

THIRD DOWN AND A WAR TO GO

THE ALL-AMERICAN 1942 WISCONSIN BADGERS

BY TERRY FREI

The following is adapted from Third Down and a War to Go: The All-American 1942 Wisconsin Badgers by Terry Frei, published this month by the Wisconsin Historical Society Press. For more information about this title, see the inside back cover of this issue.

As Veterans Day 2000 approached, my father was struggling. Jerry Frei was seventy-six, and heart, knee, and circulation problems limited his mobility. That was bad enough, but he also felt himself slipping away from the football community.

The sport was his occupational passion. After playing for the University of Wisconsin, he served as a high school and college coach, primarily at the University of Oregon; then he was a longtime offensive line coach in the National Football League, with the Denver Broncos, Tampa Bay Buccaneers, and Chicago Bears. Finally, he became a scout of college talent for the Broncos.

In late 2000, I mentioned to my father that I wanted to talk with him about his war service for a *Denver Post* column to run the Sunday before Veterans Day. He was reluctant. I emphasized that I would portray him as a representative of a generation we hadn't thanked enough and that it would be a "nice, little article."

My father and I went into his den. We began by talking about the start of the war, which came when he was a Wisconsin freshman, and of the time he spent at the UW before becoming a World War II pilot. Throughout the conversation, a point of reference was the 1942 Badgers team picture on his wall. Jerry Frei was number 65 in the fourth row, the eighteen-year-old sophomore guard from Stoughton, Wisconsin.

I had known for years that this Badgers team included famous players. Elroy "Crazylegs" Hirsch had visited our

home in Eugene, and during a vacation we had visited him at the Wisconsin Athletic Department offices in Camp Randall Stadium. Dad had coached Hall of Fame players, but he sounded like an awestruck eighteen-year-old when talking about Dave Schreiner, the '42 team's senior All-American end. Fullback Pat Harder, the Badger next to my father in the team picture, became an NFL star and then an NFL umpire, and I knew that offensive line coach Jerry Frei thought Harder called too darned many holding penalties. (Dad thought that about all NFL umpires.)

I also realized that many of the players in the picture, like my father, had gone off to serve in World War II—and that not all of them had returned.

The column ran the day before Veterans Day.

After my father's death three months later, as I kept looking at the team picture, which my mother now had hanging in her retirement community apartment, I decided I wanted to know more about what it was like for the players to go through that 1942 season, knowing that they, like so many of their contemporaries, soon would be in another uniform, risking their lives for their country.

The 1942 Wisconsin Badgers were a terrific football team. As young men in that era, they were extraordinary, yet typical. Among other reasons, that's why theirs is an All-American story.

DAY OF INFAMY

Around 1:30 in the afternoon of December 7, 1941, Erwin Kissing strolled into Rennebohm's Pharmacy, on the edge of



Photo from the author's collection

Jerry Frei got his wings and became a full-fledged AAF pilot at age nineteen.

the University of Wisconsin campus. The stocky freshman halfback from nearby Monticello was proud to be considered one of the athletes on campus. Only his parents and his professors called him Erwin. A few called him Erv. Almost everyone else knew him as Booby.

As Kissling paid for his newspaper and headed out, another student rushed through the door. Kissling had never seen him before and never would again. But this guy had to tell somebody. He settled for Booby.

“Hey,” he breathlessly informed Kissling, “the Japs just bombed Pearl Harbor!”

“What are you talking about?” Kissling asked.

“The Japs just bombed Pearl Harbor!”

Kissling hadn’t noticed that at the lunch counter, two other Badger freshmen—halfback Jim Regan and quarterback Jack Wink—were having coffee after finishing their meals. As they talked, the guy in the white shirt behind the counter suddenly turned up the radio.

As other students crowded behind them to listen, Regan and Wink looked at one another. It was a look exchanged across America that morning. It meant “Our lives have just changed.”

Many of the Badgers weren’t aware of the events of the morning until they heard excited newspaper hawkers scrambling down the Madison residential streets. Four freshmen players—Elroy Hirsch, Bob Rennebohm, Hank Olshanski, and Russ Schultz—lived on the upper floor of the house at 812 West Johnson Street, renting rooms from the kindly Mr. and Mrs. Hanley.

“We didn’t have our radios on,” says Rennebohm, a distant relation of the family that owned the drugstores. “We were studying. We heard a guy yelling ‘EXTRA!’ on the street. So we ran out, bought a paper, and turned on the radio. We knew we’d be going somewhere by the time it was over.”

