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# NO HELMETS REQUIRED

THE REMARKABLE STORY OF  
**THE AMERICAN ALL STARS**

GAVIN WILLACY



# INTRODUCTION

I can clearly picture the moment this all started: I was on a platform at West Hampstead station in London, on my way to work as a sports journalist. I was reading *Our Game* magazine and became engrossed in a feature by Tony Collins about Mike Dimitro and his American All Stars. In a couple of pages, Tony ignited a fascination in me that led to more than a decade spent creating *No Helmets Required*.

I originally intended writing a history of rugby league in America, with a few chapters on the All Stars saga. In the winter of 2002/03, my wife Jo and I spent six months travelling around the world: many of our stops just happened to have connections with American rugby league! Heading down the east coast of the States, I met up with a variety of US rugby league faces and continued some research about the All Stars. In Floridian libraries, I followed an online thread by an Australian fan named Roopy, who had collated newspaper reports of the All Stars games.

But the whole project changed one day in California in January 2003. I decided to try to track down an All Star, so started with an obscure name: I discovered Gary Kerkorian had recently died but found phone numbers for his son, Paul, and widow, Joyce. The following evening we found ourselves in a stranger's house in Fresno. They welcomed us into their home and enchanted me with tales of Gary's adventures in Australia and the NFL. They also, crucially, put me in touch with many of Gary's old mates, for which I owe a great debt.

From that breakthrough came many more: I borrowed our friend John Friend's vintage BMW sports car to drive across San Francisco Bay to meet the wonderful Al D. Kirkland in Palo Alto and the fascinating Vince Jones in Concord – the streets deserted around Oakland as the Raiders were in the Super Bowl that day – and they put me together with Jack Bonetti.

When we got to Australia I saw where the All Stars had played in Sydney, Brisbane, Cairns and Townsville. I even trekked to Ireland to spend a day with Landon Exley on his holidays, before heading back to California in 2007 to see Dimitro's old campus at UCLA and visit USC Trojans with their former players Al Abajian, Ed Demirjian and the legendary Teddy Grossman. Up in the Bay Area, a bed-ridden Al Kirkland, recuperating from a major operation, sent his physical therapist away so he could again talk me through the events of more than 50 years earlier. "This guy's come further than you to see me," he said. Classic Al.

I even got to dine with Tony Rappa at his seafood restaurant in Monterey harbour.

When I thought I had nearly finished writing the book, Michelle Dimitro, Mike's daughter, kindly sent me stacks of Mike's mementoes, cuttings and notes from all his football, rugby league and life adventures. Those boxes sent me back to the drawing board for another few years but made the tale what it is now. They filled in a lot of gaps.

Mike Dimitro was just one of many people who has fought to promote rugby league in America. And he fought the longest. He failed, but not through lack of trying. Ironically, as the story of his efforts is released, the USA will play rugby league at the highest level for the first time, in the 2013 World Cup. He would have loved that.

When I sent off the completed manuscript, I checked the date: it was ten years to the day since I had turned up at the Kerkorians' house. It was time the All Stars' story was written.

Gavin Willacy, March 2013

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*No Helmets Required* was written mainly in Bengeo, Hertfordshire; but also in Sedbergh, Cumbria; Hallsands, Devon; Cisternino, Puglia; and Alghero, Sardinia.

I was privileged to meet and interview eight of the All Stars: the late great Big Al D. Kirkland, Al Abajian, Tony Rappa, Ed Demirjian, Vince Jones, Landon Exley, Ted Grossman and Jack Bonetti. I am also grateful to Erkie Cheldin, Don Lent, Pat Henry, Sam Grossman, Bob Buckley and Fran Mulcare for their wonderful written memories. You are all stars in my book.

Many thanks to Michelle Dimitro for sharing so many of your Dad's amazing mementoes.

The following friends all very kindly put me up in their homes while I followed in the All Stars' footsteps: Simon Hunt and Matthew Jones (in Sydney), Delpha Cadogan (Huntington Beach), John Friend (San Francisco), Sarah McGhee and Bill Taylor (Auckland), Barbara and the late Louie Guyomar (Wellington), Elizabeth and Guy Sancho (Fosse) and Marie Toft (near Carcassonne).

I would like to thank all these good folk for their help, support and advice: RFL archivist Professor Tony Collins; Keith Nutter; Roger Grime; Steele Retchless; Bill Abernethy; Steve Mascord; Mike Evergin; Bob Balachandran; Freddie Lewis; John Morgan; David Niu; and George Pelecanos.

And most of all, thank you to my wonderful wife, Jo, for never once saying 'enough'! Her patience and support have been remarkable.

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Picture credit: *Rugby League Journal* – [www.rugbyleaguejournal.net](http://www.rugbyleaguejournal.net)

Artefacts from Mike Dimitro's collection courtesy of Michelle Dimitro.

Photos from Paul Kerkorian, Don Lent, Al D. Kirkland, Landon Exley and Pat Henry.



# CANADIAN PACIFIC SUPER DC-6B

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# PROLOGUE – FIVE MEN IN L.A.

## LOS ANGELES, AUGUST 1950



To the "All  
hand of frie  
off the fiel  
fans wish  
stay

Five men in the City of Angels: a Hollywood film star, an English broadcaster, an Australian hack, a Californian sportswriter and a Welsh rugby coach. They have nothing in common. Well, almost nothing.

Bob Hope is one of the world's biggest film stars. He part-owns LA Rams, the glamorous West Coast pro football franchise, which employs Mr Jane Russell at quarter back, has fans throughout Hollywood and a Beverley Hills HQ.

Eddie Waring is the voice of BBC radio sport in the north of England. A sporting svengali from Dewsbury in Yorkshire, he has a vision: seeing his beloved rugby league football beamed live into living rooms across Britain and around the world. He just wishes the BBC would share his faith in this new medium called television.

Harry Sunderland is a 60-year-old from Toowoomba, Australia. He has done pretty much everything in rugby league: first a journalist, then secretary of Queensland Rugby Football League in his early 20s, and Australia's national team manager at 40. At 50 he emigrated to manage English giants Wigan. Now he is back writing, for the *Sunday Dispatch*, commentating on BBC radio and living in Manchester.

