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Biographical Note

Henry LaMar (1906-1985) was the Harvard University football coach from 1932 to 1972. This interview focuses on the Kennedy brothers' time playing football for Harvard University.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Henry LaMar

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Henry LaMar– JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

With

HENRY LAMAR

June 2, 1964
Harvard University

By Ed Martin

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MARTIN: Henry, your association with the Kennedys goes way back to the early thirties and I believe you were associated with all the Kennedy boys. Who was the first one you came upon?

LAMAR: Well, Ed, I had the good fortune of being with all of them and the first one was Joe. Joe, I knew him first as a freshman candidate for end. And I didn't know, like most of the boys out there you don't know one from another, or who they are, but different boys impress you in different ways. And he was this real good looking boy and tough as the devil, spoke beautiful English, beautiful diction, pronunciation, but tough as the devil. And that was my first introduction to the Kennedys, Joe.

MARTIN: Well, did he make the team that year?

LAMAR: Oh, yes. Yes, Joe. With freshmen you can hardly say there's exactly a one, two or three. But Joe was certainly number one if any such thing could be had. He started the games and he played in every game I'm sure. I don't remember Joe ever being injured that kept him out. I remember Joe mainly as a good, aggressive end.

MARTIN: Do you remember what kind of a turnout they had that year?

LAMAR: Oh, we always had a big crowd.

MARTIN: You had a good turnout?

LAMAR: I would say we had at that time roughly 70 or 75 boys, at least that, maybe more. But there was always a good crowd. And they were always, there was competition. You're getting at that. He had plenty of competition. We had some pretty good boys at that time and they later developed into pretty good ends. I remember Sean Kelly was one of those ends that was later a captain. I'm trying to think of some of the other boys that played end with that group. That was a good club.

MARTIN: Well, Henry, he probably had some prep school previous experience with football

at either Milton or some of the schools he attended before he came over here. So he knew how to catch a ball.

LAMAR: Oh, I'm sure he did. Yes, he had good hands, he could handle a ball. But that isn't the thing that's been outstanding about the Kennedys. Jack was a very good pass receiver. I know we're talking about Joe, but the thing that was outstanding about the Kennedy's was their toughness. They were; they met things right head on, the hard way. They never played around a block, they played through it. And they should have weighed 250 pounds and then they would have really been something. But never mind, they didn't think of size, they just hit things. And of all of them, Joe was probably the most quiet of the boys, he wasn't, none of the boys would, I say, were great talkers or sounding off. But Joe was the most quiet, probably. On the field the most unassuming of the boys. But tough. And that's the greatest compliment I can give a kid, to say he's tough.

MARTIN: Well, did he play in all the games that year?

LAMAR: Oh, yes. And Joe played--now, I was not with the Varsity. I was exclusively with the freshmen during Joe's years and I don't remember too much of Joe's career with the Varsity at that time. I know he played. I know he was out and I know he was highly regarded. And I also recall that he was banged up once or twice but who isn't when you play football?

MARTIN: He also played rugby I understand, over here.

LAMAR: Oh, yes. He played rugby and I guess that rugby was a pretty tough game the way they played it too. In fact, I imagine the touch football they played on the White House lawn was pretty rugged. I can't imagine the Kennedy boys doing anything with a ball that wouldn't be tough.

MARTIN: Then the next one in line was, of course, Jack. And he came here sometime later in the '30's.

LAMAR: Yes, Jack came around '35, I think it was. I think his class was '39. And Jack again, Jack was a very serious conscientious hard-working kid. Not big, he was the smallest of the boys, the slightest.

MARTIN: Joe was tall.

LAMAR: Joe was tall. Joe was a little more between Bobby and Ted in size. I don't know what his exact size was, but I'd say that he went around 180 or maybe a little better. He was just about an even six feet, as I recall. Jack was a tall, slight, or he gave the appearance of being quite tall but slight build. Jack was never heavy--never had the size that he should have had to play football the way he played it.

MARTIN: What position was he?

LAMAR: He was an end. They were all ends. He was an end and he had very fine hands. He was a very fine--well, as I say about Joe--they could all catch passes. Jack was a very good receiver, but he didn't block with a bang. But he would use his length of limb to tie people up in his blocking. Some are just big enough and powerful enough to just mow a fellow down and there are others who have to tie a man up. Well Jack would tie a man up. He wasn't a power blocker. Defensively, and I think defensively, he hit harder than the good Lord meant him to hit. He didn't have the physique to hit as hard as he did. He met everything right head on and it was never single wing. And they'd come around there en masse, you know. They'd hit that off tackle and the end and power single wing and Jack would meet them like that and cut them down like weeds. He was getting an awful licking all the time he was doing it. And I think it was probably at that time that Jack first hurt his back. I'm not sure, but I know he did suffer an injury at that time to his back that. I shouldn't say incapacitated him, but did keep him out for a while. And I wouldn't be at all surprised, but maybe that was the start or the real origin of the injury that might have handicapped him.

MARTIN: Was this while he was a freshman, Henry?

