

= Lou Groza =

Louis Roy Groza (January 25 , 1924 ? November 29 , 2000) , nicknamed " The Toe " , was an American football placekicker and offensive tackle who played his entire career for the Cleveland Browns in the All @-@ America Football Conference (AAFC) and National Football League (NFL) . Groza was professional football 's career kicking and points leader when he retired after the 1967 season . He played in 21 seasons for the Browns , helping the team to win eight league championships in that span . Groza 's accuracy and strength as a kicker influenced the development of place @-@ kicking as a specialty ; he could kick field goals from beyond 50 yards (46 m) at a time when attempts from that distance were a rarity . He set numerous records for distance and number of field goals kicked during his career .

Groza grew up in an athletic family in Martins Ferry , Ohio . He enrolled at Ohio State University on a scholarship in 1942 , but enlisted in the U.S. Army and was sent to serve in World War II after just one year in college . Groza deployed as an army surgical technician in the Pacific theater , where he stayed until returning in 1946 to play for the Browns . Helped by Groza 's kicking and play at offensive tackle , the Browns won the AAFC championship every year between 1946 and 1949 , when the league disbanded and the Browns were absorbed by the more established NFL . Cleveland won the NFL championship in its first year in the league on a last @-@ minute field goal by Groza . Groza set NFL records for field goals made in 1950 , 1952 and 1953 . Sporting News named him the league 's Most Valuable Player in 1954 , when the Browns won another championship . The team repeated as NFL champions in 1955 .

Groza retired briefly after the 1959 season due to a back injury , but returned in 1961 . He was part of a 1964 team that won another NFL championship . Groza retired for good after the 1967 season . Later in life , he ran an insurance business and served as a team ambassador for the Browns . He was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1974 . In 1992 , the Palm Beach County Sports Commission named the Lou Groza Award after him . The award is given annually to the country 's best college placekicker . Groza died in 2000 of a heart attack .

= = Early life = =

Born in eastern Ohio in Martins Ferry , just north and across the Ohio River from Wheeling , West Virginia , Groza 's parents were immigrants from Transylvania , part of modern @-@ day Romania . His Hungarian mother Mary and Romanian father John (Ioan) Groza owned and ran Groza 's Tavern on Main Street . Lou was the smallest in stature of four boys in an athletic family ; his brother Alex became a star basketball player at the University of Kentucky , a member of two national championship teams .

Groza lettered in football , basketball , and baseball at Martins Ferry High School . The Purple Riders won the state basketball championship in 1941 , when Groza was its captain . He was also captain of the baseball team . Groza learned placekicking from his older brother Frank , and practiced by trying to kick balls over telephone wires when he and his friends played touch football in the street .

= = College career and military service = =

Groza graduated from high school in 1942 and enrolled on an athletic scholarship at Ohio State University in Columbus , where he played as a tackle and placekicker on the Buckeyes ' freshman team . Groza played in three games and kicked five field goals , including one from 45 yards (41 m) away . In 1943 , he enlisted in the U.S. Army as World War II intensified . He first went for basic training to Abilene , Texas , and then to Brooks General Hospital in San Antonio .

After a stint with the short @-@ lived Army Service Training Program , Groza was sent with the 96th Infantry Division to serve as a surgical technician in Leyte , Okinawa , and other places in the Pacific theater in 1945 . The day he landed in the Philippines , Groza saw a soldier shot in the face . He was stationed in a bank of tents about five miles from the front lines and helped doctors tend to

the wounded . " I saw a lot of men wounded with severe injuries , " he later said . " Lose legs , guts hanging out , stuff like that . It 's a tough thing , but you get hardened to it , and you accept it as part of your being there . "

While he was in the Army , he received a package from Paul Brown , the Ohio State football coach . It contained footballs and a contract for him to sign to play on a team Brown was coaching in the new All @-@ America Football Conference (AAFC) . He signed the contract in May 1945 and agreed to join the team , called the Cleveland Browns , after the war ended in 1946 . Groza got \$ 500 a month stipend until the end of the war and a \$ 7 @,@ 500 annual salary .

= = Professional career = =

Following his discharge from military service , Groza reported to the Browns ' training camp in Bowling Green , Ohio . He showed up in army fatigues carrying all his clothes in a duffel bag . There , he joined quarterback Otto Graham , fullback Marion Motley and receivers Dante Lavelli and Mac Speedie to form the core of the new team 's offense . Groza was mainly a placekicker in his first two years with the Browns , but he played a big part in the team 's early success . In his first season , he set a professional football record for both field goals and extra points . The Browns , meanwhile , advanced to the AAFC championship against the New York Yankees . Groza sprained his ankle in the game and missed three field goals , but Cleveland won 14 ? 9 . Behind a powerful offense led by Graham , Motley and Lavelli , the Browns finished the 1947 season with a 12 ? 1 ? 1 record and made it back to the championship game . Groza , however , was injured and could only watch as the team won its second championship in a row .