Sunderland is fearless, an expansionist, a promoter, a rugby league missionary. A stocky little fella, round glasses perched on his moon face. His nickname: The Little Dictator.

Cliff Evans is a former rugby league star. Man of the Match in the 1933 Challenge Cup Final, he was a top-class half-back for Salford, Leeds and his native Wales either side of the war. He had a spell as a parachute-jump instructor, quit playing and became coach at Leeds. After two years he gave it all up and left Yorkshire for California. In LA he set to



Cliff Evans, Harry Sunderland and B. Ward Nash

work transferring his ample skills: within two years of

arriving he had managed a theatre, a car wash and a restaurant at Venice Beach. He is still athletic, a dapper figure.

B. Ward Nash is a middle-aged, fair-haired, print salesman in downtown LA. He also writes about sport at the weekend and uses his printing business to publish sports books. He rarely leaves home without his Panama hat.

Sunderland and Waring were on their way home from Great Britain's Ashes tour. The team spent a month travelling to Australia by boat, played 27 games in less than three months there and took another month to come home. Ticket sales from so many games made it a cash bonanza for all concerned.

Both working journalists on the tour, filing copy back to England, Sunderland and Waring had followed the Australia leg and three weeks in New Zealand, with personal stop-overs in Fiji, Honolulu and San Francisco. There were visits to Dallas, Chicago and New York to come. Sunderland was in town to promote rugby league. Or perhaps more accurately, to promote Harry Sunderland and rugby league.

Waring was pretender to Sunderland's crown as 'Mr Rugby League'. Twenty years the younger, Waring had, like Sunderland, already been a club secretary, manager, author, newspaper columnist, BBC radio commentator, and expansionist. Waring knew Cliff Evans from their time at Leeds together, where Eddie was an up and coming manager.



"Stars" we extend a  
friendship both on and  
abroad. Rugby League  
offers you a very happy  
experience in Australia.

Waring and Sunderland wrote for rival rugby league papers and were the only two press men at the formation of the Rugby League International Board two years earlier. They both knew more about overseas opportunities than most.

Sunderland had tried to launch the 13-man football code in Victoria, London, France, and, for the past 20 years, America. In 1932 he went to the LA Olympics and took the opportunity to visit some of football's major movers and shakers. He spent time with University of Southern California coach Howard Harding Jones, the legendary Pop Warner up at Stanford, and met players from NFL teams Portsmouth Spartans and Green Bay Packers.

Excited by the prospect of rugby league crossing over to the US, Harry aimed high. He wrote to Chicago Bears owner George Halas suggesting the Australia team play an exhibition rugby league game in Chicago en route to England the following year.

The legendary Halas was interested and proposed that they play the Bears in September 1933 as part of the World's Fair instead: one half of league, the other of American football. Neither happened, but little Harry would never give up.

On this trip, Sunderland went to see Bob Hope's LA Rams play the Washington Redskins at the Coliseum and was blown away by the spectacle. He was also a guest speaker at the influential Helms Foundation, giving a presentation on rugby league to a room of wealthy sports boosters.

Waring, who had been behind the mic for the BBC's first televised rugby league match – the 1949 Challenge Cup Final at Wembley – was more interested in how Americans consumed sport through the little box in the corner of the room. Stunned by the way televised games gripped the men watching in bars in every US city he visited, Waring was determined that rugby league should be broadcast nationwide on British TV – and that he would be the game's number one commentator.

He visited Hope on the set of his latest movie. Hope had been at the forefront of TV's breakthrough on the West Coast: he had hosted the first-ever show broadcast in California and was now beginning an illustrious TV career with NBC. Waring was impressed by Hope's knowledge of Australian rugby league, especially for a world-famous comic-actor from Somerset.

Waring suggested that they collaborate on a rugby league film with Hope's big screen side kick Bing Crosby and name it *On the Road to Wembley*. Hope encouraged Waring to jump on the television bandwagon – and before he left the City of Angels, Eddie guested on Californian TV, discussing the differences between rugby league and American football.



*Eddie Waring and Bob Hope meet*

Needing another sympathetic ear in the LA press, Sunderland and Evans met up with Nash and told him about The Greatest Football Game he had never seen. He was hooked by the notion.

Across town, in South Central LA: Michael Machnov Dimitro was teaching social studies and coaching American football at Andrew Jackson High School in Boyle Heights. He was a long way from home. He would go a lot further.

*Sportmaster*

"IT IS INDEED A LOVELY SHIRT, SIR!"

# CHAPTER 1 ONCE UPON A TIME IN AMERICA

## WEST VIRGINIA, JULY 1922

As Ukrainians divided to fight on opposite sides in the First World War, Dimitro Machnov fled his home town of Zelinka for the land of the free. Carrying with him his life's belongings, he entered the United States through Ellis Island, where he was met by his nephew Alex, who had left Ukraine before him in search of the promised land. Together they made their way down through New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio before seeking work in the steel town of Weirton, West Virginia, 35 miles from Pittsburgh. Once settled, Dimitro called for his wife Mary and their three-year-old son John to follow him to the States. It was 1917.

Of the 20,000 citizens of Weirton, half worked at Weirton Steel. The mill was the town. The Machnovs were not total outsiders: the route they had taken had been travelled by enough of their people for there to be a Russian Orthodox Church in the town. If you have seen the Robert de Niro film *The Deer Hunter* then you have seen Weirton. It was shot there. It's where Dimitro Machnov lived, worked and died.

The Machnovs had eight children. Six survived childhood: John, Anne, Catherine, Harry, Michael and Joe. Michael Dimitro Machnov was born on 20 July 1922. Or 1923. Or 1924. Mike was never 100 per cent on that. It depended who was asking. The US Census said it was 1922.

They all lived in a two-bedroom house: Mum and Dad in one room, oldest son John slept in the living room. The other five kids shared the other bedroom: Anne and Catherine in one bed, Harry and Joe in the other, with Mike sleeping on a feather quilt on the floor. There was a kitchen, and the bathroom was in the basement.

