

THE YEAR GREASY NEALE WAS FIRED

By Gene Murdock

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It was a tense moment in the Philadelphia Eagles' dressing room at the Polo Grounds on a raw Sunday afternoon in late November 1950. The National Football League champions had just dropped a heartbreaker to the New York Giants, 7-3. The club owner stood in the center of the room and pointed an accusing finger at his coach. "And you," he shouted, "you made mistakes out there; you made mistakes!"

"Damn you," fired back the coach, "I never make mistakes. Or if I do you can't tell me in my clubhouse in front of my football players. If you want to tell me what mistakes I make on the football field, you tell me in your office on Monday morning!"

Seated in his home in Parkersburg, W.Va. 17 years later, 76-year-old Earle "Greasy" Neale still has thunder in his voice as he talks of the shouting match that openly marked the beginning of the end of his long and colorful coaching career. "Imagine this now -- the president of a ball club standing in the middle of the dressing room after you'd been beaten 7-3, popping off in front of your players, telling me you can't win with three points. Anybody knew that. It didn't take a genius to tell you that!"

The year 1950 had already been a trying one for Greasy, who had led the Eagles to NFL titles in 1948 and 1949, winning "Coach of the Year" honors both seasons. He had taken over the club, a tail-end outfit, in 1941, had converted it into a winner within three or four years and had topped this feat with three divisional and two league crowns.

As the 1950 season approached, the future had looked bright. Neale had most of his championship team back, a team studded with such seasoned stars as Steve Van Buren, Tommy Thompson, Pete Pihos and Vic Sears. In addition there were outstanding second-year men like Chuck Bednarik, Clyde "Smackover" Scott and Frank Ziegler. Greasy confided to Philadelphia sportswriter Stan Baumgartner on the eve of the College All-Star game his personal optimism: "I don't see why our boys can't do it again. Who is there to beat us?"

But things had not worked out that way. A wave of crippling injuries beset the Eagles in training camp. In the first game of the season, the Cleveland Browns, newly arrived in the NFL after terrorizing the All-America Conference, proved they belonged there by trouncing the Eagles 35-10.

As he looks back on that first game with Paul Brown's team, Greasy admits that he and his Eagles probably took the neophyte Browns too lightly.

"They beat us with passes – Otto Graham to Dub Jones. I thought Russ Craft could cover anybody alive – he covered "Crazylegs" Hirsch all the time and would take the ball right away from him and run for touchdowns – but he couldn't cover Dub Jones. I knew within 10 minutes after that game started that the Eagle defense wouldn't stop the Browns."

But the Eagles bounced back. They won five straight and seemed headed for another championship until they experienced a series of exasperating razor-thin defeats in November and December that destroyed their hopes for a third straight title. The mounting frustration came to a head in the Polo Grounds dressing room with owner Jim

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Clark and Greasy blowing up at each other. In picturesque language Neale offered to quit his job on the spot, but Clark quickly retreated and diplomatic relations between the two were temporarily patched up.

As Greasy recalls it: "After that game in New York we went out to Cleveland for our second game with the Browns. Jim and I rode out together and had a few drinks together. I forced him on Tuesday to come to practice and apologize to the team. He told me then: 'You can coach this team forever for me.'"

The cut went too deep, however, and in three months' time the "Coach of the Year" – the man who had wondered: "Who is there to beat us?" – was fired.

What happened? From the distance of years, it looks quite simple. After racing to a 5-1 record to lead the Eastern Conference at the midway point, the Eagles apparently collapsed. In the last half of the season, except for a 33-0 rout of the Redskins, the Philadelphians dropped five games. They ended up in a tie for third place in the East with a 6-6 record, the team's poorest performance since 1942.

But as Greasy tells it, nothing is ever quite that simple. Although only 6-6 for the season, the Eagles outscored their opponents by the lopsided margin of 254 to 141. And, significantly, they dropped those five second-half games by a total of 18 points. The Giants beat them twice (7-3 and 9-7), the Browns once (13-7), Pittsburgh once (9-7) and the Cardinals once (14-10).

In the first Giant game, the one that touched off the Clark-Neale confrontation, Philadelphia was near the goal line most of the time, but could not push the ball across and had to settle for a field goal. As Greasy remembers it, they were stopped five times – on the 16-, 20-, 5-, 2-, and 4-yard lines.

He talks of the second clash with the Browns with bitterness lightened by a special kind of pride. "I spent two hours a day for a week on defense before the second Brown game. Imagine that! They only give 20 minutes to defense normally.

