports but who always had the time to shoot free throws for Cokes with you. You hung around in the summer and you got up a touch football game or you played some tennis, and in between Schliebaum had us hopping in the school yard.

It was date nights at the Arden Theater with the malt shop next door. Girls were just something that were there. You would date them,

but then you switched the next time out. You knew you were supposed to take them somewhere, so you did it. But it was never a big deal.

What Duke Snider did for our high school teams in Compton was a big deal for us, and when Pete, who worked part-time for the Long Beach newspaper, wrote about Duke and we got to read it in the paper, that was a big deal. You know, in high school they played on the same basketball team. And the biggest days of the fall were about running home after school to hear about the World Series on the radio. Now that was the biggest deal of all.

And amazing as it sounds, I can't recall ever seeing one of us—any one of us—hit somebody. Fights? It was something that just never happened.

De Long also remembered that a mutual friend named Louie Joseph had an older brother who had a car. "He would drive us into Los Angeles to the magical attraction of Gittleston's Twin Links, which to us was the Augusta National of miniature golf courses." There, among the tiny windmills and the metal chutes, they would battle for a quarter a man, winner take all. "You won't believe the way Pete could concentrate. We would stand behind him and jump up and down and yell, but we could never psyche him out in those matches. The thing is I never met a competitor so intense as he was. Even in college he played hearts as though it were life and death."

When they were in high school, oratorical contests were a big thing in Southern California. What made them an even bigger attraction was the fact that you could get time off from school to prepare. There was that and the monetary prize that the American Legion gave to the top three finishers. "Just about the time a big one was coming up, a bunch of us tried to get him to go ice skating," De Long recalled.

That was a big thing to most of our bunch, but I doubt that Pete had ever even been on ice skates until that day. He didn't want to come because he was working on his speech, and I guess you could say we actually kidnapped him.

Anyway, he gets to the rink, and we helped him around a few times, and then we put him on the end of a whip. Then somebody said, “Okay, turn him loose. He’s on his own.”

So he staggers off, and the next thing you know, there’s this tremendous crash, and he goes down face-first and there’s blood all over the ice. So now we get him home, and his mother is really furious at us. Then she wipes the blood off his face and sees there’s a tooth missing. For a minute I thought she was really going to kill us.

That was on Friday, and the contest was on Sunday. His folks took him to the dentist, and they got him a false tooth. Now he goes in the bathroom and looks in the mirror and starts to practice his speech, and he sounds like Donald Duck. His dad said he practiced all night and all day Saturday.

And darned if he didn’t go to the auditorium on Sunday and compete. He didn’t win, but it shows you how determined he was about anything and everything he ever wanted to do.

Determination and commitment. It didn’t happen by accident. Decades later when he was interviewed at the National Academy of Achievement, he spoke extensively about his father’s influence:

He did so much with what he had. He never went to college more or less because of the Depression. My dad had a great influence on me, particularly later, because I was so impressed with what he did with his life. He was already a young man during the Depression, and he had this local grocery store and before that, when I was very young, we had an earthquake—1932—while he was the manager of another store. He went down there during the after-shock and he couldn’t believe how bad it was.

Everything was shattered. He swept the Rinso and Oxydol together; sold it as Earthquake Soap. It was as though it were almost against his religion to waste anything. My mother and father made do with what they had and I’m not quite sure how they did it but, tough as it was for them, they gave my brother and me a genuine middle class home. They never made a big deal over money in front of us but we knew they were struggling and I have to say that my father, just through

his example, gave me a terrific sense of work ethic as an obligation without ever lecturing.

The Rozelle home was at 3705 Agnes Avenue, and they moved into it after two previous rental homes. When they made the move into their version of the Lynwood American dream, Pete was five years old. It was the only boyhood home he remembered.

“I am,” his father, Ray Rozelle, told me when I visited him there, “the longest continual resident of Lynwood, and since I don’t feel like going anywhere, I guess I’ll hold that title a little longer.”

