

ARNIE HERBER

By Don Smith

Among most sports historians, Sammy Baugh, who hit bulls-eyes for the Washington Redskins for 16 seasons from 1937 through 1952, is considered to be the single most important individual in transforming pro football from an infantry-attack type of game to the pass-punctuated crowd-pleasing spectacle it is today.

To be sure, it is difficult to dispute the “pathfinder” tag placed on the lanky Texan for “Slingshot Sammy” without question did shape a permanent new offensive dimension for pro football.

Baugh, however, was not the first National Football League star to fill the air with his forward passes and to use that weapon with game-winning effectiveness. Many will contend that signal honor belongs to Arnie Herber, who toiled for the Green Bay Packers from 1930 to 1940 and then wound up a brilliant career with the 1944 and 1945 New York Giants.

There is plenty of documentary evidence to back up this contention. The NFL did not keep detailed statistics until 1932 and no individual figure champions were named during Herber’s first two seasons in 1930 and 1931. But Arnie did win the league’s first pitching crown in 1932 and then added two more in the next four years. Thus, the Green Bay ace was already a three-time passing champion by the time Baugh burst upon the pro football scene at the start of Herber’s eighth pro season.

During his decade with the Green Bay eleven, the Packers were annual challengers for the league championship. They won titles in 1930, 1931, 1936 and 1939 and had near misses in 1932, 1935, 1938 and 1940. His passes accounted for 8033 yards and almost 90 touchdowns, his best season coming in 1936 when he completed 77 passes for 1239 yards and 11 touchdowns.

Herber was already an established star when the fabled Don Hutson, a fleet receiver from Alabama, entered the Packers picture in 1935. The two, both destined for membership in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, quickly became an “item,” without doubt the first great pass-catch team in NFL annals.

Green Bay fans must have envisioned such a happy event when Hutson signed with the Packers. Hutson himself admitted that Herber’s presence was a primary reason for his willingness to play in Green Bay.

“I remember Curly Lambeau (Green Bay coach) telling me over the telephone that Green Bay had the best long passer in pro football,” he said.

The fans didn’t have long to wait for the deadly combination clicked for a touchdown on Hutson’s very first scrimmage play in the NFL. Going against the arch-rival Chicago Bears, Green Bay returned the opening kickoff to the 17-yard line. Herber called for Johnny Blood McNally, in his own right an all-time pro football great, to line up on the right side while the rookie from Alabama took his spot on the left side of the line. Clearly, the Bears concentrated their defenses on McNally with little thought to the rookie.

Blood scooted up the right sideline, drawing the Bears secondary with him. Herber, taking his time, was hit a couple of times before he fired to his left, deep on the sideline, where a gazelle named Hutson was streaking free. He took the pass on the Chicago 43 and raced untouched to the end zone on a spectacular 83-yard touchdown.

In 1935 alone, Herber-to-Hutson combination clicked on 18 completions for 420 yards and seven touchdowns. For the next five seasons through the 1940 campaign, Herber-to-Hutson always spelled double-trouble for NFL defenses.

Herber was born in Green Bay on April 2, 1910, and spent his entire life and pro football career, with the exception of his final two seasons in New York, in his native habitat. He died in Green Bay on October 14, 1969, at the age of 59.

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Arnie was completely unheralded as a rookie even though he had been a high-scoring basketball guard and a triple-threat back in football at Green Bay's West High School. He sold programs for the Packers so he could get into the local pro games.

Arnie attended the University of Wisconsin as a freshman and then transferred to tiny Regis College in Denver, where Red Strader had visions of building a gridiron juggernaut. But the idea fizzled with the stock market crash and the depression that followed and Herber returned to Green Bay, where he became a handyman around the Packers clubhouse.

Lambeau, who himself was an above-average passer during his active NFL days of the 1920s, decided to give the 6-0, 200-pound Herber a try at quarterback because, among other things, he felt he might be a drawing card, a mighty important consideration in pro football's earlier days. Curly agreed to pay Herber \$75 a game. Herber didn't complain. He was just happy to be a member of the 18-man squad.

In his very first game, he threw a touchdown pass to Lavern Dilweg to help the Packers to a 14-0 victory over the Chicago Cardinals. The Packers won the championship in Herber's rookie season and again in his second season. While Herber's passes were an important factor, he could do other things well, too. He could run, catch passes and punt with the best.

In one game in 1932 against the Staten Island Stapletons, Herber did all the punting, ran for 85- and 45-yard touchdowns and completed nine of 11 passes for three more six-pointers. Even though the Packers failed in their quest for a fourth straight championship, Herber made the all-NFL team.

Herber had a peculiar way of holding the ball. Handicapped by short fingers, he put his thumb over the laces to prevent the ball from wobbling and to assure plenty of spiraling action. Arnie's passes quickly became noted for two qualities: distance and accuracy.

