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North-South stars meet one of their predecessors, a Giant of a football star

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IF another reason is needed to explain why the North-South All-Star football game needs a nascent Hall of Fame, evidence of it was on football practice fields the past two days.

There, before two teams of state players who have willingly given good portions of their high schools days to the sport, stood one of the greatest players to put on shoulder pads.

Before introductions, most of the North and South stars had no idea on the identity of a man from their grandfathers' generation. It was Robert E. Lee Samuel "Sam" Huff, a guy who in his life has tackled a heck of a lot more than Jim Brown.

Greatness, it seems, can travel incognito -- depending on the appreciation (or lack of it) for the past. So, some history was taught at those practices, right along with punt coverage and trap plays.

"If I made it, hell, then you can make it," Huff told the South players. "You may not make it as big, but you can make it.

"Not all of you are going to make it, but you'll have the opportunity to make it, and this game is part of it. It's up to you to make the most of it."

The 55th North-South game will be played Saturday night at University of Charleston Stadium, and prior to kickoff, Huff will be the headliner in the first N-S Hall of Fame class.

He played in the game 56 years ago -- Robert Huff on the North roster -- as a two-way tackle from Farmington High, swallowed into North Marion by a 1979 consolidation that Huff still thinks is wrong. He's an old-school guy, a small-school guy.

He was born in the Edna Gas coal camp, but he became a big-city guy, the toast of New York as a Giant linebacker. After the North-South players heard of Huff's accomplishments, many of them sat respectfully and quietly and listened intently and finally realized:

This guy wasn't just a Giant -- he's as big as it gets in West Virginia football. He was Jerry West in a helmet.

He played in the Greatest Game Ever Played -- and was one of the greatest players who ever played. In 1963, his second-to-last in the NFL, he played six games with a broken rib.

But Huff had a hero, too. It was a fellow Farmington product, the late Frank "Gunner" Gatski.

"The fact a lot of these kids don't know me, that's just reality," Huff said before he addressed the teams. "But you have to have heroes. When I was in grade school, Gunner would come back home after the season with the Cleveland Browns. I admired him.

"When I was in high school, he'd be on the street, talking to people, and go into bars to have a drink, and I'd stand and wait for him to come out ... except I'd stand across the street and just watch him and hope that some day it would come true that I could be like him."

It was better than that. When Gatski was in the last season (1957) of a Pro Football Hall of Fame career with the Detroit Lions and Huff early in his Pro Football Hall of Fame days with the Giants, "I got to play against him," Huff said. "What a thrill that was!"

Huff has loaned more than his presence to the North-South game, which has been fading in recent years. His executive career with Marriott has brought the hotel giant to the event as a sponsor.

"I think I'm giving this a little of Sam Huff's success, and I'm glad to do that," Huff said. "What I've tried to bring is organization and support. It needed sponsors; it needed money; it needed direction. This was going down.

"I can lift it up. I know how. I had to learn when I was in New York. When I went from West Virginia University up there, I was scared to death. Subways? I didn't know how that worked. I didn't know trains ran underground. I knew coal cars did, but trains?"

Huff played for WVU teams that went 31-7, but a resounding Sugar Bowl loss to Georgia Tech in the first major bowl date in Mountaineer history still eats at a man who went on to become an eight-time All-Pro selection.

"An embarrassment," he said. "Every time I hear 'Georgia Tech' today, I still grit my teeth. If there was a game I could have back, that'd be the one. That's why these kids here need to play hard and work. You can undo the difficult times. Every time you go out there, it's important."

Huff was the lone Class B All-State player on the North team in 1952. Astoundingly, in his years at WVU he was never an All-Southern Conference first-team selection. He is, however, the only Mountaineer football player with his number (75) retired.

He was a third-round NFL Draft pick who eventually played in six NFL Championships. That was the biggest game in pro football then. The Super Bowl wasn't launched until late in Huff's 14-year career, after he had moved to the Washington Redskins.

Frustration didn't leave Huff after the Georgia Tech loss, either. It took him 13 years after retirement to get into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. At 210 pounds, he doesn't look much different than he did then. He's a strong 73.

"I don't remember much about the North-South Game we played," Huff said, "except as a Class B player I was thrilled to make the game, and just being with the guys, meeting new people, having an opportunity to show that we were the best players in the state.

"I don't remember how I got from Farmington to Charleston for the game, but we stayed at the old Daniel Boone Hotel. You were a kid, and that was great. There was a big parade. It was a big deal."

On the field, Huff's 1952 North-South playing experience was a frustration prior to Georgia Tech and a 1-5 record in those NFL Championship games, including the 1958 overtime loss to Baltimore in that "Greatest Game."

As they say, you can look it up ...

The teams practiced for 11 days then (six now) prior to the Friday night, Aug. 15 game at Laidley Field. Huff was called "Robert Lee" or "Robert" or "Bob" in news reports on the game. (Huff was called Sam then, but his given names were sent in to game organizers and he appeared as Robert Lee Huff on the roster.)

In a less politically correct time, the teams were called "Yankees" and "Rebels."

Before a crowd of 14,333 in a game that featured "abundant halftime festivities," including a "dazzling fireworks display," the North took a 12-0 lead behind the play of Weston's Fred Wyant, a future NFL referee who was Huff's teammate then and at WVU, and joins Huff again in the first North-South Hall class.

The Daily Mail game story also reported:

"At the outset, the left side of the North line, particularly (Moundsville's Bill) Underdonk, Huff and Scottie Westfall of Grantsville smothered almost every South play in their vicinity."

However, the Rebels rallied to trail 18-12 early in the fourth quarter. Then, Dale Boyd of Huntington Vinson (a Class B All-Stater like Huff) took a kickoff at the 28-yard line and ran 72 yards to tie the score with 10:28 left.

That Yankee kickoff was by none other than ... tackle Sam Huff.

"I kicked in high school all of the time," he said. "I kicked at WVU, too."

An extra-point pass from Dunbar's Bobby Maxwell to Barboursville's Gary Bunn gave the South a 19-18 upset.

So, history repeats itself. Fifty-six years later, Huff is involved in another crucial boot for the North-South.

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