He shared a lot of photos with me. They were yellowed by the passage of time, and as he spoke his vivid memories made it clear how important it was to him and his wife to create a family environment even in the toughest of times.

If you had to characterize Ray and Hazel, who had passed away in 1972 before I met him, you’d have to say they were part of a tough, proud slice of America that looked the Great Depression in the eye, went crashing to the canvas, and struggled to their feet before somebody could run over and give them a mandatory eight count.

In 1919 Ray Rozelle came out of the U.S. Navy and hustled for a job as a machinist. Then he met Hazel Healey, whose parents had come west from Illinois four years earlier, virtually at the start of America’s California-or-Bust migration. A year after that they were married. Eventually, they gambled their small savings on a neighborhood grocery store they called the Pacific Market.

Pete was born in 1926 and a younger brother, Dick, in 1929. That was the same year that America made a sharp economic U-turn. The Depression slammed across the face of America. Suddenly, Ray and Hazel were struggling to save their store. Ray told me:

I guess anybody who was around at that time recalls the way it was. The big crash hit. We tried to survive. What money I had, I put in three different banks. Nobody had much, and there wasn’t much you could do if you were in the grocery business except to give credit to the people who needed it, and there were so many of them . . . too many of them.

Well, you know how it was. I just gave too much credit. Then two of the three banks we had the money in went bust, and then FDR closed the third one when he shut them all down in 1932. I was working every night until after eight or nine, so I didn't get to spend much time with my boys in those days.

On top of that we had a terrible earthquake that destroyed half the town that same year. We managed to hang on until '39, and then I just saw there wasn't any way, so I went over to Alcoa and I was twenty-six years with them until I retired.

It is a fact of life of the Depression generation that the economic problems of the parents shaped the sons. The Rozelles, like many other parents in what then was a basically farming community, clung to the belief that none of this might have happened if they had been able to get more formal education. The academic competition among that generation's children, therefore, was intense all across the country.

Because there was no money in their homes, all of them hustled and studied and then hustled some more. Pete and his friends all mowed lawns and delivered groceries, but when he entered Compton High School, something happened that changed his life forever. He discovered journalism. A blend of circumstances and motivation turned him into an incredible part-time bread winner. It also gave him a sense of the power of communication that was so much a part of the incredible success he would eventually become. "Once he started doing work for the *Long Beach Press-Telegram*," Ray Rozelle recalled, "he always had money. There were times he could have maybe four hundred dollars in his drawer. Of course, part of that was because he never seemed to spend much. Living in Lynwood didn't require that."

But on the eve of Pete's scheduled matriculation at Compton High (Lynwood was still too small to have its own high school), Ray and Hazel made a decision that had a profound impact on his life. The principal of his elementary school had proposed to move him up an entire grade because of his gifted academic record.

Pete was athletic but undersized. The Rozelles wondered if his academic achievements might surpass his social life and his maturing. They were concerned that there might be a social gap between him and his classmates.

“Well, we had some neighbors who had moved to Modesto the year before,” Ray recalled. “They had this ranch, and we thought why couldn’t we hold him out a year and let him go on up there and work on the ranch so he could fill out physically and do some social maturing? He went up there for ten months, and he worked with horses and pigs and cows. He set up a basketball hoop to improve his game when he had time off. When he came home we were amazed. I think he crammed two years of maturity and physical growth into those ten months.”

The sabbatical from school had another far-reaching effect. It put him into a social group of classmates that created the bond with friends like De Long and Joseph and a number of others that lasted all through their adult lives.

Both his father and De Long remembered the adolescent Pete Rozelle as a kid with an enormous drive to get things done but with little interest in ego or ceremony. As a case in point, it is worth noting that neither of them attended their subsequent graduations from Compton Junior College after the war. They chose, instead, to go fishing.

Back when they were seniors in 1944 at Compton High, Lynwood, like the rest of their generation all around the country, began to change. Familiar faces disappeared, scattered to the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific. World War II was breaking up that old gang of Pete’s.

