

= Dante Lavelli =

Dante Bert Joseph " Gluefingers " Lavelli ( February 23 , 1923 ? January 20 , 2009 ) was an American football end who played for the Cleveland Browns in the All @-@ America Football Conference ( AAFC ) and National Football League ( NFL ) from 1946 to 1956 . Starring alongside quarterback Otto Graham , fullback Marion Motley , placekicker Lou Groza and fellow receiver Mac Speedie , Lavelli was an integral part of a Browns team that won seven championships during his 11 @-@ season career . Lavelli was known for his sure hands and improvisations on the field . He was also renowned for making catches in critical situations , earning the nickname " Mr. Clutch " . " Lavelli had one of the strongest pairs of hands I 've ever seen , " Browns coach Paul Brown once said of him . " When he went up for a pass with a defender , you could almost always count on him coming back down with the ball . "

Lavelli grew up in Hudson , Ohio and played football , baseball and basketball at his local high school . After graduating , he enrolled at Ohio State University , where he played only a handful of games before he was drafted for service in the U.S. Army during World War II . Returning in 1945 after serving in Europe , he joined the Browns in the team 's first @-@ ever season in the AAFC . Helped by Lavelli 's play , the Browns won each of the AAFC 's championships before the league dissolved in 1949 and the team was absorbed by the NFL . Cleveland continued to succeed in the NFL , winning championships in 1950 , 1954 and 1955 . Lavelli , who helped found the National Football League Players Association toward the end of his career , retired after the 1956 season .

After retiring from football , Lavelli held a variety of coaching and scouting jobs and was active in NFL alumni affairs . He also ran a furniture store in Rocky River , Ohio . He was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1975 . He died in a Cleveland hospital in 2009 .

= = Early life and high school career = =

Lavelli was born and grew up in Hudson , Ohio , a small town in the northeastern part of the state . Both of his parents were Italian immigrants . His father Angelo Lavelli was a blacksmith who made shoes for horses on nearby farms . As a child , he practiced catching by throwing baseballs against walls and trying to catch them when they bounced back . He liked to have friends throw ping @-@ pong balls at him to see if he could catch them .

Lavelli was a standout as a running back at Hudson High School and developed a reliable set of hands . Lavelli 's Hudson High Explorers football team had three undefeated seasons and won three county championships . He also played baseball and basketball in high school .

Notre Dame offered Lavelli a scholarship , and he committed to attend the school . After he had a chance encounter with Eddie Prokop , however , an able running back who was a fifth @-@ string player for Notre Dame , Lavelli was convinced to look elsewhere . " If Eddie Prokop were a fifth @-@ string player , I was not one to sit on anyone 's bench , " he later said . Lavelli enrolled at Ohio State University in 1941 after learning that Paul Brown was appointed the football team 's new head coach . Brown had developed a sterling reputation as the high school coach at Massillon Washington High School in Massillon , Ohio , losing only eight games in nine years there . Lavelli 's catching ability had made him a star infielder in high school , and the Detroit Tigers of Major League Baseball recruited him to play second base in the low minor leagues . He refused the invitation , opting to concentrate on football .

= = College career and military service = =

On arrival at Ohio State , Lavelli roomed with Les Horvath and Don McCafferty and played on the freshman team under coach Trevor Rees . Brown switched Lavelli to end ( the position is now called wide receiver ) . His playing time with the football team was limited , however , due to injury . He became a first @-@ string end as a sophomore in 1942 , but was ailing from a charley horse in his thigh and sat out the first game of the season against a Fort Knox military team . He had recovered by the third game of the season and started in a game against Southern California . Lavelli was hit

in the knee while grabbing for a pass near the end of the game , however , and broke a bone . He was sidelined for the rest of the season . The Buckeyes won the college football national championship that year .

