

Research Notes

BEATTIE WAS NO FEATHER MERCHANT

By Jim Campbell

The pioneer days of the National Football League are filled with legendary names – Halas, Henry, Thorpe, Grange, Nevers, Blood, Nagurski.

But in the league's fifteenth season (1934), a rookie out of the University of Tennessee made such an impact on the game that his accomplishments are sometimes questioned. No one before Beattie Feathers had ever gained 1,000 yards rushing in a season, and no one repeated his feat for another thirteen seasons until Steve Van Buren of the Philadelphia Eagles gained 1,008 yards in 1947.

Fresh from a consensus All-America college career, Feathers, a 5'10", 180-pound halfback, became the talk of pro football. Carrying the ball just 101 times in 11 games – he missed the final two regular season games and the championship game – Feathers gained an astounding 1,004 yards.

Even his teammates weren't convinced initially. Bronko Nagurski, who led Feathers on many of his runs, said recently, "We thought he was just lucky at first – getting all those long runs. Then he did it week after week."

As the years passed, Feathers' 1,000-yard milestone and 9.9 yard average per carry stood out among the 400-800 yard league leading totals of the time. Rumors surfaced that his totals included kick returns or other errors in compilation. But testimony by teammates and double-checking by statisticians verify his amazing figures.

Nagurski continues on Feathers, "Watching him run reminded me of watching a jackrabbit in a cornfield with a hound chasing him. He would change his pace and his direction all the time. He also stayed close to his interference. Today's backs leave their blockers too soon sometimes.

"Beattie would stay with you as long as you could do him some good – then he'd make his cut and go off on his own.

"You always knew where he was. He'd kinda keep a hand on your butt. You knew exactly what side of you he was on, so you knew which way to take the defender.

"You really wouldn't need to make that much contact with the defender – just screen him like a basketball pick and let him (Feathers) make his cut.

"He got hurt early in the Cardinals game – missed most of that and two other games. What kind of figures do you think he'd have had had he played the whole season?"

Joe Kopcha, a medical student and all-pro guard for the Bears that year, recalls, "It's hard to talk about Beattie without talking about Bronko. Feathers would stay behind him and crouch real low as he followed the Bronk into the hole – then he'd just whirl away in the opposite direction from which Bronk took the defensive guy.

"We ran a lot of sweeps with Jules Carlson and me pulling out from guard, but we also ran other plays, such as a straight dive over tackle. Another was a tackle trap. I'd pull and hit the tackle to the outside and Moose (tackle George Musso) would hit the guard inside and the hole would be a mile wide and a mile deep. Then add to that Bronk's lead blocking and we'd have a first down before those Packers or Giants or Lions knew what hit 'em."

Musso remembers Feathers as a gentleman and a fine teammate. "You really wanted to block for him. He'd always thank his linemen after every run. Even if he didn't get much, he'd say, 'That's okay – we'll get 'em next time.'"

Fellow halfback Johnny (Big Train) Sisk says, "We really put out for Beattie. He was the kind of guy you wanted to do your best for because you knew what he could do for the team. We weren't a one-man team – we were the Monsters of the Midway – but Feathers meant a lot to us that year."

Another Bears halfback of note, Red Grange, calls Feathers "the finest cutback runner I've ever seen."

“He was the first to use the cutback extensively. He could do it right or left – stop on a ten-cent piece and go again. He ran hard, too. Really threw his body around pretty good. I feel he didn’t get the credit he deserved.”

The shoulder injury that kept Feathers out of the final games of 1934 forced him to play with an immobilizing brace the rest of his career. In three more seasons with the Bears, two others (1938 and 1939) with the Brooklyn Dodgers, and a final season (1940) with the Packers, Feathers gained only another 974 yards totally.

But what Feathers meant to the game and the Bears in 1934 is best summed up by Grange, who says, “Anytime I would pick an all-time team, Beattie Feathers would be on it.”

Feathers, who died in 1979, coached at North Carolina State and Wake Forest after his playing days.

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THEY WEREN'T ALWAYS 60-MINUTE MEN

By Tod Maher

In the early days of professional football, before the advent of the present-day platoon system, players played both ways. They were sixty-minute men.

But that wasn't always true.

In researching the 1926 American Football League, I came across a few games that actually lasted less than the standard 60-minute timeframe.

The first incident of this phenomenon was an AFL game played on October 3 between the Boston Bulldogs and the Newark Bears at Newark. “Time of periods –” (which appears in box scores of the era near the list of officials) showed 12 minutes. Other times this happened in the 1926 AFL season were:

* October 9: Los Angeles Wildcats at Philadelphia Quakers. Reported as a “forty minute” contest in the Philadelphia *Inquirer*.

*October 10: Wildcats at Brooklyn Horsemen. First half consisted of normal 15-minute quarters, but the second half lasted for only two 12-minute periods.

A possible explanation for these two abnormalities may be the fact that they were back-to-back games for the Wildcats, a “road team” that played no home games. An agreement was probably made to shorten the length of the games for the Wildcats' sake.

*October 24: Rock Island Independents at Newark Bears. Reported as being both a four 12-minute quarter game and one consisting of both 15 and 10-minute periods. Either way, they played less than 60 minutes. Again, this was a case of consecutive road games. The Independents had played at Philadelphia the day before.

*November 6: Independents at Philadelphia. This rematch lasted 40 minutes according to the *Inquirer's* account of the game.

The Second American Football League also had some shortened games. The final game of the 1936 AFL campaign went only 48 minutes. The Cleveland Rams squeaked by the Rochester Tigers 7-6 in the snow.

Then on October 24, 1937, the Boston Shamrocks defeated the Pittsburgh Americans 27-7 in a game that was supposed to be the debut of Heisman Trophy winner Larry Kelley. However, Kelley had the flu, and the game ran for two 15-minute and two 12-minute quarters.

The National Football League was not immune from playing an abbreviated game. On November 1, 1926, the Canton Bulldogs and the New York Giants played to a 7-7 tie. According to the New York *Times*, they played only 12-minute periods.

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ALMOST A STEAM ROLLER

By Pearce B. Johnson

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Mel Hein, Washington State University All-American center in 1930, was offered a contract by the Providence Steam Roller management. Terms were finally agreed on and Mel signed the contract and mailed it himself. Ray Flaherty, assistant coach for the New York Giants of the National Football League was waiting at Mel's home for him to return from the post office after mailing his signed contract to Providence. Flaherty's offer was better than the Steam Roller's so Hein had a problem.

Flaherty asked Mel if he had a friend in Pullman -- the post office for the University. Mel said he knew the postmaster so Mel and Flaherty went to see him. They told the postmaster that Mel wanted to get a letter that he had mailed to Providence.

The postmaster gave Mel a form to fill out for the return of the letter – which was already in transit. After Mel signed the form, the postmaster sent a telegram to the Providence Steam Roller management. The letter, on its arrival in Providence, was intercepted and eventually was received back in Pullman, Washington, by Mel.

Mel then signed a New York Giants contract and played for fifteen years. In his first two seasons he was second team all-NFL. For the next eight years, he was the first team choice.

Mel remarked that if he had not been lucky enough to get the letter back, he would have played for Providence.