

GEORGE ROUDEBUSH

ROUDEBUSH'S PASSES CHANGED THE GAME OF FOOTBALL

By Matt Fenn, CAC Journal Editor

Some say Knute Rockne of Notre Dame invented the forward pass. Some will say that, well, maybe he didn't invent the pass but he certainly was the first to effectively use it as a weapon on the gridiron.

Oh, it makes a nice story...Rockne and Gus Dorais spending a summer at Cedar Point practicing hours on end so they could surprise Army with something new -- the forward pass.

The story has been repeated so often it has become legend.

The only problem is, it's not exactly true.

The man who should have gotten credit for revolutionizing the game was a Denison University sophomore halfback named George M. Roudebush.

Roudebush, a member of the Cleveland Athletic Club since 1940, is today a counsel with the law firm of Arter & Hadden, in the Huntington Building.

He is 93 years old – but don't let his age fool you. He is spry, alert, witty, at his desk every day, handling details for a number of clients.

And he remembers everything. He can cite dates, names, nicknames, figures, events, conversations that took place scores of years ago.

He remembers very well 1912, which was one year before they began fitting Rockne for his cloak of immortality. Because it was in the season of 1912 that George Roudebush and Denison U. used the forward pass to change a very ordinary team to a juggernaut.

In its first three games, Denison had scored only 19 points. "In the next five," after introducing the forward pass to the Big Red arsenal, "we scored over 200," Roudebush said.

Here's how the transition came about, according to Lester J. Black, a Denison alumnus:

"On the way home from a game, several of us discussed the uncanny ability of George Roudebush, our substitute quarterback, in throwing a football. As a result of that discussion, Coach Walter J. Livingston was approached with the idea of playing Roudy as halfback regularly so that we could make use of his prowess as a passer. Livingston agreed and immediately devised new plays.

"The next game was with Otterbein, and the score was Denison 60 – Otterbein 3. Wittenberg came next, and the score was Denison 68 – Wittenberg 0. A Columbus, OH, paper wrote, 'The Springfield bunch was outclassed and seemed to have no idea how to break up the forward pass'. The same reporter added, 'Roudebush starred by throwing forward passes for all sorts of distances with wonderful accuracy.'"

The Big Red also added victories over Cincinnati, 31-13, and Miami. A newspaper reported, "Denison, by brilliant forward passes, defeated Miami, 13-0."

Roudebush, who later played in the same backfield with Jim Thorpe for the Canton Bulldogs, has an explanation for the forward pass not being considered much of a weapon earlier:

"Rules 6 and 12 provided that the forward pass would be thrown five yards behind the line of scrimmage, but the

pass to not exceed 20 yards, and nobody wanted to throw the ball through the line of scrimmage. My first year eligible, 1912, they changed it from 20 yards to ANY distance.

“There weren’t too many rulebooks available at the time,” Roudebush said, ‘but we finally managed to get hold of one.”

The Big Red coaches and players read the rule book, and, as they say, the rest was history.

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ROUDEBUSH KNEW THE RULES

By Bob Carroll

The CC editor recently visited Mr. Roudebush in his Cleveland home. He’d put in a day of work, but he was still peppery, charming and affable. He apologized for not having scrapbooks to show us. “I’m not a saver,” he said.

We quickly learned that George Roudebush doesn’t need any scrapbooks. He remembers it all!

For more than an hour, he recounted chapter and verse of his career. He had no trouble remembering names, dates, and places.

He started as a pro in Cincinnati in 1915, played for the Canton Bulldogs for a while in 1916, then went down to play for a couple of Cincinnati teams that same year. He remembered the lineup of his Camp Sherman army team in 1917, and assured us that they were one of the best.

After duty in France – and there were some good stories there – he returned to Ohio, working in a law office in Cleveland through the week, then jumping aboard a train for a weekend football game. He took along his own equipment in a duffle bag. Sometimes, to make the kickoff, he had to change into his football duds on the train. “We did it for the money,” he says bluntly.

His two seasons with the Dayton Triangles (1920-21) make him the oldest living NFL player.

Of all his remembrances, the one we found most fascinating concerned a game he played for the Cincinnati Celts, a team run “by a bunch of wild Irishmen.” The Celts were not the most successful team in Ohio, but they had their moments. Probably the greatest came against the Pine Village, Indiana, team in 1916. Pine Village was a community of only 300 people, but it was big time football in Indiana before World War I, compiling a record that borders on the unbelievable. The Villagers had gone undefeated for 13 years. In 117 games, they’d only once been tied.

In 1915, when Jim Thorpe played one game with the Villagers, he pronounced their quarterback Eli Fenters the best passer he’d ever seen.

On October 29, 1916, they faced the Celts before a crowd of 2,500 at nearby Lafayette. In the Indiana team’s lineup, along with a cadre of native Villagers, were “Chuck” Helvie, a veteran pro end, tackle Ed “Doc” Davis, formerly of Indiana U., and guard Emmett Keefe, of Notre Dame, all three of whom went on to play in the NFL.

Roudebush’s teammates on the Celts included a guard named Frank Lane, who would become famous in the 1950’s as baseball executive “Trader” Lane with the Chicago White Sox and Cleveland Indians. To this day, Lane is still the only man to have traded one MANAGER for another – Cleveland’s Joe Gordon for Detroit’s Jimmy Dykes! Roudebush remembered him more as a talker than a player. Late in the game, Pine Village led 6-2, on a touchdown by Eli Fenters. Cincinnati couldn’t get rolling and was forced to punt from midfield. Before the snap, Roudebush drifted past the Cincinnati punter. “I’m lining up behind you,” he said.

Roudebush knew the rules, including one that is no longer in the book. Under the rules of the time, anyone lining up behind the punter was eligible to recover the kick as a free ball. He was counting on Pine Village not recognizing the significance of his stationing himself behind the kicker.

When the ball was booted, Roudebush raced downfield. He was fast, and as he neared the Pine Village goal line, the ball was just rolling across the stripe. The Pine Village safety shied away from the ball, not wanting to touch it, with Roudebush bearing down on him. But that didn't matter. It was a free ball for Roudebush, and he covered it in the end zone.

Touchdown, Cincinnati!

From there, the Celts held on to win 9-6, pulling the upset of the year in Indiana and one of the biggest ever in the state – all because George Roudebush knew the rules.