

No Passing Fancy

New book recalls the iconic Benny Friedman.

By David E. Nathan

On a visit to Brandeis a decade ago—years before he'd even decided to make a career change and swap his legal pad for an author's pen—Murray Greenberg '77 stumbled upon a subject worthy of his literary debut.

From his days as a baseball and soccer standout at Brandeis, Greenberg had some idea about Benny Friedman and his connection to the university. But he didn't learn the full story of the football pioneer until he attended a Friedman tribute held in conjunction with Brandeis's fiftieth anniversary in 1998.

"Being an athlete myself and being fairly knowledgeable about sports history, I was flabbergasted at what I heard that night," Greenberg says. "I remember leaving there overwhelmed and so proud of my Brandeis heritage. I was amazed this great figure in sports had been at my school; ultimately, my amazement manifested itself in this book."

Passing Game: Benny Friedman and the Transformation of Football, released in November by PublicAffairs (founded by Peter Osnos '64), tells the story of the man credited with saving profes-

sional football in the 1920s and '30s. The son of Jewish working-class immigrants in Cleveland, Friedman forever changed football by popularizing the forward pass as a quarterback at the University of Michigan. As a professional player, he eventually signed with the New York Giants for an unprecedented \$10,000, bringing fans and fanfare to the fledgling National Football League. After his days as a pro quarterback ended, Friedman came to Brandeis as the school's first athletic director and only football coach (the university suspended football after the 1959 season). He died in 1982.

"Over the years," Greenberg says, "he had somehow gotten lost and fallen through the cracks. When I learned about him in '98, I realized this was a much-overlooked guy who deserved to be in the sporting consciousness of America."

That Greenberg came to help restore Friedman to his rightful place in the athletics pantheon is a story in itself. After leaving a successful career as a litigator, Greenberg decided to scratch his longtime writing itch and enroll at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism. For an assignment in a book-writing seminar, he developed the outline for a book—and *Passing Game* was born.

As part of his reporting, which included both archival research and personal interviews with Friedman family members, friends, and players, Greenberg spoke with a number of "Benny's boys," as his former Brandeis team members jovially call themselves. In 2005, he accompanied some of Benny's boys to Canton, Ohio, for their mentor's long-awaited induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

"Those interviews provided important material for the book—but, more than that, they helped Benny's players relive some of the more pleasant days of their lives," says Greenberg, who, through his extensive research, came to know Friedman as few ever did.

Could Greenberg the athlete have played for Friedman the coach?

"Not only could I have; it would have been an honor," Greenberg says. "Benny Friedman was an extremely knowledgeable coach and, from all accounts, had a great coaching demeanor. He was stern when he needed to be and comforting when he needed to be. It would have been an absolute pleasure to be part of his team."

Friedman instructs his players in the ways of the forward pass.

