

Paul Cleary

Football

Class of 1940

Although Paul Cleary's career at Santa Ana High School did not amount to much – as he was considered too small at 140 pounds to play on the varsity team – he persevered, playing junior varsity football until he graduated in 1940.

He went on to play at Santa Ana College. After redshirting his first year, he started to grow in height and size. By fall, 1941, he was up to 170 pounds and was listed as the team's third-string end. By the end of the season, Cleary had earned a starting job and the team's most improved player award. In 1942 he was co-captain of the national championship football team that went 9-0 and outscored its opponents 214-64 in the process. He was selected as the Southern California Junior College Player-of-the-Year that year.

Cleary transferred to USC, but he was drafted into the Army in 1943, and during his three years of service during World War II, Cleary never touched a football. He returned to USC in 1946 and worked his way from sixth-string end to starting end by the end of the '46 season. In '47 USC had an outstanding team that went undefeated before losing to Notre Dame and Michigan in the last two games. The Trojans tied Rice, 7-7, in the second game of the season, and Cleary drew rave reviews from Rice Coach Jess Nealy, who told reporters Cleary "is the best end in the country." That was a significant statement since Coach Nealy's end was a preseason All-American pick. In fact, Cleary was selected a consensus All-American end at USC in 1947, when the Trojans were 7-2-1 and played in the Rose Bowl. The USC publicity department promoted Cleary as a two-way starter who was a "glue-fingered wingman whose deceptive style of sliding into the open makes him a standout pass receiver!! There's not much traffic around this end!"

Cleary played professionally for the New York Yankees in 1948-49 and the Chicago Hornets for the remainder of the '49 season. He left professional football to become President of R.J. Noble Construction Co., in Orange. He was later elected into the National Football Foundation Hall of Fame in 1989 and the Orange County Sports Hall of Fame in 1990.