Amid a final-thing atmosphere both on campus and in the football program, the Badgers got off to a strong start in the ’42 season.

THIRD DOWN . . .

As the undefeated Badgers prepared to play the Great Lakes Naval Training Station’s team in Chicago’s Soldier Field in mid-October, Congress made it clear it was about to lower the draft age from twenty to eighteen. The youngest players on the ’42 Badger varsity, Jerry Frei and Otto Breitenbach, wouldn’t turn twenty until June 1944, but even they already were eighteen. While most of the Badgers were already in various reserves, the lowering of the draft age would mean the acceleration of callups. Unlike the Badgers, many men on campus hadn’t yet made their military choices. On October 15 about 1,500 students attended a joint presentation by representatives of the Army, Navy, and Marine



Photo courtesy of the University of Wisconsin Sports Information Department

The T formation looked better in pictures, as in this shot of the usual 1942 starting lineup, but the Badgers more often ran out of the Box.

*The line, from left to right as the players face the camera:
RE Dave Schreiner, RT Paul Hirsbrunner, RG Ken Currier,
C Fred Negus, LG Red Vogds, LT Bob Baumann, LE Bob Hanzlik.
QB Jack Wink takes the snap in front of RH Mark Hoskins,
FB Pat Harder, and LH Elroy Hirsch.*

Corps at the Memorial Union. The crowd was too large for the Union Theater, so the speeches were piped into other rooms.

That Saturday at Soldier Field, the Navy team led 7–0 at the half. In the third quarter, Elroy Hirsch raced 61 yards for the Badgers’ first touchdown. Pat Harder’s extra point tied the score, 7–7.

Later in the third quarter, the Sailors seemed on the verge of regaining the lead. Great Lakes reached the Wisconsin 34, and Smith threw a deep pass for Carl Mulleneaux, just across the goal line. Jim Regan was covering Mulleneaux and went up to fight for the ball. “I had the eye on the ball and was going to intercept it, and I kind of slipped,” Regan recalls. Jack Wink, the sophomore quarterback, cut in front of both of them and made the interception, a yard deep in the end zone.

At the 10, Wink cut to his right. At the 12, Hugh McCullough missed him, and Wink made a beeline for the left sideline. Guards Ken Currier and Red Vogds made great blocks, and Wink burst out of traffic at the 40 and went on for the 101-yard return for the go-ahead touchdown. Because of Wink’s circuitous route and his lack of speed, the Badgers swear it might have been the most time-consuming 101-yard run in the history of football. “Jack wasn’t the fastest guy in the world,” says a laughing John Roberts, another Badger guard. “He was kind of shifty, though.”

Harder’s extra point attempt was deflected and went wide, leaving the score 13–7.

That’s how it ended.

On the train ride to Madison the next morning, many of the Badgers played cards. Senior tackle Bob Baumann took a nap, holding the captain’s game ball. Others read the Chicago papers, noticing that Francis Powers of the *Chicago Daily News* wrote that Hirsch “ran like a demented duck. His crazy legs were gyrating in six different directions all at the same time.”

Hey, Ghost, this says you have crazy legs!

Hey, Crazylegs!

The rest of the season, Hirsch was still primarily referred to as Elroy “Ghost” Hirsch, but Powers’s story and the teasing of Hirsch got the Crazylegs name in casual circulation. Eventually, it supplanted Ghost and even Elroy. “Anything’s better than ‘Elroy,’ ” Hirsch says, smiling.

A month later, Hirsch’s father, Otto, was part of the Dad’s Day festivities at Camp Randall Stadium. The players’ fathers were brought in the locker room after the Badgers defeated Minnesota 20–6 to finish 8-1-1 for the season. The *Wisconsin State Journal*’s Roy L. Matson reported the proceedings in the paper the next morning.

Bert Schreiner called out to his son, All-American end Dave Schreiner, as he crossed the room. “Davey! Davey!” he exclaimed. “Oh, Davey, what a game!”

Hirsch greeted his father.

“Hi, Pop. How are you, Pop?”

Elroy reached over and pulled his pop’s hat down, scrunching it on his head. Otto responded with a warm hug. “Aw, Pop,” Elroy said, embarrassed. Then he noticed that a photographer wanted to take their picture. “Hey, Pop,” he said, “you better fix your hat.”