“I remember,” Rozelle told me, “that when we were juniors in high school, Myron had gone to one of those grade-B movies at the Arden—I don’t recall which one, but it was probably a ‘John Wayne in the Pacific’ kind of flick—and the next day he told me, ‘This is personal for me now. I got to get into the navy.’ Well, I felt the same way. My dad was navy in World War I, and Myron and my other friends had their minds made up, so I guess mine was made up, too.”



Rozelle tried to enlist three times and was turned down all three. But a challenge to Rozelle was like a debt unpaid. Because the military's left hand never seemed to know what its right hand was doing, Rozelle finally got his wish.

"It was the damnedest thing," his dad told me.

He got rejected each time because he was color-blind. They wouldn't let him enlist, but then they drafted him. So Pete goes over to the draft board in Los Angeles, and there is this huge line. It must have stretched out longer than a city block.

Well, it was getting near lunch, and one of the guys comes out a side door and sees Pete and he hands him some money and asks, "Will you get me a quart of milk?" and Pete says he will if the guys saves his place, because Pete is thinking that maybe when he gets back, the guy will let him in early.

When he comes back with the milk and knocks on the side door, the fellow takes him inside and asks what he wants—army or navy. The guys tells him, "Okay, it's navy if that's what you prefer, but all these other guys are going into the army." After three tries, he gets a guy a quart of milk and he's in the navy.

After his basic training he was assigned to a ship—and what a ship, a rusty old bucket of bolts called the *Gardoqui*, named after a Spanish gunboat captured during the Spanish-American War. The navy converted it into a class of tanker called the Double Eagle but did not rename it. It had been refitted, and its keel was laid down at the Kearny shipyard in New Jersey in 1921. The USS Missouri it was not.

"It was an old standard tanker," Rozelle recalled, not exactly the pride of the Pacific fleet.

What it was was kind of a seagoing filling station. You go out someplace and wait, and sooner or later people came to you. It was hardly the stuff of which war movies were made.

We had a small crew (seventy men including officers), and everyone had to stand wheel watch. It was so old; it wasn't electronic and

it was a big, old heavy thing, and you were forever trying to compensate because it was so tough to keep it on course.

Right after the war ended, they sent us into Tokyo Bay, and that became kind of a dramatic thing. We were getting close to the mainland, and a lookout spotted a floating mine that had broken loose from its mooring. It was headed straight toward us, and I remember we had to make a hard right to avoid it. But, really, that was the highlight of my career as far as danger was concerned.

Two months later we had discharged our cargo and headed back to sea, back to Pearl Harbor, through the Panama Canal to Mobile. We arrived in January. That's pretty much my entire navy career.

"Not exactly," I suggested. "Myron De Long told me that you ran the football pools on the *Gardoqui*. Did you?"

"Well, I don't quite remember that," he said, but his face lit up in the kind of aurora borealis of a smile that was a Rozelle trademark.

I will admit that on at least on one occasion, I did engage in a little freelance bookmaking.

I knew a little more about football than most of the crew did. Most of them were Catholic, and they were great Notre Dame fans. That's all they were talking about that November because Note Dame was getting ready to play Army. Now this was the Blanchard-Davis era, and Army was loaded, one of the best college football teams ever.

Well, all these guys did was talk about the Irish this and the Irish that, and so I said, "Well, suppose I take Army, and I'll give you and the Irish eight points."

Rozelle laughed again and said it was the easiest money he ever made. Army won by a mere 49-0.

"Isn't that gambling?"

"Well," he said, then he paused and threw back his head and laughed, "not if you knew football."

So here came Pete Rozelle, retired yeoman, retired "bookmaker," and hungry young man, marching home after the war, and if you studied him closely at that stage, you would have had to conclude

that there was very little difference between him and millions of other young men in the same circumstance. At loose ends and thinking about a career in journalism (his dream was to become sports editor of the *Los Angeles Times*) and entitled to financing from the GI Bill, Rozelle returned to Compton and enrolled in the local junior college.

Among the returning servicemen in that freshman class was his old buddy Myron De Long. “A lot of things began to happen that year,” De Long recalled. “They obviously shaped his life, and in a way they shaped mine as well, because when they were over, I knew what I didn’t want to be.”

