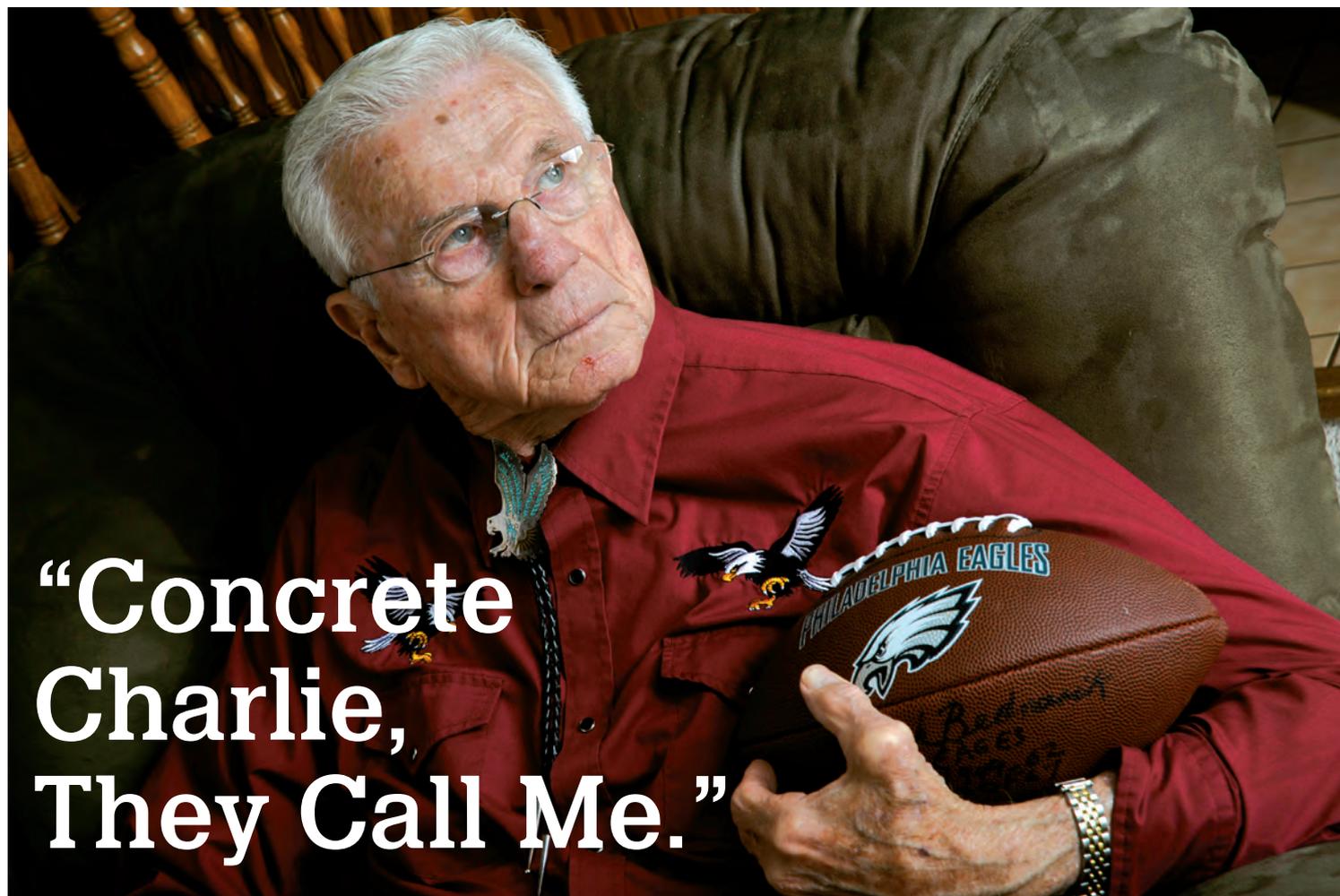


local legends



“Concrete  
Charlie,  
They Call Me.”

## The Life and Rugged Times of 60-Minute Man, Chuck Bednarik

While many of his fans may be familiar with the nickname “Concrete Charlie,” they may be surprised to learn that Chuck Bednarik earned that name in the salt mines, not on the gridiron. In fact, the name dates back to his college years, when he worked part time selling concrete. Chuck recalls a local sports columnist would later coin the phrase, “He’s as tough as the concrete he sells,” Chuck says of the sportscaster. Whatever the origin, the name still fits.

