

FRIEDMAN'S LAST HURRAH

By Bob Gill

The beginning of this story is easy.

Everybody already knows that Benny Friedman was the first great passer in football, right? That he piled up passing records that stood until Sammy Baugh and Sid Luckman came along a decade later, and did it all with a ball designed more for dropkicking than for passing? That he was by all contemporary accounts one of the five greatest players in the game in the late 1920s and early '30s? All that's common knowledge, isn't it?

Well, unfortunately, it's not. But there are those who do know, and it's unnecessary to recount Friedman's accomplishments for them here.

This is a story that even the Friedmanophiles may not know about. It goes like this:

In 1939, five years after making his final appearance in an NFL game, Benny Friedman, then head football coach at City College of New York, made a comeback in pro ball.

He did it with a semi-pro team called the Cedarhurst (Long Island) Wolverines, for whom he served as player-coach. The Cedarhurst team was a notch or two below the American Association, a fine minor league that existed in the Northeast with several teams in the greater New York area. It appears that the Wolverines may have been a new team in 1939 – in which case their name probably derived from their star player's college affiliation with Michigan.

Now let's not make this sound too dramatic. Even though the presence of Friedman did cause some interest in the Wolverines' exploits, their games still merited nothing more than single-paragraph notices in the New York papers, usually containing nothing more than the score and Friedman's contribution to it. Some games weren't reported at all. The fact that the games received that much attention, though, when other teams at that level were lucky to get their games listed in a box of "Football Results" – that fact is evidence of the aura, however dim, that still surrounded Friedman.

And even allowing for the low level of the competition, Friedman's performances were exceptional. Remember, he was an "old man" of 34 and hadn't played competitive football for five years.

Here's the record of the games I've located, first for 1939, obviously with some missing:

Oct. 30 - Cedarhurst 35, Brown Bombers 6. Friedman threw for 3 TDs, kicked 3 FGs, added an extra point. The Brown Bombers were an all-black team. Their roster varied, but the club on occasion played well against reputable opponents.

Nov. 19 - Cedarhurst 27, Roslyn 7. Friedman threw 4 TD passes, kicked an extra point.

Nov. 26 - Cedarhurst 28, Valley Stream 0. Friedman threw for 4 TDs. No extra points were mentioned in the paper.

Friedman's 1940 record is more nearly complete:

Oct. 20 - Cedarhurst 28, Glen Cove 0. Friedman threw 2 TD passes, kicked 2 extra points and added a FG.

Nov. 3 - Cedarhurst 3, Valley Stream 0. Friedman completed 6 of 15 passes on a muddy field, and kicked a FG to win the game.

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Nov. 10 - Cedarhurst 0, Churchill Pros 0. This one's interesting. The Churchill team played in Springfield, Mass., and was definitely a notch above the local Long Island teams the Wolverines had been playing. They were comparable to second-division American Association teams.

The Springfield paper was so taken with Friedman that it chronicled in detail his every doing on the field. He didn't play much (injured in the first half), completing 1 of 4 passes for 12 yards and missing two second-half FG attempts. But the paper credited him with 6 rushing attempts for 57 yards. A check of the accompanying article suggests that it should be 6 for 42 yards – but there was a 9-yard loss on a pass attempt that the statistician may not have counted.

Nov. 17 - Long Island Indians 13. Long Island was an American Association team that finished tied for fourth in a six-team league. Friedman apparently did nothing of note – may not have played at all, considering his injury the week before.

It looks like Cedarhurst played another game or two in 1940 that went unreported, or have at least gone undiscovered so far. But the Springfield paper gave Friedman's season record up to Nov. 10: 5 TD passes, 9 extra points and two FGs. Assuming that the Long Island game was the team's last, that would be Friedman's final 1940 record as well.

It may not have been the New York Giants, and Friedman's return was not as much heralded as that of, say, Norman Bates, but Friedman's 1939-40 Cedarhurst comeback did give him one last chance to display his considerable talents on a football field. The only regret is that more people don't know the extent of those talents.

But wait – there's more to the story.

In 1941, Douglas Hertz, owner of the New York Yankees in the AFL, was kicked out of the league just before the season began. A new owner took over the team, but Hertz hastily put together another team, again called the Yankees, and turned them into a touring team. To do that, he needed players, and he was able to retain only two from the the 1940 AFL club. So Hertz signed up several players from Friedman's 1940 Cedarhurst team, including Friedman as coach.

The new Yankees proved to be a pretty sad team. A few games early in the season against the sort of clubs Cedarhurst had been playing went largely unnoticed in the New York papers. One cryptic report hints that Friedman took the field himself in one game, but that's unconfirmed. And, be that as it may, nothing else of interest was going on with the team.

Then, in early October, the Yankees were invited to join the American Association when the Providence Steam Roller dropped out. Even though the Yankees had no home field, the lure of the New York name may have figured in the league's decision to bring them aboard.

It couldn't have been the quality of the team.

Friedman's club was overmatched, dropping its first three league games and at least two others. After the Oct. 26 game, a 16-0 loss to the Wilmington Clippers, Friedman stepped down as coach, citing the need to devote more time to his duties at CCNY, where he was still head coach.

The Yankees continued their losing ways through the rest of the season, thus vindicating Friedman's coaching and proving that the American Association was just too much for them.

And that, as far as I know, marked the end of Benny Friedman's second and last venture into pro football.