

OLD SCHOOL FOOTBALL

Meet Marger Apsit—a Latvian American from Aurora, Illinois, who made his mark on the gridiron as a player and coach in the pro, college and high school levels.

Marger “Migs” Apsit was one of the first—if not *the* first—Latvian American to play in the National Football League.

He played in 20 games from 1931 to 1933 and started in half of those, often as quarterback; back then, that was mostly a blocking position, so his stats don’t match the intensity of his play.

Apsit began his NFL career playing five games with the Frankford Yellow Jackets before the team—located in northeast Philadelphia—folded, and he then landed with the Brooklyn Dodgers football team, where he played in one game.

He later played two games with the Green Bay Packers in 1932 and 12 with the Boston Redskins in 1933.

In all, he carried the ball 11 times for 41 yards, threw five passes with one 25-yard completion and two interceptions, and caught one pass for 24 yards, before returning to his hometown of Aurora, Illinois.

Of course, records might be incomplete or in error; there may have been more games, yards rushed, passes thrown and passes caught. His profile on [NFL.com](https://www.nfl.com) doesn’t even mention the Frankford (sometimes referred to as “Philadelphia”) Yellow Jackets. Some old online articles mention Apsit also punted and was a place kicker, but none of those stats appear to be available.

But it doesn’t really matter. What Apsit accomplished before and after his NFL career is what sets him apart and makes for a compelling life story.

This includes playing on the “Thundering Herd” squad that won the national championship for the University of Southern California Trojans and catching a touchdown in front of 120,000 people at Soldier Field in Chicago; working on movies; being wounded in World War II while serving in the U.S. Navy; and then having a positive impact on the lives of thousands of students as a coach, athletic director and educator who, with his wife Janet (whose nickname was “Tiny”), took a busload of students on cross-country trips every summer during his East Bakersfield coaching career. Apsit died in 1988 at the age of 79.

A son of Aurora

Migs was born in Aurora on June 9, 1909. His parents were Latvian immigrants Rhinart and Bertha Apsit, who came to the U.S. in 1903 from Rīga and found a home in what is now Aurora’s Tanner Historical District.

Apsit's granddaughter Jill Fordyce said she didn't know why her great-grandparents emigrated from Latvia—or the origin of the nickname “Migs,” which was shared with her uncle Marger Apsit Jr.

“We called my grandfather ‘Big Daddy,’ and we called my uncle ‘Uncle Migsy,’ ” said Fordyce, an attorney and author. She added that her grandfather and his younger sister, Lorraine, were born in Aurora while his older sister, Elsie, was just 9 weeks old when they arrived in the U.S.

(Unfortunately, Marger Apsit Jr. died over Thanksgiving weekend.)

Apsit's playing days at Aurora West High School are described in the 2014 book *Aurora's East-West Football Rivalry: The Longest-Running Series in Illinois*, by Steve Solarz.

“Although Apsit played on some unremarkable West teams from 1924 to 1926, he was regarded as a remarkable player,” Solarz wrote. “The 5-foot-eleven, 170-pound Apsit was a high-powered, smashing fullback who ‘hit the line like a thunderbolt,’ an outstanding blocker and a devastating tackler.”

This style of play carried into college, where center Nate Barragar, a teammate of Apsit's at both USC and the Packers, told the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* that Migs won the team's award for being the Trojans' best “sweep out gridder” two years in a row.

At USC, Apsit was a three-year starter, with the team accumulating a 27-4-1 record while he was there as they thundered on to the 1928 national championship and won the 1930 Rose Bowl with legendary coach Howard Jones at the helm.

But the biggest game of all was one they lost: a 13-12 defeat before more than 112,000 people on Nov. 16, 1929, at Soldier Field (some reports say about 120,000 attended).

According to the [Bleacher Report website](#), it was the 15th-best game in the storied USC-Notre Dame rivalry. It featured one of the largest crowds for any NCAA football game and a rousing halftime speech to Notre Dame players by coach Knute Rockne, who needed to use a wheelchair that day because he was battling phlebitis as well as the Trojans.

USC took an early lead with a first-quarter touchdown on its second drive of the game.

USC had the ball on its 48-yard line when Apsit caught a Marshall Duffield pass at the 25 and “raced untouched for a touchdown,” according to *The USC Trojans Football Encyclopedia*, but Duffield missed the conversion. Notre Dame followed with a touchdown and a missed conversion of its own, with a score that stood tied 6-6 at halftime.

