

GIL BOULEY 1945-1950

By Joseph Hession

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Gil Bouley remembers the 1945 NFL Championship Game as if it were yesterday. But then the game ranks as one of the most memorable title contests in league history, more for the bitter weather than the action on the playing field.

Bouley was a rookie tackle for the Cleveland Rams that year. He joined the Rams after his outstanding college days at Boston College under the legendary Frank Leahy. In his first year with the club, he hit paydirt. The Rams ended the season with a 9-1 record, best in the NFL, then met the Washington Redskins for the championship.

As game time approached, the temperature hovered around two degrees. Wind whipped off Lake Erie, dropping the wind chill factor to about 20 below zero. Grounds-keepers worked feverishly to clear the snow and ice that blanketed Cleveland's Municipal Stadium. Earlier in the week, bales of straw had been gathered from local farms and laid on the field to prevent it from freezing over. The straw had to be removed also.

Municipal Stadium held over 80,000 fans and there was a pre-game sale of 40,000 tickets, yet only 32,178 showed up for the game. The strong north wind not only discouraged fans from attending, it played an important part in the game's outcome. The Rams won it, 15-14, but the margin of victory came in the first period when Sammy Baugh attempted to throw from his own end zone. The wind-blown pass hit the goal post, giving Cleveland a two-point safety. It was just the edge the Rams needed. They held on to win and collect \$1,468 each for the victory.

After winning the NFL title, owner Dan Reeves moved the club to Los Angeles. Bouley is one of the handful of Rams who played for both the Cleveland club and the Los Angeles edition. During his six years with the Rams, he helped lead them to three western division titles.

"Dan Reeves was still the Rams' owner in Los Angeles, so it was basically the same franchise," Bouley said. "We just moved. There was quite a big difference in Los Angeles. Cleveland was an old city, while Los Angeles was just starting to grow. Obviously, the weather was different. It seems we always played in the cold back east; nothing like the 1945 championship though. In Los Angeles we had nice weather.

"We became part of the Hollywood crowd out there. In fact, they had us making movies. A bunch of us were in a movie called "Easy Living" with Victor Mature and Lucille Ball. It was a football movie. We had to get cards from the Screen Actors Guild to appear in it. Gerry Cowhig, one of our backs, doubled as Victor Mature."

That was not the only time that Hollywood came calling at the Rams' practice field. Among the other films that Ram players performed in were "Crazy Legs, All American," about Los Angeles receiver Elroy Hirsch and "All the King's Men," starring John Derek.

"'All the King's Men' was about Huey Long, the former governor of Louisiana." Bouley said. "Long played football in college at LSU so they used several of our players for the football scenes." [Note: Derek played the Long character's football-playing son.]

Hollywood movie makers were not the only people trying to recruit Ram players. Television was a brand new medium in the late 1940s, and one crafty salesman thought the Rams could help make it popular.

"We knew this guy named Davis who tried to hire several players to sell television sets door-to-door in the off-season," he said. "This was in the 40s. Nobody even knew what television was. I remember him saying 'Pretty soon there is going to be an antenna on everybody's house.' He couldn't get anybody to work for him, though. I guess I should have listened to him."

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Bouley still wonders about the string of events that made him a member of the Rams. He did not consider professional football while an undergraduate at Boston College, but when he got an offer from Ram coach Adam Walsh, he had second thoughts.

"Frank Leahy must have recommended me to Adam Walsh," Bouley said. "I knew they were friendly and talked about the players. I really didn't want to play professional football, though. They offered me what I considered a fantastic sum, \$6,000 a year. There was no bonus. I was told by a friend I better take it before they changed their minds.

As an offensive lineman, Bouley's job was to block for two of the game's greatest quarterbacks, Norm Van Brocklin and Bob Waterfield. They had contrasting personalities, he says, but their athletic skills were very similar.

"Waterfield was always the gentleman," Bouley said. "He was a good teacher who would take the time to show people their assignments. He was patient. I remember this one play where someone missed a block and Bob got creamed. We came back to the huddle and all he said was, 'Come on, guys, try to hold them out a little longer.' That wouldn't have happened with Van Brocklin. He would have been yelling and screaming.

"Waterfield was an amazing athlete. He was ambidextrous, and he could kick left- or right-footed equally well. He was also a good runner. I'd say he was one of the best quarterbacks ever to run the bootleg. You had to protect guys like that.

"We had a well-balanced offense though. We could run the ball as well as pass. The backfield was excellent with Tank Younger, Dick Hoerner, Fred Gehrke and the rest."

The team's main receivers were Tom Fears and Elroy Hirsch. Both men are in Pro Football's Hall of fame. But the Rams had some equally dangerous receivers, says Bouley.

"Jim Benton was really something," Bouley said. "You've never seen anything like him. He was 6-3 and about 225. He wasn't that fast, but boy, could he get that ball. In one game in 1945, he gained over 300 yards in receptions and he didn't even score a touchdown." Benton's 303 yards on 10 receptions against the Detroit Lions was the NFL record until 1985.

Bouley played both offense and defense throughout most of his career. One of the greatest players he competed against was "Slingin" Sammy Baugh of the Washington Redskins.

"It's really too bad that Sammy Baugh played on such a lousy team for most of his career," Bouley said. He was a genuine triple threat. He could run, pass and punt. He was a great T- Formation quarterback. When he was on, he could complete them underhand, sidearm, crossarm or just about any way he wanted. In one game we were chasing the poor guy all over the field and I started feeling sorry for him. If that had been Van Brocklin, he would have been screaming at us."

Besides participating in the 1945 championship game, Bouley played in NFL title games in both 1949 and 1950 before retiring from the NFL. Both games were disappointments. In 1949, the Philadelphia Eagles defeated the Rams 14-0 in a drenching rainstorm. In 1950, the Cleveland Browns beat Los Angeles, 30-28.

"We not only expected to win that Philadelphia game, we expected a packed house," Bouley said. "That would ensure us more money. It rained and less than 30,000 showed up at the Coliseum." The Rams received \$740 each for that game. The Eagles got \$1,094.

Bouley ended his career on a heart-breaking note in the 1950 championship game against the Cleveland Browns. Cleveland's Lou Groza kicked a field goal with 28 seconds left to beat the Rams, 30-28.

"We were winning through the entire game," he said. In fact, on the first play from scrimmage, Glenn Davis went in motion and took a swing pass from Bob Waterfield. He ran about 80 yards for the touchdown. I still can't believe we lost that.

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"I have nothing but great memories of the Rams," he said. "Dan Reeves, the owner at the time, was always great to us. We even got paid for the exhibition games, which wasn't standard practice back then. I'll always remember those days."