

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE BULL ELEPHANTS

by Stan Grosshandler

Ever since the imaginative P.R. man of a small midwestern school capitalized on a newspaper quote by having his backfield pose on horseback, publicists have striven to come up with a catchy and unique nickname for their team's units. One of the few appellations to make a lasting mark was that of the backfield for the 1951 L.A.Rams -- "The Bull Elephants."

Deacon Dan Towler, now a Doctor of Education, recalls the origin of the trio: "During the 1950 season we were playing a game in a sea of mud. The coaches, in hopes of resting us, started alternating backs. They soon realized they had three fullbacks of equal running ability and saw a powerful weapon in two 200-pound backs leading a third of equal weight."

Thus the Bull Elephant Backfield of Deacon Dan Towler, Dick Hoerner, and Tank Younger came into being. Towler, a 25th round draft choice from little Washington & Jefferson, led the league in rushing in 1952 and upon retiring was the second leading rusher in Ram history. Hoerner, from Iowa, had been the top rusher on the team in two earlier seasons. Younger, the first Grambling graduate to play in the NFL, had been used primarily as a linebacker until he became an "elephant."

"The whole thing came as sort of a quirk midway in the '51 season," recalled Crazy Legs Hirsch. "We played the 49ers two games in a row, and the first game they beat us 44-17. Joe Stydagar, our coach, figured we had to come up with something different so he decided to put three fullbacks into the same backfield."

"During the first game the 49ers had used their small defensive backs as linebackers so they could catch our small, swift backs when they rounded end or went downfield for a pass. With the Elephants, Joe felt he could four-five yard them to death. (All three ended with a six-yard average on the year).

"The game became a real chess match. We'd put in the Bull Elephants and they'd come back with the regular linebackers. We'd put in the smaller guys -- Glen Davis, Tommy Kalmanir, Vitamin Smith, or Jerry Williams and back would come their small fellows. We also tried to complicate matters by going to three ends, Tom Fears, Bob Boyd, and myself."

"Another plus for the Elephants," added Dick Hoerner, "was that the team did not sacrifice receivers as all of us could catch. The Deacon or I would often flank out."

The second Los Angeles-San Francisco game ended in a 23-16 Ram win. The club went on to a Division Title and World Championship.

All three former Rams, Towler, Hirsch, and Hoerner, felt this was one of the greatest teams ever in many ways. They told of the closeness and Hirsch pointed out that, as they traveled everywhere by train, they got to know one another -- "sort of got our laundry dirty together." He also mentioned that salaries were never discussed; the main topic of conversation was usually football.

Towler ended the season with 854 yards, 6 TDs, and 16 pass receptions. Hoerner had 569 yards rushing, 6 TDs and 8 receptions, one for another TD. Younger had 223 yards, five receptions, and continued to play some linebacker.