

ROUGH PLAY IN THE 1950S

By Tony Barnhart

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For the most part, the early-to-mid-1950s was a quiet time in the NFL. With the war and the merger [with the AAFC] now history, the league could settle down and start to grow.

But as the game reached its Golden Age, as some have called it, a disquieting trait began to emerge. Some called them Black Hats, some called them enforcers. They were the practitioners of a form of exceptionally violent play that was still technically legal.

The examples of their handiwork were endless. There was the sight of the great Otto Graham with his jaw slashed open in 1953, courtesy of an unidentified elbow to the face from a member of the San Francisco 49ers. There was Charley Trippi, the former Georgia star, who had his face rearranged by the forearm of John Henry Johnson, also of the 49ers. In December of 1956, Chicago Bears defensive end Ed Meadows blindsided Detroit's Bobby Layne after Layne had already handed off the ball. Layne was carried off the field on a stretcher and the Bears won the Western Division championship 38-21. The Lions cried "foul" but there was nothing to be done. According to the rules of football, the hit was perfectly legal.

For all intents and purposes, these enforcers served one purpose: To inflict pain on the other team's star in order to affect the outcome of the game.

Some became the stuff of legend. Ed Sprinkle, a defensive end with the Bears from 1944-55, was the subject of a *Collier's* magazine article headlined "The Meanest Man in Pro Football." Hardy Brown of the 49ers, despite weighing just 190 pounds, once knocked out 21 men in a season. Frank "Bucko" Kilroy, a lineman with the Eagles, was the subject of a 1955 *Life* magazine article "Savagery on Sunday," which said that he should be banned from the game.

"In the 1950s the players were tougher because they came out of World War II," Kilroy told *Sports Heritage* magazine. "We had a different mentality It was the survival of the fittest."

Trippi, who played with the Chicago Cardinals from 1947- 55, was one of the stars who had run-ins with Sprinkle and Kilroy.

"Ed would go out of his way to punish somebody anyway he could," said Trippi, who now lives in Athens. "Sometimes he would jump offsides just so he'd get a chance to hit you. One time he jumped offsides and the whistle blew but he just kept coming after me. I had the ball in my hand so I just threw it and hit him square in the face. We'd be going after each other pretty good during the game."

Trippi's feud with Kilroy usually carried over from one game to the next.

"One year he leg-whipped me during a game in Philadelphia, and after I saw the film I couldn't wait until he got back to Chicago," said Trippi. "We were playing in old Comiskey Park a few weeks later and I reminded him about what he did in Philadelphia. After the game we started going after it in the tunnel. I got so mad I took off my helmet and started beating him with it."

The techniques of their trade became so common they developed their own terminology. There was the "Hi-Lo," in which two players would tackle a ball carrier with the express purpose of making an accordion of his spine. The "Missouri Block" called for using the elbow to the face of an opponent. There were techniques handed down from one player to another on how to twist a neck or flick dirt in an opponent's eye and get away with it.

Trippi believes that the rough play of the '50s was brought on by the competition for jobs after the merger of 1949 between the NFL and the All-America Football Conference (AAFC), which decreased the number of football teams from 18 to 13.

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"There were guys who felt they had to find a way to establish themselves," said Trippi. "Some guys took a lot of pride in being hatchet men. For me it was just a matter of survival. I was small (6-0, 185) and the big guys liked to try to intimidate me. I had to do something to let them know I was in the ball game."

The era of the Black Hats ended with the '50s, and there are a number of theories why. Public awareness was raised by a 1954 Sports Illustrated article by Graham entitled "Football Is Getting Too Vicious." In the article, Graham broke the public silence among players on the subject and charged that at times pro football had become "mayhem."

The public's knowledge was also increased by the Life magazine pictorial which graphically showed some of the more gruesome aspects of the game. As it turned out, Graham had been Life's consultant for the piece and suggested that the magazine keep its cameras focused on Kilroy and several other players during the games they would shoot. (Kilroy later sued Time-Life Inc. over the article and eventually settled out of court.)

Another theory which appears to have validity is that when Vince Lombardi became head coach of the Green Bay Packers in 1959, his precision offenses were designed to exploit openings caused by defensive players who might free-lance in search of action. When others copied Lombardi, defenses had to become more sophisticated and assignment-oriented.

Finally, economics played a role in the end of the black hats. When players began making enough money to be considered investments by the owners, and when television powers pointed out that people wanted to see stars play instead of watching them carried off on stretchers, there were rules changes ranging from mandatory facemasks to restricting the use of hands and legs. Extra officials were added to enforce these rules.

So by the end of the 1960 season the Black Hat Age had come to an end. Pro football had survived it, but not without a lot of pain along the way.