

NORTH CAROLINIANS *of* NOTE

Charlie 'Choo Choo' Justice

His legacy lives on

By Isaac Adams

Linebackers, the first line of defense in football, spiral to the ground as their hands slip off the Tar Heel tailback blowing past them. Cornerbacks and safeties, the last line of defense, desperately sprint after him. But it's too late. Hunched over in the end zone, Charlie "Choo Choo" Justice catches his breath. He galloped 84 yards to return a punt against the Georgia Bulldogs. Justice scored three times in the Tar Heel's 21-14 triumph over the Bulldogs back in 1948.

Justice led the Tar Heels to a No. 1 national ranking that year, and he left a legacy that many North Carolinians still remember vividly. Bob Quincy, former sports editor and columnist for *The News & Observer* and member of the N.C. Journalism Hall of Fame, writes about Justice in his book, "They Made the Bell Tower Chime."

"Charlie Justice was more than just a great football player," Quincy writes. "He was a hero and a legend in his own time. He had an impact on his home state that no other athlete had ever had before or few have had since."

Justice, born May 24, 1924, grew up in Asheville, where the 170-pound tailback played for Lee Edwards High. "Some called him the hottest property in the history of football at that time," *Tarheelblue.com* reports in a biography on Justice.

Directly after high school, Justice

served four years in the Navy during World War II. He played football at Bainbridge U.S. Naval Training Center in Port Deposit, Md., where he received the name "Choo Choo."

"He runs along just like a Choo Choo train," Quincy reports a fan saying. The nickname stuck with Justice the rest of his career. It even inspired Benny Goodman, who was known as "The King of Swing," to write a song called "All the Way, Choo Choo."

Though the University of South Carolina and Duke aggressively recruited him, Choo Choo chose UNC, then coached by Carl Snavelly, in 1946. The freshman didn't practice much because of a leg injury. But the new tailback, wearing No. 22, shocked everyone in his debut game against the University of Virginia.

Choo Choo wasn't known for his speed but for his ability to change direction. The tailback stopped on a dime to change pace and deceived the defense like a magician does an audience. The 5-foot-10 freshmen slid out of tackles and rushed for 170 yards in 17 carries that game, which was just a preview of his career.

Bronze plaques honoring Choo Choo outside Kenan Stadium at UNC say the two-time runner-up for the Heisman trophy led the Tar Heels to a 39-9-2 record, three bowl games and two Southern Conference championships. A bronze statue of Choo Choo stands in front of the plaques. It honors the two-time All American, who was the first athlete named to the N.C. Sports Hall of Fame.

But most current students haven't heard of Choo Choo.

"I just come to the games to support our boys," David Rivell, now a senior economics major, says. "I'm not really sure who Choo Choo is."

Although most students don't feel Choo Choo's impact, the team feels his pres-



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ence.

Padded players walk in and out of the stadium daily for practices, training and tutoring.

"He was an all-star, a legend," Joshua Bridges, a junior linebacker for the Tar Heels, says. "It's just an honor to be part of the same team."

Bridges says so many legends played for UNC that it's hard to pick his favorite, but he is sure that Choo Choo inspires the current tailbacks the most.

The Washington Redskins drafted Choo Choo in the 16th round of the 1950 draft. The new Redskin tailback rushed for 119 yards in 11 carries in his 1952 exhibition game. But a linebacker crashed into Choo Choo's arm and broke it. Such injuries plagued Choo Choo's professional career, causing it to be short-lived, 1950-54.

Choo Choo died in 2003 in Cherryville, N.C., but his legacy lives on.

<http://tarheelblue.cstv.com/sports/m-footbl/spec-rel/101703aaa.htm>

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Quincy, Bob. *They Made the Bell Tower Chime*.

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