

# Roosevelt Brown

By Don Smith

As the 1953 National Football League player selection draft entered its final stages, the New York Giants were wondering whom to pick next. Scouting of college player talent was not the highly-technical science in the early 1950s that it is today. The extent of many a team's scouting program was a careful look at the assorted wire service and newspaper all-America teams.

So it was that someone – no one today remembers who – in the Giants' front office glanced at a weekly black newspaper, The Pittsburgh Courier, and noticed that there was a 6-3, 225-pound tackle from obscure Morgan State who had been named to the Black All-America team of 1952.

"We had nothing to lose," Giants executive Wellington Mara would say years later in explaining the selection of Roosevelt Brown on the 27th round. History now records that this was one of the truly great "sleeper" picks of all time.

The Charlottesville, Va., native quickly developed into one of the premier offensive linemen in pro football, and he was the Giants' starting offensive right tackle for 13 years. For eight straight years from 1956 through 1963, he was a virtually unanimous all-NFL choice. For 10 straight years, he was named to the Pro Bowl although in one year, 1962, he did miss the game because of a knee operation.

Ten years after his final 1965 campaign in New York, Brown received his sport's highest honor, induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

The odds were, of course, astronomical that the 19-year-old recruit who first reported to the Giants' 1953 training camp would attain even a regular job, let alone the top honor of his profession. Rosey had signed a \$2700 contract – there were no bonus provisions – and the Giants had sent him a train ticket for the two-day trip to summer headquarters at Gustavus-Adolphus College in Minnesota. Rosey had only \$10 in his pocket but he didn't go hungry because his mother, not trusting "train food," had packed him a box of fried chicken and potato salad for the journey.

He arrived in camp dressed in a neat dark suit that had been his college graduation present, wearing horn rimmed glasses, carrying a cardboard suitcase under one arm and a tightly wrapped umbrella under the other. Only a handful of rookies in all NFL history had looked less like a football player.

There were other things that increased the original odds against Brown. Such as the fact that he didn't even know the proper stance for an offensive lineman. Or the sociological problem that, in all of his football experiences in high school and college, he had never played either with or against a white player, let alone under a white coach. But Rosey did stand 6-3. His weight was up to 245 and he did have a 29-inch waist. The Giants coach, Steve Owen, felt that anyone with those dimensions certainly deserved a good look.

To Owen, a "good look" was a scrimmage against Arnie Weinmeister, the New Yorkers' rugged all-pro defensive terror. Weinmeister battered Brown all over the field, but Rosey stuck out the day and even took a couple of laps around the field after the ordeal. Owen was impressed.

There was one problem that plagued most rookies that didn't bother Brown. That was the fear of being cut. "I wasn't scared about being cut," Brown explains, simply because I didn't know I could get cut. I thought once they had signed me that that meant I had made the team. I had never seen a pro game and the 1951 NFL championship game that I heard on radio marked the extent of my pro football knowledge."

A few weeks later, Rosey had won a starting job and he held the post for 13 years until an attack of phlebitis forced his retirement after he had reported for summer camp in 1966. During that span, the

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Giants enjoyed a truly unusual string of successes with six divisional crowns and one NFL title in an eight-year stretch. During the middle 10 years of Brown's career, the Giants compiled a sizzling 86-35-5 mark.

Certainly no one man can be singled out as the primary reason for the Giants' winning ways but Roosevelt Brown had as much to do with that success as any other player. Make a list of the things that an offensive tackle is supposed to do and Rosey did them all superbly well. He was a classic pass blocker and, on running plays, he could make the blocks that opened gaping holes. He had the speed and the mobility to get upfield on the long gainers or to protect the quarterback when he began to scramble. And he could do one thing few tackles are ever called upon to do – that is to pull and lead on wide ground plays such as a pitchout to the halfback. Once against the Eagles, he cut down three men on this maneuver.

Brown excelled against some of the physically most punishing men in pro football – Doug Atkins, Ernie Stautner, Len Ford, Gene Brito, Bill Glass, the list is long. In the 1956 title game against the Chicago Bears, the key to the Giants' chances seemed to rest on keeping the rampaging defensive left end, Ed Meadows, away from the New York passers, Don Heinrich and Charley Conerly. Brown got the assignment and did the job so perfectly that he won Lineman of the Game honors. The Giants won in a 47-7 waltz.

As a six-year old, Rosey had been promoted straight from kindergarten to the third grade and so he was only 13 when the Jefferson high school football coach in Charlottesville noticed a big 180-pounder played trombone in the school band. Rosey was drafted against the wishes of his father whose own brother had been killed playing football. It turned out that Mr. Brown was a railroad worker who was out of town much of the time and, since Mrs. Brown said OK to football, Rosey got in his first season, fortunately without injury, before his dad even knew he was playing.

Following a star-studded high school career' Rosey moved to Morgan State because that was the college his high school coach had selected for him. Four years later, as a Morgan State co- captain, Brown won the Black All-America acclaim that in turn led to his unorthodox "discovery" by the Giants.

Rosey was a durable performer, missing only three games of a possible 164 regular-season encounters with the Giants. He missed one game with a fractured cheekbone in 1958, one more with a concussion in 1963 and one final game with a badly sprained ankle in 1964. A torn knee ligament in 1961 did force an operation after the season and this operation may have in turn led to a phlebitis condition that eventually ended his career. Brown's final game was the 1966 Pro Bowl, in which he hurt his leg blocking out Atkins. That brought another flareup of phlebitis and Brown reluctantly called it quits in late August that year.

As an offensive tackle, Rosey always felt he was unseen and unappreciated. "There is self-satisfaction and we have to make that do," he often said of his lineman's role. "When the newspapers say somebody ran 50 yards for a touchdown and they don't tell who made the blocks, it hurts a little. We know we sprung him and everyone on the team knows we made it possible. After all, he's got to have the blocks. He can't go far without them."

Brown may have been right on most counts, but he definitely was wrong on one issue. His election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame proves that he was definitely seen, appreciated and remembered!