After the 1942 season , Lavelli was drafted by the U.S. Army as American involvement in World War II intensified . After basic training and a number of other specialized courses on land @-@ sea assaults , he was sent with the 28th Infantry Division to fight in the European Theatre of World War II . There his division landed on Omaha Beach , part of the Allied invasion of Germany @-@ occupied France in 1944 . He was involved with American forces in Germany 's Battle of the Bulge offensive and in the Siege of Bastogne later the same year . One in five members of his division was killed in battle .

= = Professional career = =

After returning from the war , Lavelli was again offered a chance to play baseball with the Tigers . He saw a matchup in late 1945 between the National Football League 's New York Giants and Washington Redskins and noticed that a former teammate at Ohio State named Sam Fox was an end for the Giants . " I thought if he could make the grade , so could I , " Lavelli later said . When Paul Brown offered him a chance to play on a new professional team he was coaching in the All @-@ America Football Conference ( AAFC ) in 1946 , Lavelli jumped at the opportunity . He was given a \$ 500 bonus ( \$ 6 @,@ 067 in today 's dollars ) for signing with the team , called the Cleveland Browns .

Lavelli attended the Browns ' first training camp in 1946 . Competition was fierce for a spot on the roster , but Lavelli was one of the men who made it . He was up against a number of National Football League veterans and former college stars . " The toughest game I ever played in was the first intrasquad scrimmage game , " he said later . " Nobody talked to each other for two days . " He joined an offense that featured quarterback Otto Graham , fullback Marion Motley , placekicker Lou Groza and fellow end Mac Speedie . Lavelli quickly became Graham 's top passing target and led the AAFC in receiving as a rookie with 40 receptions and 843 yards . The Browns made it to the league championship that season , and Lavelli caught the game @-@ winning touchdown in a 14 ? 9 victory over the AAFC 's New York Yankees . The victory " didn 't mean so much then , but as time goes on , it builds , " Lavelli said in 2008 .

The Browns won the AAFC championship again in 1947 . Lavelli finished second in the league in receiving behind his teammate Speedie . Both Lavelli and Speedie were named to all @-@ AAFC teams , as they had been in 1946 . Lavelli broke his leg in a preseason game in 1948 and sat out seven weeks . He came back later in the year and helped Cleveland finish a perfect season , catching a touchdown pass in a 31 ? 21 win over the AAFC 's Brooklyn Dodgers in the championship game . In a game against the Los Angeles Dons the following year , Lavelli caught four touchdowns and had 209 receiving yards , an AAFC record . In 1949 Cleveland won the AAFC championship for the fourth year in a row . The AAFC dissolved before the 1950 season and three of its teams , including the Browns , were absorbed by the more established National Football League ( NFL ) . Lavelli was the AAFC 's all @-@ time leader in yards per catch and second in receiving yards behind Speedie .

As the Browns won in the AAFC , Lavelli continued his studies at Ohio State between seasons and got his degree in 1949 . He married Joy Wright of Brecksville , Ohio that year .

When Cleveland entered the NFL in 1950 , questions lingered about whether the team could sustain its early dominance . The Browns , however , began the season by beating the defending NFL champions , the Philadelphia Eagles . The team finished with a 10 ? 2 regular @-@ season record and reached the championship game after winning a playoff game against the New York Giants . In the championship against the Los Angeles Rams , Lavelli caught 11 passes ? then a record for a title game ? and had two touchdown receptions . The Browns won the game 30 ? 28 .

Cleveland reached the NFL championship game the following year but lost to the Rams . The 1952 and 1953 seasons followed a similar pattern : the Browns made it to the championship game but lost both times to the Detroit Lions . Lavelli was named to the Pro Bowl in 1951 and 1953 . He was

seventh in the NFL in receiving yards in 1951 , with 586 . He gained 783 receiving yards in 1953 , the fifth @-@ highest total in the league .

Over the years , Lavelli developed a reputation for making big plays when they counted most , as he had done with his touchdown reception in the Browns ' first championship game in 1946 . He was nicknamed " Mr. Clutch " in a Pittsburgh Steelers scouting report , although " Gluefingers " ? a name bestowed upon him by Browns announcer Bob Neal ? was more widely used . He practiced with Graham tirelessly to refine routes and was not afraid to run over the middle , where he risked a pounding from defenders when the ball came his way . " Dante was the greatest guy at catching a ball in a crowd that I have ever seen , " Brown once said . Among other innovations , he and Graham also mastered sideline patterns at a time when few teams used them .