Further success followed for the Browns and Groza , who was nicknamed " The Toe " by a sportswriter for his kicking abilities . Groza led the league in field goals and the team won all of its games in 1948 , recording professional football 's first perfect season . As he grew into a star placekicker , Groza began playing regularly at offensive tackle beginning in 1948 . One highlight of that year for Groza was a 53 @-@ yard field goal against the AAFC 's Brooklyn Dodgers that was then the longest kick in pro football history . With Groza , the Browns could attempt field goals at a range many other teams could not . " Anywhere from 40 to 50 yards (37 to 46 m) , he was a weapon , " Tommy James , Groza 's holder for eight years , later said . Another championship win followed in 1949 , but the AAFC dissolved after the season , and the Browns were among three teams absorbed by the more established National Football League (NFL) .

The war had shortened Groza 's college career , so he continued to study at Ohio State in the offseason in his early years with the Browns . He graduated with a degree in business in 1949 . Groza married that year , to Jackie Lou Robbins , a girl from Martins Ferry who was working as a model in New York City when they first dated .

The Browns ' debut in the NFL in the 1950 season was closely watched ; while the team dominated the AAFC in its short existence , some sportswriters , NFL owners and coaches considered the league inferior . Cleveland put all doubts to rest in its first game against the two @-@ time defending champion Philadelphia Eagles , winning 35 ? 10 . In a game against the Washington Redskins later in the season , Groza broke a 24 @-@ year @-@ old NFL record by kicking his 13th field goal of the season . He also scored the only touchdown of his career in that game on a reception from Graham . The Browns ended the regular season with a 10 ? 2 record in the American Conference , tied with the New York Giants . That forced a playoff against the Giants in which Groza kicked the winning field goal for the Browns with under a minute to play .

The Browns next faced the Los Angeles Rams in the championship game . Groza came into the game as the NFL 's leading kicker , both in terms of points scored and accuracy . He had a success rate of 68 @. @ 4 % in an era when most teams made fewer than half of their attempts . The Rams went ahead early in the game on a touchdown pass from star quarterback Bob Waterfield and a scoring run by Dick Hoerner . But Graham and the Browns came back with four touchdowns , two to receiver Dante Lavelli . As time wound down in the fourth quarter , however , the Rams were ahead 28 ? 27 , and Cleveland had a final chance to win the game . Graham drove the offense to the Rams ' nine @-@ yard line and set up a Groza field goal attempt . The 16 @-@ yard try sailed

through the uprights with 28 seconds left , giving the Browns a 30 ? 28 victory . It was the biggest kick of Groza 's career . " I never thought I would miss , " he said later . After the season , Groza was named to the first @-@ ever Pro Bowl , the NFL 's all @-@ star game .

Cleveland again reached the championship game in 1951 , but lost this time in a rematch against the Rams . Groza had a 52 @-@ yard field goal in the game , a record for a championship or Super Bowl that stood for 42 years . He was again named to the Pro Bowl after the season . The same scenario was repeated in 1952 and 1953 : the Browns reached the championship both years , but lost both times to the Detroit Lions . Groza was playing with cracked ribs in the 1952 championship loss , and he missed three field goals . Groza set a record in 1953 when he made 23 field goals and had an 88 @. @ 5 % success rate , a single @-@ season mark that stood for 28 years . He made the Pro Bowl again in 1952 and 1953 , and was a first @-@ team All @-@ Pro selection both years .

The Browns came back in 1954 to win another championship . That year , Groza was named the NFL 's Most Valuable Player by Sporting News . Cleveland won the championship again in 1955 , beating the Rams 38 ? 14 . Groza was named to the Pro Bowl and sportswriters ' All @-@ Pro teams in 1954 and 1955 .

Hurt by Graham 's retirement before the season , Cleveland had its first @-@ ever losing season in 1956 . Groza 's kicking continued to be a strength through the ensuing three years : he reached the Pro Bowl in 1957 , 1958 and 1959 , and tied Sam Baker for league leader in points scored in 1957 . Cleveland reached the championship game in 1957 but lost to the Lions . The Browns lost to the New York Giants in a single @-@ elimination playoff in 1958 , and failed to reach the postseason in 1959 . Groza sat out after the 1959 season due to a back injury and was presumed to be retired . While his kicking was his most visible contribution to the team , Groza was also an offensive tackle up until his injury , when Brown replaced him with Dick Schafrath . " Lou never got all the credit he deserved for his tackle play , probably because his great kicking skills got him more notoriety , " Andy Robustelli , a defensive end who played against Groza , later said .

