

I REMEMBER BENNY

By Ernest L. Cuneo

I played guard for the Orange (NJ) Tornadoes in 1929, their only season in the National Football League. We weren't great but we were no slouches. In our opening league game, we fought the New York Giants to a bloody 0-0 tie. Here I encountered a great – Benny Friedman of Michigan.

He had perfected the forward pass. Indeed, he was revolutionizing the game even with the old ball and under the old rules – always passing from five yards behind the line of scrimmage, two consecutive incompletes bringing a five-yard penalty, and a turnover on an incomplete pass in the end zone.

When Benny passed, he aimed and threw with his body, using the follow-through of a pitcher with something of a golfer's pivot on his left leg. Throughout his life he swore that his pivot follow-through put him in a position to withstand terrible punishment, that his left leg was as important to him as his right arm.

Benny and I had an unusual relationship. That first time I played against him – when the Giants played the Tornadoes at Orange – he pretended he was fading to his right to throw a pass. I faded with him, hoping he'd believe I was leaving a big gap in the line. This is called a "mousetrap" and Benny fell into it. He went for the hole, and I went for him. And got him!

He was stunned for a bit, but thereafter his ego expressed itself. It was inconceivable to him that a run-of-the-mill player like me could trap him. So he named me on his All-League Team, and I played on his Blue-Gray Bowl team in an exhibition game on New Year's Day.

Later that season, the Tornadoes went to the Polo Grounds to play the Giants again. That was where I saw Benny throw the greatest forward pass I ever saw. It was a snowy, gloomy day. A Giant drive was running out of steam at our 25-yard-line. Everybody knew Benny was going to pass, so we blitzed. I got through along with several others and we tore at Benny. He fell back to the 40-yard line. Meanwhile, Ray Flaherty, the New York end, sneaked across our goal line, slipping in the mud as he did. At 40 yards, in the gathering gloom, with a wet ball, Benny pegged it to Flaherty who caught it while flat on the ground!
We'd tied them at Orange, but they beat us at New York.

Benny was surely the greatest passer of the decade. But, in a way, he never grew up. He stuck around pro ball, ran quarterback camps and was as immersed in football as he was when he was pegging for the Giants.

Over the years, Benny and I would telephone each other occasionally. I always greeted him with a "Benny, how's that old leg?" and he'd invariably and enthusiastically recite the protection given by his follow-through leg pivot. The last time I called him, when I gave him the usual question, he stunned me by saying, "Ernie, haven't you heard? I lost my leg; they amputated it." Shortly thereafter, he killed himself. Handgun.