The event that had the biggest long-range impact on Rozelle’s ultimate calling was taking place a continent away in New York City. Even as the old *Gardoqui* was docking in Mobile for decommissioning, the NFL owners were meeting to vote on a request by owner Dan Reeves to move his Cleveland franchise to Los Angeles.

The Rams had beaten the Washington Redskins a month earlier to win the 1945 league championship. But theirs was a typical NFL story for many owners. Champions or not, the team had lost fifty thousand dollars that year. And the future did not look any better.

The rival All-America Football Conference’s Cleveland Browns were for real. Their league was headed for NFL merger, and the Browns were the hottest football team in either league. The prospect of two Cleveland football teams was unacceptable. It scared the hell out of Reeves.

With a guaranteed lease offer from the Los Angeles Coliseum in hand, Reeves sought permission to move. He was denied on the very first vote. Enraged, he threatened to walk out and sell the club. Then one of the lodge brothers wondered how they were going to explain that the NFL, still seeking a significant fan base in many of its cities, had lost its championship franchise.

Off that rare burst of logic, they took another vote, and the Rams were headed to Los Angeles. Compton Junior College had a nationally acclaimed football program with appropriate facilities. The Rams set up their preseason training camp there.

Meanwhile, Rozelle and De Long, on campus with tuition paid by the GI Bill, were hustling once again. They had set up the Compton News Bureau to add to their walking-around money, with Compton JC football as the vehicle.

“A guy named Maxwell Stiles was doing the Rams’ publicity,” De Long recalled, “and Pete knew him from the days when Pete was working part-time at the *Long Beach Press-Telegram*. So he walks into our office and asks us to put together the programs for their preseason games.”

That’s when Rozelle first met Tex Schramm, who would have a major impact on him within a few years, and Reeves, who would have an even bigger one.

“So the Rams came down to Compton that summer,” De Long said, “and it was like we woke up suddenly in the middle of Fairyland. I mean, here we were, two kids just out of the navy, and now we were running around the practice field, rubbing shoulders with Tom Harmon and Kenny Washington and Bob Waterfield. And there was Jane Russell, Waterfield’s fiancée and Hollywood pinup queen, at every practice.”

For De Long, this was heady stuff. But for Pete, it was another step in valuable on-the-job training. He was learning his job, and as a bonus he got fifty bucks for putting out the exhibition-game programs. To quote De Long, “Pete was in football heaven.”

Then the Rams left for LA to start the season, but they didn’t miss a beat because Compton had a terrific football team that year. They did their publicity and covered Compton for the local papers. “We felt they were good enough to represent the West in the Junior Rose Bowl,” De Long said. They were right. They were young and eager, and suddenly they were caught up in an aura of self-importance. “I’d be a liar if I said we didn’t feel like that,” De Long admitted. Here they were just a few months out of the service, giving out radio interviews and going into newspaper offices and planting stories. “Looking back now, I can see what was happening,” De Long said with genuine insight. “Pete was getting ready for a career, and I was just having a hell of a lot of fun.”

The following year we were so sure that Compton would be back in the game that we sat up all night writing press releases and stuffing envelopes. Cameron College [of Oklahoma] was the visiting team. Then Pete calls down to the newspaper to see if the selection committee has made a decision about the home team. The guy tells him they did, and they didn't pick us. They picked Chaffey Community College.

I think that over all the years I've known him, that's the only time I ever saw him really angry. Angry? Hell, he was furious. We were tearing up all the press releases and cursing and stomping. Looking back, I can see that both of us acted as though it were some kind of directly personal insult.

They took it so personally that the heart went out of the Compton JC News Bureau after that. With graduation on the horizon, they shut it down. But before they did, an unexpected opportunity would step out of the shadows to put the future czar of professional football's life on the road to his place in history.

