

AAFC Player Profile: Frank “Gunner” Gatski

Frank "Gunner" Gatski (March 18, 1921 – November 22, 2005) was an American professional football player who was a center for the Cleveland Browns of the All-America Football Conference (AAFC) and the National Football League (NFL) in the 1940s and 1950s. Gatski was one of the most heralded centers of his era.

Known for his strength and consistency, he helped protect quarterback Otto Graham and open up running lanes for fullback Marion Motley as the Browns won seven league championships between 1946 and 1955. Gatski won an eighth championship after he was traded to the Detroit Lions in 1957, his final season.



He was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1985. Marshall retired Gatski's number 72 in 2005, the only football number retired for the Thundering Herd.

1946 -1948 AAFC.

When Gatski graduated, Sam Clagg, a teammate at Marshall, helped get him a tryout with the Cleveland Browns after contacting John Brickels, an assistant coach with West Virginia ties. The Browns were a new team in the All-America Football Conference (AAFC) and were set to begin play in 1946. Gatski, who was working in the mines after graduating from Auburn, hitchhiked to Bowling Green, Ohio for the team's training camp. He did not consider a football career a certainty, and returning to the coal mines where his father had died in an accident was a distinct possibility. "I didn't know what was

going to happen," he said later. "I just went up there to see what would happen."

Gatski arrived in Bowling Green with the nickname "Gunner" for his strength and speed on the offensive line that he had acquired in Huntington. The center before Gatski at Marshall, Jim Roberts, was said to hit like a tail gunner, and that may have had something to do with Gatski picking up Gunner as his nickname and as the newest Herd center. Growing up in the rough surroundings of a West Virginia mining town had toughened him up, and he did not mind Cleveland coach Paul Brown's overbearing perfectionism. As a professional, he later said, "you're supposed to be able to take that crap." Initially, Gatski's prospects of making the team looked dim. Brown had brought in veteran center Mo Scarry to be the starter. But Gatski proved his value to the team with his reliability and work ethic. He made the team and signed a \$3,000 per year contract.

Gatski played mostly as a backup to Scarry and as a linebacker in his first and part of his second season. He became the full-time starter at center in the 1948 season. The Browns, meanwhile, were an immediate success. The team won the AAFC championship every year from 1946-47-48-49, posting a perfect season of 14–0 in 1948 and losing only four games in four seasons. Gatski's role on the offensive line was to help protect quarterback Otto Graham from defenders when he went back to pass. He also helped push away defenders and create space for fullback Marion Motley to run 47- in.