

Emlen Tunnell: NFL Hall of Famer and All-Around Nice Guy

The Radnor High School grad broke through the NFL's color barrier—and everything he knew about life, he learned in Garrett Hill.

BY MARK E. DIXON

If our life course is set in childhood, then the pro football career of Emlen Tunnell was probably made in Garrett Hill, a “Huckleberry Finn kind of town” where everyone knew your name and got along.

“We had never heard of the word ‘integrated’ in those days. We all just lived together—Italians, Irish, Germans, English, Negroes and just about everyone else,” wrote Tunnell—the first black player inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame—in his 1966 autobiography.

That nurturing background set the pattern for an amiable man who disarmed others with his personality, then wowed them with his skill. “I’m not mad at everybody,” he wrote in the era of civilrights marches, Vietnam protests and assassinations. “I’m hardly mad at anybody. Some of my friends tell me that I like guys nobody else likes. That may be true in a few cases. I look for the good in people, and I’ve found it in them most of the time.”

Tunnell played defensive positions, which, in theory, made him less likely to be a star than, say, a quarterback. But he made the most of it. In 1952, he gained more yards on kickoff, punt and interception returns (924) than that season’s NFL rushing leader (894 yards). He retired in 1961 with 79 interceptions.

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"Tunnell was in charge of roaming and patrolling the outfield," explained football historian Michael MacCambridge, author of *America's Game*. "Quarterbacks at the time talked about Tunnell as one of the best at faking his intentions, disguising his intentions. A quarterback would wait all day, see that Tunnell didn't seem to be spending much time over in a certain area of the field and throw there and get burned for it.

"[Quarterback] Bobby Layne called Tunnell the best in the business at that. Because of that, he was incredibly successful at not just stopping the other team, but at changing the game."

Tunnell was the first black player to join the New York Giants, but not the first black to play professional football. That was Charles W. Follis, who played with an Ohio team called the Shelby Blues beginning in 1902.

But Tunnell came along at a time when the game's desegregation was still facing resistance. Washington Redskins owner George P. Marshall banned blacks from his team in 1932, and he was quoted as saying, "We'll start signing Negroes when the Harlem Globetrotters start signing whites." The Redskins finally capitulated in 1962.

Born in Bryn Mawr, Tunnell moved to Garrett Hill as a youngster with his mother, Catherine, and three siblings. His father, Elzie, left when the children were young. Catherine supported the family with money earned cleaning other people's houses. Tunnell remembered her as "crazy in a fun way."

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“My mother could’ve used some extra money coming in,” he wrote, “but she didn’t believe in chasing her kids out to work during the summer months. ‘I’d rather have you out playing,’ she told me many times. ‘You’ve got the rest of your life to work.’”

Instead, using the slack time when her affluent Main Line clients were off summering somewhere, Catherine worked overtime as a maid in Atlantic City, building small nest eggs that helped carry her family through the winters.

For his part, Emlen was usually out somewhere, playing baseball at the Garrett Hill Playground (now Emlen Tunnell Park) or Villanova University. “I must have spent half my childhood in Villanova, and I don’t mean in the library,” wrote Tunnell. “Four good stone throws from our front door was a wonder of wonders, a big-time college sports plant.”

Tunnell claimed in his book to have played games against 21-year-old college students when he was 8. “Baseball, football, basketball—they were all easy for me,” he wrote.

And always, there was his United Nations of friends—“Coots” Tomaso and “Cornie” Silverie, in particular. One neighbor kept her eye on the Tunnell kids when Catherine was working. Another local woman was always there first with soup or a home remedy when someone was ailing. And pharmacist Fred Riegner pretended not to notice when Tunnell and his pals sneaked five-cent cakes for school lunches. “He figured that we needed those cakes to keep us going,” wrote Tunnell.

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As a boy, Emlen Tunnell's goal was to play for the Radnor High School Red Raiders. That was also true of most of his friends. Tunnell made the varsity team as a freshman—and not yet 14.

“What a difference there would have been in my life if Jules Prevost, the head coach at Radnor, or his assistants, Leo Curtin and Charlie Riley, had been guys with bitter souls who would have preferred to lose football games than to play a Negro kid,” he wrote.

But it wasn't purely altruism: Radnor was a smaller place then, without much reserve strength on its bench. Tunnell, at 134 pounds, weighed almost as much as some of the seniors.

