

Gene Rossides, 92, Dies; Led Columbia to Historic Upset of Army

A star quarterback, he helped snap West Point's 32-game unbeaten streak in 1947. Instead of the N.F.L., he became a lawyer and served two presidents.

By Richard Goldstein

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Gene Rossides, a former Columbia University star quarterback who engineered one of college football's most remarkable upsets, a 21-20 victory over Army in October 1947 that snapped the Cadets' 32-game unbeaten streak, before pursuing a career in law and politics and serving in two presidential administrations, died on Saturday at his home in Washington. He was 92.

His daughter Gale Rossides confirmed the death.

For all of Columbia's hapless football seasons, the Lions have featured a string of brilliant passers, going back to Sid Luckman, who became a Pro Football Hall of Famer popularizing the T-formation with the Chicago Bears in the early 1940s.

Rossides was an outstanding passer and runner at Erasmus Hall High School in Flatbush Brooklyn, a decade after Luckman played there.

At a season-ending banquet for Rossides's 1944 high school team, he was summoned to take a phone call.

"It was from Sid Luckman," Rossides recalled long afterward. "He said, 'You go play for Lou Little at Columbia.' And that was it."

Rossides turned down two full scholarships already offered by other colleges and accepted a partial one from Columbia.

Little had coached the Columbia team that produced the football program's most glorious afternoon, a 7-0 upset of Stanford on a muddy field in the 1934 Rose Bowl.

Rossides orchestrated another golden moment on Oct. 25, 1947, when the Lions, 2-2 on the season, played Army, which was unbeaten and unscored upon in four games, though its Heisman Trophy running backs Glenn Davis and Doc Blanchard and its outstanding quarterback Arnold Tucker had graduated.



Columbia Athletics

The Cadets took a 20-7 lead before a crowd of some 35,000 jamming Columbia's old Baker Field. But Rossides twice connected with his end Bill Swiacki, who made two brilliant catches: on a fourth-quarter touchdown pass and then another on a pass that put the ball on the Army 3. The outstanding running back Lou Kusserow then ran the ball in to make it a 20-20 game.

Army had missed one of its three extra-point attempts, but Columbia's Ventan Yablonski converted for a third straight time, and the Lions emerged with a stunning victory.

Rossides, a junior at the time, tied a single-game Columbia record set by Luckman and Paul Governali by completing 18 passes against Army. After closing out his Columbia career, he played in the East-West Shrine All-Star game.

Rossides was selected by the Giants in the 10th round of the 1949 N.F.L. draft, but accepted a scholarship to Columbia Law School instead and graduated in 1952.

He went into private law practice, became active in Republican politics and spent two and a half years as an assistant to the undersecretary of the Treasury in the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Mr. Rossides later held important roles in the election campaigns of Senators Jacob K. Javits and Kenneth B. Keating, both Republicans of New York.

After heading Richard M. Nixon's New York presidential campaign office in 1968, Mr. Rossides served as an assistant secretary of the Treasury in the Nixon administration from 1969 to 1973, overseeing the Customs Service, the Secret Service and other agencies and enforcing rules on trade and tariffs.



Mr. Rossides, left, was an assistant secretary of the Treasury in October 1969 when President Richard M. Nixon received a commemorative trophy marking the 100th anniversary of the Secret Service. Mr. Rossides oversaw the agency. At right was James J. Rowley, director of the Secret Service. UPI

Returning to private law practice, Mr. Rossides was a partner in the Manhattan firm most commonly known as Rogers & Wells. Its partners included William P. Rogers, who was attorney general in the Eisenhower administration and secretary of state under Nixon.

Mr. Rossides became a leading voice in the Greek-American community when he founded the American-Hellenic Institute in Washington in 1974. He remained with the organization as a board member into his later years.

His first marriage, to Eleanor Burcham, ended in divorce. In addition to his daughter Gale, from his first marriage, he is survived by his wife, Aphrodite (Macotsin) Rossides; another daughter, Eleni Rossides; two sons, Michael and Alexander; a brother, Daniel; and seven grandchildren.

Eugene Telemachus Rossides (his middle name was for the son of Odysseus and Penelope in the “Odyssey”) was born in Brooklyn on Oct. 23, 1927. His mother, Anna (Maravel) Rossides, was a native of Sparta, Greece; his father, Telemachus, was a physician of Greek extraction who had come to America from Cyprus.

His father died of pneumonia when Gene was a month old, and Gene’s mother took a job as a waitress to support him and his 2-year-old brother, Daniel.

“She made \$20 a week,” Rossides told The New York Times in 1964. “My brother, when he was old enough, took odd jobs. Eventually I had a paper route. But every chance I could, I sneaked down to the Parade Grounds near Prospect Park to play football or baseball.”

Rossides started at halfback for Columbia’s 1945 team and scored five touchdowns against Cornell, then switched to quarterback as a junior after being tutored by Luckman in spring practices. Rossides and Kusserow became known as the Goal Dust Twins, and both were selected to Columbia’s 24-member all-20th century squad.

For all the excitement around Columbia’s upset over Army in 1947, Rossides would have wait for game films to see his decisive fourth-quarter touchdown throw to Swiacki.

“It was a down-and-out pass,” he once recalled. “They had a player in front of Bill and one behind him. I was moving out of the pocket and got away from Army’s Joe Steffy, and I threw the ball over the safety’s head toward Bill as I got hit by Steffy. I didn’t see the rest of the play. All I heard was a roar.”