

# LEN CASANOVA

## A WEST COAST FOOTBALL LEGEND

By Jeremiah R. Scott Jr.

In December 1999, the Humboldt County (Cal.) Times-Standard newspaper published its All-Century football team. Honored as the All-Century football coach was Leonard “Cas” Casanova.

Len Casanova was born June 12, 1905 on a ranch in the Grizzly Bluff area near Ferndale, California. Len’s father, John, came to Humboldt County in 1886 from the Romansch area of Switzerland. His mother, Marie Ursula, also came from Switzerland to South Dakota as a young girl. Len’s parents courted through correspondence and were married in Assumption Catholic Church in Ferndale.

The first Casanova home was in Alton, where John Casanova worked for the Pacific Lumber Company. The Casanova family later moved to Ferndale where John drove a freight wagon and became Ferndale’s superintendent of streets. The Casanovas had six children—three boys and three girls. Leonard (“Cas”), the second youngest, got his start in football in the early 1920s when he played halfback for Ferndale High School, and in 1922 he captained the Ferndale team to a co-championship with Eureka High School. The Ferndale team ended the season with seven wins in eight games. One of Casanova’s early athletic feats came in the first game that year against Arcata High when, as a left-footed kicker, he drop-kicked a 45-yard field goal as Ferndale defeated the Tigers 10-0.

Mae (Earley) Bugbee, from Ferndale’s Class of 1925, remembers that Cas was “very popular, a good student, and lots of fun while in high school.” While in high school, Cas delivered newspapers and worked at a meat market in town. In his senior year, Cas also played basketball and baseball and was president of the student body. In the 1923 Ferndale High yearbook, under the column “Expected to Be” in the Senior Horoscope section, Cas listed his future career as “football coach.” Cas entered Santa Clara University in the fall of 1923 and played football and baseball from 1923 through 1927. As a freshman in a game against Stanford, Cas picked up a fumble and returned it 86 yards for a touchdown.

In 1924, Cas was playing halfback and doing the punting for Santa Clara. The Santa Clara - St. Mary’s College game, a popular match since it originated in 1895, was long known as the “Little Big Game” and was played annually at Kezar Stadium in San Francisco. Playing against St. Mary’s, with the ball resting on the Santa Clara two yard line, Casanova was called on to punt from his own end zone. The punt traveled a total of 97 yards to the St. Mary’s one yard line, and that punt now ranks as the second longest of college football history if pre-1937 statistics were included in the NCAA record book. Clark Bugbee, a high school teammate, later recalled that “Cas wanted to be a good punter. The coach gave him a football to take home and practice with. He practiced winter and summer and turned out to be quite a punter in college.”

Cas was Santa Clara's team captain in his senior year, where his coach was Adam Walsh, who had played at Notre Dame under Knute Rockne. Cas graduated in 1927 with a bachelor's degree in philosophy and a minor in history. He attended summer sessions at USC and obtained his teaching credential in 1932. Following college graduation, Cas played one season with the San Francisco Olympic Club team and began his teaching and coaching career at St. Joseph Military Academy in Belmont (Cal.). In 1928, he began teaching physical education and coaching football and baseball at Sequoia High School in Redwood City, California. During that time Cas met and married Dixie Simmers of Santa Cruz. Dixie had attended San Jose State College and was teaching kindergarten. The couple was married on June 12, 1931 in Redwood City.

As head football coach at Sequoia High, Casanova's team won the Peninsula Athletic League championship in 1935. In 1936, Cas became an assistant coach at Santa Clara University under Lawrence "Buck" Shaw and he remained in that position until he joined the United States Navy in 1942. In addition to being assistant football coach, Cas was also head baseball coach from 1939 to 1942. Santa Clara compiled a successful season in 1936 and was invited to play Louisiana State in the Sugar Bowl on January 1, 1937, and the Broncos upset the nationally ranked Tigers 21-14. Sportswriter Harry Borba of the San Francisco Examiner reported the post-game scene: "Those boys from the West have just torn down the north goalposts and quite appropriately, too. Now the south goalposts are falling prey to small, joy-crazed bands of Santa Clara rooters all the way from Northern California. Their Bronco heroes have just beaten Louisiana State 21-14 in the major upset of the post-season." In the fall of 1937 Santa Clara went undefeated, sharing the number nine Associated Press ranking with Notre Dame, and the Broncos were invited to the Sugar Bowl again where they stunned eighth-ranked Louisiana State, 6-0.