Indirectly, it began with Louis Joseph, the young man whose brother, Emile, had been the wheelman on those pre—World War II expeditions in Compton to play miniature golf. Joseph, a determined but never gifted athlete who had played on the Compton High School basketball team with Rozelle and Snider, desperately wanted to go on to college. Through sheer self-discipline, he had made himself an acceptable player. With a plan that would have done honor to the legend of Frank Merriwell, it was his idea to enroll at Notre Dame, try out for basketball, and win a free ride.

But fairy tales usually remain just that. He didn't make it, but while he was there he met a young man from Milwaukee who was trying to do the same thing. His name was Paul Schramka, and along with Joseph he was also cut, but a friend told him that Pete Newell, the coach at the University of San Francisco, was looking for what he euphemistically called "physically motivated" players. Schramka, who never threw an elbow he didn't like, headed for the city they were beginning to call Baghdad by the Bay.

Newell found a use for his limited skills. Later when Rozelle

and De Long would wind up on the *USF* campus, they dubbed his forte “the Schramka Sacrifice.” It was a highly complex maneuver worthy of a caveman. The opponent had the ball . . . the opponent had the shot . . . and then the opponent had two free throws, because Schramka had put him up in the eleventh row, and it is very difficult to shoot from there with a guy from Milwaukee attached to your sternum.

So Schramka became a substitute and a scholarship player with the *USF* Dons. That season Newell took the team south to play the University of Southern California (*usc*). Rozelle and De Long were at the game, and because Schramka had heard about him from Louis Joseph during their brief stay at Notre Dame, he introduced them to his coach.

Newell asked them about the Compton News Bureau and how it worked. Then he told them, “I may be calling you guys. We are going to need some help with publicity.”

Joe Kuharich, a new football coach, had been hired. Newell’s basketball team was on the brink of big-time results, and both would play a major role in Rozelle’s future.

The future commissioner of the *NFL* always did think a jump or two ahead. “We both wanted to get our four-year degrees,” Rozelle recalled when I asked him what motivated them to head for *USF*. “I didn’t think the academics were going to interfere with the job. I knew that sports were really my life. I got good grades. I got mostly *As* and some *Bs* all through school, but I really crashed to get them. I didn’t stay up with my studies as I should have to really learn. I’d cram for a test and get an *A* or a *B*. So now if I could get a degree and a salary [he would get both] and still stay in sports, I figured *USF* would be a good deal.”

“I don’t know what he got,” De Long told me, “and I really never cared. I was working toward a degree, getting five bucks a month for laundry, and I was single and we had the *GI Bill*. I was having fun, and in my heart I just wanted to knock around until I figured out what I really wanted to do with my life. With Pete, it was different. I’m sure he already knew.”

And as would happen so often in the future, he was headed for the right place at the right time. Swept along by the postwar boom, a group of local businessmen were interested in making USF a major sports attraction for the city. You can find similar groups at almost every major college in America. They are called boosters, and they believe that winning teams will make their schools something special. This group had money and influence. There were five of them headed by a local construction tycoon named Charlie Harney. Newell, who saw where the school's athletic program was headed, convinced Harney to interview Roselle and De Long. Realizing they wanted degrees and the money was secondary, Harney hired them.

“Right from the start,” Rozelle told me, “San Francisco had a special attraction for me. It's a tight geographical city like New York, and I like that. I like a well-ordered place.”

All his adult life, it remained a favorite for him. To use his word, what he liked the most was its “character.” But his arrival at USF was not an “I Left My Heart in San Francisco” kind of social thing. It was 1948 and he felt he was on his way toward something, and through yet another set of strange circumstances he had come to the place that would be the next vehicle for it.

The University of San Francisco is a Jesuit school located near Golden Gate Park in the heart of the city. Like the whole American spectrum in general and urban colleges in particular, both its scope and its role underwent massive changes in the years immediately following World War II. For a time the returning GIs even changed the way they dealt with that mission.

These were young men in a hurry. They had been ripped summarily out of the mainstream of the educational process. Some of them had been to places their geography books forgot. Some of them had seen things that once viewed would change their lives forever. Now they were back in school. They were not the kind of freshmen whom sweet varsity Sue used to dream about.

