

The legend of Swede Hanson, among the Shore's greatest

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(Photo: Mark R. Sullivan/Staff Photographer)

Story Highlights

- Swede Hanson led Leonardo High School to back-to-back state championships in 1925-26
- At Temple, he was an All-American back, rushing for nearly 3,000 yards in his career with the Owls
- He led the Philadelphia Eagles in rushing in each of their first four seasons, beginning in 1933

MIDDLETOWN – The yarns are Bunyanesque in their retelling.

Like Thanksgiving Day in 1925, when he led Leonardo High School over a hill on old Doelger Field off Ridge Rd. for a game against Red Bank and all but won it then and there with his man-child appearance.

There was the baseball game along Kemp Ave. in Fair Haven where he requested a curveball and proceeded to hit a home run so deep into a cornfield it was 30 minutes before they could find the ball and continue.

Ripley's Believe It or Not! noted that he once punted a ball 175 yards, clear out of Temple Stadium.

But what if the tall tales surrounding Thomas Tucker ``Swede" Hanson are accurate?

Or at least, allowing for inflation over the years, close enough to the truth that they weave the legend of the first superstar athlete to emerge from the Jersey Shore.

It turns out there are plenty of facts to back it up. Like the day in 1933 he outplayed Chicago Bears stars Red Grange and Bronko Nagurski during the Philadelphia Eagles' inaugural season.

Seated behind the counter inside his store, Beacon Awards and Signs, Ray Veth slowly worked his way through a treasure trove of old photographs and newspaper clippings he has collected over the years.



Ray Veth of Middletown displays a team photo of the Leonardo High School football team from 1924. In the photo is Swede Hanson, one of the great early athletes at the Jersey Shore, who Veth has done extensive research on. (Photo: Mark R. Sullivan/Staff Photographer)

It all started innocently enough in the late 1980s when they began brainstorming a Lions Hall of Fame for Middletown North High School, the former Leonardo High School.

“Bud Foulks, the former Middletown mayor who was in the Class of '32 and played football, said “the first guy that has to go in is Swede Hanson,” Veth recalled. “I said, “who is Swede Hanson?” And then all the sudden the stories started coming out.”

And they kept coming ... and coming.

Then Veth showed off his latest item, a matchbook cover from the mid-1930s, perfectly preserved in a plastic case, featuring Hanson as a member of the Eagles. It notes that Hanson had “an exceptionally strong straight-arm, runs with power and speed, and can pass, punt, place-kick and drop-kick.”

The images and anecdotes are dizzying in their scope. So maybe it's best to just start at the beginning.



Thomas Tucker ""Swede" Hanson, third from the left, shown in a 1925 portrait of the ""Four Horsemen of Leonardo,"" the starting backfield for Leonardo High School's state championship team. From left to right are Otto Schnoor, Norbert ""Norby"" Simpson, Hanson and Donald ""Dutch"" Uhrig. (Photo: Mark R. Sullivan/Staff Photographer)

The Four Horsemen of Leonardo

Growing up in Navesink, the oldest Hanson brother, Joseph, played on the first official Leonardo football team in 1919. Swede, who had a twin brother, Henry, began playing high school sports in 1922, when he was just in seventh grade.

A year later, according to Veth's research, Hanson was listed as a starter in the season opener against Neptune, as new head coach Lewis ""Gyp" Blood installed the Knute Rockne box offense that his young protégé would be the centerpiece of.

By 1925, Hanson, then just a sophomore, was nearly unstoppable, as Leonardo went 8-0 and won their first state championship. He ran for 194 yards and four TDS in a season-opening win over Freehold, in addition to returning the opening kickoff 95 yards, and never slowed down.

After the season, Leonardo accepted a challenge to play Rahway's ""Wonder Team,"" which hadn't lost in three years, at Rutgers, where they suffered their only defeat.

Seizing on sportswriter Grantland Rice famously dubbing Notre Dame's 1924 backfield ""The Four Horsemen,"" a portrait of the ""Four Horsemen of Leonardo,"" including Hanson, Otto Schnoor, Norbert ""Norby"" Simpson and Donald ""Dutch"" Uhrig, was taken after the season.

Little changed in 1926, as the quartet helped engineer the greatest season in school history. By the time it ended with a 34-0 win over Red Bank, Leonardo had outscored their opponents 231-20. They won East Jersey League and the Central Jersey Class B state championship for the second straight year, and having beaten Rahway 40-0 to end their winning streak, Leonardo was considered the best team in the state.

Hanson, who also played basketball and led Leonardo to a state championship in baseball, ended up at Temple in 1927 and scored 29 points in his first game with the Owls.

In 1930, in front of 35,000 fans at Temple Stadium, Hanson starred in what still ranks among the greatest games in school history when they emerged with a 7-6 upset of Bucknell and Clark Hinkle, who would go on to star with the Green Bay Packers and be inducted into the inaugural class of the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

