

CONVERSATIONS

by Stanley Grosshandler

While idly glancing through a recent purchase--*The Chicago Bears: An Illustrated History* by Richard Whittingham (Rand, McNally, 1982)--I chanced upon a long, narrow photo occupying two pages. The caption stated it was the only known photo of the champion 1933 Bears. There was the Papa Bear and all his team standing in a single row, dressed in business suits, Red Grange, Bronko Nagurski, Bill Hewitt, and the rest. I was pleasantly surprised to find I had known four of the team personally. They were Carl Brumbaugh, Dick Nesbitt, Joe Kopcha, and Johnny Sisk.

In the fall of 1945 as a freshman out for the team at the U. of Cincinnati, I came under the tutelage of Head Coach Ray Nolting and his assistants, Carl Brumbaugh and John Wiethe. The Bearcats were resuming football after a war-forced hiatus and the former Bear great was to bring some of the Monster of the Midway magic to his alma mater.

Two years removed from the Bears, Nolting installed their version of the T. Having played the single wing, I found it difficult on two counts. First, Nolting felt you need know only your own assignment on each play which prevented you from understanding what the play was designed to accomplish. Second, the plays were numbered odd to the right – the opposite of how single wing plays had been called. I don't believe I ever did learn the plays.

Nolting also showed endless game films of such poor quality it was difficult to determine which team was ours. To this day I find game films extremely boring.

A vainly handsome man, Ray would frequently hand his bridgework to a manager and scrimmage with the club. I vividly recall how amazed I was to see how quickly he gained full speed from a standing start.

Brumbaugh stuck with the QB's so I had little contact with him. I recall once in the shower him saying he had become bald due to the fact he had to take so many showers during his football career. I believed him!

Wiethe, a graduate lawyer who had played pro basketball and was an All-NFL guard, eventually became the most powerful politician in Cincinnati. He always impressed me as having been hit in the head once too often by opposing NFL linemen.

I met Dick Nesbitt through a mutual friend. A broadcaster, he announced the U.C. games. My only recollection of him was talking to him after our first game. Although we won big, my sole contribution to the win had been one pass reception for a minus five yards. Nesbitt was singularly unimpressed with this feat.

I have always regretted the fact that I did not have the presence of mind to quiz these great players on their pro careers. I am certain they had many wonderful stories to tell.

Another golden opportunity missed was in the U.S. Army. A senior officer at Ft. Sam Houston was Dwight "Paddlefoot" Sloan, the old Arkansas and Cardinal passing great. He really did walk like a duck. Lt. Col. Sloan was a mild man with a very pleasing smile.

One day I questioned him about playing against my all-time hero, Don Hutson. He told me about the first time he faced the Packer great. He was having no trouble covering him and wondered why other people did. He soon found out. Hutson suddenly disappeared! When Sloan discovered him, Hutson was way down the field easily taking a touchdown pass.

Many years later, I used this story in a magazine article. I sent a copy to Sloan and received one of the nicest letters of appreciation I have ever gotten.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 5, No. 2 (1983)

I have had many conversations and considerable correspondence with a third member of the 1933 Bear team, Dr. Joe Kopcha, well known to his fellow P.F.R.A. members. As much of what I might write has already been detailed in these pages, I'll move on to the fourth member of that great Bear team.

John Sisk is an insurance executive in Milwaukee whom I met through Dr. Joe.

One of my first questions to him was, "How did it feel to have played with nine future Hall of Famers, against almost a third of those in the Hall, and even future President Gerald Ford?"

"I never have really thought about it," he replied. "Obviously playing in a backfield with Nagurski and Grange took a lot of pressure off me as they did so many things so well.

"When I first broke in with the Bears," John recalled, "They had Bronko Nagurski and George Trafton. The Bronk could do anything. He never tackled anyone, just would run right through them." One legend has it that Nolting joined the Bears so he could play with Nago rather than against him, only to find the Bronk on the opposite side of the scrimmage line at the first Bear practice.

Sisk continued: "Trafton was a very strong man who was a great scrapper.

"Bill Hewitt broke in the same year I did. He had been a fullback at Michigan, but Halas made an end out of him. The first time we scrimmaged he lit into a tackle much bigger than him. As far as Halas was concerned, he had made the team right there. You know he never wore a head gear until the league made him years later. Also he was so fast on crossing the line, opponents constantly complained he was offside. Actually he was one of the first to anticipate the count and move quickly."

One of my most interesting conversations with John Sisk regarded the Bears' offense.

"We really used a multiple offense. Though we basically ran the T, we often lined up in the single wing so Grange and Feathers could take advantage of Nagurski as a blocker. When we went single wing we used an unbalanced line with the QB's Brumbaugh or Masterson standing behind the guard. I always felt that while Bronko blocked well for all of us, he was especially vigorous in his blocking for his pal Feathers. I shared the wingback with Gene Ronzani, also from Marquette. Jack Manders shared fullback with Nagurski.

"On defense we always used our three best tacklers – Hewitt, Nagurski, and Grange – on the left. I backed up the right and our center played in the middle, almost making it a 6-2-1-2. This was standard and we never changed. If a team did something unexpected, we did not know what to do."

Following both the '35 and '36 seasons, the Bears and Packers played exhibitions on the West Coast. The first year John planned to play and then get married.

"One week before I was to get married," he said, "I broke my shoulder. I was scared Halas would not let me play again so I told the QB not to give me the ball, just put me in motion.

"The next year I broke my thumb tackling Clarke Hinkle. They just carried me off the field, straight to the hospital, and operated on me. As I was being carried off, the promoter gave me a bottle of alcohol for I had scored a touchdown. I just gave it to the doctor who operated on me."

Johnny's son played for the '64 Bears, making them the only father-son combination in Bear history. To this day he is in constant contact with George Halas, feeling he is one of the finest people who ever lived, a feeling shared by every old-time player I have ever spoken to.