

OSU Sprung Csuri To Success Beyond Football

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Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Charles "Chuck" Csuri initially became known at Ohio State for his years on the gridiron, but the career paths he pursued after football brought him groundbreaking success.

As a child of the Great Depression, Csuri weathered an upbringing of poverty and served for the United States in World War II before his breakthrough began on campus in Columbus. With an aggressive motor to offset his undersized stature, Csuri developed into a multiyear starting offensive tackle for the Buckeyes. He was voted MVP by his teammates, team captain and an All-American in 1942 when OSU won the program's first national championship, going 9-1 overall and 5-1 in the Big Ten.

While he has since been recognized for that season and the accolades it brought on the field, Csuri became best known for pioneering in the field of computer graphics, computer animation and digital fine art. Considered by Smithsonian Magazine to be the "father of digital art and computer animation," Csuri graduated from Ohio State in 1947 with his bachelor's degree in education, followed in 1948 with his master's degree in fine art.

Csuri is a professor emeritus of art education and computer and information science at Ohio State, where he established the Advanced Computing Center for Arts and Design (ACCD) as one of the world's first computer art, animation teaching and research programs. With an intellectual curiosity for computers and technology coupled with his art background, Csuri intertwined his work with art and computer science in the 1960s, beginning his creation of computer graphics and computer-animated films in 1965. Between 1971-87, Csuri also founded the Computer Graphics Research Group and the Ohio Super Computers Graphics Project. He co-founded Cranston/Csuri Productions (CCP), which was one of the world's first computer animation production companies.

Born in West Virginia and raised in Cleveland before he came to Ohio State, Csuri still resides in Columbus today. He recently

discussed his trailblazing journey from football to war and arts and computers in a conversation with BSB.

BSB: Your successful careers across multiple fields started at Ohio State, where you also happened to play football. Ultimately, what led you to the university?

Csuri: "I went out for football my sophomore year (of high school at Cleveland West Tech) because my older brother played football – so that's what younger brothers do. And then I got cut from the squad because I was too small. Then the next year, over the next year, I gained about 30 pounds. So my junior year I played football and did reasonably well. In my senior year, I started putting things together. My high school coach was the brother of the assistant football coach at Ohio State, and I had never even considered going to college. I didn't even think it was possible. He saw me play in high school. Although I didn't get any awards as a player – I didn't make all-city or anything like that – he said, 'You know, I think you could make it at Ohio State,' I said, 'Really? OK.'

So he set it up that I could get to Ohio State and that's how I got to Ohio State – because of coincidence, just sort of being at the right place at the right time with the right person. Then when I got to Ohio State, I was very apprehensive about what was going to happen to me because here I was, born in West Virginia. I lived there until I was 10 years of age. It was coal-mining country. My father was a coal miner and there was a lot of poverty. I really was a child of the depression, as were many of my teammates, and so I didn't know what to expect. It was a bit overwhelming for me. The high school I went to wasn't particularly a good high school, where the kids were primarily there for vocational education and the idea of college wasn't something very remote. Only the wealthy kids got to go.

"But I'll never forget the first day I had the scrimmage. Within five minutes, I knew I

could make the (Ohio State) team because of the way contact was made and I knew that I could handle whatever I was faced with, so it gave me a lot of confidence. As time went on, especially in academia, my first two years were a bit difficult. I had to play catch-up because I didn't really have a good educational background. By my junior year, I was up to full speed and did really well. I made A's my junior, senior year and from that point on I was OK. But it was, academically, a battle the first two years. But it was a time when you had no help like the kids get today, have tutors and everything like that. You were on your own. But anyway, that's sort of where it started."

BSB: You played for the legendary Paul Brown, who was the head football coach at Ohio State from 1941-43. What do you remember from your experience under him? What was he like on a daily basis?

Csuri: "Paul Brown was one of these people that when he walked into the room, he had this presence – he had an aura about him. You had the feeling he was important, even before he opened his mouth. So there were very few people like that, but he was one of them. He was very organized, very innovative, very imaginative and a great psychologist in a way that related to players. He knew how to push the button to get me to work, so I was very impressed by him as a person. I immediately had respect for what he had to say and his so-called authority. It was a great experience.