LAMAR: While he was a freshman, yes. Now, Jack went from his freshman year, and he played. He was as regular as any end we had. He went from his. . . . Incidentally, Toby MacDonald was on that freshman team, you know, the Congressman. That was a great class. A wonderful bunch of boys on that freshman squad. But he then went and the next year he came out and he was a Junior Varsity, which is the normal move: freshman, at least a year of Junior Varsity and then on to a substitute for Varsity and eventually playing, which are the normal steps on up to the Varsity, the sequence that one goes through. But he came out and he played Junior Varsity ball. The same guy that he was the first one year, slammed into anything, good hands, handled the ball well. And go after it--my God--the effort the boy put out! But anyhow, again, he had an injury there and that's what I mean when I say he hit harder than the good Lord meant him to hit. He didn't have the physique or the bone structure to hit like he did hit. At least, that's my opinion. And he was hurt again and then he went out for swimming. And did quite well with the swimming team. I think he was a backstroker. And there all I know is that he did swim and he swam with some darn good swimmers. And they had a darn good record.

MARTIN: How about Joe on the Varsity? Was Joe's record on the Varsity pretty good?

LAMAR: Oh, I'm sure it was. I don't remember frankly, Ed.

MARTIN: You lose touch with them.

LAMAR: You do, even those of a couple of years ago.

MARTIN: To complete the record though on the brothers--Ted--how did he compare with his older brothers?

LAMAR: Ted was the best football player of the four of them. In my opinion.

MARTIN: Also an end, too?

LAMAR: He was an end, yes. Ted could do--Ted had the size. He weighed, I'd say 205 or maybe a little more, a pound more or less. But he was well over 200. And it was all good tough muscle. I mean Ted wasn't a fat boy--and he was tough. But again a wonderful team man and a wonderful boy to coach and to be with. I'll never forget one night we were out there and we went over--the freshmen to scrimmage the Varsity. And the Varsity A team was off on one side, they were off on one side running through some plays or something. And I've forgotten who the fullback was but anyhow, Lloyd Jordan called us over. We went over there and they lined up in a double wing. Well, we hadn't been using double wing. So the freshmen, they jumped into the normal six-man line that we would be playing and the Varsity went into a double wing on us; the fullback in a full spin and the two halfbacks faking around and they went through the middle of our line and played a good game. I immediately ordered them to get out of that and get into a five-man line. And those ends come down on them as hard as you can, real quickly. I was telling them what to do. "Go down and go into that fullback as hard as you can." Holy Nellie! The poor boy! The fullback doing the half spin, or doing the full spin on the next play, he got about half way around and Ted hit him. And the ball goes in one direction, the wing back goes in another. I thought someone was going to be killed. And Ted comes back and he said, "Is that all right, coach?" (laughter)

MARTIN: You know, on this business of them all playing. I often wondered, did it ever occur to you that the two of them might possibly have been better in different positions? Or did they just follow the leader, sort of?

LAMAR: I can't imagine them following the leader. Now, Bobby. . .

MARTIN: I mean the older brother.

LAMAR: No, I don't think so. As I say, I can't imagine them following the leader, each of them had a mind of his own. And I don't think, if the older brother had--no matter what he did, I think the others would have done what they thought. But Bobby came out originally as a center, when Bobby arrived here. So Bobby broke the tradition of ends as he started off. But Bob came here and he was a little kid. But oh, what a mean little kid. He wasn't very big but, again, he was tough and he was mean. And he was playing center and I didn't think Bob could play. This was in 1942. I believe it was 1941 or '42. So he came here as a center and he played center. We had no JV, we had no freshmen, we had just one squad at that time, during the war years. And Bob left and went in the Service and came back and came out for football--end, he was no longer a center. I don't know how he changed over. He was larger, he was stronger, he was more mature. And he went to end and he played end--and what a mean end he was. Bob didn't have the size of Ted. He was more compact and a stockier build than Jack.

MARTIN: He didn't have the height either.

LAMAR: He didn't have the height, but he was tough and he was mean. That year that he played, that's the year that the team was going into T-formation and the T-

formation was relatively new. And we were trying various defenses, as I recall, against the T-formation and I remember Bob going in and busting some things and hitting some things. Bobby was real tough kid.

MARTIN: Henry, your association with the Kennedys and particularly with the late President continued after they left Harvard. Do you recall incidents when you ran across the President?

LAMAR: Yes, I remember one particularly because it's rather interesting; it's how off-base I could get at times. Mrs. LaMar and I were going down, we were down at Beacon Street and we met Jack Kennedy coming up the street. And we stopped. I introduced Mrs. LaMar and we were talking and we talked quite a while about this, that and the other, mainly about athletics and football. And when Jack left and went up the street, I turned to Mrs. LaMar and said, "You know, honey, he's a wonderful person and some day he's going to be governor." (laughter)

MARTIN: Well, his direction led him a lot higher than that.

LAMAR: No, he never made governor. (laughter)

MARTIN: Henry, looking back at his early career here at Harvard, did he indicate to you at that time or did you ever have any thoughts that he would go far in whatever field he chose after he left here?

LAMAR: Oh, I was sure that he would do well. Just as I said that, "he'll make governor", like that would be the top position. Of course, he skipped that and went right ahead but you knew that Jack was going to go ahead. He certainly--if you knew him at all, you certainly felt that way. I did, very definitely.

MARTIN: How about Joe? Did Joe show some of the same qualities of leadership that. . . .

LAMAR: They were very much alike. Joe and Jack were the closest two, I think, of being alike. Because the boys, as a whole, you can hardly say they fell into a mold or a pattern. I mean that each was his own man. But I would say that Joe and Jack were probably most alike.

MARTIN: This interview has been with Henry LaMar, Boxing and Freshman Football Coach at Harvard. The interview took place June 2, 1964. The interviewer Ed Martin. The place Harvard University.