Breakfast was coffee and toast. Lunch was a baloney sandwich with tea or water – no milk. Dinner was served in order of those who had worked: the youngest often ended up with just bread and butter and a mug of tea or coffee. Life was no picnic.

Michelle Dimitro: 'My father worked with his father at Weirton Steel in the open hearths. Dad was out there working from the age of five, picking up pop bottles, shovelling coal, anything which could help bring food home for the family.'

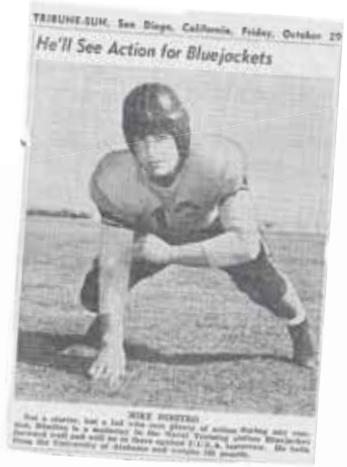
Mike's child labour was described as 'heavy chores': hauling coal to fill the bed in the basement from 6am to 7pm, all alone, wearing old pants with holes in the knees, no hat and cardboard shoes.

Like many mining and steel towns, Weirton was wrecked by alcohol. Mike's Dad – who played the accordion at Ukrainian weddings to raise a few bucks – was one of many immigrants who spent his meagre wages in Weirton's bars and staggered home in the dark of night. On payday, Mike would trail the bars to find his father and drag him home before all the money had gone. One perk of the drink culture was the number of bottle tops lying around for Mike to collect and cash in. He would also pick apples in summer to bring home to the family. The drink and the coal dust would cut his father's life short.

Michelle Dimitro: 'Dad realised at a young age that working in the open hearth of the steel mills was not how he wanted to spend the rest of his years, especially when he would listen to the Rose Bowl game being played on the radio and the temperature in LA was in the 70s while they were freezing in West Virginia. He knew he had to get out and he knew the way to do that was through education and playing sports.'

Mike was something of a sporting protégé. At Weirton High School in the late 1930s, he starred at baseball, football, boxing, and wrestling. In 1939 he was voted the top football player in the high schools of northern West Virginia and in 1940 played for the West Virginia All Stars when they beat the Ohio All Stars at Wheeling Island Stadium. Mike was the only kid to play the full game: at guard in defense and full-back on offence. He was already The Man, in Weirton.

He won Golden Gloves boxing titles in three states at three different weights. The precocious teenager lifted the light heavyweight crown in Boston – among his opponents was Tony Musto, who would lose a world title bout to Joe Louis a year later. En route he caught wanderlust, the travelling bug.



Soon, Mike was packing his bags. He had managed to combine sporting excellence with passing his exams and doing shifts in the mill. In the summer of 1941, he left home – and his brothers and sisters to care for their bed-ridden father – and fled 600 miles south-west to Tuscaloosa to take up a football scholarship at the University of Alabama.

There he continued his sporting journey: first he played guard for the freshmen football team. In spring he could be found minding third base for the Baby Tide baseball team. By September 1942, Mike, now a sophomore, was on the Alabama football roster. Under legendary coach Frank Thomas, the Crimson Tide roared into the ten-game season with five straight wins, conceding just one touchdown. They secured an invite to the Orange Bowl in Miami and on New Year's Day 1943, Mike and the Crimson Tide beat Boston College 37-21. He was voted on to the Southern Conference All Star team. He also showed signs of being a leader, opening a boxing school at the university – Dimitro's Athletic Club – where he coached Golden Glove fighters.

It was at Alabama that Dimitro met two major figures in his life: fellow jock Ray Terry and Evelyn Woodall. 'Woody' would become his first wife, Terry his sidekick on his greatest adventure.

Mike was living the American dream and needed an American name, not a Russian one. He dropped Machnov and became just plain Mike Dimitro. With thick dark hair, black eyes and brooding eyebrows, he looked every inch the Italian-American stallion. That was better than being 'a Ruski' in the south as the US joined the Second World War.

Dimitro signed up, and with a glowing reference from the Crimson Tide, was assigned to the US Navy. As he turned 21 in July 1943 he left his new wife Woody behind in Tuscaloosa and headed 2,000 miles south-west to the Naval Training Station in San Diego.

As Squadron Leader Dimitro awaited his first Pacific posting, his football flourished. The Training Station football team was filled with elite college players and former pros. They faced the best of California's college football in the Pacific Coast Conference. Three months after arriving, Dimitro was playing guard as the Bluejackets, coached by former New York Giants Bo Malenda and Mac McLinda, thrashed hapless UCLA 28-0 at Hull Field, in front of 6,000 exhilarated Navy personnel. He was at left tackle when the Bluejackets stunned the previously invincible USC in 'the greatest athletic achievement in NTS history'. Dimitro could see at first hand the allure of such prestigious football schools – and they could see his talent up close.

Mike was transferred to the US Naval Training Center at Bainbridge in Maryland. While on the banks of the Susquehanna River, Mike heard news from Europe: his little brother Joe had been seriously wounded in action in Italy and was now in an Allies hospital in north Africa. He never recovered, dying there, aged just 17.

In the freezing early months of 1944, Mike's passion burned even stronger. He needed revenge. He was thrilled to be finally sent to war: Dimitro headed for the South West Pacific Theater.

Mike was stationed in Port Moresby, the manic capital of New Guinea, an Australian territory defended by the American amphibious force. From there he flew north-east to the Caroline Islands, where the Allies destroyed a Japanese base in Operation Hailstone on two devastating February days. Dimitro later claimed he was 'wounded by a burst of shrapnel over the landing craft' as he arrived in the Carolines. It can't have been too serious. He might have been more hurt by the 'Dear John' letter Woody sent him: she was divorcing him already.