Notre Dame came back in the second half with a drive that culminated in a 1-yard touchdown run and an extra point. USC roared back with Russ Saunders' 96-yard kickoff return for a touchdown, only to have another missed conversion, which led to the 13-12 defeat.

The memory of the game holds magic even now, as programs from that day were recently being [offered on eBay](#) with asking prices of \$599 and \$575.

Highlights from the game appear on YouTube featuring a clip of [Apsit's touchdown](#) at the 1:35 mark.

Fordyce said her grandfather never let that game go.

“One thing I really know is that Notre Dame was our rival and I knew that from my earliest, earliest years,” she said. “I can remember being a child, and that the rivalry was not the USC-UCLA game. It was always Notre Dame. There's a lot of stuff online about the great game he had against Notre Dame.”

The year before, USC had ended its season with a 27-14 homecoming victory over Notre Dame on Dec. 1. Apsit caught a Don Williams pass for a 19-yard touchdown to give USC a 12-0 lead on the way to its first-ever victory over Notre Dame and first-ever national championship.

“The Irish never had a chance,” wrote Steven Travers in his 2010 book *College Football’s Thundering Herd*.

Bleacher Report ranks that game, which was played before 72,632 people, as the 22nd best in the USC-Notre Dame rivalry.

As for Migs, ainsworthsports.com ranks him as the 286th top USC Trojan of all time, five spots ahead of 1991-92 Los Angeles Raiders quarterback Todd Marinovich.

Playing with the Duke

One of Apsit’s best-known teammates was offensive tackle Marion Morrison, who joined the team in 1925. But he lost his football scholarship before his junior year after breaking his collarbone in a surfing accident. When he became an actor, he changed his name to John Wayne and went on to become king of the Hollywood Western.

The Duke, however, was not the only Trojan from that era who appeared on the silver screen. Hollywood producers often recruited USC athletes to fill out their casts. “I remember hearing stories from my grandmother about the guys on the football team being extras on the sets during those years,” Fordyce said.

One of Migs’ former students told the [Bakersfield Californian](#) newspaper that some folks called Coach Apsit “Hoppy” because he had worked part time as the double for actor William Boyd, better known as Hopalong Cassidy.

The [Internet Movie Database](#), which allows the public to edit pages, lists Apsit (misspelling his last name as Aspit) as appearing in the 1931 movie “[Touchdown!](#)” and 1932’s “[The All-American](#),” though no other confirmation of that could be found online.

[An ad](#) for “Touchdown!” proclaims: “A picture that reveals for the first time the problems, hopes, heartaches and glorious triumphs that actually make a Touchdown!”

This is followed by smaller print stating: “At last a story where the hero does not score the winning points and where the hero’s team loses the game. A story big in every way ... A story that will hold you during its telling as few stories have.”

IMDb describes the plot for “All American” simply as “The story of the rise and fall of an All-American football player.”

The ad for “Touchdown!” mentions that the movie includes Apsit’s teammates Russ Saunders and Nate Barragar, along with coach Howard Jones, football legend Jim Thorpe “and many others.”

In both movies, according to IMDb, Migs appears as “football player (uncredited).”

Both movies star Richard Arlen, whose credits include 1927’s “Wings,” the first film to win the Academy Award for best picture, and a 1968 episode of the television show “[Petticoat Junction](#),” in which he plays himself.

Arlen remained friends with Barragar. When Barragar was playing on the Packers with Apsit and Saunders, Arlen invited them to be part of his New York stage show when they came to town to play the Giants at the Polo Grounds, according to the book *The USC Trojans College Football's All-Time Greatest Dynasty*, by Steven Travers.

"After winning a close one, Barragar, along with teammates Russ Saunders and Marge [sic] Apsit (former Trojans), had to herd Arlen out of the Polo Grounds and into a cab—without changing from their game clothes," Travers wrote. "The show was a big success, and despite being Packers, the uniformed players were given a big ovation."

Triumphant return to Aurora

In those days, the college game carried more prestige than the NFL, and the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* article announcing that Migs was joining the Packers notes that "This will be Apsit's second season in postgraduate football."

High school ball may not have been too far behind on the prestige ladder.

In 1932, Migs married Janet Yarbrough, and "returned to a hero's welcome at West Aurora" in 1935 to succeed his mentor, Ralph Fletcher, as head coach, Steve Solarz wrote. "Almost immediately, Apsit breathed new life into what had been a middling program, leading the Blackhawks to a perfect 9-0-0 season and a conference championship in his second year as coach."