With players who were often smaller than the competition, Prevost preferred a running and passing game. Tunnell excelled at this—and caught the attention of local sportswriters. After a game against Tredyffrin-Easttown in 1940, Herb Good of the *Philadelphia Record* wrote, “Cool and poised before the furious charges of the Berwyn linemen, Tunnell put on a passing exhibition that was as beautiful to watch as it was flawless and devastating in execution.”

Tunnell's fondest memory may have been the time his knee was whacked from the side during the game against Ridley Park. The team doctor said he was through for the season, but he desperately wanted to play against Lower Merion, the last game of the season—and his high school career. Prevost sided with Tunnell.

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Meanwhile, “over at Lower Merion, a kid named Jack Muntz called a meeting of the football players,” wrote Tunnell. “Jack had gone to Radnor for a while—our mothers once had worked together—before he transferred to Lower Merion. ‘If Tunnell plays,’ Jack told his teammates, ‘nobody hits him unless it is absolutely necessary to save the game.’”

Tunnell was touched by the gesture, which echoed his view of how people ought to be.

Sportswriters had speculated that Tunnell would go to Cornell University or possibly one of the black colleges. But he chose the University of Toledo for the simple reason that Toledo officials agreed to buy him a suit, which his mother couldn’t afford and college students then needed. In his freshman year, Tunnell broke his neck. Friends at Radnor High sent flowers, and neighbors chipped in \$12 to buy his mom a train ticket to Toledo.

Doctors worried about paralysis. But, four months later, Tunnell finished his freshman year playing on Toledo’s basketball team.

Rejected from the Army because of his broken neck, Tunnell enlisted in the Coast Guard in 1943 and spent most of the next two years on the *U.S.S. Etamin*, a Victory ship whose job was to transport troops and cargo to the South Pacific. Tunnell was a steward’s mate, waiting tables in the officer’s mess. In April 1944, at Seleo in Papua, New Guinea, the ship was hit by a Japanese aerial torpedo. Tunnell wasn’t injured, but he saved a machinist’s mate running in flames from the engine room.

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“Over the years, a big deal has been made over my saving a shipmate’s life, but there was nothing heroic in what I did,” wrote Tunnell, who beat out the flames. After the torpedo hit, he noted, the mate had stayed below to turn off valves that otherwise might have produced an explosion. The other man, he insisted, was the real hero.

Tunnell finished his Coast Guard service in San Francisco, where his performance on an all-service football team so impressed his commander that the officer got him interviews at UCLA and USC. But Tunnell eventually chose the University of Iowa to continue his college education because of its reputation for being fair to black athletes. There were 325 candidates for the football team in the fall of 1946, and 58 were black. Despite the competition, Tunnell made first string as left halfback.

Iowa had two so-so seasons while Tunnell was on the team, though he got good reviews. One of Tunnell’s best games was in a loss to a Notre Dame team now considered among the best college teams of all time. His Iowa career ended early when he was benched with an eye infection requiring surgery.

Tunnell had no money for the eyeglasses he needed during recuperation, but the owner of the Iowa City drugstore where he hung out took care of that. “Jack Lubin was color blind and forever doing things for people, just like Mr. Riegner back home in Garrett Hill,” wrote Tunnell. “He took up a collection among the football fans, who came into the store and put it in my hand.”

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Tunnell intended to return. But back home in Garrett Hill, a questionnaire from the New York Giants showed up in the mailbox. His original class at Toledo had graduated, making him eligible for the NFL. Knowing there were few blacks in the league, though, Tunnell was ready to throw the form away—until he ran into an old friend and former Villanova coach, Vince McNally.

Talk to the Giants, McNally advised. “[Giants owner] Tim Mara is a square shooter, and he’ll level with you,” he said. “Maybe the Giants are ready for a colored player. If so, it might as well be you.”

Mara—“the finest man I ever knew,” said Tunnell—was a former bookie who’d founded the Giants in 1925, after buying the franchise for \$500. He said barely a word about race, offered Tunnell a \$5,000 contract, and asked about Garrett Hill.

“He told me that the most important thing for me to do was to be just a regular Joe in my contacts with other players on the team and let the racial thing take care of itself,” wrote Tunnell. “He figured that the place where I was raised and the schools I had attended and my war service had prepared me to cope with any situation that might come up.”

And so they had.

Mark E. Dixon welcomes comments. Write a letter.

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