

colorado classics

Colorado Classics: Telegram from the Detroit Lions traveled long distance

Posted: 12/20/2011 01:00:00 AM MST **By Irv Moss**
The Denver Post

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For Stan Hendrickson, the little World War II airstrip in the New Guinea jungle not only was a long way from the University of Colorado and Folsom Field, it was where he learned that he had been selected in the NFL draft by the Detroit Lions.

He tells his story today, saying his service time in the U.S. Army was an interlude in his life while he was "doing what I had to do."

Hendrickson experienced the highlight of his college football career while playing for CU against Missouri. He was an end on offense and defense for the Buffaloes, and on Oct. 3, 1942, he rushed between the Missouri quarterback and halfback to intercept a lateral. He returned the theft 76 yards for a touchdown. "It's still in the CU football record book," he said of the play that was the longest return of a fumble for the Buffs at the time and now ranks fourth.

Hendrickson played at 6-foot-3 and 175 pounds and made the all-conference team in 1942 for CU coach Jim Yeager.

While in the Army, Hendrickson found

himself in the control tower of a New Guinea airstrip with time to think about his football career at CU. The sound of a jeep navigating the muddy, rutted road broke the silence. Hendrickson watched as the driver guided the jeep to the control tower. A telegram was being delivered to Hendrickson.

"It said, 'Congratulations. You've been drafted by the Detroit Lions,' " Hendrickson remembered.

War wounds

There was no fanfare, no television coverage, no NFL commissioner to dramatize the announcement. There was no media coverage at all. So how did the telegram make its way to Hendrickson?

"The military postal service really is good," Hendrickson said. "I knew the sergeant who ran the mail room. He knew where to find me."

Apparently, so did the Lions. They made him the 266th pick of the 1944 draft, a 26th-round selection. CU tackle Paul Briggs was a

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seventh-round pick of the Lions in that draft.

Hendrickson played for CU from 1941-42. He helped the Buffs go 7-2 in 1942 before serving in World War II. His remaining eligibility at CU had to be filed away for future use.

From New Guinea, Hendrickson went to the Philippines to fight the Japanese.

"I was there about six months before General MacArthur made his return," Hendrickson said. "I lived in the mountains with a guerilla force and sent information back to our lines."

Hendrickson was wounded in the right shoulder and neck during a firefight with the Japanese. The wounds left his right arm impaired and he also suffered damage to his vocal cords. His military career over, Hendrickson returned to CU in 1947.

"I gave football a try again," he said, "but it didn't work. I stayed on the team but didn't play."

Hendrickson began a business career and never played in the NFL.

The Buffs remain so important to him, he meets former CU players and coaches every Tuesday for coffee. "It's the bright spot in my life," he said.

Bill Kucera, who played at CU a decade after Hendrickson, makes sure he gets to the meetings.

"He doesn't drive anymore," Kucera said of Hendrickson, who turns 90 next month. "I know it means a great deal to him to be part

of our group. His wife tells us all the time how important it is to him to be with us every Tuesday."

Hendrickson has a unique story to tell at those meetings. No one else can say they received an invitation to play in the NFL while in the New Guinea jungle.

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Hendrickson bio

Born: Jan. 17, 1922, in Des Moines, Iowa

High school: Natrona County, Casper

College: University of Colorado

Family: Wife Miriam, sons Murl, Lloyd, Kirk and Kyle

Hobbies: Fly-fishing and golf

Agenda: Live as long as he can



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