"I remember we were going to go to Los Angeles. In those days, you went to Los Angeles by train. You didn't fly. We took the train called the Super Chief from Chicago all the way across the country. It was one of the greatest trips of my life because I'd never been out of Ohio and here we were on all of these cars going all the way across the country. We had private dining cars, sleeping cars and it was an ideal way to travel. We didn't stop anywhere any more than we had to, so we weren't picking up passengers or anything like that and the team went all the way to Los Angeles. It was a fantastic trip. I loved it. It was a way to see the country.

"But the week before we went, Paul started talking to me about this tackle I was going to play opposite of. I was very light as a tackle. I only weighed about 210. I was the lightest tackle in the Big Ten. The only reason I played tackle was because they needed somebody that was aggressive.

"Even though I was brought in as an end, I was apparently able to show signs of aggression that they liked in somebody that could play tackle. So at tackle – I really wasn't big enough to play tackle, but I learned how to play it – (Brown) told me I was going to go up against a guy who weighed 250. In those days, that was big. I was really scared that I was going to get killed by this guy. I worked my butt off all week going into the game. When I got into the game, I really clobbered the guy. I just let loose and I let him have it. I hit him so hard I knocked him out of the game. That's one of the nicest things that's happened to me playing football. It was against the University of Southern California in 1941 (a 33-0 win by Ohio State on Oct. 4 at Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum).

"It's a joke that I went up against him. I was a peewee. There was a ceremony here in Columbus honoring the 100 best players from Ohio State somewhere in downtown, 2007 or 2005. We had to go up on stage by position and

when they called for tackles, I walked up on the stage and all of the guys standing and waiting said, 'Are you sure you're in the right place?' I was with these guys who were 300 and sometimes 400 pounds because they gained weight. They looked at me, this peewee, like, 'What are you doing here? You're in the wrong place.' The game, it is such a different deal. We played both ways, we didn't have a face mask and blocking was different. The way people block today would be considered illegal when I played."

BSB: You played for Brown, but Woody Hayes was a legend in his own right when he was the head football coach at Ohio State from 1951-78. Did you ever compare the two? What did you think about Hayes?

Csuri: "Well, he was a complicated person for me because the feelings I had about him were that he had a temperament that I could not relate to. I didn't particularly like him. On the other hand, I met many of his former players over the years. They were very high on him and they thought a great deal of him. So I had very mixed feelings, more based upon impressions of former players and my own personal impression, because I just didn't like that kind of personality. He had a kind of bravado, very emotional and I thought it was kind of silly. But anyway, that was my impression. I'm not saying I had the accurate impression. That's just the way I felt about it."

BSB: So Brown wasn't really like Hayes? How was he different?

Csuri: "He was the calm person. He didn't get outrageous. He didn't jump up and down and curse and yell. I mean, he would just give you a dirty look or give you a gesture. It was a totally different style of coaching. Way different."

BSB: After you were on Ohio State's first national championship team in 1942, you and your teammates had successful careers beyond football. How much did Brown factor into the development of his players on and off the field?

Csuri: "I think there were circumstances that it was more like the following – most of the guys on my team, mostly all of them graduated from college except one on the entire squad. Most of us were children of the Great Depression. This was the depression where there was about 25 percent unemployment. We were poor, so the opportunity to go to college was just fantastic – at least for me, but I think it was the same with these other players. Our primary focus I think really was one of college education and career, and we didn't think in terms of football. Nobody thought about going and playing professional football. It was just something that happened after World War II and especially when television became the medium of the society. It's the same as everything. The idea of professional football, it was something that was remotely in people's backgrounds. But I don't think anybody even thought about it after World War II. A few of them on my team did play professional football."

BSB: As the first Ohio State player in program history to win the Heisman Trophy in 1944, Les Horvath was one notable member of the team. What was it like playing with him?

Csuri: "I know that, but on the other hand, he was a second-stringer on our squad because there were other players that were better than him. He went to dental school, so he was able to play football. He didn't go into the war. On our squad, he was a second-string player. There was a guy named Paul Sarringhaus who was a better halfback than Les Horvath, but he never made Heisman. (Horvath) just

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HISTORIC SUCCESS – Charles “Chuck” Csuri was team captain and MVP when Ohio State won its first national title in 1942.

happened to decide to go to dental school and that’s just the way that it worked out for him. Same thing with Don Steinberg, who was on our team – he went to medical school.

“Regarding Les, I could tell you a story. This is one of my treasured stories. Les Horvath’s father and Gene Fekete’s father and my father were all Hungarians. They came from Hungary and all spoke Hungarian. My brother arranged for my father to attend an Ohio State-Pittsburgh football game in 1942. They seated our fathers on the sidelines.