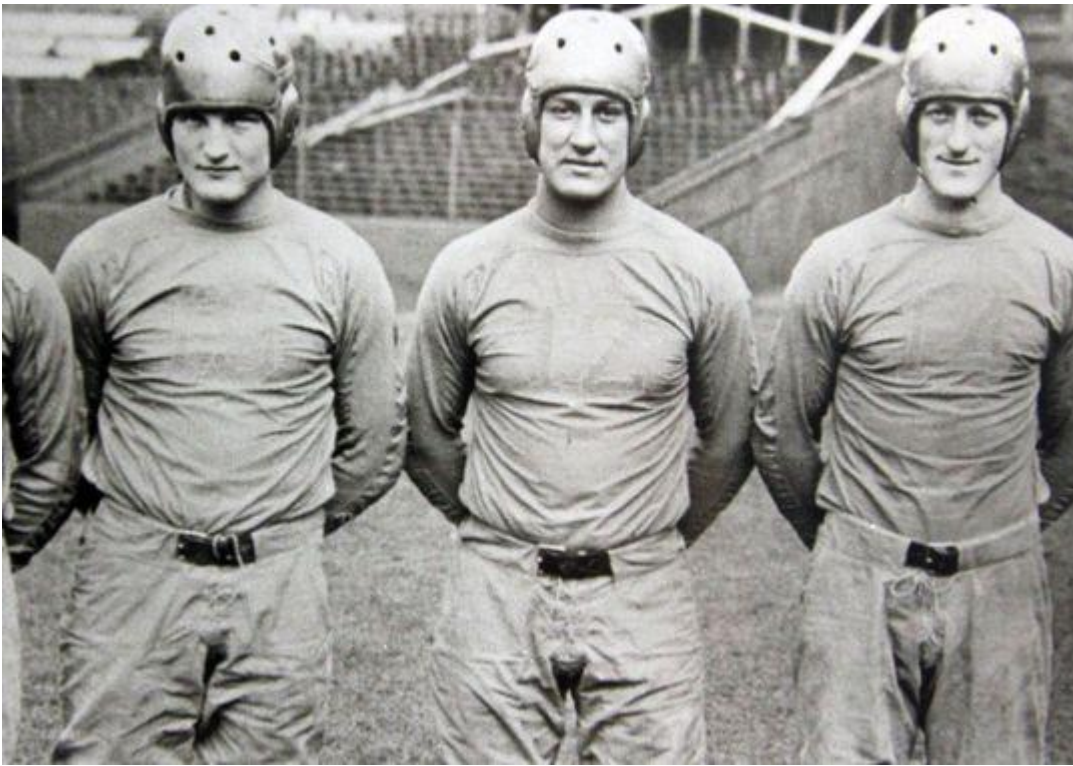
In that game, Hanson scored the winning points with a 78-yard punt return, and tackles Hinkle late in the fourth quarter at the Owls' 15-yard-line to prevent a touchdown.

“As the story goes, Swede is taking a class at Temple in football theory as part of his phys ed major,” Veth said. “The professors says ‘it’s fourth-and-2 near the end of the game and it’s tied. What do you do?’ He’s expecting Swede to say he’d punt, but instead he says ‘give me the ball and get out of the way.’ The professor says ‘that’s not the answer. Give me more details.’ So he says ‘give me the ball and I’ll get two yards and then some.’

“The professor flunks him for the day, and the next day he’s named All-American.”

Hanson made his way into pro football in 1931 with the fledgling Brooklyn Dodgers, before playing in the NFL in 1932 with the Staten Island Stapletons. And when the “Staples” went bankrupt, Bert Bell was awarded the franchise and moved the team to Philadelphia, with Hanson scoring the Eagles' first touchdown on a 35-yard reception in 1933.

They weren't great teams, but they had their moments and Swede Hanson was regarded as one of the league's top players. In 1934 he finished second in rushing to Chicago's Beattie Feathers and was named All-Pro for a second straight year. He would lead the Eagles in rushing in each of their first four seasons.



Buy Photo

Former Leonardo High School star Swede Hanson shown as a member of the Philadelphia Eagles in the 1930s. Hanson is on the right. The photo is from the collection of Ray Veth. (Photo: Mark R. Sullivan/Staff Photographer)

He was traded to Pittsburgh in 1938, where he played one season alongside Byron “Whizzer” White, a rookie who led the league in rushing and would go on to become a Supreme Court Justice.

Swede Hanson retired after the season and became a mechanic at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard, where he would work for more than three decades.

“We really had fun,” he told the Philadelphia Daily News in a 1957 interview. “We used to travel by bus. Once we went from Atlantic City to Green Bay. We would ride along until we saw a high school field or an open lot. We would get out and practice. Then we’d ride some more until seven or eight at night, flop in a rooming house and get going in the morning. If we had a flat, the players fixed it.”



Thomas Tucker “Swede” Hanson, a star athlete at Leonardo High School in the mid-1920s before playing at Temple, is shown running the ball for the Philadelphia Eagles in the mid-1930s. The photo is from the collection of Ray Veth, (Photo: Mark R. Sullivan/Staff Photographer)

New life for a legend

The passion is evident in Ray Veth's voice as he talks about Swede Hanson, having spent 25 years collecting snippets of information, tracking down leads and separating fact from fiction.

“We had to write bios on who our (Hall of Fame) candidates were,” Veth said, “and you could find stuff on the Chris Barnes' and Bobby Generelli's of the world because they're still current.”

Hanson was a bit tougher. But once Veth started looking into Hanson's past, he couldn't stop.

He holds up a Leonardo football team photo from 1924, taken behind the old high school, which burned down in 1963 and is now the site of Bayshore Middle School. There's another of Swede Hanson in the late 1950s shaking hands with Arnie Truex, the longtime Leonardo/Middletown football coach.



Swede Hanson in 1925 as a star football player at Leonardo High School, before going on to play at Temple and with the Philadelphia Eagles. (Photo: Mark R. Sullivan/Staff Photographer)

For the record, Swede Hanson died with little fanfare in 1970, at age 62.

But Veth's research has breathed new life into the legend of an athlete who set an early standard for greatness at the Jersey Shore.

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