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## **Origin of the Running Species**

**By Jim Campbell**

Football, as we know it today, can trace its “roots” back thousands of years to ancient Greece. From there, the game spread to nearly every corner of the earth, to nearly every known civilization.

The games usually took a form more akin to soccer than to American football. But all that changed one November day in 1823 at England’s tradition-steeped Rugby School. A plaque tells the story:

This stone commemorates the exploit of William Webb Ellis who with a fine disregard of the rules of football, as played at the time, first took the ball and ran with it.

Running with the football was not covered in the rules. But the English preppies, rather liking what Master Ellis did, continued to allow the practice, and a game – named after the school at which it was founded – was born.

The Rugby game eventually emigrated to North America and evolved into football as played today in the United States.

In actuality, the game recognized as the first college football contest – Princeton versus Rutgers, November 6, 1869 – resembled rugby more than football.

With the setting down of football rules in 1876 came plays, formations, and strategy. Because there was no forward passing, all backfield men were running backs.

The Wedge: The first great tactical weapon in American football evolved into the fearsome “flying wedge” that was outlawed.

The very first formation – evolving after the “mass” or “wedges” – was the T-formation. With only slight modifications, it can be seen today. What Amos Alonzo Stagg used at the University of Chicago in the 1890s is today’s Tight-T or Full-House-T.

One aspect that differed from the old to the modern formation was that in the early days, not only could all the backs run with the ball, but ends, tackles, guards, and centers, could – and would – carry the ball. The linemen simply took a step into the backfield, got a hand-off from the quarterback, and headed for the designated point of attack – usually behind an eight-man wave of blockers. By the turn of the century, however, there were rules enacted to clarify who could carry the ball and against massed interference, which often led to uncommon violence.

In the early T, the quarterback was the signal-caller and the man who handed off to the other backs. Because each of the three remaining backs had specific duties, each had a different designation. The left halfback was a primary runner. The right halfback was a primary blocker. The fullback usually was a power runner and blocker. This was the case in both the T and the Single Wing, which came into being shortly after the turn of the century.

Early T-Formation: Reforms of wedge, such as requiring seven men on line of scrimmage, spawned a new formation – the T.

While the left halfback and the right halfback had different designations in the Single Wing (in the Single Wing, the left halfback was called a tailback, and the right halfback was called a wingback), their responsibilities were about the same in both formations.

The tailback was the main man in the Single Wing. He got the ball most of the time on a direct snap from center, was the heavy-duty runner, and, ideally at least, an adequate passer and kicker.

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 7, No. 3 (1985)

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The wingback was stationed outside the right end, and was used mostly for blocking. He ran an occasional inside reverse.

The fullback continued to furnish blocking and power running, while the quarterback also evolved into a blocker.

Single Wing: A power formation, with double-team blocking, pulling guards, and little deception, it was in fashion into the 1940s.

Most teams that used the formation did little passing. Forward passing was legalized in 1906, but there were rules – in addition to the balloon-like ball itself – that tended to keep football a running game.

Well into the 1920s, a second incomplete pass in a series would result in a loss of down and a five-yard penalty. Another rule provided for giving the ball to the opponent if an incomplete pass went out of bounds. Also, the opponent was awarded a touchback – and the ball on the 20-yard line – if a pass were incomplete in the end zone.

Passing was only moderately popular in the early years of the NFL, mainly as practiced by coach Earl (Curly) Lambeau's Green Bay Packers with Arnie Herber and Cecil Isbell throwing to Don Hutson in the 1930s and early 1940s.

But the rules of the game forced most teams to run, and some became very proficient at it.

The 1936 Detroit Lions piled up impressive rushing totals. In a 12-game schedule, Leroy (Ace) Gutowsky totaled 827 yards (three yards behind league leader Tuffy Leemans), Earl (Dutch) Clark 628, Ernie Caddel 580, Bill Shepherd 292, Ike Peterson 276, and Glenn Presnell 201. The team total (2,885 yards) was a league record until it was eclipsed by the Miami Dolphins' 17-0 team of 1972 with Larry Csonka, Jim Kiick, and Eugene (Mercury) Morris, who rushed for 2,960 yards.

Because there was no extensive film study, four or five decades ago, teams often could throw offensive maneuvers at an opponent who literally would not know what hit him. There was no logical way to break down and defense some of the deceptive offenses.

Pro Football Hall of Fame coach Weeb Ewbank says that the first film study was done by looking at old Pathe newsreels. "Mainly, we were looking for 'new wrinkles,'" he says. "The idea of scouting an opponent by film came much later – in the 1940s, after the war." Paul Brown of the AAFC Cleveland Browns in 1946, was the first professional coach to seriously use film to study his opponents as well as his own team.