No stranger to hard work, Chuck grew up during the Depression. His parents emigrated to the U.S. from Czechoslovakia in 1920, after World War I, and settled down in Bethlehem. Charles Philip Bednarik was born five years later on May 1, the eldest of six. His father found work at Bethlehem Steel, while his mother looked after home and family. The family had to rely on welfare for clothes and food, and Chuck recalls, “That was a tough life, growing up that way.” It was during those days that he discovered his love of sports. “I was playing on the streets because there were no cars, but if I broke a window, I was afraid to go home.”

### THE ALL-AMERICAN

The Valley native started playing football during his years at Liberty High School, where he helped the team to an undefeated season in his junior year. “Football was my prime objective,” he says. He had intended to be a teacher or a coach, but after he graduated, he was drafted at 18 and entered the Air Force. “I couldn’t wait to go into service,” says Chuck. He served as a B-24 waist-gunner with the Eighth Air Force. “We flew 30 combat missions over Germany. We crash-landed three times on the way home, and I kissed the ground when we landed and said, ‘I don’t ever want to fly again’ which, of course, I did, but I knew I was very fortunate and lucky.”

When he returned home, Chuck considered working at the steel plant like his father, but his high school coach, John Butler, saw his potential and suggested he go to college. At 6-foot-3 and 230 pounds, Chuck’s abilities on the football field were undeniable. “Johnny said to me, ‘I think you can make something of yourself.’ He was a big influence in

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## local legends

my life," says Chuck. He took advantage of the G.I. Bill of Rights (which provided college or vocational education for returning World War II veterans) with his good grades, and was able to receive a partial football scholarship. Butler told him to meet with the coach at University of Pennsylvania. "I went down to Philadelphia and the coach handed me an entrance exam. Then I saw that stadium, and said, 'wow!' So I went and I'm glad I did." Football games at Penn drew an approximate 78,000 fans to Franklin Field. "When we played Army, the cadets marched, and when we played Navy, the midshipmen marched; it was a spectacle," Chuck remembers. He became an All-American during his years there, during which professional football was emerging from its infancy.

### BOTH SIDES OF THE BALL

From 1947 through 1958, the National Football League instituted a bonus pick into the draft to be awarded randomly to promising players. With four years at Penn under his belt, Chuck turned pro after being drafted by the Philadelphia Eagles in 1949. "I spent 14 years with them, a total of 18 years playing football in Philadelphia." Chuck starred on both offense (as a center) and defense (as a linebacker) and became one of the last players to play both sides of the ball from 1949 to 1962.

Chuck is best known for his tough tackles; in particular, his two most famous tackles against Packer Jim Taylor and Giant Frank Gifford, both of which occurred in 1960. The Eagles were about to lose that year's championship to Green Bay when Chuck tackled Taylor. "I happened to stop him on the last play from scrimmage on the nine-yard line, going to score, otherwise we would have lost. It was the game-saving tackle, and the Eagles haven't won a championship since." Chuck had been the only Eagle between Taylor and the end zone, and, in the words of sportswriter Bill Lyon, "He wrestled him to the cold, hard ground like a rodeo cowboy bulldogs a steer and then sat on the squirming, seething Taylor until the clock blinked down to all zeroes." Chuck added insult to injury by telling Taylor, "You can get up now, Jim. The game's over." Chuck had played 58 minutes that game, and they won 17-13. "That was probably one of my proudest moments and, without a doubt, the greatest game I ever had," he says.

That same year, Chuck knocked New York Giant great Frank Gifford out of football for more than a year. He made what is now one of

the most talked about tackles in NFL history. "New York is a big city; everything big happens there. Frank was a popular running back for the Giants, and when we played them in New York, I hit him so hard, he was unconscious." There is a well-known photo of Chuck standing over Gifford with his fist held high in the air. "I was saying 'This ----ing game is over!' It was a nasty expletive, but people have asked me to autograph it." Frank said later that it was a "nice, clean hit." Years later, when they saw each other at the Hall of Fame, Gifford commented, "I made you famous."



To make it into the NFL Hall of Fame, a player needs to be retired from football for five years. Chuck was nominated the first year he was eligible, in 1967. His coach, Earle "Greasy" Neale, presented Chuck with the award, and vice versa, when Neale made it in as well two years later.

"I asked him why [he wanted me to present] and he said it was because I was the best talker. I was glad to do it; I've always admired him." Chuck was one of only 13 players from the NFL draft to have gone from being the first overall pick of a draft to earning election into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. As his plaque reads, he was a "rugged, durable, bulldozing blocker" and a "bone-jarring tackler" during his 1949 to 1962 stint with the Philadelphia Eagles. He has since become one of the most notable players in the history of football.