In eight years, West Aurora had just one losing season and a .653 winning percentage under Coach Apsit. His name lives on at the school as part of an annual award.

The Anderson/Apsit Leadership Award was created by West Aurora alumnus Sonny Anderson to honor his former coach, and it is awarded to one male and one female student athlete for their "leadership and work ethic, regardless of their athletic ability," the award's description reads. Head coaches nominate an athlete whose names are placed on a ballot for all head coaches to vote on.

Anderson's instructions were to honor athletes who "display first and foremost the values of leadership, integrity, hard work, and over-all character." The description adds that Anderson "was emphatic that this award not be given solely on athletic ability.

Jill's father, Garrett "Gary" Yarbrough Apsit, was born in January 1940. Migs stepped down from the Aurora coaching job in 1942. Records show he joined the U.S. Navy on April 14, 1944. He was a lieutenant junior grade serving as a communications officer in the Pacific, Fordyce said.

Her grandfather was on a Higgins amphibian landing craft when it was hit by a Japanese mortar and almost all onboard died. "He was in the back of the boat and was slammed forward and broke his jaw," she said. "He lost all of his teeth and his hair turned white. He was in the hospital in Guam for several months."

These are all stories she has heard from others. "I remember my dad telling me that his dad never talked about his experiences in World War II at all," Fordyce said. "And I don't remember him telling stories like that."

Records show he was released from service March 2, 1946.

Back to coaching

After the war, Apsit returned to California and to coaching in 1946, leading the Glendale College Vaqueros to an 11-18-2 record over three seasons. He later became head football coach at East Bakersfield High School, a post he would hold for 17 years.

His players included his son Gary, who played left end on the 1956 and 1957 teams, and was named twice to the All-South Yosemite League Team, according to his [August 2011 obituary](#).

"I do think it was the primary bonding experience that they had," Fordyce said. "My grandfather was known as being incredibly devoted to the team and students and very hardworking. I remember my dad saying, 'You know, if anybody thinks it's easy being the coach's kid, it's actually harder' because he had more expectations of my father.

"But I do know it was very meaningful for both of them and for my dad to play football for his dad," she added.

To say Apsit was an old-school coach was an understatement.

In 1981, Migs was inducted into the [Bob Elias Kern County Sports Hall of Fame](#), located inside Bakersfield's Rabobank Arena, where the caption under his photo notes that "after four years in professional football, settled in Bakersfield and became one of this city's most familiar football figures."

"A disciple of single-wing football, he was the last coach in this area to use that offensive formation during his 17-year tenure as head coach of the East Bakersfield High School Blades," the caption continues.

The formation had been developed by Stanford University's Glenn Scobey "Pop" Warner, an archrival of USC's Howard Jones. It featured four players in the backfield: a wingback, fullback, tailback and quarterback, the latter often serving as a blocker.

Warner developed it when he coached the Carlisle Indians, an all-Native American team that included legendary football player and Olympic decathlete Jim Thorpe.

"Thorpe could run, pass and punt," an article on the [Football Babble](#) website. "Warner wisely developed an offense scheme which could take advantage of this, and the single-wing formulation was born."

Jones would later adapt the single wing to USC's offense and it was used to great effect when Apsit was on the team.

(The name reportedly sprung from what the formation looked like from the stands.)

Larry Press, the longtime sports columnist for the *Bakersfield Californian* and Apsit's fellow [Kern County Sports Hall of Famer](#), talked about the coach's dedication to the single-wing offensive formation.

"Marger 'Migs' Apsit, a really nice guy," Press recalled in a [2018 interview](#). "Came out from Illinois to play for USC, where he was the QB—blocking back, then zero in the single-wing offense. And he coached that at (East), the last manifestation of that ancient formation."

Press, who often featured Apsit in his "In the Press Box" column, died in February 2020 at the age of 93. He had this to say in his column when Apsit died in 1988: "Migs, who died last week, was known around here as the long-time coach who stuck stubbornly with the single wing, explaining simply that it was the system he knew best."

The exception being in 1959, when Apsit experimented with the “modern, newfangled multiple offense,” and promptly lost the next four games. He went back to the single wing, which then sparked a five-game winning streak to close the season and clinch another South Yosemite League title.

Press was among those in the third class inducted into the East Bakersfield High School Hall of Fame in 2013. “Although Larry Press did not graduate from or teach at East, he developed strong ties to the school,” [an item](#) in his old paper said. “He wrote about a multitude of East High athletes in his column, called the Press Box, and was a fixture on Monday mornings in the office of legendary football coach Migs Apsit, talking all things sports.”