Shifts from one formation to another in mid-play, popularized by college coaches Glenn S. (Pop) Warner at Carlisle and Stanford, Knute Rockne at Notre Dame, and Bernie Bierman at Minnesota, caused even more confusion. It wasn't until the mid-1920s that the shifting players were made to come to a one-second stop before the ball was snapped.

Double Wing: By using the quarterback as a wingback on the left, blocking power was added as well as the deception of a reverse.

The Double Wing varied only slightly from the Single Wing. In this alignment, the quarterback became a wingback on the left side of the formation. His primary function was as a blocker, but he did run an occasional reverse or catch a pass. Slightly different, but basically similar, were the Short-Punt and A-formations, the latter practiced exclusively by the New York Giants under Steve Owen.

While power running and tightly bunched formations were the vogue at both college and professional level, one man in the NFL dared to be different. George Halas of the Chicago Bears stuck with the T-Formation. With input from coaches Ralph Jones of Lake Forest Academy and Clark Shaughnessy of the University of Chicago and Stanford, Halas incorporated man-in-motion into his T attack. The purpose was to spread the defense to provide better blocking angles, thus allowing runners to get outside to sweep the ends. Although successful in the 1930s, Halas and the Bears created the first real sweeping revolution in football formations when they whipped the Washington Redskins 73-0 in the 1940 NFL Championship Game. Just weeks later, Shaughnessy's Stanford team used the T to great effect in the Rose Bowl.

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 7, No. 3 (1985)

---

By 1946, most high school, college, and pro teams were running from the T; the transition no doubt would have been made even more quickly had it not been for World War II's effect on the evolutionary process.

By 1949, only the Pittsburgh Steelers were running the Single Wing in the NFL, and they abandoned it after the 1951 season. Later, Princeton and UCLA were the last major colleges to convert to the T in the late 1950s.

T With Man-in-Motion: By adding motion to 1890's formation, the Chicago Bears spread the defense for better blocking.

The T gave the runner a wider variety of plays, a more open offense, and the chance to get out in the open field more quickly. As teams introduced splits between linemen, a variable space between linemen as opposed to the toe-to-toe alignments of the earlier formations, backs got through the line and into the secondary even faster.

About this time, the Los Angeles Rams, under Shaughnessy, and later Hamp Pool, began spreading their T-formation even more, splitting their ends and flanking a halfback. This also led to more running room, giving former two-way halfbacks Elroy (Crazylegs) Hirsch of the Rams (and later Dub Jones of the Browns) a new lease on life. Hirsch and Jones were freed from the pounding they took in running and blocking from scrimmage and were able to concentrate on catching passes downfield.

In 1951, the Rams and the San Francisco 49ers were vying for the lead in the NFL's Western Division. The 49ers had just beaten the Rams at Kezar Stadium and were coming to play the Rams at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. What developed was a cat-and-mouse game that would bring about another trend in running strategy.

The 49ers had two light, quick defenders deployed as outside linebackers in Jim Powers and Verl Lillywhite. Both 185-pounders could keep up with Rams receivers such as Hirsch, Glenn Davis, Tom Fears, Tom (Cricket) Kalminar, and Verda (Vitamin T.) Smith.

To take advantage of Powers' and Lillywhite's lack of bulk, Rams head coach Joe Stydahar devised the Bull Elephant backfield. His runners actually were three fullbacks, all in the 225-pound range – Dick Hoerner, Deacon Dan Towler, and Paul (Tank) Younger. They started out running wild. When 49ers coach Buck Shaw countered by putting the bulkier and harder-hitting Don (Boom Boom) Burke and Norm Standlee into the lineup as linebackers, Stydahar inserted his “pony backs” to run around them. The Rams defeated the 49ers 23-16 on their way to the NFL title. The Rams went with the Bull Elephants for much of the rest of the season.

While not employing three hefty runners the way the Rams had, other teams in the NFL stayed with the Full-House T through much of the 1950s. The runner who became the flanker sometimes was moved up to the line of scrimmage, but many teams attacked with three ball carriers -- the left halfback, fullback, and right halfback. Although there were line splits and split ends, the offenses of the 1950s and 1960s were far from the wide-open “sets” of today. Motion was used more, but the next evolutionary step really did not come along until the 1970s when the colleges' I-formation tailbacks or those schooled in the Wishbone and Veer came into the pros and became runners from the Power-I. O.J. Simpson was among the first, followed by Tony Dorsett, Wilbert Montgomery, Earl Campbell, James Wilder, Marcus Allen, and others.