In the steaming heat of the Pacific theater, Dimitro was still getting his sporting fix. He boxed in the Carolines and played football for the Hawaiian Island All Star Team. Between all the boxing, football, baseball and wrestling, Dimitro claimed to have served in the Philippines, Guam, Japan, Tarawa (where the Japanese were massacred on 20 November 1943), Saipan (where the US forces ousted the Japanese in July 1944) and Okinawa (where the battle in 1945 was arguably the worst in the Pacific). He just happened to have been at four of the major US successes of the whole war. Dimitro liked to tell a tall tale. He just could not help himself. Much of it, however unlikely, was true. But the truth was never enough.

It was during two days' leave that a seed planted in Dimitro's mind that would change his life. He cadged a lift aboard a Royal Australian Air Force cargo plane to Sydney. The pilot, an Aussie named 'Bluey', was a rugby league player. He took Dimitro to see a game at the Sydney Cricket Ground. As a kid, he had seen immigrant Welsh miners playing rugby union on the slag heaps in Weirton between shifts down the pit, and US troops had played rugby in Guam in their down time. But this was something different. The West Virginian was blown away by the speed, the passing and the ball control. He had seen the future.

# CHAPTER 2 BECOMING A BRUIN

## WAR IS OVER - BACK TO SCHOOL



Dimitro was discharged on 28 December 1945. He had continued his degree at Alabama by correspondence but, having tasted San Diego, nothing would tempt him back to the Deep South or West Virginia's coal fields. It was sunshine and surf for him.

In the summer of 1946, Dimitro returned to Southern Cal to get his teaching certificate, enrolling on a PE, History and Education degree at the University of California in Los Angeles: UCLA. But he was really there to play football. The swarthy, stocky, powerful Dimitro was a wanted man. He went straight in to Bert LaBrucherie's highly-rated Bruins squad at left guard. Dimitro wore 27. Number 26 was left tackle Xavier Mena, a towering 19-year-old kid from San Diego. Don Paul was the giant centre, Jerry Shipkey the full-back who had transferred from USC.



Mike Dimitro

Dimitro excelled as the Bruins saw off Stanford, Cal and Oregon amid their first eight straight victims. In the winner-takes-all clash with city rivals USC at the Coliseum in late November 1946, the Bruins came through 13-6 to win the Pacific Coast Conference and an invite to the annual Rose Bowl Game: the biggest day in college football. And therefore the biggest day in US sports.

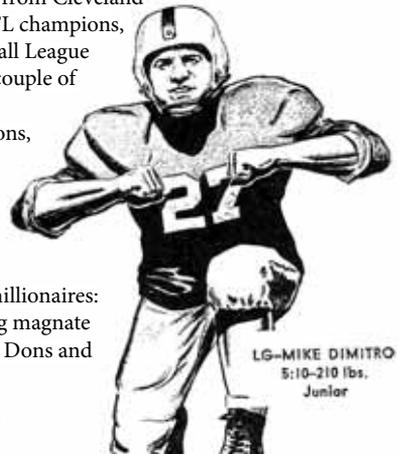
They finished the regular season by beating Nebraska 18-0. They had played ten, won ten.

Then, in front of 90,000 mainly-Bruins fans in Pasadena, Dimitro and Co were humiliated by Illinois, 45-14. It was a New Year's Day nightmare.

**1947** It was supposed to have been Big Mike's perfect ending. Going into that game, Dimitro had planned to quit college for a career in pro football. In December 1946, he and three other Bruins were drafted by Bob Hope's Los Angeles Rams in the 11th round. The Rams had only been in town a year, having moved from Cleveland as reigning NFL champions,

opening up the West Coast to pro sport and making the National Football League what it claimed to be. But they were still struggling financially, losing a couple of thousand bucks a week.

Dimitro was also wanted by the Rams' more affluent rivals: the LA Dons, of the All American Football Conference. The AAFC was a post-war success. It briefly challenged the NFL and temporarily succeeded in becoming more attractive to players and fans than the established pro competition. Outbidding the NFL to sign the best available players, the AAFC soon became known as a superior league and its crowds dwarfed those in the NFL. The flamboyant Dons were owned by a syndicate of millionaires: actor Don Ameche, MGM Studios head Louis B. Mayer and horse racing magnate Benjamin Lindheimer. They were getting bigger by the year. But still the Dons and



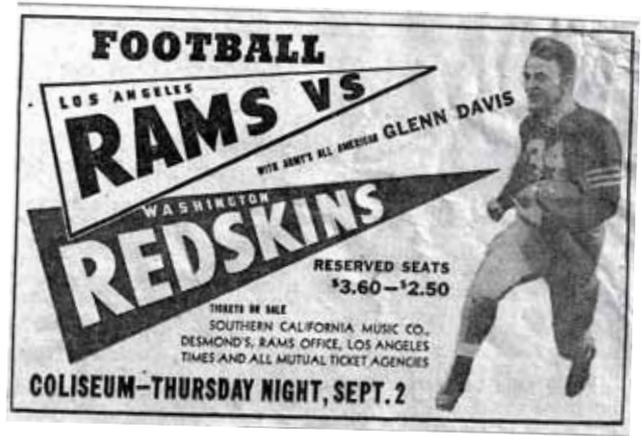
Rams were fighting over second place in the press and the fans' hearts: college football remained king in LA.

The Dons bid for Dimitro, also in the 11th round, of the AAFC draft along with four other Bruins. In February 1947, the 210lbs guard withdrew from UCLA, his future all planned out.

When his father died in August after a long illness, Mike headed home to Weirton. There he realised a teaching qualification

would offer him far more security than jacking it all in for what could be a few months as a pro football player. He returned to UCLA to complete his degree.

Dimitro had an outstanding season for the Bruins in 1947. Bursting out of the blocks in defence, he was a tackling machine, snuffing out danger all over the Coliseum field. In an extraordinary few minutes against Southern Methodist, he tackled All-American Doak Walker four times in a row on the Bruins' two-yard line. On the offensive line he blocked everything defences could throw at him to protect his quarterback. He was a colossus of the Coliseum.



