

= Frank Gatski =

Frank "Gunner" Gatski (March 18 , 1921 ? November 22 , 2005) was an American football center who played for the Cleveland Browns of the All @-@ America Football Conference (AAFC) and the National Football League (NFL) in the 1940s and 1950s . Gatski was one of the most heralded centers of his era . Known for his strength and consistency , he helped protect quarterback Otto Graham and open up running lanes for fullback Marion Motley as the Browns won seven league championships between 1946 and 1955 . Gatski won an eighth championship after he was traded to the Detroit Lions in 1957 , his final season .

Gatski was born in West Virginia to a coal @-@ mining family . He played for three years on his local high school team before attending Marshall University , where he continued to play football . He joined the U.S. Army in 1942 and went to fight in World War II . Upon his return in 1945 , he finished his collegiate studies at Auburn University in Alabama . After graduating , he tried out and made the roster for the Browns , a team under formation in the new AAFC . He played as a linebacker and backup center for most of his first two years before earning a spot as the starting center . He retained that position as Cleveland continued to dominate after the AAFC dissolved and the Browns were absorbed by the NFL in 1950 . He retired in 1958 , never having missed a game or practice in his career .

After leaving football , Gatski worked briefly as a scout for the Boston Patriots . He then joined a reform school in West Virginia as athletic director and head football coach , staying there until the school closed in 1982 . He was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1985 . Marshall retired Gatski 's number 72 in 2005 . He died that year in a nursing home in West Virginia . In 2006 , the East End Bridge in Huntington , West Virginia was renamed the Frank Gatski Memorial Bridge in his honor .

= = Early life = =

Gatski was born in 1921 and raised in Farmington , West Virginia . His father and grandfather were immigrants from Poland , and most of the men in his family worked at the nearby Number Nine Coal Mine Camp . Gatski started at center for three years on his Farmington High School football team , which played on a cow pasture with no scoreboard , bleachers or game clock . He worked in the coal mines during the summers , and went to work in the mines full @-@ time during his senior year in 1939 . Gatski was reserved and aloof , but he was also known as a graceful dancer . " I used to dance a lot in Farmington , " he said in 1949 . " But I like polkas better than jitterbugging . "

= = College and military career = =

In 1940 , Marshall University coach Cam Henderson offered Gatski a chance to attend the West Virginia school on a football scholarship . Gatski accepted . He joined the junior varsity team , where he was the starting center for a season before moving to Marshall 's varsity football team in 1941 . He started 17 games at center and linebacker beginning in 1941 , when Marshall posted a 7 ? 1 record . The team faltered the following year , falling to 1 ? 7 ? 1 as its best players went to serve in the military .

Gatski signed up for an Army reserve unit after the 1942 season as America 's involvement in World War II intensified . Marshall canceled its football program in 1943 as Gatski entered his senior year , but his unit was activated and he was sent with an infantry division to fight in the European theater of World War II . He went to England and followed American troops as they landed in Normandy and marched further into Europe . " I wasn 't in any heavy fighting , " he later said . He was a Private First Class in the Army . Gatski returned from duty in 1945 , but Marshall had yet to resume its football program , so he enrolled at Auburn University in Alabama and finished out his studies , playing part of the season on the school 's football team . " Marshall hadn 't started back up , and I hadn 't played football for two years , " he later explained . " I didn 't want to sit around and do nothing , so I went to Auburn . "

= = Professional career = =

When Gatski graduated , Sam Clagg , a teammate at Marshall , helped get him a tryout with the Cleveland Browns after contacting John Brickels , an assistant coach with West Virginia ties . The Browns were a new team in the All @-@ America Football Conference (AAFC) and were set to begin play in 1946 . Gatski , who was working in the mines after graduating from Auburn , hitchhiked to Bowling Green , Ohio for the team 's training camp . He did not consider a football career a certainty , and returning to the coal mines where his father had died in an accident was a distinct possibility . " I didn 't know what was going to happen , " he said later . " I just went up there to see what would happen . "

By the time Gatski arrived in Bowling Green , he had acquired the nickname " Gunner " for his strength and speed on the offensive line . Growing up in the rough surroundings of a West Virginia mining town had toughened him up , and he did not mind Cleveland coach Paul Brown 's overbearing perfectionism . As a professional , he later said , " you 're supposed to be able to take that crap . " Initially , Gatski 's prospects of making the team looked dim . Brown had brought in veteran center Mo Scarry to be the starter . But Gatski proved his value to the team with his reliability and work ethic . He made the team and signed a \$ 3 @, @ 000 per year contract .

Gatski played mostly as a backup to Scarry and as a linebacker in his first and part of his second season . He became the full @-@ time starter at center in the 1948 season . The Browns , meanwhile , were an immediate success . The team won the AAFC championship every year from 1946 to 1949 , when the league dissolved . Gatski 's role on the offensive line was to help protect quarterback Otto Graham from defenders when he went back to pass . He also helped push away defenders and create space for fullback Marion Motley to run in .

The Browns merged into the more established National Football League (NFL) in 1950 . Aided by Gatski 's blocking , the offense and the team continued to succeed . Cleveland won the 1950 NFL championship , and reached the championship game in each of the following five seasons , winning again in 1954 and 1955 . By the time the Browns entered the NFL , Gatski had developed a reputation for consistency , durability and toughness . Brown began keeping only one center on the roster ? Gatski . Centers today would complain about that , Walt Michaels , who played with Gatski in the early 1950s , said in later years . Gatski , however , did not mind . " He would take all the snaps , " Michaels said .

Gatski was a quiet man who liked to hunt . He practiced hitting targets with his bow and arrow at League Park in Cleveland , where the Browns trained during the season . He was one of the Browns " Filthy Five " players who did not wash their practice uniforms during the season . Brown called him one of the strongest men on the team 's roster . Graham thought of him as sure protection against opposing linemen . Teammates called him an " iron man " and a " Rock of Gibraltar " . He was named to All @-@ Pro lists in all but one year between 1951 and 1955 and made the Pro Bowl in 1954 and 1955 .

The Browns struggled after Graham retired in 1956 and ended the regular season at 5 ? 7 , their first @-@ ever losing record . After the season , Brown traded the 35 @-@ year @-@ old Gatski to the Detroit Lions for a draft pick after Gatski asked for a raise . He only played in the 1957 season with the Lions . Detroit beat the Browns for the NFL championship that year . By the time he retired after the 1957 season , Gatski had played on eight championship teams , a professional football record . Gatski did not miss a practice or a game during his 12 seasons in football .

= = Later life and death = =

After retiring from football , Gatski was a scout for the Boston Patriots for two years before becoming head football coach and athletic director at the West Virginia Industrial School for Boys , a correctional facility for young offenders in Pruntytown , West Virginia . He worked there until the school shut down in 1982 . He hunted and fished in retirement , and was often difficult to reach . He lived on a mountain in West Virginia and did not have a telephone for many years .

Gatski was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1985 as part of a class that included Joe Namath , Pete Rozelle , O.J. Simpson , and Roger Staubach . Gatski said he had not expected to make it into the hall . He had not played for 28 years when he was selected by an old @-@ timers committee . Two decades later , Marshall University retired Gatski 's number 72 during a homecoming game against the University of Alabama at Birmingham . Gatski was the first and remains the only Marshall football player to be so honored .

Gatski died on November 22 , 2005 at a nursing home in Morgantown , West Virginia and was buried at the West Virginia National Cemetery in Grafton . He was married and had seven children . The following year , the East End Bridge in Huntington , West Virginia was renamed the Frank Gatski Memorial Bridge during halftime of a Marshall @-@ UTEP football game .