

Alan “The Horse” Ameche

By Chris Hartman



Alan Dante Ameche arrived at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to play football in 1951. Although the coaches realized he had potential, the 205-lb. freshman was not selected as a starter his first JV game. But by the time he left four years later, "The Horse" required special shoulder pads for his 212-lb. frame and had accumulated nearly every award and honor available to a college football player, up to and including the Heisman Trophy.

Widely acknowledged as the best fullback Wisconsin ever produced, Ameche was one ingredient in a major turnaround in the school's football program. What seemed like an interminable losing streak had frustrated fans and the administration alike, but hope seemed to have arrived in the form of Coach Ivy Williamson, hired in 1949. His first two years had been successful, and the addition of Ameche would propel the team to even greater heights.



Kenosha, WI

Alan Ameche was born Lino Dante Amici in Italy in 1933. After immigrating to the United States, August and Elizabeth Ameche moved their family back to Italy in the late 1930s. All sources are quick to point out that little Lino had no choice but to don



Mussolini's proscribed Fascist youth uniform. After a year, the family returned to the United States and settled down in Kenosha, WI where August worked in a factory.

At the age of sixteen, Lino decided his name was not tough enough. The newly-christened Alan began his football career at Kenosha's Bradford High School, where he was an all-state fullback for one of the best high school teams Wisconsin can claim. In 1950 they went undefeated, racking up more touchdowns than their opponents scored points. Ameche alone scored 108 points that season.

His talent was not limited to the gridiron; he placed at state finals and set city records for running track (the 100 and relays) and throwing shot put. All told, Ameche earned six letters between the two sports.



Ameche's strength was legendary, at least in the southeast corner of Wisconsin. In 1949, he entered a light heavyweight Golden Gloves novice championship. When his potential opponents heard that he had entered, they all withdrew, and he won the title by default.

UW Career



Although Ameche didn't start that first JV game against Iowa on September 28, 1951, he did play—roaring onto the football scene with two touchdowns. At that time, freshmen were eligible for varsity play without restriction, and the next day Ameche dressed for the varsity game against Marquette. By week four he had proven himself, gaining 148 yards against Purdue, and he started nearly every game for the next four years.

The exact origin of his nickname is unclear, although Wisconsin assistant George Lanphear insisted that he christened "The Horse" because he worked like a horse in practice. Each of the other reasons invoked, however, seems just as likely: his unflagging stamina, how he personified sheer brute strength, his signature high-stepping gait. Whatever its origin, the name stuck because it fit; by all accounts a reserved, polite man in his personal life, Ameche was a force to be reckoned with on the gridiron.

Wisconsin's 1951 team, a powerhouse dubbed the "Hard Rocks" by a local reporter, had the best defense in the country and finished the season at 7-1-1. Ameche was the first



freshman to ever lead the conference in rushing, gaining 774 yards in 147 attempts—simultaneously breaking two Big Ten records. Including non-conference games, he rushed for 824 yards, a Wisconsin record. Despite the team's phenomenal statistics, the Badger's championship hopes had been dashed by an early, heartbreaking loss to Illinois.



The Badgers began the 1952 season with high hopes. The season was not without its struggles, but Wisconsin managed to finish strong, tied for the conference title with Purdue. Ameche led the Big Ten in rushing again that season, and his honors included being named to the UP and AP All-Midwest teams, as well as to the First-Team All-Big Ten—for the first of three consecutive years.

The Badgers were selected to play in the Rose Bowl that year against USC, the first postseason appearance in UW history. Within minutes of the announcement on Nov 24, 1952, an estimated 2,000 students left class to join a roving celebration around campus (complete with impromptu band); the crowd proceeded up State Street, bringing traffic to a standstill. When the revelers approached the Capitol building, Governor Walter Kohler appeared on a balcony to lead a chorus of "Varsity." Thousands of students traveled to California to support the team.



The Rose Bowl game was a hard-fought match that remained scoreless until the last few minutes. Although they lost 7-0, Wisconsin's stats were more than respectable, and The Horse rushed for 133 yards in 28 attempts.

1952 was also a big year for Ameche personally. He married his high school sweetheart, Yvonne Molinaro, on Thanksgiving. They had their first two children while Ameche was playing for Wisconsin.



The 1953 season presented a new challenge for everyone involved in college football: the double-platoon rule had been abolished, and players were forced to become more versatile.

For the first time in his life, Ameche played the position of linebacker, and he did so quite well. Throughout his junior and senior years, he played both offense and defense, often playing up to 55 minutes per game.



He was named to ten All-American rosters that year, first string on 6 of them, including those of Look magazine and the American Football Coach's Association. He was an Academic All-American and named MVP.

Though limited by injuries his senior year, Ameche still managed to make his mark. He ended his college career as the NCAA all-time rushing leader, a record that he set in the Badger's 11-6-54 win over Northwestern at Camp Randall; in the process he also set a new Big Ten individual rushing record.