"Motley gains 15 yards, Graham doesn't complete a pass. And they beat me on an intercepted pass that they scored on and two fumbles where Groza kicked field goals. They beat us 13-7. They made two first downs – and I'll bet it's the only game Graham ever played in which he didn't complete a pass!"

Greasy's strategy for stopping Marion Motley was simple: "I put Bednarik on that Motley and I said: 'That's your man, and don't you let him go anywhere. When he comes through the line, whether he's got the ball or not, you hit him and you hit him and you tear him apart!'

"That Bednarik, he was something! You know, he was the first lineman ever taken as a first-round draft choice. He and Van Buren and Joe Muha were the best picks we ever made."

The loss of those five games by 18 points resulted less from a collapse of the team on the field -- on defense the Eagles allowed far fewer first downs than any team in the league and were only 70 yards behind the Browns in yards allowed -- than from a succession of damaging injuries, but anytime a coach loses players like Van Buren, "Bosh" Pritchard, Scott and Al Wistert for extended periods, he's in trouble. Greasy was no exception.

Van Buren developed a spur on the bottom of one of his feet in training and after playing in the All-Star game with Novocain deadening the pain, he was returned to Philadelphia for an operation and did not practice for the next six weeks. He missed the season's opener and was far below par all year long. His rushing total dropped from the league-leading figure of 1,146 yards in 1949 to 626 in 1950, with his average declining from 4.4 yards a try to 3.3.

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Pritchard, who had finished fifth in the NFL in rushing in 1949 with a 6.0 average, injured a knee in training and didn't play in a single game in 1950. Scott, who as a rookie from Arkansas in 1949 had averaged just under five yards a try in 40 carries, was badly injured in the second quarter of the 1950 opener against the Browns and was finished for the season.

As Stan Baumgartner explained it: "Pritchard and Scott are very fast men who can run the ends, keep the opposing defense spread and make it possible for Van Buren to plunge through the line. When these two carriers were out of the lineup, the opposition concentrated on Van Buren and bottled him up before he could get started. The only other danger was quarterback Tommy Thompson's forward passes. With no far of Pritchard, Scott or Van Buren, the rival club concentrated on possible receivers. So Neale's entire intricate offense bogged down."

Greasy was vacationing at Lake Worth, Fla. in February 1951, confident that his Eagles would bounce back the next season, when he got a terse telegram from owner Jim Clark saying: "You will be paid for the one year remaining on your contract, but you are no longer the coach of the Philadelphia Eagles."

"It was a complete surprise," says Greasy. "After that blowup in New York Clark told me that I could coach the Eagles as long as he had the club. It liked to kill my wife. She died two months later."

In Neale's opinion an important factor in his dismissal was a difference of views over his scouting system. "We had the greatest scouting system of any team in the NFL," Greasy proudly claims. "We had the information on every boy who entered school until the time he graduated from any college in America."

According to Greasy, it was in 1943 that he and Alexis Thompson, who then owned the Eagles, and general manager Harry Thayer worked out an elaborate method of compiling complete information on all college football players.

"We had 68 books that we took into the second draft meeting we attended. No team had ever done this before. They laughed at us, but you can bet they stopped after we got ourselves men like Van Buren and Muha with that system!

"The problem was that Jim Clark, who headed the 1,000 stockholders who bought the club from Lex Thompson, didn't know anything about football. He wanted to trim expenses by doing away with my scouts. He thought we were spending too much money for information on football players.

"That scouting system won us championships. But I was wasting my time telling Clark that. He paid no attention to it."

To replace Neale, Clark hired Bo McMillan, who in three years as head coach of the Detroit Lions (1948-50) had compiled a 12-24 won-lost record and had feuded continually with the clubowners. He coached the Eagles for two games in 1951, quitting because of illness. Wayne Millner succeeded him and the Eagles wound up the year with a 4-8 mark.

Today, Greasy Neale lives in his boyhood hometown in a house filled with trophies. The trophies tell of the days he played football with Jim Thorpe long before the NFL was born, of years as a slick-hitting outfielder with the Cincinnati Reds and as a coach of college football teams – including the Washington and Jefferson giant-killers who held mighty California to a scoreless tie in the 1922 Rose Bowl.

And some of the trophies tell Greasy that he was professional football's "Coach of the Year" two years in a row – just before a season when the percentages took over and five games lost by a total of 18 points brought him and his high-flying Eagles back to earth.

NEALE'S PRO COACHING RECORD

