

STOPPING THE FORCE

by Bob Braunwart & Bob Carroll

In a classic case of immovable object and irresistible force, the Chicago Bears and New York Giants met on December 29, 1963, for the NFL championship.

The Bears, keyed by linebackers Bill George, Larry Morris, and Joe Fortunato, had held opponents to 144 points during the season -- the lowest total since 1950 when teams played only twelve games. All year the defense told quarterback Billy Wade: "Get us eleven points and we'll win." The Bruins' average of just over ten points surrendered per game hadn't been bettered since World War II and was the main factor in their 11-1-2 record.

Although the Giants' defense of Robustelli, Huff, and Paton had been famous for years, in 1963 they had done it with offense -- riding the air arm of Y.A. Tittle and the receiving of Del Shofner, Frank Gifford, and Joe Morrison to 440 points. Yat had thrown a record 36 touchdown passes in leading New York to a 11-3-0 mark.

A crowd of 45,801 packed Wrigley Field in eleven degree temperature and millions more watched in comfort at home on television. The Giants were slight favorites at kickoff.

The New Yorkers showed they deserved the compliment by moving straight down the field to a touch down the first time they got the ball. Wade, the Bears' veteran quarterback, fumbled at his own 41 and Erich Barnes recovered for the Giants. Tittle mixed running plays with an 11-yard toss to Morrison to get to the 16. Frank Gifford evaded Bennie McRae in the end zone to take Tittle's throw for the TD. The Bears buried Tittle under a just-too-late rush on the play, slightly injuring his left knee. The score stood 7-0 with 7:22 of the first quarter gone.

A few moments later, the Giants were knocking on the door again, but all-pro Del Shofner dropped a Tittle pass in the end zone. At the moment, the Bears' reprieve seemed only temporary, but Shofner -- perhaps the most dangerous receiver in the NFL -- would not catch a pass all day.

It was a turning point. A few moments later, Larry Morris picked off a screen pass at the Chicago 34 and lumbered toward the Giant goal. "For the first 34 yards I was just praying no one would tackle me," said Morris. "Then I was praying someone would. I was getting pooped real quickly." New York guard Darrell Dess knocked him down at the five.

On first down, Wade handed off to halfback Ronnie Bull who blasted to the two. Then Billy sneaked the remaining distance for the tying touchdown. The first quarter ended at 7-7.

Back came Tittle and the Giants, but the Bear defense dug in and stopped the drive at the three. Don Chandler set up shop at the 13 and booted a field goal to make the score 10-7, Giants, at 5:22 into the second quarter.

The Giants kicked off and stopped the Bears again. And, another drive got underway. Tittle moved his team to a first down on the Chicago 32. Then he flipped a little sideline toss to Gifford who went out of bounds at the 29. But back at the 40 Tittle lay on the ground in agony. Morris had brushed past two blockers and smashed into him just as he threw.

"His left knee was rigidly set on the ground," Morris explained, "and I slammed him just at the knee. I guess that's what hurt him."

Tittle had a different explanation: "I fell over my own body after that pass. I had slipped going back to pass and just fell badly."

Either way, it was the key play of the game. Tittle limped off with torn ligaments in his left knee. Under his replacement, young Glynn Friffing, the Giant drive petered out, ending in a missed field goal.

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After two injections to kill the pain, Tittle hobbled back in for the second half, but he couldn't plant his left leg and his throws lacked their normal snap. Late in the third quarter, Bear defensive end Ed O'Bradovich moved in front of a Tittle screen pass intended for Morrison at the 24. The 6-3, 255-pound O'Bradovich thundered to the 14 before a host of Giants pulled him down.

It took the Bears five plays to negotiate the distance, but when Wade sneaked across from the one-yard-line behind center Mike Pyle, the Bruins went in front for the first time.

Although more than seventeen minutes remained in the game, Tittle was on one leg. Gallantly, he rallied his troops, but his desperate passes were just too soft. Twice the Bears intercepted in the end zone, the last with ten seconds left. The final score of 14-10 made the Bears champs on two Wade sneaks.

For the Giants, the loss was the fifth in five championship appearances since 1958. Tittle was both the goat of the game for his five interceptions and the hero for his brave one-legged try.

For the Bears, the game was a vindication for 68-year-old George Halas after many critics had complained he was too old to remain a head coach. Added kudos went to young assistant coach George Allen who designed the great Bear defense. That great crew had held the high-powered Giants to the "usual" ten points.

Most of all, the game proved the immovable object was superior to the irresistible force -- when the force was hobbled on one leg.

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December 29, 1963, at Chicago, IL -- Wrigley Field

Attendance: 45,801

New York Giants	7	3	0	0	-	10
Chicago Bears	7	0	7	0	-	14

NY: Gifford, 14 pass from Tittle (Chandler kick).

CH: Wade, 2 run (Jencks kick)

NY: FG, Chandler 13

CH: Wade, 1 run (Jencks kick)