On the plus side, the colleges saw a sudden glut of tuition money generated by the GI Bill. Schools like USF were particularly affected.

Building space had always been at a premium for urban campuses. Suddenly, patchwork fields of surplus army Quonset huts became America's new halls of ivy.

Populated with mature students, dreaming of the kind of physical and academic expansion that never before seemed possible, usf followed the route so many others of its type undertook. It was determined to generate new attention and prestige through athletic success.

Newell was already ensconced as the basketball coach. He was joined by Kuharich, a terrific recruiter of football talent. He would prove it eventually as the head coach at Notre Dame and with the Cards and Eagles in the NFL. Newell was so successful he would eventually jump to the University of California at Berkley. They were Rozelle's first master mentors.

So, this is the way it was, therefore, when Rozelle and De Long arrived on the usf campus, fresh from the minor league glories of Compton JC that, as De Long explained, "we were young enough to have secretly thought we were responsible for." The year was 1948. It was a time of infinite hope and excitement all across America.

Within the span of that first year, two things happened that convinced Rozelle that there was a very special and personal thrill when people suddenly sat up and took notice of you. And the unlikeliest early example came from the usf soccer team, who won and won in total secrecy.

Then Rozelle found the Prince. Well, there was some debate as to whether he was actually a prince. Rozelle thought he was. De Long told me he was not as sure. But he was, indeed, wearing tribal robes when Rozelle found him waiting tables in the campus dining hall. Things being what they were with usf soccer, if you were trying to promote it and one of your players said he was a prince and you thought people would like to see a prince play soccer, then you didn't stop to ask him to let you see the royal birthstone.

Rozelle and De Long hit the office mimeograph machine so hard it's a wonder it didn't explode. By the time they had a full



head of steam going, the prince had become a daily item in all the Bay Area papers.

“Well,” Rozelle told me, “the truth is that we were pretty darn good. The school thought so, and it went out and rented Kezar Stadium. We had never drawn a crowd over, say, five hundred until then, but we worked like hell. We played Temple there, and we drew ten thousand people. It was then that I realized, if you sold it to the media properly, people would come.”

At the same time, the city of San Francisco awakened one morning to discover it had a basketball team. It may have been the first time the town paid any attention to that game since Hank Luisetti—credited with invention of the running one-hand shot—led Stanford past Long Island University before a crowd of more than seventeen thousand at Madison Square Garden.

But now it discovered—through the dedicated efforts of Pete Rozelle and Myron De Long—that basketball was, indeed, alive and well and very much worth watching in the City by the Bay. It was not the kind of team the school would offer the city later when Bill Russell would arrive, but it would do very nicely.

Led by a big, strong kid named Don Lofgran, who later would have a brief whirl at pro basketball, and a pint-size guard named Rene Herrerias, the Dons would move on to New York City and win the National Invitational Tournament (NIT) at Madison Square Garden. Rozelle made sure that the nation’s media capital knew who they were even before they were invited.

In fact, what he did helped them get invited. They would finish the year at 25-5 under Newell, but long before that he got the attention of Madison Square Garden’s key officials. Rozelle launched what De Long referred to as his “Mutt and Jeff campaign,” sending out pictures of six-foot-five Lofgran with his left arm extended horizontally well above the top of the five-foot-six Herrerias’s head. He named the duo after a pair of popular comic strip heroes who had a similar height difference. Newspapers everywhere picked up the photo.

It was a beginning, and as the ball began to roll, Rozelle sensed

that something even bigger was surely going to happen. Actually, it was already in motion across town at San Francisco Junior College.

A local kid named Ollie Matson was a 9.6 sprinter and the best power runner Kuharich had ever seen. Earlier as a high school kid, he had competed in the national 400-meter trials for the Olympics. Four years later he would qualify for the Games in Helsinki and win two medals. The staff was shocked when Kuharich suddenly announced that Matson was coming to USF. De Long remembered:

It happened so fast we couldn't believe it. We used to play poker with Newell and Pete Woolpert, his assistant, and some of the football coaches, and all they talked about was Matson.

