

RINGERS!

and The Pride of Portsmouth

Quiz questions: What NFL Hall-of-Famer once joined a minor league team at the end of a season and played a decisive role in leading the team to a championship?

Stumped? Well, it's not surprising. But you did have two chances to get the answer. See, there were two Hall-of-Famers who fit the specifications. And they both did it in 1939.

Call it "the year of the ringer."

Ringer No. 1 was Ace Parker. When the Brooklyn Dodgers finished their NFL season, Parker went home to Portsmouth, VA, where the Portsmouth Cubs of the Dixie League were in a neck-and-neck race for the title. Needing a win in their final game Dec. 3 to keep pace with the Richmond Arrows, the Cubs recruited Parker, who ran for 59 yards and scored the game's only touchdown in a 7-0 win over the Washington Presidents that left the two contenders deadlocked.

A championship playoff was arranged for Dec. 31 in Portsmouth. Once again Parker was there; and once again he scored the only touchdown as Portsmouth took the title, 7-0.

Actually, the term "ringer" is a little strong in Parker's case, because he'd been playing games with Portsmouth since 1937 – in fact, he began his professional career with the Cubs, as we'll see in a minute. Anyway, the point is that his presence in two crucial games may seem unfair, but it really wasn't controversial.

That was not the case with Ringer No. 2.

To set the scene, 1939 was the year George Halas bought the Newark franchise in the American Association and turned it into a farm team for the Bears. When the AA's regular season ended, Newark was tied with Wilmington for first place in the Southern Division. A playoff was scheduled for December 10.

With the NFL Bears having finished their season a week earlier, Halas sent rookie Sid Luckman to Newark to help their AA namesakes. Some might have seen this as a gesture of togetherness, but the Wilmington Clippers weren't among them.

Wilmington protested that Luckman wasn't eligible for the playoff game because he hadn't played with the team during the regular season. AA president Joe Rosentover ruled in Newark's favor, however, explaining that "league rules did not cover the use of players in a divisional playoff," but only in a league championship game.

That Sunday Luckman completed 5 of 9 passes or 63 yards, including a game-winning touchdown pass to Dick Schweidler in the fourth quarter, as Newark won 13-6. Consistent with the logic of Rosentover's ruling, he wasn't allowed to play in the title game a week later, but the Bears did fine without him, winning easily over the Paterson Panthers, 27-7.

If you're keeping score, that's two ringers, three games, three touchdowns, and two championships.

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To return to Ace Parker: In 1937, fresh out of Duke, he was drafted in the second round by the Brooklyn Dodgers. But instead Parker started the season with Portsmouth as a non-playing coach. The Cubs opened the season 0-3-1, failing to score a point in four games, before he relented and took the field Oct. 31 for a game against the Alexandria (VA) Celtics. The move was a partial success: The Cubs finally scored, but they still lost 16-7.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 10, No. 5 (1988)

Two days later, perhaps discouraged by his team's performance, Parker found a way out: He signed with the Dodgers, and embarked on a Hall of Fame career in the NFL.

That didn't mean he was through with the Dixie League, though. On Dec. 5, with the NFL season concluded (for Brooklyn, anyway), he rejoined Portsmouth for an exhibition game with their arch rivals, the Norfolk Clancys. Though he hadn't shown much against Alexandria, Parker was a star this time, throwing for three touchdowns and booting a field goal and an extra point in a 29-7 Portsmouth win.

A year later Parker again joined Portsmouth for a couple of December games after finishing his stint with the Dodgers. In the Cubs' final regular-season game, against Richmond, he was ineffective in a 14-9 loss. But a week later, in another exhibition against Norfolk, Parker scored all the Cubs' points in a 7-7 tie before a crowd of 5,601 –the season's largest.

All through this period Parker's NFL accomplishments were enthusiastically reported by the Press in both Portsmouth and Norfolk. Sometimes the tone was absolutely parochial, as in 1939 when one paper announced the NFL all-pro team with the headline (I'm paraphrasing) "Parker fails to make all-star squad." (Ace was on the second team, but that wasn't good enough.)

And all through the period, Parker kept showing up in the uniform of his first pro team, the Cubs.

1939 we've already covered. In 1940, his MVP year, Parker didn't play at all with Portsmouth, but the Cubs won the league title without any help from him. In 1941 the Cubs slipped to fifth place, and when they took on third-place Newport News (led by George Cafego) in a post-season exhibition, they needed a little help. Guess who?

Actually, the Cubs weren't content with just Parker to help them out. They also picked up NFL players Art Jones, Dick Humbert and Lyle Graham (the latter another Dixie League alumnus). But despite a great game from Parker, who ran for 95 yards and passed for 236 more, plus two touchdowns, Portsmouth came out on the Short end of a 21-13 score.

That was the end of the Ace Parker's pro football career in Portsmouth. But after the wear he resurfaced as a player-manager of the Portsmouth Cubs baseball team in the Piedmont League. Parker led the league in 1946 with a 0.331 average in 92 games; in 1947 he batted 0.315 in 130 games. He hung around for one more season, then moved on in 1949 to another Piedmont League team in his old college home, Durham. He lasted there through 1952, after which he finally called it quits.

In the impressive story of Ace Parker's athletic achievements, Portsmouth certainly plays a minor role – no role at all, as far as most people know. He made his name at Duke, earned pro football stardom with Brooklyn in the NFL and New York in the AAFC, and played major league baseball in Philadelphia.

But in his hometown, that didn't matter. Though other cities might claim him as theirs, he was always the pride of Portsmouth.