“At one point in the game, we were close to them – somewhere on the 20-, 25-yard line – and (former fullback/linebacker) Gene Fekete in Hungarian yells to his father, ‘Hey, pop. Watch this play.’ Here are these Hungarians – my father had never seen a football game in his entire life. He had no idea what the hell was going on. He was sitting there smoking cigars – all three of them were smoking the cigars – and Fekete yells and says to watch him. Dammit, he runs for one of the longest plays from the line of scrimmage for a touchdown (89 yards, the longest OSU play from scrimmage until Kenny Guiton connected with Devin Smith for a 90-yard touchdown in 2013). You couldn’t have written a better script. It was just fantastic. I just treasure that story, that experience.”

BSB: Are there any other stories that come to mind when you remember playing at Ohio State?

Csuri: “One story was one of those crazy things when you block a kick. I’d never blocked a kick in my entire life except for the Michigan game (a 21-7 win over the then-No. 3 Wolverines on Nov. 21, 1942). I blocked one kick in my entire career, (blocking it at the UM 35 and setting up the Buckeyes’ first scoring drive of the game) and it made me famous. Six inches, one way or another, and I wouldn’t have been famous (laughs). That was another high point.”

BSB: Was the rivalry between Ohio State and Michigan as big then as it is now?

Csuri: “It was intense. Oh, yeah. It’s probably gotten more intense because of the media hype, but it was pretty intense. We didn’t need any special motivation. We just knew it was an important game, and we just were up to it. That’s all.”

BSB: Looking around at your team, did you think those guys would become so successful after football? A lot of you did.

Csuri: “No, not really, not really. I don’t

think I even thought in those terms. I didn’t have that type of vision, not at that age. There were people I liked very much. There was a camaraderie that was fantastic and that was great, and that went on for a very long time. But as to whether they would be successful – a lawyer or doctor – I never thought about those terms. I wasn’t that forward thinking when I was that young. I really wasn’t.”

BSB: Don Steinberg, who was a teammate of yours as you mentioned, wrote “Expanding Your Horizons: College Football’s Greatest Team,” featuring you and your teammates’ lives on and off the field. Five pages were exclusively on you. Did you know that former Ohio State head coach Jim Tressel (2001-10) used to make his teams read that book?

Csuri: “I know Jim very well. I know the book very well, yes. I guess Tressel did. I understand he did and I know a lot of people still read it. I keep getting people coming and calling for me to sign the book. I don’t know where they’re getting copies of it, but somebody does and it seems to have a life of its own.”

BSB: When you still have people calling and asking you to sign that book, what does that mean to you?

Csuri: “It’s nice, it’s very flattering and you like it. Once in a while, it gets to be a nuisance. But that’s mainly because of depending on what I’m doing and the time I have. Sometimes people hit me at the wrong time and it’s a little awkward, but most of the time it works out well.”

BSB: On the 1942 national championship team, the ethnic diversity was so much different than it is today. Back then, it was such a predominantly white game. From your perspective, what was it like?

Csuri: “(Offensive tackle) Bill Willis was the only black player. He was fantastic, he was a great guy and he was a great personality. I related very well to him. I think mostly everybody did. But in hindsight, as I think about it, he had an enormous amount of pressure because he was the only black player on the team. He had to be Mr. Nice Guy. In other words, he couldn’t swear, he couldn’t act like the rest of us because he was black. I mean, he had a rule that was different. When we went on a road trip, he couldn’t go to the hotel with us. They had to find special housing for him. In hindsight, I don’t know how the hell he did that. And what the coaches had to deal with, with the kind of prejudice that was prevalent at

the time. But Bill was a person that was super. That guy, I really liked him.”

BSB: Was he someone you and your team collectively embraced?

Csuri: “Oh, yes. I think, across the board, everybody liked Bill. Bill had such a fantastic, natural athletic ability. In fact, he was so quick and strong – that was one of his problems. He would overcharge. He had to be taught to restrain himself to play the game more efficiently. It was kind of weird, but he was super strong.”

BSB: Willis went on and played professionally with the Cleveland Browns. How influential was Brown, who coached there from 1946-62, in presenting that opportunity?