**MIKE DIMITRO**  
HE'S A ROUGH, TOUGH  
GENTLEMAN FROM WEST  
VIRGINIA, ONE OF UCLA'S  
MOST AGGRESSIVE LINEMEN.

15 NOVEMBER 1947

*Los Angeles Daily News*

**MIKE DIMITRO**  
NEED WE SAY MORE  
PERHAPS THE BEST IN THE  
NATION. RATED AS SUCH IN A  
RECENT RADIO-NEWSPAPER  
POLL. BRILLIANT IN ALL  
PHASES OF PLAY.

17 NOVEMBER 1947

*Californian Daily Bruin*



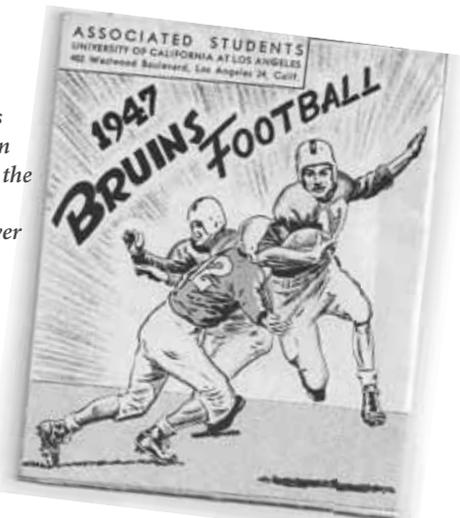
18 NOVEMBER 1947

## BEST GUARD IN US - DIMITRO

*Californian Daily Bruin*

*'While all the local experts who pick the All Star teams were watching the glamour boys, a stocky little lineman snuck in the back door and became the first man from the Pacific coast to be named for national honors: UCLA's scrappy guard Mike Dimitro...never a rahrah boy, never flashy but always there fighting, plugging holes.'*

'Granite Dimitro' was an All-American. Chosen by New York sportswriters as the outstanding player in his position, Dimitro was invited to leave LA straight after the game with USC to fly to the Big Apple for the presentation dinner at the Waldorf Astoria. He could take any girl he chose: he picked a UCLA queen Juanita Breneman, who the papers claimed was his fiancée, and her twin sister Juana. After a week in the Big Apple, the



# FRENCH GOVT FALLS IN CRISIS

bizarre love triangle moved on to Weirton, where 'Punchy' took the girls to meet his family at 305 Engle Street.

Dimitro was getting all the wraps ahead of the big game against USC Trojans. The Bruins' number 27 was at the heart of it all, protecting quarter back Benny Reiges from left-guard, playing both ways - defence and attack.

He was delivering the goods - and with them came stardom, in LA at least. He was getting used to the headlines, the photos, the girls. He kept every paper: ten copies if it was a good one.



19 NOVEMBER 1947

## BIG MIKE COACH BERT LABRUCHERIE TABS MIKE DIMITRO AS HIS MOST VALUABLE MAN

LA Evening Herald-Express, back page

He was already in the big time. In Chicago to play North Western, the Bruins shared the front page of the *Daily Tribune* sports section with the all-New York 'Subway' World Series.

The Notre Dame-USC game took \$10m at the bookies in Southern California alone. The front page of the *LA Daily News* had Bruins team news above Mao Tsetung's communists withdrawal into Manchuria:

'LINEUPS FOR BRUINS, STANFORD - Expect 100,000 at big UCLA-Indians grid tilt'  
'BIG RED RETREAT BEGUN IN CHINA'

The Bruins shoved the Jake LaMotta fight fix story into the round-up. A whole page of photos in the *LA Times* showed the players relaxing before the USC clash. The *Herald-Express* ran a Hollywood vox-op: Betty Grable said the Trojans would win. Rita Hayworth said the Trojans by two touchdowns. Lana Turner picked UCLA.

It was boiling up.

## PRINCESS ELIZABETH'S WEDDING DAY WILL BE LIVE ON ALL FOUR MAJOR RADIO NETWORKS



## 22 NOVEMBER 1947

102,938 squeezed into the Coliseum, just 265 short of the all-time record. They saw the Trojans snatch a 6-0 win. It was a grudge game with not an inch given. Everything was on the line and Dimitro's men lost it. There would be no return to the Rose Bowl game.

Despondent, Dimitro went AWOL. He failed to complete a physical exam and was told in January 1948 he was being expelled by UCLA.

Only a frantic appeal allowed him to be restored within a week.



**1948** That off-season, Dimitro took up rugby 'as a sort of summer training'. Rugby union was the only code played in California. The big schools used it primarily in the spring and summer for their athletes to keep fit and active, and middle-class students indulged in its social reputation. Several of the Bruins football team gave rugby a go.

While the offers from the Dons and the Rams remained, Dimitro decided again to stay at UCLA to complete his degree. He got married for a second time – to fellow student and trainee high school teacher Patricia Dodds – and changed his name again too, to Michael Mitchell Dimitro. It was his third, but far from final, identity.

He headed home to Weirton and took part in Olympic boxing trials, winning three heavyweight bouts to qualify for the final round in Boston, but had to return to UCLA's pre-season camp instead.

Dimitro also spent some of the summer of 1948 working in the post department at a Hollywood film studio. The *Hollywood Citizen* showed him delivering parcels to sarong-wearing sex symbol Dorothy Lamour, the straight girl to Bing Crosby and Bob Hope in the *Road to...* films. Mike was warming to the showbiz world, empowered by the buzz.

There was another medium making waves. KLAC-TV launched in LA to rival Bob Hope's KTLA and sent two cameras to every Trojans and Bruins game, beaming pictures to homes throughout California. Dimitro should have been the star. Instead, he was rarely seen.

The 1948 season started badly and finished worse. The Bruins got nilled by Northwestern in the opening game, Dimitro was injured and failed to get his starting position back. Strutting the Coliseum sideline in October,

he would have seen a classy young quarterback leading Stanford's freshmen in the curtain-raiser against the UCLA 'Frosh': Gary Kerkorian would stick in his mind.

By November, with the Bruins out of Bowl contention again, Dimitro chucked his toys out of the pram. The 'UCLA Fireplug' turned Cry Baby. The UCLA campus became a gigantic crèche.



