

MOOSE OF THE BEARS

By Bob Braunwart & Bob Carroll

In 1929, when little Millikin (Ill.) College defeated tiny Eureka (Ill.) College, 45-6, the slaughter went almost unnoticed on the nation's sports pages. No one knew then that two opposing guards in the game would go on to bigger things.

For Eureka, at a conservative 175 pounds, was one Ronald "Dutch" Reagan, who eventually achieved some political success after a movie career famous for his portrayal of football hero George Gipp. For Millikin, at a cumulative 260 pounds, was one George "Moose" Musso, who also achieved some political success -- as sheriff of Madison County (Ill.) -- after a pro football career famous for his dual role as immovable object and irresistible force.

Reagan describes that long-ago meeting as "very busy" and particularly "hairy" on defense. As the score indicates, Musso gave the future President more trouble than a whole lineup of liberal Democrats can today. Small wonder! Moose Musso became a synonym for powerful line play during the next decade-plus with the Chicago Bears when the Monsters of the Midway were at their most monstrous. He blocked for Nagurski, Luckman, and McAfee and tackled shoulder to shoulder with Stydahar, Lyman, Fortmann, Kopcha, Turner, and Hewitt. He belonged in their company. They made him captain of the team.

Three years after he joined the Bears, he was All-League at tackle. Then Coach George Halas switched him to guard. Almost immediately he became All-League there. Halas' assessment was definitive: "George Musso is the greatest guard in professional football ranks."

No one was better at getting out and leading the interference. How could such a big man move so fast? For Musso it was easily explainable. He was blocking for Nagurski who waited for no one. "If you didn't open the hole, he'd hit you in the back, and the next time you'd either open it or get out of the way quick."

Nagurski and Musso roomed together. "Bronko was just a swell guy to be with," says Musso. In 1943, when World War II manpower shortages brought Nagurski out of a five-year retirement, Musso was there encouraging and even rubbing down his old friend's aching legs after practices.

It all paid off. Nagurski performed ably at tackle through most of the season. Then, in a game the Bears needed to clinch the Western Division title, he returned to fullback to lead a thrilling comeback win, picking up 84 yards on 16 bruising carries.

It was like old times. A few weeks later Musso and Nagurski celebrated yet another NFL Championship. Backs and receivers can be measured by their statistics -- so many yards, so many touchdowns. A lineman's "stats" are in his team's won-loss column. During Musso's twelve years as a Bear bulwark, the team took four NFL championships and seven division titles. Their regular season record was an almost unbelievable 104-25-6 for an .806 percentage.

The 1940 team was the best of all. Many experts still regard it as the top pro team of all time, and contributing to its success ranks as Musso's greatest football thrill.

Sid Luckman was teaching the world how to play T-quarterback. When he wasn't passing to Ken Kavanaugh, Dick Plasman, or George Wilson, he was handing off to McAfee, Bill Osanski, Ray Nolting, or a half dozen other touchdown-makers. The line was big, mobile, and deeper than a Russian novel. The third-stringers could have starred for most other NFL teams.

Anchoring the impregnable defense at middle guard was Musso, now listed at anywhere from 270 pounds to roughly the equivalent of a trolley car. No one could run over him and those who tried to make the long trip around became easy prey for linebackers like Bulldog Turner and Danny Fortmann.

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Perhaps Musso's finest moment came in the championship game against Washington. The Redskins had one of their best teams. A couple of weeks before the title game, they'd upset the Bears, 7-3, and owner George Preston Marshall made the mistake of calling the Bears "quitters" and "crybabies."

When the Bears took the field on December 8, Halas had them primed. On the second play from scrimmage, they exploded. Osmanski busted off tackle and swung to the outside. Musso cleared out his man. George Wilson knocked off the last defender. And Osmanski was in the end zone, 68 yards downfield.

With Sammy Baugh throwing, Washington moved back downfield, but veteran Charlie Malone dropped a sure TD pass. The Bears immediately countermarched and scored again.

At the half it was 28-0, but Musso recalls Halas again brought up George Marshall's comments "and we got mad all over." The Bears went out and scored seven more touchdowns to set the all-time standard for professional excellence, 73-0.

