

## **THE BEST PRO A COLLEGE EVER HAD**

By Bernie McCarty

Only one man in the history of the game of football was a member of a major professional club and THEN returned to the college level to play another season.

That man was Bob Steuber, a spectacular All-American halfback who paced the University of Missouri to Big Six Conference championships in 1941 and 1942.

Fact is, Steuber's case may be unique in all of American sports history. Only a world war could have created a situation where Steuber was allowed to play again in college and nobody made a fuss.

Some folks may argue, but this writer believes Bob Steuber was the best backfield operative Missouri ever had. He could do it all. As a runner Steuber exhibited blazing speed, power, and agility in an open field. Across 21 games in 1941-42 Steuber carried the ball 262 times from scrimmage for 1953 yards, averaging 7.5 yards per attempt. He passed, punted and kicked from placement. He was a wicked blocker. And Steuber often was every bit as spectacular on defense as he was on offense.

The *1943 Illustrated Football Annual* picked an All-Missouri Valley team of the decade. Writer Frederick Wade remarked, "My ace halfbacks are Lloyd Cardwell, Nebraska '36-'36, and Bob Steuber, Missouri '40-'42. Both these 200-pounders were sprint artists on the track team. Both were brilliant, shifty ball-carriers. They also could block like a pair of subway-commuters and on defense they always got their man. Or men."

In what was supposed to be his final collegiate game, against a powerful Iowa Preflight service team in 1942, Steuber burst 58 yards through the line for a touchdown and booted the extra point. That raised his season scoring total to 121 points, a Big Six all-games record. The A.P. review of the game noted: "The speedy Tiger halfback terminated a brilliant college career by turning in one of his finest all-around performances. The St. Louis senior was a defensive standout." Missouri won the contest 7-0.

Steuber entered the last clipping in his college football scrapbook and was ready to launch his pro career. He was the number one pick of the Chicago Bears in the spring draft of 1943. But before joining the Bears he had an August date to play with the college all-stars against the pro champion Washington Redskins. That 1943 college all-star outfit had perhaps the finest backfield in the history of the series, gridders, like Otto Graham, Glenn Dobbs, Pat Harder, Bob Kennedy, Charlie Trippi and Steve Filipowicz. And Bob Steuber. And Steuber earned a starting halfback berth and returned a punt 50 yards for the first all-star touchdown. The collegians went on to drub Washington 27-7.

The Chicago *Tribune's* Wilfrid Smith rated Steuber "the fastest man on a fast team." And Coach Clark Shaughnessy, in another *Tribune* article, exclaimed, "Unholy smokes. I never saw such a collection of backs on any one aggregation."

Steuber joined the Bears and saw duty as a substitute in the league opener against Green Bay September 26. It cannot be disputed that Steuber was now a full-fledged professional football player.

So on September 27, the day after his first official NFL game, the Navy ordered Steuber to report to Depauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, for training as an aviation cadet.

Depauw had scheduled a slate of six games in 1943, and in the season opener struggled to a scoreless tie against Oberlin. Then Steuber and several others experienced gridders among the Naval cadets arrived on campus and reported for football duty. Apparently nobody questioned Steuber's right to play with the tam, and none of Depauw's five remaining opponents, only one a service club, voiced an objection.

In those last five games, with Steuber in the line-up, Depauw outscored the opposition 206-6.

**Their record:**

Depauw 0 - Oberlin 0

Depauw 50 - Illinois Normal 0

Depauw 39 - Indiana State 6

Depauw 33 - Wabash 0

Depauw 42 - Ohio Wesleyan 0

Depauw 42 - Fort Knox 0

Steuber literally ran wild and compiled a record so incredible that he may rank as the greatest "small" college player of all time. In just five games he tallied 19 touchdowns and kicked 15 conversions for 129 points. And he rushed for over 1000 yards, averaging 10 yards per carry. He was the national leader in both scoring and rushing in 1943. Imagine what Steuber's figures would have been if he had played a full season's schedule!

After two years in the service, Steuber returned to pro football and put in three years in the All-America Football Conference.

Thus Bob Steuber stands unique in football history for three reasons. He was a "major" college All-American and probably the University of Missouri's best back. He was a bonafide professional who was allowed to play another season of amateur football. And he may have been the finest back ever to play "small" college football.

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