I-Formation: In the 1960s, alignment added power and deception; was forerunner of today's Power-I with its option running.

They still lined up eight yards behind the ball in the pro version of the I, but the I-back had time to “read” his blocking and find the opening. This type of option running was a further refinement of Vince Lombardi's “run to daylight” theory as practiced in Green Bay in the 1960s.

Lombardi, who once said, “Football is first, and always will be, a running game,” featured a rather simplistic approach to moving the football on the ground. He took a few basic plays and worked on precise execution. He used a pair of 215-pound backs, Paul Hornung and Jim Taylor. The trend toward backs who were somewhat interchangeable led to dropping halfback and fullback as designations in favor of running back, which still is officially in use today.

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 7, No. 3 (1985)

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Lombardi's running game featured specific points of attack in the line, but, once the back got to the hole, his direction was dictated by where the opening, or "daylight" was. Most teams used a big back attack throughout the 1960s and well into the 1970s, when still another trend was developing.

While teams had two running backs, one usually emerged as the runner and the other as the blocker, e.g. Jim Brown and Ernie Green of the Browns, Larry Brown and Charley Harraway of the Redskins, John Brockington and MacArthur Lane of the Packers, Franco Harris and Rocky Bleier of the Steelers. For this reason, some teams eschewed the official running back label and stuck with fullback (blocker) and halfback (ball carrier). The Los Angeles Raiders do it with Kenny King and Marcus Allen.

Running games stayed basically unchanged into the 1980s, but the "running back" changed. Some teams went to specialized backs, most notably the Cowboys in their use of Preston Pearson in third-down situations. An adequate ball carrier, Pearson was uncanny at catching passes coming out of the backfield.

Others made use of a more versatile back, one who could stay on the field at all times. William Andrews of the Falcons, Marcus Allen of the Raiders, and Walter Payton of the Bears are the prototypes. They run, they block, and they catch passes. Dan Henning, an assistant coach in Washington, brought the Redskins' one-back system to Atlanta when he took the head coaching job in 1983, using William Andrews at the position.

Washington and power-runner John Riggins made the most effective and consistent use of the one-back formation, the latest NFL trend. Riggins and the Redskins simply take control of a game by moving the ball on the ground and keeping it away from the other team.

The single-back is a normal progression from the runner-blocker tandem. If only one man is going to carry the ball, why clutter the backfield with another blocker? The H-Back, usually an additional tight end who goes in motion, offers additional deception, either as a blocker or as a pass receiver downfield.

Single-Back: Progressing from runner-blocker, only the runner is left in backfield, adding another player to block or catch passes.

New England, under both former head coach Ron Meyer and current head coach Raymond Berry, employs the single-back. The Patriots vary the lone runner, either Mosi Tatupu, Tony Collins, or Craig James. The Rams, with Eric Dickerson, personify the single-back attack of the mid-80s.

Over the years, some teams have developed mini-trends. The Kansas City Chiefs of the 1970s used short runners. Warren McVea, Mike Garrett, and Robert Holmes, all about 5 feet 9 inches, hid behind giant offensive linemen and darted off their blocks for good yardage.

Under Paul Brown, the Bengals would start 230-pounders such as Boobie Clark, then go to darters such as Essex Johnson in the second half after opponents had been softened by the power backs.

Quarterbacks who also could run became part of some teams' ground attacks, either by design or necessity. Bob Waterfield of the Rams and Tobin Rote of the Packers were pioneers in the 1950s. Fran Tarkenton brought "scrambling" to the game in the 1960s, and gifted athletes such as Greg Landry of the Lions, Terry Bradshaw of the Steelers and Archie Manning of the Saints could – and would – run for yardage on planned plays. Bobby Douglass of the Bears set the standard for running quarterbacks when he rushed for 968 yards in 1972.

Misdirection Plays: With the movement of the blockers, a false read is offered to stymie strong defensive pursuit.

More a tactic than a trend, "misdirection" plays have been around since the 1950s. The left guard "pulls" as if to lead a sweep around right end, while the ball is given to the runner over the vacated left guard hole, which is caused by the defensive player's being influenced or suckered away by the flow of the play. Miami and Pittsburgh used the play effectively to cut down the great pursuit of active defensive tackles such as Bob Lilly and Alan Page. Rookie Alan (The Horse) Ameche's first play as a Baltimore Colt in 1955 was a 79-yard touchdown over the Bears' left tackle on a misdirection call.

## **THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 7, No. 3 (1985)**

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Trend-setting running backs are remembered fondly, but the reality is that most of their deeds could not have been performed without the help of blockers – interior linemen and others who helped clear the way.

It was that way a century ago ... and it is not different today.