Football recruiting was almost impossible here because we were up against all those California glamour schools getting the real good kids. How do you compete for Saturday's heroes with Stanford and Cal Berkeley and further down the coast with USC and UCLA [University of California at Los Angeles]? We were an urban school with no league affiliation on top of that, and we had trouble just putting together a schedule.

Getting Matson really stoked Pete's imagination. He said, "If he comes here, this place is suddenly going to be crawling with guys who can actually play the game."

Rozelle demonstrated there was a touch of the prophet within him. As soon as Matson set foot on campus, it seemed like an army of huge young men in search of educational enlightenment and football fame flooded the campus. Their high school reputations were spectacular, and the names fall off the tongue like the roster of a college football Valhalla. They included future all-pros such as Dick Stanfel, Bob St. Clair, Gino Marchetti, Ed Brown, Red Stephens, Ralph Thomas, Roy Barni, and Joe Scudero. And, of course, Ollie Matson.

Kuharich had a football team and a half in the making. And Rozelle realized the future was his—but with a set of incredible problems to overcome. He was promoting a team that he was sure

would bid for national attention, but it was a squad with no home field of its own and no schedule that could make any money.

The West Coast teams, with the exception of Loyola of Los Angeles, which was in the same bind, wouldn't dream of risking their prestige against a football team like *USF*. It was De Long's recollection that Rozelle's efforts to overcome those handicaps nearly drove him bananas. "He would do almost anything to get *USF* into the newspaper—any newspaper. Studying was never a big deal with either of us, so we'd be sitting around the room at night, and suddenly he'd say, 'Why don't we go over to the office and do a special story on that third-string tackle from Hammond, Indiana, so we can send it to his hometown paper?'" So we would go over to that drafty old army barracks that was our office, and I'd write it and he'd look at it and make me rewrite it. I mean, he just never stopped."

In 1951 the Dons came east to play Fordham University. Fordham was no longer the Fordham of Sleepy Jim Crowley and Eddie Danowski and Vince Lombardi. But it was a prestigious name, and, more important to Rozelle, this was New York City, the communications capital of the world. He had seen firsthand what it had meant to *USF* when it came to town for the *NIT* a few years earlier. Now he was pounding on the doors of every newspaper in town, knowing he had a quality product to sell.

So what if the game would be played in a battered old relic called Triborough Stadium, a facility as vital to Manhattan as, say, the Burma Road was to Boston? Reporters would be there—reporters from all over the Great Megalopolis. They would get to see Ollie Matson, and Rozelle was sure their response would be staggering.

A crowd mercifully announced at fifteen thousand found its way to the crumbling old ballpark. People who knew the level of Fordham football at that time insisted that half of them were actually confused motorists seeking directions to the George Washington Bridge.

But with a little help from Mr. Matson, the secret was out. *USF* could play virtually any other college team in the country if

they had the guts to schedule the Dons. Matson took the opening kickoff and ran it back 94 yards. In the fourth quarter with the game tied at 19–19, Matson took another kickoff and ran it back 90 yards to win it.

Afterward, an erudite sportswriter from the *New York Herald Tribune* named Harold Rosenthal wrote, “For once a college press agent told a reporter the truth about one of his school’s football players. Pete Rozelle promised earlier in the week that Ollie Matson would prove he is special and yesterday he did.” It was the first time Pete Rozelle’s name had ever appeared in a New York newspaper.

The Dons went undefeated that year. Matson scored twenty-one touchdowns and gained 1,556 yards. Among the team’s victims were the San Diego Naval Training Center, Santa Clara, and Loyola of Los Angeles, the “other team” the big boys would not play because of its quarterback, Don Klosterman, later a scout, general manager, and close friend of Rozelle.

Loyola was relegated to the same lower tier as USF. Klosterman was so versatile he could embarrass all of the neighboring big boys if they agreed to play Loyola. The same was true of USF, and its talented roster neighbors like Cal, Stanford, and Santa Clara refused to schedule them.