A reporter suggested to Baugh, "It would have been different if Malone had caught that pass."

"Sure," said Baugh, "73-7."

Afterward, in the dressing room, the Bears made exuberant mastadons, erupting in joy and pride. Musso spoke for the team: "We were just fired up and we went out there to kick the pants off them."

To teammate Aldo Forte, a fair country guard himself, Musso "personified the Bears. Halas was 'Poppa Bear,' but teammates and opponents called George 'Big Bear.'" In a mixed menagerie of metaphors, Forte lauds the Moose as a "Big Bear" with "the mobility and quickness of a giant cat."

With Forte, Musso, Ray Bray, and Hall-of-Famer Danny Fortmann, the Bears had the best guards since the Spartans lettered at Thermopolae. But no one is perfect. One day at practice, George pulled out of the line and ran head-on into Fortmann pulling in the opposite direction. "I looked down at him," Musso recalls with a chuckle. "What's the matter, Danny? Haven't you learned the signals yet? I knew it was my mistake, though. Danny was Phi Beta Kappa."

The two great guards became close friends and still call each other long distance about once a month. When Musso suffered a near-fatal auto accident in 1962, Fortmann -- by then an outstanding West Coast doctor -- dropped everything to fly to his St. Louis hospital bedside. Musso had multiple fractures in his legs and pelvis. Doctors counted 54 separate breaks. But they couldn't count out Musso. Within a year and with the aid of crutches, he was at work as Madison County treasurer.

George Halas, who made few mistakes during his long career, almost made a big one and counted Musso out of the Bears' future at the start of his career.

Big George had starred in basketball, track and baseball, as well as football at Millikin. And he played well in the East-West All-Star Game held in Chicago as part of the Century of Progress celebration. Still, Millikin was well off the beaten path of All-America selections. Halas showed Red Grange a photo of Musso in a basketball uniform and sporting a big mustache. "He'll never make it," prophesied Red. "He looks like a walrus!"

Undaunted, Halas courted Musso with a \$90 per game offer and a "bonus" -- a five dollar bill, enough for a train trip to Chicago and a sandwich. Musso turned down a \$75 per game offer from Steve Owen of the New York Giants. "It wasn't just the money," George insists. "A Millikin teammate, George Corbett, also joined the Bears, and Leo Johnson my coach at Millikin, helped me decide."

At training camp, Musso impressed everyone with his size and quickness, but he just couldn't get untracked and played poorly in exhibitions. Halas, concerned about how green he was, "told me he wished I would go to a Cincinnati farm team that first year." That wasn't for Musso who preferred an outright release. He reminded Halas that arch-rival Curly Lambeau had said there was a place for him with the Packers should he be cut.

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Halas countered with an unusual offer. He'd keep him for a few more games at half salary, and, if it didn't work out, he'd talk trade with Lambeau. Musso jumped at the chance. He'd just taken an apartment with Nagurski and Corbett and preferred to stay in Chicago.

He played about a quarter in the next game against Boston. One day Red Grange came up to him and put his hand on George's beefy shoulder. "We talked for a while. He told me I could make the club if I just played up to my capability. It was a shot in the arm. The next Sunday at Brooklyn I played about a half, gaining confidence as I went along."

The Bears returned home for a shoot-out with the Cardinals. The Redbirds were leading 9-7 in the final quarter when Musso broke through to block Joe Lillard's punt. The ball rolled through the end zone for a safety and the Bears went on to win. Halas forgot all about the half-salary arrangement. Musso had made the team.

Two weeks later he was starting and the New York *Times* called him "the fifth man in the Giants' back field." By the end of his rookie season and for eleven more seasons, Musso was recognized as one of the foremost linemen in the league.

Now enjoying a well-earned retirement in Edwardsville, Ill., Musso still watches games, but football has changed some since he hung up his cleats after the 1944 season. As a guy who sometimes went a full 60-minutes, he says, "I can't quite see this offense- defense system today. I question that the players are fresher because they play only one way. I think changing units takes the 'heat' out of the game. I don't think the players are as close, and I'm sure the spectators don't come to know the players as well."

For fully a dozen years Bear fans had no trouble recognizing Moose Musso. He was the big guy in the middle of the line and usually in the middle of the action.