



His name is etched in Navy annals for the battles he fought and the victories he won - on land.

Over fifty years ago, Joe Bellino riddled Army's defense and led Navy to a 17-12 victory in a celebrated game in their storied series.

That afternoon in 1960, before 98,000 fans and a national TV audience, Bellino ran for 85 yards, caught two passes, scored a touchdown, returned kickoffs and, at game's end, intercepted an Army pass on Navy's goal line to preserve the win. His play thrust the fourth-ranked Midshipmen (9-1) into the Orange Bowl and clinched the Heisman Trophy for Bellino, a stubby, elusive back and the first Navy player to receive the coveted award.

Enter his home in Bedford, Mass. these days and you'd have trouble finding that statue. It's downstairs, on an unobtrusive shelf in the TV room

"I've seen people walk in the house and look all around for it," said Bellino, 72. "Finally, they say, 'Joe, where is your Heisman?'"

"I thought of giving it to my high school, but my son said no."

Married 50 years to his childhood sweetheart, Bellino works as national accounts director for an auto auction company. He is close to his playing weight (185) and still plays catch with his three grandsons. Last year, he took them to a game at Navy, where he was to be honored at halftime.

"When I got up to go onto the field," Bellino said, "the 6-year-old asked, 'Hey, grandpa, are you gonna play?'"

Half a century ago, few players caught the nation's fancy like Bellino, a modest little plugger who, at 5-feet-9, looked like anything but America's best. Yet there he was, the nation's No. 2 scorer (110 points), darting here and feinting there and scuttling for touchdowns with a spontaneity that drove opponents nuts.

"He runs like a berserk butterfly," Sports Illustrated wrote of its cover boy on the eve of the 1960 Army-Navy game.

Red Smith, sports columnist for the New York Herald Tribune, wrote that Bellino "wriggles like a brook trout through congested traffic."

"All I know is that I was quick," Bellino said. "I wasn't big in the shoulders or waist, but my legs were stocky and I was built low to the ground. I could run straight, or sideways, without losing any speed, and I had lateral movement that let me bounce in and out (of jams)."

Bellino's success against Army in 1959 - three TDs in a 43-12 rout of the Black Knights - led the losers to devise a strategy they hoped would stop him the next year. They called it "Operation Bellino." When 1960 rolled around, signs vilifying Bellino peppered the West Point campus. A bed sheet hanging from one barracks' window pictured the Navy runner sitting in a sinking rowboat called the "U.S.S. Bellino."

No matter. In the first quarter, with Navy pinned on its 1-yard line, Bellino broke loose for 58 yards. Then he scored the game's first TD.

Late in the game, however, Bellino fumbled on his own 17. Army recovered, trailing by 5. Bellino stayed in the game at defensive back, determined to make amends.

"From then on, I either made a tackle or broke up a pass on every play," he said. "Check the film. I wasn't going to be the goat, and Army wasn't going to score."

Army didn't. Bellino picked off a pass at the goal line and returned it to midfield as time ran out.

The following night, Bellino appeared on "The Ed Sullivan Show." Two days later, he won the Heisman Trophy in a landslide vote over college stars like Mike Ditka (Pitt), Tom Matte (Ohio State) and Billy Kilmer (UCLA).

"I was in engineering class when I got the news," Bellino said. "Someone said the (Naval Academy) Superintendent wanted to speak to me. I thought, 'Geez, I'm in trouble academically.'"

He soon learned otherwise.

Afterward, a reporter asked Bellino what else he hoped to accomplish.

"Well," the All-American said, "another guy from Massachusetts did pretty good this year and I'd like to meet him."

Within days, Bellino found himself having lunch with that "other guy," - President-elect John F Kennedy - in Georgetown. Kennedy, a former Navy Lieutenant who served in World War II, attended the Orange Bowl, where the Midshipmen fell to No. 5 Missouri, 21-14. Playing with a broken collarbone, Bellino made a diving, 28-yard TD catch that he still calls "the best play I ever made."

He and Kennedy stayed friends.

"In June of 1961, I was picked to deliver our class yearbook to the President," Bellino said. "He invited me into the Oval Office, where we sat for an hour, just two guys with Boston accents talking football."

Bellino also appeared on a Bob Hope Sports Awards Show, where he hit it off with the host.

"After rehearsal, being pro-military, he (Hope) asked, 'How about coming to my place for dinner?' He met me at the stage door, in his Buick, and we went to his house," Bellino said.

There, he said, Hope turned the tables:

"Bob phoned his son and asked me to say hello to him."

Years later, Bellino got a call from Hope. The comedian was in Boston and wanted to meet up with Bellino. After dinner, the two men took a walk outside Hope's hotel where, at 1 a.m., a police car pulled up beside them.

"The cop warned us to be careful because it was a dangerous neighborhood," Bellino said. "Then he saw who we were, called his precinct and said, 'Sarge, I'll be off for 15 minutes. I'm taking a walk with Bob Hope and Joe Bellino.'

"The desk sergeant didn't believe him, so the cop says to me, 'Joe, would you guys come back to the station with me?' "

Hope agreed to that.

"Bob entertained those guys for more than an hour," Bellino said.

Autographed photos of Hope and Kennedy hang in Bellino's home, as does the telegram from President Dwight Eisenhower congratulating him for winning the Heisman, and a poster signed by all five service academy Heisman winners (the

others are Army's Glenn Davis, Doc Blanchard and Pete Dawkins, and Navy's Roger Staubach).

Bellino disappointed as a pro. He played three years with the Boston Patriots after a four-year Navy hitch in which he served on a minesweeper in Vietnam. Not that he has regrets.

"I've had three careers - athletics, military, and civilian," he said. "I've got a great family. My son played lacrosse at Navy and is now a Commander in Naval Intelligence in Germany. I'm getting long of tooth, but I still play racquetball and golf."

Best of all, perhaps, are the memories of having defeated Army as a senior.

"Whenever I meet a West Pointer, I have a smile on my face, because the last time I played them, we were winners," Bellino said. "To know that is very important."-- Mike Klingaman