Groza took 1960 off and did some scouting for the team . He also focused on an insurance business he started . " I was 36 and I thought I had retired , " he said . The following year , however , he came back to the team at the urging of Art Modell , who bought the Browns that year . Not wanting to use a roster spot on a kicking specialist (Groza 's back injury prevented him from playing on the line) , Brown had signed Sam Baker to kick and play halfback . But Groza was eager to return and Modell insisted . Groza stayed with the team as a placekicker until 1967 , and was on a Browns team that won the 1964 championship . Groza scored the first points in that game on a third @-@ quarter field goal . He also kicked four kickoffs more than 70 yards (64 m) and out of the Baltimore Colts end zone , preventing a return . Cleveland won 27 ? 0 .

When Groza retired for good in 1968 after 21 seasons in professional football , he held NFL career records for points scored , field goals made and extra points made . He had 234 field goals , 641 extra points and 1 @, @ 349 total points in the NFL . Counting his AAFC years , his career point total was 1 @, @ 603 . He was the last of the original Browns still on the team . Groza , who was 44 years old when he quit the game , said in his memoir that retiring was " the saddest day of my football life . " His top salary was \$ 50 @, @ 000 in his final year .

= = Later life and death = =

After Groza retired , he entertained an offer to play for the San Francisco 49ers , but was reluctant to do so because he did not want to move his family and insurance business to the West Coast . He was offered a spot with the Browns as a kicking coach , helping mentor the young Don Cockroft , but he declined . Later in life , he became an ambassador and father figure for the Browns , inviting rookies over for dinner and helping them find apartments . He continued to run a successful insurance business and lived in Berea , Ohio near the Browns ' headquarters and training facility . He and his wife Jackie were known as the team 's First Family .

Modell relocated the Browns to Baltimore in 1995 and renamed the team the Ravens , provoking a wave of anger and disbelief from fans and former players . Groza was a leading critic of the move ,

saying it was " like some man walking off with your wife . " In 1996 , Groza wrote a memoir titled The Toe : The Lou Groza Story . The Browns restarted as an expansion team in 1999 .

Groza was hobbled in the late 1990s by back and hip surgeries and Parkinson 's disease . He suffered a heart attack in 2000 after dinner with his wife at Columbia Hills Country Club in Columbia Station , Ohio . He was taken to a hospital in Middleburg Heights , Ohio , where he died . He was buried in Sunset Memorial Park in North Olmsted , Ohio . Groza and his wife had three sons and a daughter . Following Groza 's death , the Browns wore his number 76 on their helmets for the 2001 season .

= = Legacy and kicking style = =

While field goals had long been viewed as an important part of football strategy , kicking specialists were a rarity before Groza 's time . Groza 's success from distances of 40 yards (37 m) and beyond raised the bar for kickers across the league . He set single @-@ season NFL records for accuracy , distance and number of field goals in his first three years in the league , marks that went unbeaten until kicking specialists became a common feature of the game in the early 1970s . Groza 's kicking was the difference in 15 % of the Browns ' games during the AAFC years , and teams began to take notice when his field goals made the difference in both the NFL playoffs and the championship game in 1950 . " Everybody started to pay attention to field goals when the Browns started to win games with them , " Pat Summerall said . Groza led the NFL in field goals made five times in his career .

Groza was a straight @-@ ahead kicker . He approached the football in a straight line and booted it with the top of his foot , aiming for the middle of the ball . Early in his career , Groza scraped the ground with his cleats in a straight line to help guide his kicks . Later he put down a piece of one @-@ inch adhesive tape rolled up inside his helmet . The " Lou Groza Rule " in 1950 banned the use of artificial kicking aids , including the tape . The straight @-@ ahead style used by Groza and other kickers of his era has since been supplanted by soccer @-@ style kicking with the side of the foot . " I don 't know why all the kids kick soccer @-@ style , " he said in 1997 . " They kick the ball with the side of their foot , which is supposed to give them better control . I don 't know , I never tried it . "

Groza was named to the National Football League 1950s All @-@ Decade Team in 1969 and inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1974 . The Browns retired his number 76 ; he is also in the team 's Ring of Honor , a grouping of the best players in the club 's history whose names are displayed below upper @-@ deck seats at FirstEnergy Stadium . In 1992 , the Palm Beach County Sports Commission established the Lou Groza Award , given to the best National Collegiate Athletic Association Football Bowl Subdivision (formerly Division I @-@ A) kicker . The Browns ' training facility in Berea , Ohio is located at 76 Lou Groza Boulevard . One of his kicking shoes is part of the collection of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington , D.C ..