

The Hudson Hero



*The Legacy of
Football Hall-of-Famer
Dante Lavelli*

By: Kelly Boyer Sagert

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A storytelling program for

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On a frigid day in 1923 – February 23, to be exact – a baby boy was born to two Italian immigrants. His name was bigger than he was – Dante Bert Joseph Lavelli.



Dante was born to Angelo and Emilia Lavelli of Hudson (*Ohio*) a place located between two bustling cities – Akron and Cleveland. Angelo was a well-respected, in-demand blacksmith who could create unique hand-crafted pieces of ironwork.

As for Emilia, she kept house for a priest before her wedding, and dedicated her life to being a loving wife (and then mother) after her arranged marriage. She was an excellent cook and seamstress. At lunchtime, she would walk a hot lunch to her husband at work – along with a bottle of homemade wine. At home, she would welcome guests with plenty of delicious food.

When Dante was in second grade, he was already playing football, baseball, and basketball. By the time he was in high school, he was a full-fledged hero, the Hudson High School Explorers’ “never-say-never” quarterback. Dante led his high school to three undefeated seasons in a row, and three straight Summit County championships.

So, after high school graduation in 1941, what was next for Dante?

Angelo, who had learned the blacksmithing trade in Italy from his father and during an apprenticeship, hoped that his son would take over the family business, the Hudson Ornamental Iron Works.

Emilia, meanwhile, wanted Dante to do something that would keep him close to their Hudson home.

As for Dante, he had other plans. To quote his father in the *Akron Beacon Journal*,
“The boy – he wants to play and play and play.”

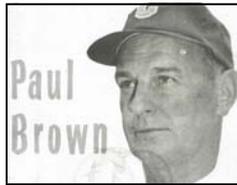
But . . . where? And, since Dante played three sports, what?

The New York Yankees and the Detroit Tigers baseball teams expressed interest in
him.

Detroit was nearly 200 miles away. New York was about 400 miles away. This meant
that neither of them would be considered close to home – at least, not by Emilia’s standards.

The solution? Dante was recruited by a man named Paul Brown to play football at
the Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio.

The bad news was Columbus was a bit more than 100 miles away. The good news
was it was a whole lot closer than Detroit or New York!



Brown was a no-nonsense kind of coach who just wanted his team to get the job
done – and win games. Fortunately, that’s exactly what Dante had in mind and what he was
already doing.

Unfortunately an injury sidelined him during his sophomore year. Then something
else even worse derailed his football career for far longer than an injury AND it took him
much further away from home than 100 miles: World War II.

Dante enlisted in 1943 and fought in one of the war’s fiercest battles against Adolf
Hitler and the Nazis in the Battle of the Bulge. “British Bulldog” Winston Churchill called
this “the greatest American battle in the war.”



Taking place in the Ardennes region of Belgium from December 16, 1944, through January 25, 1945, this brutal six-week battle unfolded with frigid weather conditions. Record-breaking low temperatures created a mixture of freezing rain on top of high drifts of snow. Fog was thick. More than 15,000 cold-related injuries were reported that winter, including frostbite and pneumonia.

In this wicked weather, Hitler hoped to divide the Allied forces (from Britain, France, and the United States) in what was ultimately his last military offensive move of significance. By the time this battle began, American troopers were already “fatigued” and unaware of what was coming at them as they were attacked by 30 German divisions.

In response, Allied soldiers, including the Americans, formed a line in the form of a large bulge – and then they fought. Oh, how they fought!



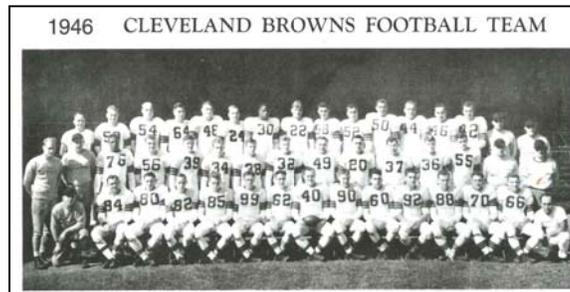
The U.S. Army suffered more than 100,000 casualties, making this the bloodiest battle ever fought by an American army.