The Browns won another championship in 1954 , thanks in part to a strong regular @-@ season performance from Lavelli . Lavelli led the team in receiving that year and made the Pro Bowl after the Browns beat the Lions for their second NFL title . A third NFL championship followed in 1955 . In the championship game against the Rams , Lavelli caught a touchdown in the second quarter and scored a second time on a 50 @-@ yard pass just before the end of the first half . The Browns won 38 ? 14 .

Lavelli initially planned to retire in 1955 but came back for a final year in 1956 , when the Browns posted a 5 ? 7 record , the team 's first @-@ ever losing season . In his 11 @-@ year career , Lavelli caught 386 passes for 6 @,@ 488 yards and 62 touchdowns . He was a confident receiver , former teammates said in later years . He could often be heard calling for Graham to throw him the ball while running routes . He was also known for his ability to improvise on the field . In a 1955 game against the Eagles in slippery conditions , he caught the winning touchdown with less than a minute left by swinging around the goalpost with his arm to get open .

During his Browns career , Lavelli was involved in the creation of the National Football League Players Association . The concept of a union to represent players in league matters was hatched in Lavelli 's basement in 1954 . Lavelli and two teammates , Abe Gibron and George Ratterman , met every Wednesday to discuss the union . They approached Creighton Miller , a Cleveland lawyer and former Notre Dame star who had worked briefly as an assistant coach with the Browns , for help . The union was founded at a meeting before the NFL championship game in 1956 . The following year , the players got \$ 50 per exhibition game , a \$ 5 @,@ 000 minimum salary , injury pay and medical care . The union is now the primary representative of players in labor negotiations and disputes with the NFL .

= = Later life and death = =

After retiring from football , Lavelli ran an appliance business on Cleveland 's west side . From 1961 through 1963 , he served as an assistant to Graham , who was coaching college stars in the annual College All @-@ Star Game . Lavelli was also an assistant coach with the Browns and a scout for the Chicago Bears . He later owned a furniture store in Rocky River , Ohio and had an interest in two bowling alleys . He had a hand in founding the NFL Alumni Association , a charitable organization .

Lavelli was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1975 , joining former teammates Graham , Motley and Groza and coach Paul Brown . Later in life , he golfed and attended NFL alumni events and lobbied to get the NFL to recognize his and other players ' AAFC statistics . The NFL refused to incorporate AAFC statistics into its own when the league dissolved and the Browns became part of the NFL , in contrast to the NFL 's recognition of statistics from the American Football League ( AFL ) following the AFL @-@ NFL merger . Lavelli called it a " double standard " . He died in 2009 at 85 at Fairview Hospital in Cleveland of congestive heart failure and bladder and kidney infections and is buried in St. Mary 's Cemetery , Hudson , OH . He and his wife Joy had three children , Lucinda , Edward and Lisa ; as well as four grandchildren , Aaron , Noah , Luke and Danielle . Hudson High 's stadium is named in honor of him .

The Akron Community Foundation established a Dante Lavelli Scholarship Fund in 2010 to help Hudson High athletes pay for college . ? He was one of the best I ? d ever seen , ? Willie Davis , a

defensive end who played for the Browns shortly after Lavelli retired , said . ? He set the mold with his running patterns and catching the ball . ? After Lavelli died , Graham praised his abilities and remembered his eagerness to get his hands on the ball . " He was always coming into the huddle and telling me he was open and that I should throw to him , " Graham said . " He wasn 't saying that to be a big shot . He just loved to play . If he was open by a few inches , he 'd be yelling , ' Otto , Otto . ' Many a time when I was stuck and heard that voice I would throw it in his direction and darned if he didn 't come down with it . He had fantastic hands . "

= = Career statistics = =