

## John Reger - Sports and Athletics



John Reger is the hero of a “rags to riches” sports story.

The NFL great was born at Wheeling on Sept. 11, 1931, the second of the seven children of Katherine and Casper Reger of East Wheeling where he attended Cathedral Grade School before going to Linsly Military Institute in Wheeling.

Under 6 feet tall and weighing only 125 pounds, Reger nevertheless proved he had the heart and determination of someone twice his size. Throughout his playing days at Linsly, he made his presence known to all those trying to stop him. Despite all the odds, the bruising fullback and linebacker was named captain of the All-Ohio Valley Athletic Conference team in 1949 and also was an All-Valley and All-City performer. His senior year team with the Linsly cadets lost only one game, 20-19, to Triadelphia in one of the most memorable high school games played during that era at Wheeling Island Stadium.

After such a spectacular high school career, it was no surprise when Reger won a football scholarship at the University of Pittsburgh. His 1950 freshman gridiron squad at Pitt went undefeated. However, after playing only three varsity games, Reger injured his knee, ending his college playing career. He left Pitt after the season and did not return to college.

He had married his high school sweetheart, Janice, in 1950 and they lived and worked in Wheeling for several years. In 1955, while Reger was working at a Wheeling gasoline station, his Linsly coach, Etz Rine, called the Pittsburgh Steelers and told them he had “a real old-fashioned fullback and an old-fashioned linebacker down here” in Wheeling. The Steelers agreed to give Reger a tryout. At the time, he had not played football in five years

Even in those days, it wasn’t often that a player with little or no collegiate experience made good in football’s pro ranks. It was the chance of a lifetime for Reger and he made good on it. Through his tenacity, he got better and better and by the time his inaugural season began, Reger was a starter and on his way to gridiron stardom,

He not only performed well enough to earn a roster spot for the Steelers as a linebacker, but he developed into one of the best of his day. Quick, strong, hard-hitting and durable, Reger was selected as the Steelers’ Most Valuable Player in 1959, the season for which he also earned his first trip to the Pro Bowl. He played in the Pro Bowl three times as a Steeler: in 1960, 1961 and 1962.

Reger played nine years for the Steelers and, interestingly, a near tragedy for him resulted in an important change for the NFL. “It was in my last year with the Steelers” during a game against the Philadelphia Eagles at Franklin Field, Reger recalled. “I was hit in the head and somehow had a spasm in my throat and it cut off my air. If there hadn’t been oxygen in the ambulance they sent for, I would have died. Ever since then, every NFL team has had to have oxygen on the sidelines.”

Just prior to his 10th season in the pros, Reger was placed on waivers by then-Coach Buddy Parker following a 42-7 loss to the Cleveland Browns in an exhibition game. The angry Parker dropped six “older” Steelers, including Reger and Tom “the Bomb” Tracy. Both Reger and Steeler receiving star Preston Carpenter were picked up by the Washington Redskins .

Reger had played two years with the Redskins when he settled in Hollywood, Fla., where he had started a landscaping business serving south Florida. However, then-first year Redskins Coach Otto Graham asked him “to come back one more year,” which he did. Reger finished his 12-year NFL career with Washington after the 1966 season.

Reger continued in the landscaping business until 1971 when he moved to Tampa, Fla., and opened a restaurant, “Damn Shanty,” which he operated in downtown Tampa for 15 years, retiring in 1986.

Reger was inducted in 1993 into the Upper Ohio Valley Dapper Dan Hall of Fame and was chosen in 1970 as a member of The Intelligencer All-Time, All-Valley football roster.

Now a widower, Reger said family, friends, golf and wonderful memories from a professional football career that almost eluded him are the major focus of his life in Tampa,