All told he scored 25 touchdowns, ran for more than 100 yards sixteen times (for 200 yards against Minnesota on November 24, 1951), and rushed for 3,212 yards in 673 carries, a NCAA 4-year rushing record. He also held all then-current Wisconsin rushing records for season and single-game performances.

At the end of that season, Ameche was named the top player of the [Senior Bowl Game](#). He was again named MVP by the team, as well as the Big Ten MVP and UP's Back of the Year. He was a consensus All-American, repeated his Academic All-America



performance, and received the first-ever Walter Camp Memorial Trophy. Last but not least, of course, Alan Ameche won the 1954 [Heisman trophy](#); the first UW player to receive the honor, he scored over 200 points more than the runner-up. To date, the only other UW player to receive the Heisman is Ron Dayne, in 1999.

Fans in Kenosha threw the Ameches a party after his senior year. The gifts included a 1,500-lb. horse and 3,212 one-dollar bills—one for each of the yards he had gained at Wisconsin. But Ameche's football career was not over yet; he still had to make his mark on the NFL.

For historical video footage of Alan Ameche in action at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, visit the [Athletic Department](#).

After leaving the Badgers, Ameche was courted by the Canadian Professional League and was offered \$100,000 to wrestle professionally. But he chose to enter the 1955 NFL draft and was selected in the first round by the Baltimore Colts. They offered him more money than they had ever offered a rookie before: \$15,000. Their confidence was not misplaced: the very first time he touched the football in a professional game, on September 25, 1955, he ran 79 yards for a touchdown against the Chicago Bears.



That first season with the Colts Ameche led the NFL in rushing yards and was named NFL Rookie of the Year. He was the only rookie picked for the Pro Bowl, and received that honor again for the next three years. For the next several seasons, Ameche played with a winning Colts team led by Hall of Fame quarterback Johnny Unitas.

On December 28, 1958, the Baltimore Colts and the New York Giants played the NFL Championship game at Yankee Stadium. In the league's first-ever sudden-death overtime, Alan Ameche scored the winning one-yard touchdown. That game has been called the greatest game ever played, in no small part for its role in drawing professional football into the American consciousness. 45 million people watched the game on television, a previously unheard of audience share for the sport. When the Colts returned to Baltimore, they were mobbed by 30,000 overzealous fans at the airport. Professional football had captured the nation's attention.



Ameche played six seasons for the Colts before injuring his Achilles' tendon. Two championships, 4,045 yards and 40 touchdowns later, The Horse's pro career was over.

Retirement

Fortunately, Ameche retained interests other than football. In 1957 he had opened [Gino's Restaurant](#) in Baltimore, MD with fellow Colts teammates Gino Marchetti, Joseph Campanella, and Louis Fischer. The partners quickly parlayed the successful hamburger joint into a chain that numbered over 300 locations at its peak; it was eventually sold to Marriott Corporation, making Ameche a multi-millionaire.



Ameche remained on the East Coast after his retirement. He and Yvonne had six children, four of whom played college football.

Ameche became active in organizations such as the United Negro College Fund, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Multiple Sclerosis Society, and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. He also owned a chain of indoor tennis court facilities and briefly embarked on

a career as a sports agent in the mid-eighties, optimistically aspiring to ease the transition between college and professional sports for young players. He lasted only a few months in the business, upon his departure citing the "dirty business" of sports that had cropped up since the more simple times when he was in college.

Post-Gridiron Honors

Even after his career ended, Ameche continued to be recognized. He was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1975, and received two awards that recognize former players for distinguishing themselves off the playing field: the NCAA Silver



Anniversary Award (1980) and the College Sports Information Directors Academic Hall of Fame (1992).

Of course, he was also celebrated in his home state. In 1969 he was named to Wisconsin's All-time team by fans, earning the title "All-time greatest player". He was inducted into the WI State Athletic Hall of Fame and the National W Club Hall of Fame, and received the WAA Distinguished Alumni Award.

Nor did Ameche forget his alma mater. During halftime at the Northwestern game in 1984, Alan Ameche presented his Heisman trophy to Athletic Director Elroy Hirsch as a gift to the University of Wisconsin-Madison. It is currently on display in the lobby of Camp Randall Stadium.



Alan Ameche died on August 8, 1988, following a heart attack. Interestingly, years after Ameche's death, Yvonne got remarried—to Glenn Davis, the 1946 Heisman trophy winner who played for Army. One of their children also has another Heisman connection: Cathy Ameche married Michael Cappelletti, brother of Penn State's 1973 Heisman trophy winner John Cappelletti.

In 1991, Ameche was one of 35 charter members inducted into the UW Athletic Hall of Fame. In a special ceremony at Camp Randall on September 9, 2000, Alan Ameche's number was retired and his name was added to the historic stadium's façade, following that of Ron Dayne.



The honors continue to roll in. On December 31, 2004 he was named to the Rose Bowl Hall of Fame. The continued recognition that Ameche receives, decades after his career and even after his death, serves as a tribute to his dedication and hard work both on and off the field. Alan Ameche lives on in the memory, and in the record books, of UW.