Seconds later, they faced the camera.

Outside, the Wisconsin band was playing its post-game show. The strains of “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition” were audible in the dressing room.

The sting from the November 7 loss at Iowa was diluted, although the Badgers realized it had cost them the Big Ten title. Ohio State beat Michigan 21–7 that day to clinch the championship by a half-game over the Badgers. “I’ve never been more proud of a bunch of fellows in my whole life than I am this afternoon,” Stuhldreher said.

In the press box, *Wisconsin State Journal* columnist Roundy Coughlin wrote for his Sunday readers: “Boy, I’ll bet the Wisconsin boys in service celebrated last night when that score went out Wisconsin 20, Minnesota 6. I’ll bet the closest tap room got an awful work out. Did Schreiner ever play a game. Did you see him ride those blockers. That’s prettiest football picture I ever saw. All the printer has to do is get the type set up for Dave Schreiner as the All-American right end.” He also had kind words for Schreiner’s Lancaster buddy, halfback Mark Hoskins. “The blocking and tackling by Hoskins was really a thing of beauty and he had that winning spirit in his body.”

Downtown, the bars and taverns were doing ring-it-up business. A bellman told the *State Journal* it was the busiest single night in Madison since the celebration following the repeal of prohibition.

“I think we sensed it at the time, that it was never going to be the same, that it was the last hurrah of carefree college kids,” says Tom Butler, who celebrated the victory that night

as a UW freshman. “Our age of innocence was over. I always said we were born in the middle of the roaring ’20s, we grew up during the Great Depression, and graduated from high school and went into World War II.”

By the end of the season, Schreiner was certain of his military decision. He wasn’t going to medical school, and it seems a safe bet that even if he had remained on that academic track, he wouldn’t have accepted the deferment. He didn’t want to watch others serve. His partial color blindness ruled out trying to become a pilot and joining Hoskins in the Army Air Forces reserves, so he decided the best course was to follow many of his teammates and sign up for the Marine Reserves.

After the Christmas break, Hoskins and the other Badgers went back to school, but for the most part their hearts weren’t in it. Most of the underclassmen stopped attending class and studying. “We should have all flunked out of school,” says Jim Regan. “When football season ended, I got all Fs. Most of us did. Very few of us went to class.”

Most of the Badgers in the Army Air Forces, including Jerry Frei, were indeed called in to the service before the end of the second semester, in early 1943. Hoskins even tried to speed up the process. The Badgers’ potential flyers were so eager, they delegated their team cocaptain to go to Chicago,

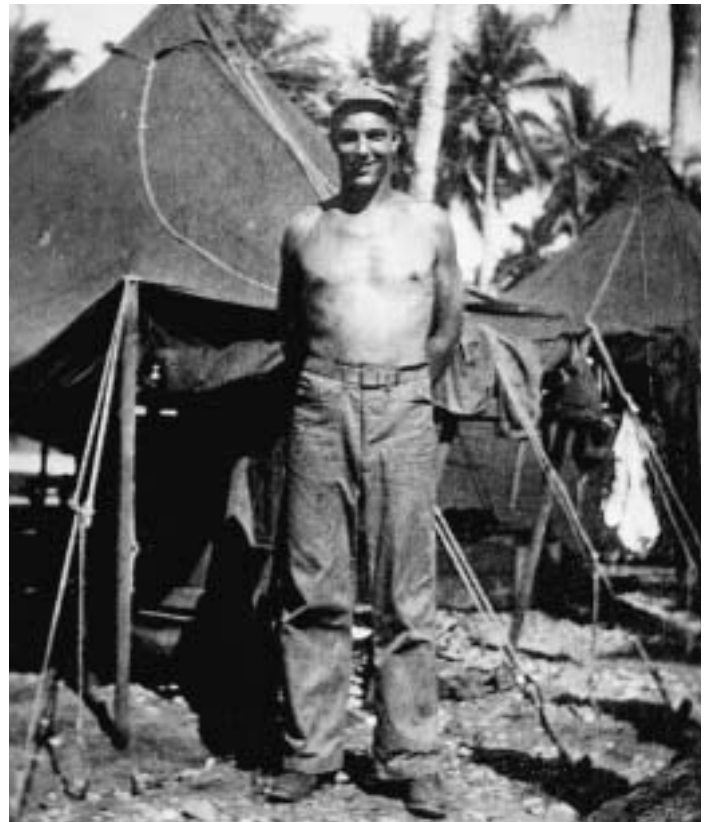


Photo courtesy of Judy Corfield

Dave Schreiner in the Pacific.

where Hoskins brashly made an appointment to see a general in the Fifth Army headquarters.

