AAFC Player Profile: Dante Lavelli

Dante Bert Joseph Lavelli (February 23, 1923 – January 20, 2009), nicknamed "Gluefingers", was an American professional football player. An end, he played for the Cleveland Browns in the All-America Football Conference (AAFC) and the National Football League (NFL) from 1946 to 1956. Starring alongside quarterback Otto Graham, fullback Marion Motley, kicker Lou Groza and fellow receiver Mac Speedie, Lavelli was an integral part of a Browns team that won seven championships during his 11-season career. Lavelli was known for his sure hands and improvisations on the field. He was also renowned for making catches in critical situations, earning the nickname "Mr. Clutch". Browns head coach Paul Brown once said of him: "Lavelli had one of the strongest pairs of hands I've ever seen, when he went up for a pass with a defender, you could almost always count on him coming back down with the ball."



1946 -1948 AAFC.

After returning from the war, Lavelli was again offered a chance to play baseball with the Tigers. He saw a matchup in late 1945 between the National Football League's New York Giants and Washington Redskins and noticed that a former teammate at Ohio State named Sam Fox was an end for the Giants. "I thought if he could make the grade, so could I," Lavelli later said. When Paul Brown offered him a chance to play on a new professional team he

was coaching in the All-America Football Conference (AAFC) in 1946, Lavelli jumped at the opportunity. He was given a $500 bonus ($8,255 in today's dollars) for signing with the team, called the Cleveland Browns.

Lavelli attended the Browns' first training camp in 1946. Competition was fierce for a spot on the roster, but Lavelli was one of the men who made it. He was up against a number of National Football League veterans and former college stars. "The toughest game I ever played in was the first intrasquad scrimmage game," he said later. "Nobody talked to each other for two days." He joined an offense that featured quarterback Otto Graham, fullback Marion Motley, placekicker Lou Groza and fellow end Mac Speedie. Lavelli quickly became Graham's top passing target and led the AAFC in receiving as a rookie with 40 receptions and 843 yards. The Browns made it to the league championship that season, and Lavelli caught the game-winning touchdown in a 14–9 victory over the AAFC's New York Yankees. The victory "didn't mean so much then, but as time goes on, it builds," Lavelli said in 2008.

The Browns won the AAFC championship again in 1947. Lavelli finished second in the league in receiving behind his teammate Speedie. Both Lavelli and Speedie were named to all-AAFC teams, as they had been in 1946. Lavelli broke his leg in a preseason game in 1948 and sat out seven weeks. He came back later in the year and helped Cleveland finish a perfect season, catching a touchdown pass in a 31–21 win over the AAFC's Brooklyn Dodgers in the championship game. In a game against the Los Angeles Dons the following year, Lavelli caught four touchdowns and had 209 receiving yards, an AAFC record. In 1949 Cleveland won the AAFC

championship for the fourth year in a row. The AAFC dissolved before the 1950 season and three of its teams, including the Browns, were absorbed by the more established National Football League (NFL). Lavelli was the AAFC's all-time leader in yards per catch and second in receiving yards behind Speedie.