Mike meets Dorothy Lamour



7 HOME GAMES  
7 FOOTBALL COACHES  
7 IMPORTANT DATES TO REMEMBER



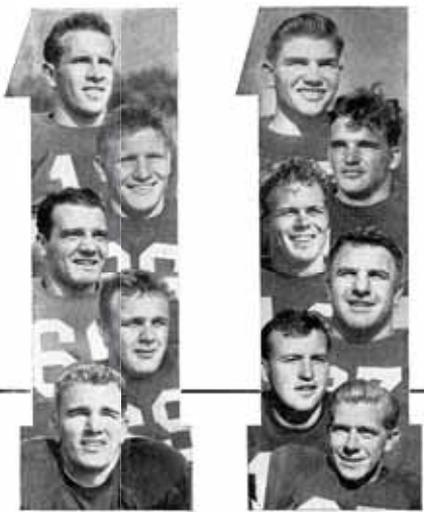
# BRUIN FOOTBALLERS' LUCKY YEAR!

See the BRUIN ELEVEN IN ACTION  
Collegiate Football in the Coliseum



Returning Bruin Lettermen

- \*\* Hal Beardsley, LE
- \* Jim Brown, LB
- \*\* Bill Clement, RB
- \*\* Mike Collins, LB
- \*\* Dave Collins, RB
- \* Eddie Eaton, LG
- \* Hank Evans, C
- \*\* Al Haskell, LT
- \* Don Hunt, LE
- \*\* Gene Johnson, LH
- \*\* Leon McLaughlin, C
- \*\* Ward Mathews, LT
- \*\* Jack March, FB
- \* Joe Nease, RB
- \*\* Ray Nagel, QB
- \* John Nkomo, RB
- \* Chuck Page, RB
- \*\* George Rabe, LT
- \*\* Joseph Pollock, RB
- \*\* Glenn Rowland, LH
- \*\* Bill Stomper, QB
- \*\* Art Wolfe, P
- \*\* Jay Ziegen, RB
- \*\* Dan Ziegen, LH
- \*\* Phil Ziegen, RB



**BERT LA BRUCHERIS**—Look for an even more magnificent 10th straight record of 20 wins and 9 losses at UCLA.

**WILLIAM "DUTCH" FEHRING**—This newly-added student comes to UCLA from tough football territory—Purdue and Oklahoma.

**WED MATHEWS**—UCLA fans hope Bruin back are as tough and good as was this recently-acquired headlin

**SHILEY CALHOUN**—His Bruin Season shapes up stronger than ever this year.

**A. J. STUEZINEGGER**—"Stuey" gets the Bruin ready for games.

**ROBERT PATTERSON**—The Bruin's leading receiver had made four touch

Dimitro had been used off the bench against Nebraska Cornhuskers, played 40 minutes, and was on the field every time the Bruins scored. But that was enough for him to go on strike and spout off: 'Unless I can start, I won't play the last three games.'

4 NOVEMBER 1948

## DIMITRO DROPPED FROM SQUAD DIMITRO LEAVES TEAM - WILL FOLLOW PROFESSIONAL BOXING

UCLA Daily Bruin

## BRUINS DROP MIKE

LA Times Green

8 NOVEMBER 1948

# DIMITRO'S OWN STORY OF FOOTBALL ROW AT UCLA MIKE BLAMES COACHES, LISTS MEN WHO QUIT

The Mirror

IMPORTANT TICKETS  
PUBLIC SEASON \$19.00

UCLA  
1948 Football  
LOS ANGELES

Sept. 18—Washington State (8:30 P.M. Sat. night)  
Sept. 25—Northwestern  
Oct. 2—Idaho 2:30  
Oct. 9—Washington State  
Oct. 16—Stanford 4:00  
Oct. 23—Oregon State  
Oct. 30—Nebraska at L.A.  
Nov. 6—California at L.A.  
Nov. 12—Oregon (8:30)  
Nov. 20—SC 2:00

\*Inc. Fed. Tax.  
PUBLIC SEASON (except for USC and location possible is a members only.  
ALUMNI SEASON

MAIL TICKET APPLICATION  
ASUCLA Football Coliseum, Los Angeles 2  
to purchasers about game tickets appropriate which they admit.

Back page lead: 'Dimitro last night walked into the Mirror office, asked for a typewriter and wrote his own version of the argument.'

It's a two page story. Big news.

He claims other players, including reserve George Kauffman, pulled out of the team because of LaBrucherie. The coach says Kauffman was never good enough to play anyway. The gloves are off.

## LA BRUCHERIE SAYS MIKE NEVER EARNED TOP SPOT

Then:

### COACH BERT LABRUCHERIE SAYS: MIKE CAN COME BACK IF APOLOGISES

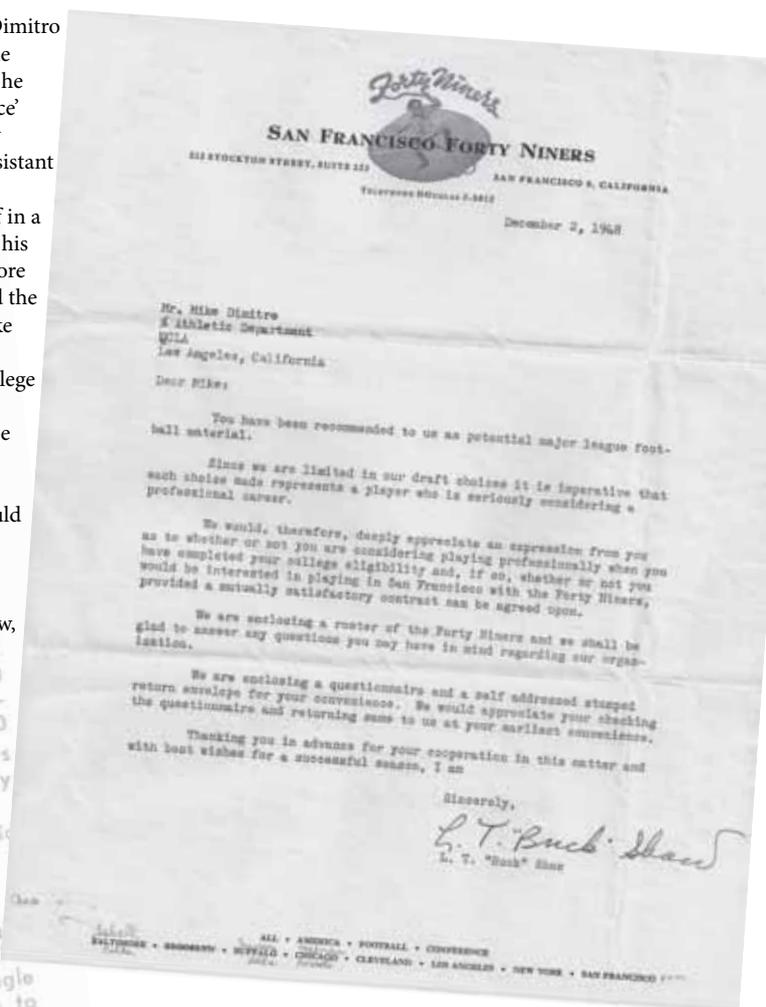
GUARD MIKE DIMITRO RETORTS:

