

RECORDS: NEAR & NON

By Bob Braunwart & Bob Carroll

During one of those Bear-Giant encounters that were the gems of the pro football scene in the early 1930's, New York center Mel Hein came out of the huddle and squatted over the ball. The rest of the Giant line surprisingly set up way over to one side, looking for all the world like someone had messed up royally. The odd formation, however, made Hein eligible for a pass. Sure enough, New Yorker Harry Newman moved in like a T-quarterback, and, when Hein snapped him the ball, he handed it right back through Mel's legs. Still crouched over, Hein began to wend his way slowly downfield while most of the Bears chased after the fading Newman.

After a few steps, Hein got a little excited at the prospect of a touchdown "walk" and began to pick up speed. This aroused the suspicion of Bear George Musso who came over and sat on him, thus ending Hein's pretensions after a short gain.

So much for subterfuge!

We only bring this up because the play falls into the category of "oddities that sometimes pass for records." It's been called "the shortest completed pass in NFL history" but it certainly was not that. Hein's gain on his walk must be counted but many completed passes have gone for losses. Perhaps it might rate as the "shortest distance covered by a football between passer (Newman) and receiver (Hein)." Possibly we should take a note from the Hollywood Oscars and call it "the best performance by a center in a cameo role."

For years the N.F.L. Record Manual carried this:

Shortest Completed Pass (for touchdown) -- 4 inches, Cecil Isbell, Green Bay, to Don Hutson, vs. Cleveland, Oct. 18, 1942. (Touchdown.)

Somehow, the absence of that little note in the new, streamlined, no-nonsense Manual makes the little book seem a trifle cold. Still, there may be more serious omissions.

P.F.R.A. member Rich Bysina recently suggested that lists be developed in certain defensive categories, such as fumble recoveries, sacks and blocked kicks. The Record Manual tells us that Fran Tarkenton recovered 43 of his own fumbles, but that doesn't count. Through 1979, Jim Marshall had picked up 29 opponents' bobbles (and on 28 of them avoided running the wrong way). But the manual is mute on sacks and blocked kicks. I asked my wife who the greatest sacker was and she told me it was the bag boy at the A & P, but I don't think she understood the question.

What's the record for blocked kicks? A yellowing newspaper clip insists that Adolph "Swede" Youngstrom of the Buffalo All-Americans blocked nine punts in 1920, but who counted?

1920 seems to have been an exceptional year for blocking punts. Rock Island blocked three in the first quarter against Muncie on October 3 and the Cardinals duplicated that in the third quarter against Detroit on October 31. According to one newspaper account of the Cardinal game, all three blocks were accomplished by one man -- end Len Sachs. Surely, that must be some kind of a mark, if true. But even if Sachs doesn't make it into the record book, the guy assigned to block him should be cited for record-breaking ineptitude.

On the other hand, it's dangerous to assume. Supposedly the biggest man in NFL history was Detroit lineman Les Bingaman. If anyone was ever christened with the wrong first name it was Les who was so much "more" he had to be weighed on a freight scale. They say when he retired Detroit had the only field in the league that sagged in the middle.

But who was the smallest player?

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Recently, the NFL admitted that Atlanta's Reggie Smith at 5'3" was one of the shortest players ever to play in the league. Unfortunately, most of the newspapers who picked up the story dropped the qualifying phrase and called him "the shortest."

This brought an anguished protest from Jack Shapiro, a back with Staten Island in 1929. Although he admits that no one measured him while he was with the Stapes, he presents an official document -- his World War II army discharge -- which shows him at 5'1/2", making him undoubtedly the shortest. Moreover, he believes he played at 119 pounds which would probably be another record.

Sometimes, certain records should get asterisks like Roger Maris' 61st home run. *The Coffin Corner* has several times drawn attention to the fallacy of citing performance records -- total yards, completions, etc. - based on a 16-game schedule when most of the league's history saw teams playing fewer games in a season.

However, our favorite "total" record stands unchallenged after more than forty years. It's Most Total Yards Lost Rushing in a Single Season. The record is a minus 180 yards. The reason we like this record is that it is so misleading. Setting that mark in 1940 was little Davey O'Brien, the dynamic little passer who was just about the only offense the 1-10 Philadelphia Eagles had that year. But every time he went back to pass and got sacked -- a more than sometime occurrence with the Eagles -- he was tagged with a rushing loss.

Another favorite record is Tommy Thompson's 732 pass completions -- the top NFL mark for a one-eyed passer. When we were in school, they taught us that the reason people have two eyes is for depth perception (and also to keep the face from being lopsided). Then along came Mr. Thompson who had been blind in one eye since his youth and who, in theory, shouldn't have had enough depth perception to pour a glass of milk much less complete a long bomb, and all he did was lead his team (the Eagles again) to two NFL Championships and three division titles.

Incidentally, in 1980, Thompson had the sight in that eye restored after 50 years. Dr. Dennis Brooks of Germantown Hospital removed a cataract with a new ultrasonic technique. Perhaps it's sacrilege but we think Dr. Brooks' "completion record" might be even more important than just about any quarterback's.

As a disgruntled disc jockey once said, records are made to be broken. We didn't think anyone could top Johnny "Mr. Zero" Clement's mark for the lowest number worn on a jersey. That was before Jim Otto.