With America's entry in World War II, Casanova was commissioned in the United States Navy in June 1942 as a full lieutenant. He served in the Wickhorst-Hamilton Survival and Physical Fitness Program, instituted to improve the physical fitness and swimming ability of all naval personnel. Cas was stationed at the Corpus Christi Naval Air Station in Texas and the Bremerton Naval Shipyard in Washington, where he was promoted to lieutenant commander. His last naval station was Coronado Air Station near San Diego, where among his students were Ferndale friends Jim Bugbee, son of a former teammate, and a young pilot named Don Clausen, who later became a congressman. Cas was discharged at the end of the war as a full naval commander.

In 1946, after his naval discharge, Cas accepted the appointment as head football coach for the Santa Clara Broncos, with his former head coach, Buck Shaw having been named as the first San Francisco 49ers head coach that same year. Cas was head coach at Santa Clara for four years (1946-1949) during which time his teams won twenty games, lost thirteen, and tied three against many of the strongest teams in the country. Casanova's 1948 team defeated Stanford and tied Michigan State, along with posting an upset win over Oklahoma at Kezar Stadium, 20-17.

In 1949, the Santa Clara Broncos opened with a disappointing defeat at the hands of the California Golden Bears Rose Bowl team. Santa Clara then went unbeaten over its next eight games—marred only by a 7-7 tie with Stanford. After nearly upsetting mighty Oklahoma in its final game, 28-21, the Broncos were invited to play in the Orange Bowl game in Miami. Their opponent was the Associated Press number eleven ranked University of Kentucky Wildcats, coached by Paul "Bear" Bryant. Bryant, who later became the all-time winningest football coach in collegiate history after moving on to Texas A & M and Alabama, had earlier served under Casanova in the United States Navy. Kentucky was an overwhelming favorite. Santa Clara's nineteen-car train was known as the "Orange Bowl Special" and it stopped at Yuma, Arizona, and Del Rio, Texas, to allow the team to hold short practice sessions. In Miami Santa Clara scored a monumental upset of Kentucky, 21-13. Santa Clara was ahead 14-13 and scored its final touchdown with thirty seconds remaining in the game. Bear Bryant remarked after the game:

"I had better men at my disposal than Casanova had. He got more out of his men than I did."

In 1950, Cas was offered the head coaching position at the University of Pittsburgh. Cas expected to have an experienced Pitt team to play a tough schedule against Notre Dame, Michigan State, and Ohio State. But in June 1950, the Korean War began and most of his football players were called to military duty. His depleted ranks were able to gain but one victory in the 1950 season. In 1951, Cas decided to accept the head football coach position at the University of Oregon in Eugene. Oregon football fortunes had grown dismal, and in 1951 and 1952 the Oregon Ducks won just two games each season. With Cas at the helm the Ducks' records improved, and in 1956 Oregon would play a tie with Pacific Coast Conference champion Oregon State.

The Oregon Ducks played in one of the earliest nationally-televised games in 1953 against Nebraska—winning 20-12. In 1957 Oregon was crowned Pacific Coast Conference champion. A Time magazine article, dated November 4, 1957, reported on the Oregon Ducks with a picture entitled, "Oregon's Tourville Crossing California, Scents of the Rose Bowl." The article included the following report: "The brief words echoed like a bomb in the strained silence of the dressing

room 'Rose Bowl,' muttered Oregon quarterback Jack Crabtree, as if the very syllables were sacred. His silver-haired coach, Len Casanova, cut him short: 'It's a silly thing to discuss.' But it was too late to button anybody's lip. The desperately quiet Oregon Ducks had just beaten California, 24-6. They were still unbeaten in Pacific Coast Conference play, and their hometown of Eugene was already planning a New Year's visit to Pasadena. Stanford's Indians are the biggest stumbling block left between Oregon and the Rose Bowl. And if the Ducks waddle by Stanford this week, Coach Casanova is determined that they will do it in his own quiet way—concentrating on defense and stubbornly waiting for the breaks."

As Pacific Coast Conference champions, the Oregon Ducks were invited to play in the 1958 Rose Bowl—their first appearance in the Rose Bowl since 1917. The opponent would be the number two nationally-ranked Ohio State Buckeyes, coached by Woody

Hayes, and a 21-point favorite. Through the 1957 game, the Big Ten's record over the Pacific Coast Conference in the Rose Bowl series stood at ten wins against one loss, and football fans gave Oregon little hope. At the Rose Bowl, Ohio State took the opening kickoff and marched 80 yards for a touchdown, but Oregon replied with a touchdown to tie the score 7-7. In the third quarter, Oregon missed a 24-yard field goal and the score was still 7-7 in the fourth quarter. Ohio State then kicked a 34-yard field goal in the fourth quarter to go ahead 10-7. Oregon then took the ensuing kickoff and marched down the field toward the goal line until an unfortunate fumble stalled the drive, and Ohio State defeated Oregon 10-7.