## I WON'T PLAY UNLESS I CAN START

On the eve of the game, Dimitro was back in. According to the *Evening Herald and Express*, he had 'smoked the pipe of peace' with LaBrucherie then a few choice remarks from two assistant coaches 'poured salt on old wounds.' 'Dimitro walked off in a huff and this time turned in his suit, once and for all.' 'I got sore and walked off,' Dimitro told the *Express*. 'I'm not going to take anything from those two.'

Bottom line, Dimitro's college career was ending in bitter acrimony. It would not be the last time he would put his ego ahead of loyalty. Come Christmas, LaBrucherie would be gone too.

In December, Mike was invited to try out with San Francisco 49ers. He withdrew, once more, from UCLA and headed to Honolulu to play for the Pac Coast All Stars in the Hula Bowl. It sated his wanderlust for another winter.



**1949** Dimitro – now living at 2524 Prosser Ave – soon changed his mind again and finally finished his degree at UCLA. He accepted an all-expenses paid three-week trip to Chicago in August courtesy of the *Tribune* to play for the college's All Stars against the NFL champions, Philadelphia Eagles, at Soldier Field in the traditional season opener. Despite being 27, he was listed as being 24 years old. A year earlier UCLA had him down as 25. Curious.

The \$150 game fee would take his little brother Harry three weeks to earn at Weirton Mill. And when Mike was offered \$5,500 a year by LA Dons – plus a \$250 bonus if he makes the team – he snubbed the LA Rams' latest offer and signed for the AAFC team.

On 1 June 1949, Dimitro finally turned professional. In mid-July he joined five other rookies at practice in Long Beach. Overwhelmed by dollar signs, Mike went out and bought a brand new, all-optionals, two-door Styleline Dix from a Chevrolet dealership on Santa Monica Boulevard. The Chevy cost him \$2,000. Not a cent of his AAFC contract was guaranteed: all the Dons were committed to paying was his bed and board in training camp and a one-way ticket home if they released him. In mid-August, that's exactly what Dons coach Jim Phelan did. Mike flew to New York to try out with their new franchise, the Bulldogs. They didn't want him either. And they were awful, winning just one game of their opening NFL season, eventually evolving into Baltimore Colts.

Devastated by his rejection by pro football, Dimitro enrolled across town at USC to do a Masters degree in education. But by October he had applied to transfer back to the University of Alabama. He was pin-balling from pillar to post.

He saw sense and stayed with Patty at their Stewart St home in Santa Monica. His Masters thesis was based on analysis of the 1947 SMU-UCLA game film in which he'd had a stormer. His football mates said Patty must have written it. They were probably right.

Dimitro mixed with USC's football players on campus but, as a twice-married 27-year-old war vet, he was almost a decade older than some of the kids arriving straight from high school. He was not one of them, never could be. His time had been and gone.

Leaving USC in 1950, he took up a post at Palo Verde Junior College. He would be paid \$3,500 a year to teach and work as line coach during the football season, then take the college baseball team in the spring. When he went home to Weirton for the holidays, he came back having signed almost a whole football team from Ohio for the next season. But Dimitro would not return to Palo Verde with them. Desperate to make the most of his athletic ability, he started to hunt a pro football deal again.

The demise of the AAFC that year left only 12 pro teams and about 500 players in the States. So, in the summer of 1951, Mike headed up to Canada to try out for Edmonton Eskimos instead. They didn't sign him either. He could go back to West Virginia and play 'dirt-lot' semi-pro football in the mud and sludge.

No thanks. LA was home now. All of his brothers and sisters were in Southern California now, too. The sunshine of LA proved irresistible. He moved in to a small detached house on Ceilhunt Avenue with Patty and got a teaching job at Andrew Jackson School in Boyle Heights.

His dream of being a football star was over.

**FOOTBALL · SUNDAY · COLISEUM**  
**2:00 PM**  
**KIMBROUGH** **RADOVICH**  
**O'ROURKE** **DOBBS**  
**REINHARD** **FENENBOCK**  
**L.A. DONS**  
 VS.  
**SAN FRANCISCO '49ERS**  
**NORM** **FRANKIE** **LEN**  
**★ STANDLEE ★ ALBERT ★ ESHMONT ★**  
**NEVER BEFORE FOOTBALL LIKE THIS AT PRICES LIKE THESE**  
 On Sale Sunday from 10:00 A.M. at the Coliseum  
 50,000 General Admission Seats ..... **\$1.00**  
 (Coaches Section)  
 12,000 Student Tickets ..... **.25c**  
**35-YARD LINE RESERVED SEATS** ..... **\$2.00**  
**Choice 40, 50-YD. LINE RESERVED SEATS** ..... **\$3.50**  
 RESERVED SEATS ON SALE UNTIL 5:00 P.M. SATURDAY AT  
 AN Harris & Frank and Brooks Stores, Phelps Turkel (Wilshire Blvd.), Mike  
 Lyman's Restaurant (Eighth and Hill), Jerry Rothchild's (Beverly Hills), Don  
 Angeles Dons—607 S. Hill Street.  
 For Complete Information, Phone MADison 62295

# All-America Football Conference

## Contract Between

### The Los Angeles Dons, Inc.

herein called Club, and Mike Dimitro  
at 2524 Proser Ave., Los Angeles 34, Calif. herein called Player.