The coach, of course, was part of the school’s inaugural Hall of Fame class as a posthumous selection. Another charter selection was Major League Baseball player [Johnny Callison](#), a four-time National League all-star. Best known for his years with the Phillies, Callison made his major league debut in 1958 with the White Sox and played for the Cubs from 1970 to 1971 before retiring two years later. Although he found fame as a baseball player, Callison played tailback for Migs on the 1955 East Bakersfield High team.

In his column eulogizing Apsit, Press wrote: “Migs loved his football, his golf, his precious Tiny and his sons and their families. He was unfailingly a friendly, good-natured and sincere soul who made a tremendous contribution to the youth of this city, and he’ll be missed.”

Cross-country on a bus

One of the more lasting manifestations of these contributions was the annual cross-country bus trip Migs and Tiny would lead for Bakersfield students.

“He and my grandmother took students on a USA tour every summer,” Fordyce said. “They took like 40 kids in a bus and traveled the United States and taught them history and showed them all the highlights.

“My whole life, when I go back to Bakersfield, I still run into people who know the name Apsit from this,” she added. “He had to have impacted thousands of kids in that role as teacher and coach and tour guide.”

While she was too young to go on the trips herself, Fordyce said that some of her most vivid and lasting early childhood memories include being part of the welcoming party when her grandparents returned to Bakersfield.

“When their bus returned, after being gone for the summer, they would pull up—I believe it was in the East High parking lot—and they literally had taken 40 kids for the entire summer,” Fordyce recalled. “It was so funny, because my grandfather—who they all called ‘Coach’—was driving this little VW bus behind the big bus that the kids were on, bringing all of their dress clothes they needed for when they did things like visit the White House.

“I just remember seeing them return and hearing how excited all the kids and their families were. I have such a vision of that. And now, as an adult, understanding that this undertaking was completely something that they created on their own. It’s just really remarkable. I think it just shows his level of devotion to education, to history and the students. And I remember being a little girl and being very excited for them to come home.”

In 2010, 22 years after the coach’s death, *Bakersfield Californian* President and CEO Richard Beene asked in his “Bakersfield Observed” blog: Who remembers Migs Apsit?

His inbox was deluged by readers sharing their memories.

“We hit all the important spots along the Southern Coast, up the East Coast, and back through the Midwest,” responded one reader. “We got a great overview of the U.S., and Tiny would give us a history lesson on every stop. We swam at Miami Beach, had 'shoo fly pie' in Amish country, saw a show at the Copa in New York, visited Williamsburg, saw Niagara Falls.”

“It was called the USA Tour,” another reader wrote in. “We stayed in hotels, motels and camped out occasionally. It was a fantastic experience.”

Ten years after those memories were offered, those trips were still being talked about. “I can still say that the one defining moment for me was in July 1960, when I was part of a group of 50-plus high school students on a seven-week tour of the U.S. with chaperones that included football coach Migs Apsit from East High,” wrote retired math teacher and sports public address announcer Carl Bryan in a [June 2020 op-ed column](#).

“We were in Washington, D.C., for several days, which included a trip to the offices of Sen. John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts, who was about to travel to the Democratic Convention where he would be named the presidential nominee,” Bryan recalled. “The senator came out of his office and spoke to us for about five minutes. From that point on, I realized that we who are lucky enough to be born into a good life have an obligation to ‘lift while we climb’ and provide assistance for those who are not so lucky.”

Janet “Tiny” Apsit—whose ancestors, Fordyce said, came to America on the Mayflower—died in 1997.

Fordyce said she didn’t learn many of the details about her grandfather’s amazing life until she was older, because he was “incredibly humble” and never talked about them.

If there was one thing she wants Chicago’s Latvian community to know about her grandfather, Fordyce said it was the difference he made in his students’ lives as a coach and teacher.

“He was universally respected for his devotion to his players and his students,” she said. “He made a big impact in the Bakersfield community. He died in 1988, and they still give an award at Aurora High in his name for dedication and sportsmanship.”

Andis Robežnieks

The editors of cikaga.com are very grateful for the patient and generous assistance of Ms. Jill Fordyce. She is the granddaughter of Marger Apsit and provided invaluable assistance in crafting this article. Ms. Fordyce is the mother of five children, a practicing attorney and author. Please see <http://www.jillfordyce.com/>.

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