But down in Stockton, California, the College of the Pacific, once a Rose Bowl team, smelled money. A full house for Pacific’s games was rare. It saw the value in a David versus Goliath game. When it agreed to play USF, more than forty thousand people sardined into the local ballpark to see the “mystery” Dons take on what was then the College (late to become University) of the Pacific, the most prestigious foe a USF football team had ever faced. Also in the crowd that day was the Orange Bowl selection committee.

Rozelle, his propaganda machine, and Kuharich’s players were on the verge of a miracle. The Dons were awesome that day. They rolled to a shockingly easy 47–14 victory. Rozelle went out and bought suntan lotion, and, look out, Miami, the Dons are ready.

All they had to do was wait for the bid. They were all dressed up but, as it turned out, with no place to go. They turned down the bid when the Orange Bowl insisted that two players—Matson and Burl Tolar (later hired by Rozelle as an NFL on-field official)—stay home. They were African Americans, and the committee didn't want them anywhere near the segregated Orange Bowl.

They were denied their ultimate moment in the spotlight. But eight members of that team were later chosen in the upcoming NFL draft. The pros had noticed them despite their unbelievable triumphs without a home field or a major league schedule.

Rozelle had successfully mounted a brilliant publicity campaign with an incredible sense of purpose. “We had worked like hell,” De Long said.

We had this ancient typewriter and this mimeograph machine that weighed a ton, and we would lug them to the top of Kezar for our home games. We were among the first to provide play-by-play for our writers. We never stopped planning.

His big scene was the eight-piece band he put together to play “Goodnight, Irene” after each touchdown while the student body waved white handkerchiefs at the other stands. But what I really know is that he wanted to feel that he had been able to help create *his* All-American—take a kid at a little school like this and make him more important than stars at Notre Dame or USC.

From the moment that Matson first showed up here, Pete worked day and night on him. He once told me, “Don't laugh. He is going to be *my* All-America.” He played it that way whenever he got the chance.

Matson was a great runner in the Olympics later on. Pete must have read that story about Jim Thorpe going to a meet and the other coach blowing up and yelling, “You mean your school has a two-man team?” and Thorpe said, “No, the other guy is the manager.” “Well, Pete, so he tried it with Matson. He entered him in the Fresno relays as the USF track team, and he wasn't lying because USF didn't have a track team. Ollie was it and Pete paid the entry money, and Ollie went out and won his events.”

They were exciting times. Rozelle was a regular visitor to Bay Area newspapers, and he often recalled those times as golden. He acquired his first car, a battered old Plymouth, but dating was hardly a formalized thing. There was very little of a social life except for the nightly hearts games that De Long recalled as “pure aggression. We played for very little money and a lot of blood. The cursing and the table pounding were rather intense. One night we pushed our next-door neighbor, Father Houk, to the limit of Christian tolerance. He knocked softly on the door and said ‘Gentlemen, I really hate to say this, but I think your language is getting a bit vivacious.’”

And then there was the day Rozelle picked up the office phone. Newell was on the other end. He had a handkerchief over the handset, and the conversation went like this:

“You have a praaayer name Wirree Wong?”

“Yes, sir. We have a player named Willie Wong. Who are you?”

“Yesss. I am Mr. Woo of China Press. People of Chinatown demand you say why Wirree Wong no praaay in games.”

“Well, sir, he’s only five-foot-five and . . .”

“Wirree Wong no praaay because he Chinese.”

“Oh, no, sir. Nothing like that. Our coach, Mr. Kuharich, would never . . .”

“Then why he no praaay? You tell big rie.”

It was Newell, with a handkerchief over the phone’s speaker. He had Rozelle squirming for a half hour.

For De Long, it was a time of self-discovery. For Rozelle, it was something very different, another set of emotional landmarks on the road map that was taking him to what he was meant to do. But even as the two grew closer in understanding each other, they were drifting toward their separate destinies. According to De Long, “I never really wanted journalism, and he wanted to be the sports editor of the *LA Times*. I wanted a career in education. It was time for me to move in that direction. And Pete, well, he was perfect for what he finally became.”