Csuri: “I really don’t know the particulars of that situation at all. I know Brown asked me if I would play pro football for him and I told him I wasn’t interested in playing. I wanted to go to graduate school. I was affected by the war. After World War II, World War II dissipated whatever macho I had before World War II. After going into combat and seeing the consequences of war, I just did not have the same mind-set. I played my senior year because of social pressure, but I really did not want to play football. I was finished. It was enough.”

BSB: World War II is a tough time to draw from your memories, but what do you remember? How difficult was the transition from war to football when you went back to Ohio State?

Csuri: “I think it’s the regimentation, the discipline of war and military life that is so different from anything you’ve ever experienced. So that’s a real adjustment, trying to get used to that. But in my case, I was luckier than some people. I went to basic training in Camp Shelby, Mississippi, and even to this day, I remember my army serial number. Which is bizarre, but I do and that’s the way it goes – 15307118 is my army serial number.

“But then they decided we needed some more engineers, so I went to engineering school. Here I had the art background, but the military decided I’d be a good engineer. So I was sent to the Newark College of Engineering (one of the oldest and largest professional engineering schools in the country, now named the New Jersey Institute of Technology) and I was there for a little over a year while I was in the military service, taking calculus, analytical geometry, physics and stuff like that.

“In hindsight, I was very lucky because it turned out to be a great education for me (while training to become an officer). It helped me in terms of career choices and things I wanted to do. After, then they decided, ‘No, time’s up, we need more people in Europe,’ so they suspended the program and they shipped me off to Europe into combat. So my career to be an officer was circumvented by the war and that’s what happened to me.”

BSB: After World War II, you go from veteran to football player and then artist. Did you ever anticipate doing what you did as a career?

Csuri: “No, not really. I didn’t really think it

through. When I think about what could have happened to me, what could have happened to me is I could have graduated with an art degree and then discovered that I couldn’t make a living and then I would have ended up selling cars. I probably would have been a car salesman. But it turned out for me – luckily, for me – that I had the ability to communicate to people about art so the faculty decided to add me as a teacher. So I was given the opportunity to teach at Ohio State. Fortunately, I was able to take advantage of that and my career turned out very well.

But had it not been for that, I don’t know what would have happened to me. My life would have been totally different. It would have been a different story – and not a very pretty story, I don’t think, because I don’t think I could have made it as an artist, not in Columbus, Ohio. If I had been more knowledgeable, I might have moved to New York but not Columbus. Especially in the ‘40s and ‘50s, it simply was not the place to be.”

BSB: What made you want to pursue art? After that, what compelled you to get involved in computers?

Csuri: “The art thing came very naturally. I found out that I had an itch for art when I was extremely young, when I was 10 years of age. I had a brother that was 11 years older than me. He saw that I had a great interest in art, so he arranged for me to go to Cleveland Art School Saturday morning classes when I was 10 years of age. So for two, three years, I went to Saturday morning classes and I used to wander around the art museum. So my interest in art came very early and when I came to Ohio State, I had to decide on a major and I knew that’s just what I liked so that’s how I happened to end up in it.

“The computer is a different story. When I was on faculty at Ohio State – you have to remember, back in the ‘50s, Ohio State was more like 20,000 students. There were 25 (thousand) at the most. It was smaller, a different kind of environment. It was easier to connect with people, other faculty members. Among the people I connected with was Jack Mitten, who was a professor in industrial engineering. He and his family and my family became very close.

“I’ll never forget, it was sometime in the ‘50s, Jack, we were visiting him and he came home and he said, ‘Damn, the computer went down.’ I said, ‘The computer? What fell down? What’s a computer? It does what?’ I thought it was some kind of creature that I had never heard of. Then I said, ‘Well, what does it do? How does it do that?’ One question after another. Those questions weren’t answered in a day.

“But over 30 years, I would have this dialogue about a computer and what it does. In the early years, computers did not do graphics. There was no graphics output. People hadn’t even thought of it. But over a period of years, because of my dialogue and exchanges with Jack Mitten, I got a conceptual background and framework for how the computer works and what it could do. We thought about the computer as being an intelligent machine, a philosopher but not as an artist.

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Csuri Pioneered Computer Graphics After Football

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"Then one day I was looking at The Lantern, the student newspaper. There on the front page was a picture of a computer, processed by a computer through some engineering student who had taken a special typewriter that had nine grade-level keys and they figured out a way to make it type keys representing points on a surface that looked like a face.

