

Conversations about the A

by Stan Grosshandler

When the great innovative coaches of the professional game are enumerated, one rarely hears the name of Steve Owen. Yet Stout Steve, as he was called, was one of the first to vary from the standard single wing, double wing, or Notre Dame box by employing his A formation. He also introduced the umbrella defense, the forerunner of what for many years was the standard NFL defense, the 4-3-2-2.

My first encounter with the A formation was at a small Ohio college where a misguided coach, reading of Owen's successes and lacking the dozen capable backs and Mel Hein, tried to install this system. Since the role of blocking back was not very appealing to the candidates for the team, several -- including myself -- were drafted. As all of us lacked the skill for the formation and the plays had no deception, the tailback -- a former Army major much older than the rest of the team, took a dreadful beating.

My first opportunity to learn about this weird formation came two decades later when I read the boxscore of a Brewer baseball game and saw that Hank Soar was in town to umpire the series. I called him at his hotel, and he immediately instructed me to get a pencil and paper.

"In 1937, Steve came up with the A formation," Hank stated. "He split his linemen, placing four to the right of the center and two to the left. He was one of the first to split linemen. The wingback was placed behind the weakside left end and was called the #1 back. The blocking back was behind the weakside left tackle and was designated #2 back. The tailback or fullback was directly behind the center four yards deep and called the #4 back. The quarterback (#3) was a yard closer to the line and to the right of the tailback. Because backs interchanged on the #3 and #4 positions, we were rarely called fullbacks or quarterbacks."

The name, A formation, came from the fact Owen had intended to use several formations and planned to call the A, B, C, etc. He found he had his most success with the A and used it the most. Several books mention that in one game he ran three consecutive plays using three different formations. It also should be noted here that historian David Neft credits a considerable amount of the success for this formation to Mel Hein, the great center, who could easily center the ball to any of the three backs in position to take the snap.

"Steve regarded our '38 crew as his best (a fact borne out in his book *My Kind of Football*)," Hank continued. "We had two backfields of equal strength. Ward Cuff and Dale Burnett were at the #1 spot; Nello Falaschi, Leland Shaffer, and John Gildea, a fine punter, at #2; myself, Tuffy Leemans, Len Barnum, and Red Wolfe at #4; with Ed Danowski, Bull Karcis, and Kink Richards at #3." Ed Danowski supplied me with a similar diagram of this formation, differing with Soar only in that he placed himself in the #4 position. A later conversation with Charley Conerly brought out the fact he was drafted specifically to play the tailback in the A formation.

Using the A the Giants were Eastern Division champs in '38, '39, '41, '44, and '46 and NFL title holders in 1938.

The 1939 A backfield was essentially the same other than the addition of Eddie Miller and Ken Strong who returned to the team from the AFL.

The 1941 backfield had talent galore. Beside Danowski and Leemans, as passers they had Marion Pugh and Kay Eakin. Other A formation backs that year were Len Eshmont, Andy Marefos, Frank Reagan, and Soar for the #3 and #4 spots. Wingback was still Cuff with help from All-American George Franck and Howie Yeager. Dom Principe joined Shaffer and Falaschi at blocking back.

The '44 team showed the effects of World War II. The vet Arnie Herber, along with Joe Sulaitis and Hank Soar, played quarterback. Soar only played a part of the season. According to his account he played

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while in the army. One Sunday he did well, got lots of publicity in the papers that made his officers angry, and so was shipped out.

Bill Paschal, who was the NFL's top rusher in '43 and '44, was at fullback, backed by Howie Livingston, Carl Kinscherf, and Strong. Wingback was still Cuff along with Bill Petrilas, and the blocking backs were Keith Beebe, Len Calligaro, and Hub Barker. From the stats it would appear that Paschal did all the running, with Herber only carrying in life threatening situations.

The 1946 A formation starred Frank Filchock who had a fantastic season. He was backed by Emery Nix. Paschal still did the bulk of the running, backed by Merle Hapes. (Had Paschal not been injured for the title game, it does not seem likely Hapes would have gotten into the mess he did.) Other runners were Soar, Reagan, Franck, and Livingston, with the blocking backs Steve Filipowicz and veteran Cecil Hare.

It is difficult to believe that this formation was used until the 1949 season when Conerly was installed as the first Giant T-quarterback. One book does state Owen shifted midway during 1948, but for the record the Giants became a T-team in '49 when everyone, save the Steelers, had gone to the T.

Finally, when I visited my college a few years ago and met the man who succeeded my coach, he told me the old coach had never forgiven him for scrapping the A formation.