

## **THE BRONX**

by Victor Mastro

Lombardi's Packers, Pittsburgh's Super Steelers, Chicago's Monsters of the Midway, Cleveland's Big bad Browns, the glittering Dallas Cowboys and the ancient Canton Bulldogs, all claimed winners' thrones in the NFL. Soldiers Field, Wrigley Field, League Park, and Municipal Stadium burned with the fever of football, while gridiron ghosts of yesteryear ran, passed, blocked and tackled. Out of all this gladiatorial grandeur, one borough in a great city stands atop these mountains of football folklore -- the Bronx.

Just across the East River from the Bronx, the Polo Grounds was the scene of many great football games during the 1920s-30s. Meanwhile, the Bronx was still a rookie in football experience.

But Red Grange, the fabled Four Horsemen of Notre Dame, and Fordham's Seven Blocks of Granite left their imprints on football, playing games at Yankee Stadium. Furthermore, some of the early greats of the NFL came from or played high school or college ball in the Bronx. These included Sid Luckman, Ken Strong and Ed Danowski. Steve Owen, the legendary Giant coach, worked as a foreman in the Bronx coal yard.

In 1934, the "Sneaker Game," perhaps the greatest comeback in championship play, resulted from shoes borrowed from Manhattan College in the Bronx. After that classic, no NFL team dared take the field in cold weather without having "sneaker" type footwear available.

In the mid-1930s, Fordham in the heart of the Bronx boasted what might have been the greatest offensive and defensive line in college history -- the "Seven Blocks of Granite." Tackle Ed Franco was a consensus All-American. So was center Al Wojciechowicz who later became an All-Pro with Detroit and Philadelphia. Guard Vince Lombardi later became one of the greatest of pro coaches.

So popular was Fordham, that the Cleveland NFL franchise formed in the '30s took its nickname from the Rams of the Bronx. In 1946, they took their "Bronx Rams" to California.

On October 15, 1939, the Fordham-Waynesburg game was the first college contest to be televised.

During World War II, the Army-Navy and Army-Notre Dame grid "wars" were fought out on the soil of Yankee Stadium.

In 1946, the All-American Football Conference began play. The Bronx's representatives, the New York Yankees took over Yankee Stadium. They won two straight eastern AAFC titles, but each time they were bested in grueling play-offs by the western leaders -- the Cleveland Browns. The Browns went through 29 games without a defeat from mid-1947 to mid-1949; only a 28-28 tie with the Yankees marred their record. The Browns remained a factor in Bronx football for more than a decade.

During the 1950's, the Giants resided at the Concourse Plaza Hotel and in the dormitories of Fordham University. They practiced at Coffey Field under two of the games' greatest coaches, then Giant assistants. Vince Lombardi handled the offense for head coach Jim Lee Howell and Tom Landry handled the defense. Some of the greatest players in pro football history played for the Giants in the 1950's: Frank Gifford, Andy Robustelli, Alex Webster, Emlen Tunnell, Charley Conerly, Roosevelt Brown, Sam Huff, and many more.

1956 was a glorious year for sports in the Bronx. The baseball Yankees won the World Series and the football Giants opted to play their home games at Yankee Stadium.

By mid-season, the Giants were fighting for a division title. The seventh game of the year brought the Chicago Cardinals to the Bronx ballpark for shootout for first place. The game attracted 62,410 -- the largest crowd for a Giant game since Red Grange brought out the fans in 1925. New York won over the Cards 23-10, and the Giants went on to the division championship.

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In the title game, the Giants toppled the favored Chicago Bears on December 30, 1956. The New Yorkers ran wild, 47-7, in a stunning upset.

The Browns were back on top in the division in 1957, but things were different the next year. The Giants edged Cleveland 21-17 in Cleveland at mid-season. Then, after the Browns had regained the division lead, New York had one more chance. On December 14, they faced the Browns at Yankee Stadium. A Giant win would force a play-off.

With Cleveland leading, Jimmy Brown made a rare fumble and Giant captain Robustelli recovered. New York went on to tie the score at 10-10. Then the Giant defense stopped the unstoppable Brown on the snow-covered Bronx turf until Pat Summerall could boot a 49-yard field goal to gain a classic 13-10 win.

The play-off came a week later, again at Yankee Stadium. It produced several play-off records, such as most fumbles, fewest yards gained, fewest rushing attempts, fewest first downs for both teams.

The brilliant Giant defense stopped Jim Brown cold, and the offense scored a field goal and a TD on a run option pass play sent in by Vince Lombardi. The 10-0 win made the Giants eastern champs.