As for the football fighter, he was shot in the foot during this battle, but he safely returned home to his family – and, despite that injury, to his beloved sport.

Now he was playing for the newly created Cleveland Browns of the All-America Football Conference (AAFC). This team was formed on April 20, 1945, shortly after Dante had survived the horrific fighting at the Battle of the Bulge.

The team was named after its first coach, Paul Brown. Since he was known as the

father of the modern offense, it shouldn't be surprising that they won all four conference titles in the years they were part of the AAFC (1946-1949).



During Dante's professional football career, he earned the nickname of Gluefingers. Why? Here's what future Hall of Famer, quarterback Otto Graham, had to say about his teammate. "If I had to throw the ball to get a first down and I had to pick any receiver in history, it would be Dante. He had the best hands the game has ever seen, and he had the desire to go up and get the ball." In other words, he wasn't about to drop that pigskin, no matter how cold the temperatures!



Otto also said, "Dante would scratch, claw and kick to get the ball. He was always coming into the huddle and telling me he was open and that I should throw to him. He wasn't saying that to be a big shot. He just loved to play. If he was open by a few inches, he'd be yelling, 'Otto, Otto.' Many a time when I was stuck and heard that voice, I would throw it in his direction and darned if he didn't come down with it. He had fantastic hands."

When the team transitioned to the National Football League (NFL) in 1950, Brown remained the coach.

That year, the Browns and the Rams played in the first championship game. Cleveland won in a tight contest with a score of 30-28.

Brown greatly appreciated Dante's skills, saying that, "He had the strongest hands

I've ever seen. Nobody can take the ball away from him once he gets his hands on it." That's why the coach called him, "Mr. Clutch". He said, "... if there was a tight situation – get the ball to Lavelli."

Dante went on to perform key roles in the ten championship games that the Cleveland Browns played in. They won seven of these titles, a remarkable run. During his eleven years in professional football, Dante played two positions – offensive end and defensive end – with 386 receptions for a total of 6,488 yards. All-League selections? Four!

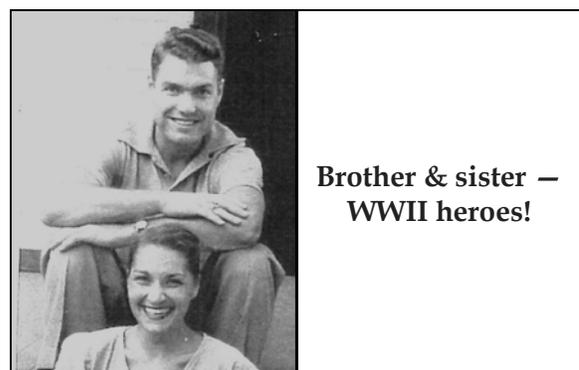
In 1975, Mr. Clutch was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. 2020 is the 100th anniversary of the league. A perfect time to celebrate the accomplishments of Ohio's incredible home-town boy.

However, it wouldn't be right to end the story here. There is ANOTHER hero in this story. Or should I say, HEROINE?

Dante's sister, Edith Lavelli, (1921-2003) joins her brother on the Hudson WWII Honor Roll. She became a member of the Women's Army Corps (WACS) in December, 1942. She was one 150,000 WWII WACS whose members were the first women other than nurses to serve within the ranks of the US Army.

The Hudson Clock tower is a War Memorial with the names of Hudson Heroes including Dante and Edith. But to be fair, there's one other hero on that plaque - Angelo, who received the Victory Medal in WWI.

We salute them all!





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This story is from an upcoming book and storytelling program about Dante Lavelli. It will join other EVE history programs which cover topics such as REMARKABLE OHIOANS and ORDINARY PEOPLE IN EXTRAORDINARY TIMES: STORIES FROM WWII.

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From CANAL SONGS AND STORIES, a fun and informative program that features music and stories from the Ohio-Erie Canal, to our Emmy-nominated documentary, TRAIL MAGIC: THE GRANDMA GATEWOOD STORY, a look into the life of an inspiring woman. Other projects in the works includes documenting the life of Victoria Woodhull, first woman to run for president in 1872 (www.victoriawoodhullforpresident.org) and an upcoming book on LOST RESTAURANTS OF DOWNTOWN CLEVELAND for Arcadia Press.

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