At the finish of one of their championship seasons, the Packers went to Hollywood to make a movie short. One sequence called for Herber to throw the ball from the 50-yard line and break a three-foot-square pane of glass which has been suspended from the crossbar between the goal posts. Arnie took a few warmup tosses and then, on his first attempt, hit the bulls-eye. But the director had failed to get the cameras rolling. He told Arnie he would have to do it again. Calmly on his very next toss, Herber duplicated the feat.

Arnie was with the Packers in an era when the quarterback was fair game, even after he threw the ball. This, added to the fact that he needed extra time for his receivers to get downfield for his long passes, meant that he took many fierce beatings. Yet in his early years with the Packers, he never wore a helmet.

During the 1937 season, Arnie suffered a leg injury that sharply reduced his effectiveness. In 1938, a new passer, Cecil Isbell from Purdue, began alternating the quarterback chores with Herber. After the 1940 season, Arnie retired.

Four seasons later, the New York Giants, beset by the manpower problems of World War II, talked him into coming back. Arnie was 34 years old and had not thrown a football in three years when he reported to the Giants summer camp. He had so much surplus weight that newspaper writers described him as a "tub of lard." But he went to work with fiery diligence and, by the start of the season, was down to his playing weight of 210 pounds.

In a game against the Eagles in that 1944 season, Herber completed five of six passes for 114 yards and two touchdowns in the last six minutes of the game to give the Giants a 21-21 tie. The Giants startled the sports world that season with a complete turn-about of fortunes that brought them an Eastern Division championship. A splendid defense that yielded only 75 points, a battering-ram fullback named Bill Pascal and one old man named Herber had made the New York victory possible. In the NFL title game against Arnie's old team, the Packers, the Giants lost, 14-7.

The Giants slumped dismally in 1945, but Herber had his moments. The New Yorkers were trailing Philadelphia, 21-0, when Arnie entered the game in the third quarter. In the space of four minutes and 48 seconds, Herber exploded with three touchdown passes to an obscure end named Frank Liebel and then added a fourth to give the Giants a 28-21 victory. Playing in just the second half, Arnie completed 10 of 16 passes for 187 yards and the four touchdowns.

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Since the season ended a week later, this big game proved to be the "last hurrah" for Herber, who hung up his spikes and returned home to Green Bay for good. Arnie left the active football scene with the reputation of being football's greatest-ever long-distance passer.

As one of Green Bay enthusiasts once wrote: "Arnie Herber was the Babe Ruth of pro football. Like the Babe, he specialized in the 'long ball,' he was highly popular with the fans and he left a lasting mark on the sport he played!"

ARNIE HERBER TB-DB-QB-BB

Herber, Arnold Charles (Herbie) 5-11, 203

Wisconsin; Regis HS: Green Bay West [WI]

B: 4 / 2 / 1910, Green Bay, WI D: 10 / 14 / 1969, Green Bay, WI (59)

Pro Football Hall of Fame 1966

Year	Team	Gm	PASSING							RUSHING				
			Att	Com	Pct.	Yds	AvgG	TD	IN	RATE	Att	Yds	Avg	TD
1930	GB	10	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	--	-	-	-	0
1931	GB	3	-	-	-	-	-	0	-	--	-	-	-	1
1932	GB	14	101	37	36.6	639	6.33	9	9	51.5	64	149	2.3	1
1933	GB	11	124	50	43.3	656	5.29	3	12	26.2	62	77	1.2	0
1934	GB	11	115	42	36.5	799	6.95	8	12	45.1	37	33	0.9	0
1935	GB	11	109	40	36.7	729	6.88	8	14	45.4	19	0	0.0	0
1936	GB	12	173	77	44.5	1239	7.16	11	13	58.9	20	-32	-1.8	0
1937	GB	9	104	47	45.2	684	6.58	7	10	50.0	5	9	1.8	0
1938	GB	8	55	22	40.0	336	6.11	4	4	48.8	6	-1	-0.2	0
1939	GB	10	139	57	41.0	1107	7.96	8	9	61.6	18	-11	-0.6	1
1940	GB	10	89	38	42.6	560	6.29	6	7	53.6	6	-23	-3.8	0
1941-43										DNP				DNP
1944	NYG	10	86	36	41.9	651	7.57	6	8	53.0	7	-58	-8.3	0
1945	NYG	10	80	35	43.8	641	8.01	9	8	69.8	6	-27	-4.5	0
13 years		129	1175	481	40.9	8041	6.84	81	106	50.1	250	116	0.5	3

Additional Statistics: Rec 11-155 14.1 3 TD; Int 2-0 1 TD; Punt 39-1551 39.8; Scor 44, 0-1 FG, 2 XK