"When I saw that, it just blew my mind. I saw the implications immediately because I had this background. The combination I had – some background in mathematics, nothing serious but enough – and my dialogue and background and discussions with Jack made me realize that this had great potential. So I went to the electrical engineering department and met with the students, they walked me through the process of what they did and I learned a great deal.

"I came home after this and I said to my wife, 'I'm going to study computer programming.' My wife, who's an artist, said, 'What? You're out of your mind. OK, go ahead.' So I signed up for computer programming and there was one computer on the entire campus, one mainframe, and that was how I began."

BSB: It was such an unknown. What was it like, the thrill of not knowing what you were getting into?

Csuri: "It was pretty bizarre. It was crazy because at the time, I made that decision. I was a full-time professor, I had tenure and I was the only faculty member that hadn't chosen New York City. I had a gallery deal at the time. So in a way, I had some leverage. I was very isolated. There was nobody I could talk to about it. I could not get into a dialogue with anybody. I had to make up fantasy questions and ask myself, 'Why are you doing this?' So I had to play games with my own mind on why I was

doing something because there was nobody to talk to and I did this for a long time.

"With some help, some computer programmers at the computer center, I made some pictures. Then, quite by accident, I discovered a magazine article about somebody in Germany who made a picture with a computer. I went, 'Oh, my God. Somebody else is really the greatest in the world.' I then submitted a picture to a publication and they reproduced it. Then things just sort of snowballed after that.

"But I couldn't tell you what it was like. It was just something that I can't communicate, what it was like to be in that place in time when you come up with an idea that nobody understands but you believe it has good potential and people think you're crazy to do it. But to do it in spite of that, you believe it, and that's what I did because I was convinced this way the way it was going to go."

BSB: Let's go back to 1942 right now.

Could you even conceive the idea of a computer?

Csuri: "There was no way. I wouldn't say anybody could. Things were ongoing in the underground, so to speak, with the military and with people trying to figure out how to interrupt the German communication system. So there were computer ideas beginning to take place during World War II, but it didn't in academia until after World War II. I don't know exactly what year, but it had to be in the '50s."

BSB: When you look at the way computers and technology have advanced since then, how crazy has that been for you to see?

Csuri: "It's fantastic. I mean, there are things I thought that would happen and were going to happen. There were other things that I didn't anticipate ever in this world. It never occurred to me that there would be an Internet or there would be cellphones. That was something that was just beyond my thinking.

"But I knew that computer graphics would have an implication on society, especially in animation. That I was convinced of, and in that case, I think I was right on the money on that one. But I also knew that it would be a very powerful communication tool and that people would start using graphical communication more and more to communicate. It's continued to be. Now, what we're going to see is the role that artificial intelligence is going to play with everything.

"Right now, we're working on a project involving eye tracking where the computer tracks your eyes and what you're looking at. Have you ever heard of the IBM watch and intelligence system? It's an artificial intelligence system that IBM has developed. They're putting it into the public domain and people could have access to it. So we're trying to figure out how to use voice commands and artificial intelligence to make pictures and graphics and animation. I'm presently working on a project with a former student of mine – it's not a big project, it's pretty minor because we don't have any real funding and he's living in San Francisco and I'm in Columbus so we have to communicate by email and telephone.

"That's what I'm saying. I'm still doing basic research in that area. Nothing serious, nothing that I consider very important, but I still have enough intellectual curiosity that I like to see how it works and by doing something."

BSB: How are you doing in your health? You turn 96 on July 4.

Csuri: "I'm still walking, but I have had serious problems. I had two total hip replacements. I go into the gym now with a walker and everyone looks at me strange as hell. Here's a guy coming in with a walker and trying to do weight lifts (laughs). I go to a gym in Powell, Ohio, the YMCA has a nice facility and I just try to work with what I can work out and get in my car and come home."

BSB: How much of Ohio State do you still watch during football season in the fall? What do you think about the team going into 2018?

Csuri: "I watch the games. Yeah, I watch Ohio State games. But I really don't think about it too deep in those terms anymore. It's just simply Ohio State football. I watch it and that's it. I'm told by the paper they're supposed to have a good team, but I don't know what that means. I don't go through the trouble to analyze players and the best player. Occasionally, I will think about and wonder about quarterback controversy and something like that. Like the thing with (Joe) Burrow and the kid (Dwayne Haskins) they finally made the quarterback. I wondered who was the better one, and I had no opinion about it."



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