Much of the nation had rooted for the underdog Oregon Ducks and their coach, Len Casanova. Oregon outgained Ohio State in total yards and first downs. Bill Leiser of the San Francisco Chronicle Sporting Green, on January 2, 1958, reported in part: "A kick that sailed true, 34 yards through the upright posts, as against one that did not, won for Ohio State the finest football game of modern Tournament of Roses history this balmy afternoon, 10-7. Tabbed for a three touchdown licking, Casnova's Oregon Ducks refused to accept the odds and matched the more numerous and more powerful athletes from the Big Ten blow for blow, yard for yard, and

touchdown for touchdown. The kicks, I swear, were from exactly the same one single spot or hash mark, at the same exact angle from the same side of the field.”

Braven Dyer of the Los Angeles Times, who had picked Ohio State to win by a 48-14 score, said: “The score of 10-7 was a complete moral victory for the underdog Ducks from Eugene who had been doped to lose by three touchdowns. They lost, but at day’s end there weren’t many fans who were willing to concede that the better team had won.” Vincent X. Flaherty, writing in the San Francisco Examiner, said: “Len Casanova undoubtedly performed the greatest coaching feat of the season for the Rose Bowl classic...there couldn’t have been a bowl team anywhere in America yesterday that dazzled with more spectacular finesse.” After the Rose Bowl, Cas was honored as the season’s most highly-recognized football coach in the country. Humboldt County, also proud of its nationally-acclaimed hero, honored Len Casanova and his wife, Dixie, at the Redwood Acres Fairgrounds in Eureka, where over 500 gathered to pay tribute to America’s most famous football coach on January 14, 1958.

Cas continued to coach the Oregon Ducks through 1966, for a total of sixteen years. The Webfoots continued their winning ways, with appearances in the Liberty Bowl (1960 vs Penn State) and the Sun Bowl (1963 vs Southern Methodist). Cas also coached in the Hula Bowl and the annual East-West Shrine game in San Francisco. Cas attributed much of his success at Oregon to his assistant coaches. His initial offensive coordinator from 1951-1959 was John McKay, later head coach for USC. Other assistant coaches were John Robinson, later head coach for USC and the Rams, Bruce Snyder, later head coach at Cal and Arizona State, and Jerry Frei, later Oregon head coach. Cas retired as Oregon’s head football coach after the 1966 season and was appointed Oregon’s athletic director, where he served four years until he retired in 1970. His sixteen-year record at Oregon was 82-73-8, and in the final eight seasons it was 47-31-4.

In 1964 Cas was named president of the American Football Coaches Association (AFCA), and in 1977 he was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame. He also received an honorary doctorate degree in 1989 from Santa Clara University. Alonzo Steiner, now a semi-retired Portland attorney and son of longtime successful Oregon State football coach Lon Steiner, played for Cas from 1953-1955. He remembers Casanova’s close rapport with his players, and the coach driving 300 miles to Ontario, Oregon to attend a local school board meeting so that he could urge the board to hire one of his former players. In 1990, the AFCA presented the Amos Alonzo Stagg Award to Cas for his contributions to the sport of football.

After the untimely passing of Dixie Casanova at age 51 on October 17, 1960, Cas married Margaret Pence Hathaway three years later and the couple moved to Eugene, Oregon. Along with his two daughters, Cas has four granddaughters and six great-grandchildren. During the Casanova coaching reign the 46,000-seat Autzen Stadium in Eugene, home to the Oregon Ducks, was built, and on September 27, 1991, the University of Oregon dedicated the new Len Casanova Athletic Center adjacent to the stadium. The athletic center occupies 101,477 square feet on two floors and cost over \$11 million to complete.

Still active at age 96 and attending reunions with his former players and coaches, Cas sat for an interview with me and named some of the highlights of his coaching career: Most Memorable Game - 1950 Santa Clara win over Kentucky; Most Exciting Game - 1957 Rose Bowl against Ohio State; Most Memorable Players Coached - Mel Renfro, Dick James, George Shaw, Hall Haynes, John Hock, Bobby Moore, and Dave Wilcox; Best Coaching Opponent - Jim Owens of Washington.

Former California Governor and U.S. Supreme Court Justice, the late Earl Warren, often stated that he always read the sports page first when reading the morning newspaper because it told of men and women’s successes. Len Casanova was one of those successes.