The Club is a member of the All-America Football Conference, herein called the Conference. The Constitution and Rules of the Conference define the relationship between Club and Player and vest in a Commissioner (herein called the Commissioner) powers of control and discipline and of decision in case of disputes.

In consideration of those facts and of the mutual promises and the promises of each to the other hereinafter set forth, Club and Player agree as follows:

1. Club hereby employs Player to render skilled services as a football player during the year(s) 19 49 including Club's training season, exhibition games, Conference games and post-season championship games in said year(s).  
2. For performance of Player's services and agreements hereunder, Club will pay Player the sum of \$ 5,500.00 per year, which shall be payable in semi-monthly installments commencing with the first and ending with the last regularly scheduled Conference game of Club.

In addition Player shall be entitled to all amounts allocated to him by the Commissioner or the Conference Rules for post-season play-offs and championship games.

3. Player agrees to perform his services hereunder diligently and faithfully and to conform to high standards of personal conduct, fair play and good sportsmanship and to Conference Rules and Club regulations respecting player conduct.

4. Player agrees that until June 2 of the year following the last year stipulated in paragraph 1, he will not play, or contract to play, football otherwise than for Club, except with the approval in writing of the Commissioner and Club.

5. Player represents and agrees that he has exceptional and unique skill and ability as a football player, that his services to be rendered hereunder are of a special, unusual, extraordinary and intellectual character which gives them a peculiar value which cannot be reasonably or adequately compensated for in damages at law, and that Player's breach of this contract will cause Club great and irreparable injury and damage. Player agrees that, in addition to other remedies, Club shall be entitled to injunctive and other equitable relief to prevent a breach of this contract by Player. Player represents that he has no physical or mental defects, known to him, which would prevent or impair performance of his services.

6. Club and Player agree to accept and comply with all provisions of the Conference Constitution and Rules and all decisions of the Commissioner thereunder. Club and Player accept as part of this contract the Regulations printed on business hours for inspection by Player. A copy of the Conference Constitution and Rules shall be available at Club's office during its regular hours for inspection by Player.

7. Club may terminate this contract by written notice to Player if Player shall at any time (a) fail, refuse or neglect to render his services hereunder; or (b) fail, in the opinion of Club's coach, to have or exhibit sufficient skill or competitive ability to qualify or continue as a member of Club's team; or (c) in any other manner materially breach this contract, including the Regulations. If this contract is terminated by Club by reason of Player's failure to render his services hereunder due to disability resulting directly from injury sustained in the performance of his services hereunder and stipulated in paragraph 2, for the balance of the season in which the injury was sustained. In all other cases, if this contract is terminated by Club during its regular Conference season, Player shall receive as his full compensation up to such termination bears to the total number of days in such Conference schedule. If this contract is terminated during the training season, payment by Club of Player's expenses and his transportation as provided in the Regulations, shall be full compensation for Player's services during the training season and Club shall not be obligated to pay any part of the sum stipulated in paragraph 2.

8. Player agrees that he may be fined or suspended from payment and play by the Commissioner or the Club for violation of this contract, provided that any termination of this contract or fine or suspension by Club shall be appealable to the Commissioner in accordance with the Conference Rules.

9. Player agrees to cooperate with Club in any and all of its promotional activities and agrees that Club shall have the right to use his name, portrait, picture, likeness and performance in all exhibitions, descriptions and representations of the football games of Club on the field or by radio broadcasting, television, motion pictures, photography or other media and in connection with any and all promotional, advertising or trade purposes of Club and the Conference. Player recognizes that Club has an insurable interest in Player and Player agrees to cooperate with Club in all matters pertaining to that interest and its protection by Club.

10. Player agrees that on or before June 1 of the year next following the last year stipulated in paragraph 1, by written notice to Player, Club may renew this contract for said following year on the same terms, including the terms of payment, as those stipulated in the other paragraphs hereof, unless Player and Club agree upon a higher or lower payment to Player. Such option of renewal and the promise of Player not to play otherwise than for Club have been taken into consideration in determining the amount stipulated in paragraph 2.

11. This contract, including said option, may be assigned by Club to any other Club in the Conference, and Player agrees to report to the assignee promptly, as provided in the Regulations, upon notice of such assignment. Upon and after such assignment, all rights and obligations of the assignor hereunder shall become and be rights and obligations of the assignee and the assignee shall become liable to Player for his salary and the assignor shall not be liable therefor. The assignee may, under conditions prescribed in the Conference Constitution, become an assignee of this contract with the same effect as if the contract had been assigned to Conference by Club. All references in this contract to Club shall be deemed to mean and include any assignee of this contract.

12. Any dispute between Player and Club shall be referred to the Commissioner as an arbitrator and the Commissioner's decision shall be accepted by all parties as final. Club and Player agree that any claim by either party against the other shall be deemed waived and released unless presented in writing to the Commissioner within 90 days from the date it arose.

13. This contract sets forth the entire agreement between the parties. No verbal agreements or understandings between Club and Player shall be valid or binding.

14. A copy of this contract shall be filed with the Commissioner by Club within 10 days after its execution. This contract shall have no force or effect if disapproved by the Commissioner within 10 days after such filing.

SIGNED in triplicate this 26 day of April 19 49

WITNESSES:

Player to R.A. # 250.00  
Bonus if he makes the  
team at training camp.

THE LOS ANGELES DONS, INC.

By Tony Bellini  
(Club)

Mike M. Dimitro  
(Player)

305 Engle St. Westton, W. Va.  
(Home address of Player)

(PLAYER'S COPY)