### OVERPAID & UNDERPLAYED

Football has almost regressed over the years, in Chuck's opinion. His major complaint is that there are too many players complicating the game today. "They're overpaid and underplayed. I call it 'pussycat football.' I'm sure most of these kids would like to go both ways, but there are so many of them, that's the only way they can play." In his generation, there were 20-25 men, so they stayed on the field, and stood out, and were therefore worthy of the honor. "How do you select a real Hall of Fame-er?" asks Chuck. "It's not what it used to be. The teams have doubled in number, and these kids, that's all they know, offense or defense. I can't blame them, the game has changed drastically."

Chuck now resides in Coopersburg; he



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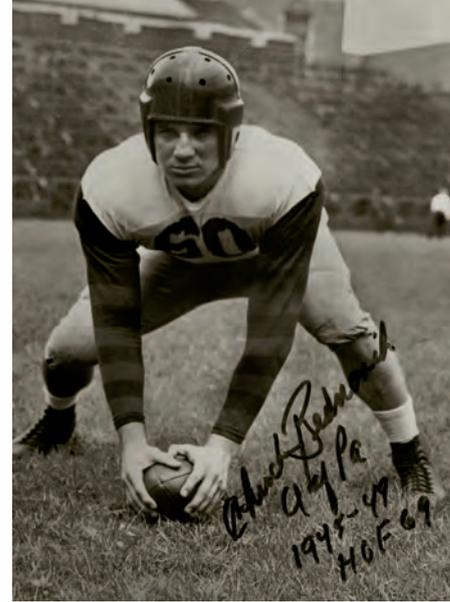
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spends his days relaxing at home with his wife of over 50 years, Emma. Chuck says, "When I first saw her, I said to my buddies, 'I'm going to dance with that girl!'" Emma laughs, "And look at us now." She says fondly, "He's a good man, a good father. He has a short fuse though; he's very impatient. Religious, too, overly sometimes!" Chuck replies simply, "That's the secret. I go to mass every morning, and I don't go anywhere without rosary beads in my pocket." He has been Chairman of the Board for the Pennsylvania State Athletic Commission for several years, and is in charge of boxing and wrestling.

He also does card signings during football season. The couple enjoys spending time in their quiet corner of the Valley. Emma, who was also born in Bethlehem, says, "We wanted to get away from all the crowds, return to our roots, and settle down in the country...it's peaceful here. There's only one street, and we have deer in our backyard. We like it." The Bednariks have five daughters and ten grandchildren, one of whom has decided to pursue his grandfather's passion for football.

The Bednariks remain amazed by the amount of fan mail he still receives, particularly during football season. "They love him down in Philly," says Emma. "Next to Benjamin Franklin, I'm the most popular guy in town," Chuck quips. Of their life together, Emma says, "It's been very interesting and exciting. It's really something, a lot of thrills and chills. We've been invited to so many places. We've done a lot of traveling; all over the country: Hawaii several times, and Europe about 10 times. We've met presidents and other [society] people."

Today, Chuck's outlook on his career and his life is one of no regrets. "Except maybe that I was born too soon," he jokes. "The money these players make today—although, the money I made was good for my time."

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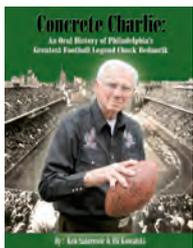


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At 84, Chuck is taking it easy these days. "I'm up early every day, between 6 and 6:30 a.m. First thing, I go to church. Then I come home, have a glass of red wine, and watch some television. I listen to some polka, have another glass of red wine, watch some more television, and go to bed between 9 and 9:30 p.m. Overall, I'm satisfied with my life." Chuck says he'd really like to be remembered for the way he played the game; as the last player to play both sides of the ball, and play the entire game: "the last of the NFL's 60-minute men." **S**

### READ MORE...



**Concrete Charlie: An Oral History of Philadelphia's Greatest Football Legend** by Eli Kowalski and Ken Safarowic offers additional insight into the life of the man behind the muscle. Scheduled for release on October 3, 2009, Concrete Charlie contains more than 130 interviews with people who have known the football star throughout his life. They include Lehigh Valley friends; contemporaries of his youth in Bethlehem, college and NFL teammates and opponents, former non-football employers, as well as media and political figures such as Governors Ed Rendell and Tom Ridge, and of course, those who know him best; his family.

"Part of the allure of football is hard hits—like crashes in NASCAR. He was a master of the hard hit. He was tough, no nonsense; and he has those fingers that point every way." -Ed Rendell

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