When he was called into the office, Hoskins asked: "Sir, when are we going to be called in?"

The general told Hoskins to pass along a message to his teammates and fellow prospective pilots: "Don't worry, boys, we'll take care of you!"

One by one, or in small groups, the Badgers left Madison and civilian student life.

"I think every one of us—and this was true across America—felt we might not come back," says Jim Regan, who ended up in the Army. "I know I thought that."

By 1944, the Badgers were around the world, in uniforms of a different sort.

. . . AND A WAR TO GO

The B-17 bomber was on fire. Copilot Mark Hoskins could see the flames, smell the cordite, and sense the crew's time running out. From the seat to Hoskins's left, the captain yelled the order to abandon the plane. Hoskins scrambled down to the nose, joining the navigator and bombardier, expecting to follow them out the opened hatch.

But they were struggling with the little door. They yanked and shoved and twisted but couldn't get it open. The flames burned and the smell grew stronger. If they didn't get out soon, they wouldn't get out at all, and their frenzy showed they knew it.

Hoskins pulled them away from the door.

The twenty-two-year-old airman told himself he was a blocker again, leading a sweep for Hirsch or Harder in Camp Randall Stadium. Against Notre Dame or Ohio State, it didn't matter. He backed up, charged at the little door, and crashed into it with his shoulder.

Not only did the hatch open, but Hoskins flew through it and found himself in the skies over Hungary. Stunned, he managed to pull his parachute ripcord and began to drift to the ground, where he would take his chances.

Then he saw the German fighter plane, presumably the one that had nailed the B-17.

The pilot, his guns at the ready, was flying toward Hoskins, a floating and defenseless target.

It was June 27, 1944.

Eight months later, on April 1, 1945, three of Hoskins' Badger teammates—Dave Schreiner, tackle Bob Baumann, and halfback Bud Seelinger—landed on Okinawa with the Sixth Marine Division. By the third day, the Sixth Division was almost across the thin Ishikawa Isthmus.

"Dave complained to me that he wasn't getting his share of action," Captain Clint Eastment recalls. "He wanted to get more action. I said, 'Just wait a while. It's a long campaign.'"

Eastment was right. The three Badgers, all first lieutenants, were in the thick of it.

By April 20, the U.S. forces had control of the Motobu Peninsula and there was a lull in the fighting. Schreiner had time for socializing, both to talk about the news that the Germans had surrendered and the war was over in Europe, and to talk football. Young Larry Parmelee of Milwaukee was a corpsman, officially a Navy pharmacist's mate attached to the Marines. One corpsman in Schreiner's A Company asked Parmelee if he would like to meet the Wisconsin All-American football player. Parmelee, who had played high school ball, jumped at the offer, saying he had listened to Schreiner and the Badgers on the radio and dreamed of playing in Camp Randall, too.

"They were bivouacked about a half-mile from us, and my friend came over and got me and introduced me to Dave," Parmelee says. "We just sat around, cross-legged on the ground, and we talked. We talked a lot about Wisconsin, the hunting and fishing, and about some of his football exploits. He asked me if I was interested in football, and I said, 'Boy, do I want to go to Wisconsin in the worst way.' He said, 'Well, if we get out of this thing OK, you look me up and I'll be available for you.'" Schreiner said he would introduce Parmelee to the Wisconsin coaching staff.

Parmelee returned to his unit and excitedly told his buddies about meeting one of his heroes.

On June 8, 1945, according to a later dispatch by Marine Corps correspondent Don Petit, Schreiner was heroic in grenade battles for two hills near Naha. Petit wrote that Schreiner twice charged up the hill and tossed grenades into Japanese positions, and the one hundred enemy soldiers withdrew.

Eastment was severely wounded that day. "Dave Schreiner pulled me out of the line of fire," Eastment says. "He looked at the holes. He said I had four of 'em, so we thought that I'd been hit by four bullets. But I found later, there were only two bullets that made the holes."

Eastment's fighting was over, and he hated leaving his men behind. Schreiner became company commander. And the battle raged on. ❧

About the Author

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Photo by John Leyba