

Colorado Classics: Gary Knafelc, former CU Buffs star

By Irv Moss *The Denver Post* *The Denver Post*

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It probably would come as a shock to anyone who knows him, but Gary Knafelc admits there was a time in his life when he was afraid.

It wasn't when he was a bouncer as a youth in his father's tavern in the rough steel mill section of Pueblo. Or when he played offense and defense at the University of Colorado before platoon football. It wasn't when he played for the Green Bay Packers and storied coach Vince Lombardi.

The time when Knafelc remembers being afraid was when he had to strike out on his own after graduation from Pueblo Central High School.

"I had never been anywhere outside of Pueblo," Knafelc said last week from his home in Green Bay. "I had talked a little bit to (coaches) from Oregon, Notre Dame and UCLA, but I was afraid to go very far away from home."

The trip from Pueblo to Boulder wasn't a joyride some 60 years ago.

There wasn't an Interstate 25 to provide smooth sailing to Denver, and the Boulder Turnpike between Denver and Boulder still was on the drawing board. The narrow, two-lane road between Colorado Springs and Denver was nicknamed the Ribbon of Death because of the number of accidents.

"It especially was bad when there was snow," said Knafelc, who lettered at CU from 1951-53. "When you think back that far, people probably think we traveled in covered wagons."

Knafelc's Pueblo was much different from today, with the city still trying to battle its way out of the economic turndown. Back then, the CF&I steel mill was booming and Knafelc Tavern, La Tronicas and Gus's Place, all well-known places, were in the mill's neighborhood and the middle of the surrounding energy.

Knafelc overcame his fear of travel and made it big at CU. He played for coach Dal Ward when the Buffs were in the Big Seven Conference. Ward employed the single-wing offense, and in 1953 Knafelc led the team in receiving with 22 catches for 451 yards and eight touchdowns. He also played end on defense and has vivid memories of playing against Oklahoma quarterback Eddie Crowder, who would later become CU's coach.

"I think I averaged about 57 minutes a game of playing time," said Knafelc, who made the 1953 all-Big Seven team.

Knafelc's memories of his NFL career are laced with thoughts of Lombardi.

"Coach Lombardi changed everything for me, how I lived, everything," Knafelc said. "We were always on Lombardi time. The clocks at Lambeau Field were always set 15 minutes early. I haven't been late for anything since, and I'm usually 15 minutes early."

One play on the field stands out. It came during the opening game of the 1955 regular season against Detroit. It had been a long time since the Packers beat their rival. Knafelc scored the winning touchdown in the last minute of the game on a pass from Tobin Rote and is known to this day as the only player to be carried off the field by Packers fans, who were celebrating his touchdown in Green Bay's old City Stadium.

"I may have that distinction forever, because the fans can't get on the field in Lambeau Field," Knafelc said.

Knafelc left the Packers after the 1962 season and played one year in San Francisco before retiring. In 1964, Knafelc stepped into the Packers' radio booth, where he stayed for 40 years.

"I didn't know anything about announcing," Knafelc said. "I was with Bart Starr, and I enjoyed it. The press box was a lot warmer in December than being on the field."

A couple of weeks ago, Knafelc made himself heard again in support of demands that the NFL increase its financial and medical help to players of his era.

"I don't think they want to help us," Knafelc said. "They're hoping for us to die off so they don't have to worry about us."

Knafelc cherishes his time with Lombardi. He feels the same way about his high school coach, Solie Raso, who still lives in Pueblo. He learned how to get along when growing up among the strong ethnic groups that make up Pueblo.

"I'd play the game again under the same circumstances," Knafelc said. "I'm not a bitter old man."

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Biography

Born: Jan. 2, 1932, in Pueblo

High school: Pueblo Central

College: University of Colorado

Family: Wife Emily, son Greg, daughter Kristi

Hobby: Golf

Residences: Green Bay, Wis., and Clermont, Fla.