The Giants had beaten their championship game foe, the Baltimore Colts, during the regular season, but Colt QB Johnny Unitas had been out with injuries. On December 28, boasting the league's second-best defense, best offense, and a healthy Unitas, the Colts showed up at Yankee Stadium to avenge that earlier loss.

The Landry defense was highly respected, but the young Johnny U. kept throwing, especially to Raymond Berry, with dismaying success. By the third quarter, the Giants were down 14-3 and facing a blow-out. Then a magnificent goal line stand gave them new hope. They stormed back, scored twice, and led 17-14 with less than two minutes on the clock.

The Giant defense had given its all. "It was like the Alamo. Our heroes were finished, dead!" Unitas led his team down the field. With only 17 seconds left, the Colts tied the game on a field goal.

The first "sudden death" overtime began, but the Giants were spent. They had played their hearts out and they had nothing left. They received the kickoff, ran a few unsuccessful plays and punted. The Colts moved irresistibly down the field. On the 13th play of their drive, Alan Ameche punched over the winning touchdown. Thus ended the contest sometimes called "the greatest game of all time."

The year 1959 was anticlimactic. Lombardi had gone off to Green Bay and Landry would soon leave for Dallas. The Giants won the NFL east again and again lost to the Colts in the championship game. On October 18, 1959, the Giants recorded their second largest attendance up till that time, 68,783 vs. the Philadelphia Eagles.

The highpoint of the season came on December 6. All the frustrations acquired in years of playing the hated Browns boiled over as the Giants knocked Jimmy Brown out of the game and went on to a 48-7 victory. It was also the season's low point as excited fans delayed the game twenty minutes by running out onto the field. Cleveland coach Paul Brown called it "the worst crowd behavior" he had ever seen.

The 1960's belonged to a Bronxite -- Vince Lombardi. As coach of Green Bay he won five championships. It is worth noting that today's Super Bowl winners receive the Lombardi Trophy.

Philadelphia won the eastern NFL title in 1960. The worst thing that happened to the Giants occurred when Chuck Bednarik of the Eagles put Frank Gifford out of football for a year with a bone-crushing tackle. The second worst thing happened late in the season when Landry's hapless Dallas Cowboys, unable to win even a single game, managed a tie at Yankee Stadium. The Giants finished third and Coach Howell retired.

New coach Allie Sherman got some new players for 1961, including pitcher Y.A. Tittle and catcher Del Shofner. Although the club combined with St. Louis to set a record of 14 fumbles on September 17, the

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offense was strong. At the end of the season, the "new look" Giants met the Green Bay Packers in New York's thirteenth championship appearance. That number proved unlucky for the Bronx club, as they were humiliated, 37-0, and had all year to reflect on their woe.

Frank Gifford came back as a receiver in 1962 to add his skills to Tittle's passing attack. On October 28, in a match for first place with Washington, Tittle threw seven TD passes. Shofner gained 269 yards on his receptions. Between them, the Giants and Redskins gained 821 yards passing.

The next week, Sonny Randle of the Cardinals caught 16 passes against the Giants to gain 256 yards. But most of the time the New Yorkers put on the offensive show while winning their last nine games. Tittle threw 33 TD passes, Don Chandler set a Giant record with 104 points, and Alex Webster became the team's all-time leading rusher. On the defensive side, Andy Robustelli recovered his 21st fumble, at the time the record.

Lombardi brought his Packers to the Bronx for the '63 championship. The Giants looked for revenge on a windy, sub-zero day. Each Giant had a personal vendetta. Slugfests were frequent. Despite the Giants' determination, the Packers chiseled through the cold to a 16-7 win.

In 1963, the Giants were older but still strong. Still, they needed a win over the surprising Steelers in the season's final game to repeat their eastern title. In the third quarter, Pittsburgh trailed but seemed to have the momentum going for them. On a crucial third down, Frank Gifford made a diving one hand catch that was good for the needed yardage. That reception ignited the team and the Giants rolled to a 33-17 win.

At Chicago, the Giants met the Bears for the championship. It was a close, defensive struggle which the Giants lost 14-10.

That was the last hurrah for the Giants. Age and some questionable trades took their toll. In 1964, they fell to last in the east. During the next ten years, they gave their fans plenty of thrills but few victories. In 1975, they moved to New Jersey.

Bronxites can look back on some of the greatest moments in football history, and the Bronx will hold a special place in football folklore forever.