

The 1945 Title Game: Cleveland's 12th Man

by Jack Ziegler

The 1945 Eastern Division champions, the Washington Redskins (8-2-0), were built around the bullet passing of Sammy Baugh. Baugh's 1945 passing stats were phenomenal: 1,699 yards, 11 TDs, only 4 interceptions and a blistering 70.3 percent completion rate. Baugh's main receiver was halfback Steve Bagarus, a rookie from Notre Dame, with 35 receptions for 517 yards.

The 'Skins' main rusher was fullback Frank Akins, with 797 yards and a 5.4-yard average. Though second only to Philadelphia's Steve Van Buren in rushing yards, Akins would perform poorly in the championship game, and his lackluster effort was keenly felt.

The Western Division champs, the Cleveland Rams (9-1-0), featured rookie QB Bob Waterfield from UCLA in a "bombs away" passing attack similar to Sid Luckman's or Arnie Herber's. While Baugh's stats were superior, Waterfield's were certainly respectable: 1,609 yards, 14 TDs and a 53 percent completion rate.

Besides Waterfield, the Rams looked to rangy end Jim Benton (45 receptions, 1,067 yards, 8 TDs), halfbacks Fred Gehrke and Jim Gillette, and fullback Don Greenwood. Greenwood was the short yardage man, while Gehrke (6.3- yard average) and Gillette (6.1 average) were the breakaway threats.

The championship game was scheduled for 1:30 p.m. Sunday, December 16, at Cleveland's Municipal Stadium. With the temperature at 6 degrees Fahrenheit and a gale blowing in off Lake Erie, only 32,178 fans showed up to partially fill the stadium's 77,569 seats. One earmuffed cop, looked around at blanket-wrapped fans, some gathered around small fires in the stands, was heard to remark: "Barnum was wrong. There's one born every second."

On an early possession, Cleveland drove from its own 21 to the Washington 5. Highlights included three Waterfield completions to Benton, one a 30-yarder to the Redskins 14. But on the next play Washington's Wayne Millner threw Gehrke for a six-yard loss. The Rams struggled back, coming up one yard short of a first-and-goal when Gillette was stopped at the 5 on fourth and two.

With the ball deep in their own territory, the Redskins immediately went into punt formation. But Baugh fumbled a bad snap and intentionally grounded a pass. The penalty moved the "Skins back to the 2 1/2-yard line. On the next play, Baugh surprised the Rams by passing from the end zone to Millner, all alone on the Redskin 10. But a sudden gust of wind carried the ball into one of the uprights. The ball bounced back into the end zone, giving the Rams a safety and a 2-0 lead with 5:40 left in the first quarter.

Had the ball bounced onto the field of play, it would have been ruled an incomplete pass. As reporter John Dietrich of the Cleveland Plain Dealer noted with understatement, "The fairness of the rule is subject to some question."

The fluke safety proved costly for Washington. Not only did it provide the ultimate victory cushion, but soon afterward Baugh left the game, having reinjured the sore ribs he sustained in the last game of the season against the Giants. He returned only briefly, mainly as holder for placekicker Joe Aguirre. Merl Condit filled in as punter.

Baugh's replacement was his understudy since 1938, Frankie Filchock. Filchock had seen only limited action in 1945, but he struck quickly in the second quarter, tossing a 38-yard pass to Bagarus, who faked out Waterfield and ran in for the game's first touchdown. Aguirre's point after was good and Washington led 7-2.

Waterfield, perhaps smarting from his defensive lapse against Bagarus, redeemed himself late in the second quarter. Beginning on his own 30, he moved the Rams downfield, helped by a 19-yard run by Gillette and a 14- yard reception by Benton. The coup de grace was a Waterfield-to-Benton 37 yard touchdown pass. Benton caught the ball in full stride, dancing away from a diving Les Dye to make the

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halftime score 9-7, Rams. As if to make the point that little should be taken for granted on this day, Waterfield's extra point attempt was partially blocked and barely flopped over the crossbar for the conversion.

Early in the third quarter, Waterfield threw his second touchdown strike of the day, a 44-yarder to Gillette. Easily outdistancing the backpedaling Ki Aldrich, Gillette caught the pass in full stride at the 10 and sprinted untouched into the end zone. Waterfield's kick sailed wide, though, and the Rams led 15-7.

Late in the third quarter, the 'Skins struck back. Filchock began the march on his own 30, the centerpiece play a 50-yard pass to Bagarus, who was dragged down from behind by Gehrke on the 6 to prevent a score. On the next play Ram tackle Gil Bouley threw Filchock for an 11 yard loss, seemingly killing the Redskins' chance at a touchdown. Running plays by Condit and Sal Rosato moved the ball to the 8-yard line. On fourth down Washington went for the touchdown. Right halfback Bob Seymour faked to the inside, broke to the corner of the end zone, and gathered in Filchock's pass without a Ram within 20 yards. Aguirre converted to narrow the score to 15-14.

Though the scoring was over for the day, the excitement was not, as the ball changed hands eight times in the last quarter. The Redskins' best chance came after a Ram drive collapsed on the Washington 24, Pat West's attempted lateral bouncing away from Gillette on the frozen ground and Aldrich recovering. The "Skins seemed inexorable as Filchock drilled a 44-yard sideline pass to Dye at the Cleveland 31. But three line plays netted only 7 yards and Aguirre came in to attempt a field goal, with Baugh holding. The kick was high enough and long enough. Referee Ronald Gibbs hesitated momentarily before signaling "no good." Pushed by the wind, the ball had drifted slightly to the right with 6:16 left in the game.

After another Cleveland possession, Bagarus returned a Waterfield punt to the Redskin 42. Two Filchock passes moved the ball to the Ram 41, but there Cleveland stiffened. With 2:10 left Aguirre tried another field goal, this one falling pathetically short.

The Rams turned the ball over one last time, but on the first play Filchock's pass was picked off by Ram back Albie Reisz, who returned it to the Washington 29. Waterfield ran out the clock on quarterback keepers, and the Rams hung on to win, 15-14.

The 1945 championship was a game filled with irony, The much anticipated quarterback duel between old pro Sammy Baugh and new kid Bob Waterfield never took place. Baugh's statistics were dismal: 1 completion in 6 attempts, a 6-yarder to Bagarus. Frankie Filchock, however, performed extremely well, completing 8 of 14 for 178 yards and 2 TDs. In this one game he passed for more yardage than he did in the whole regular season.

The big stories for the Rams were Waterfield's passing (14 of 27, 192 yards, 2 TDs), Jim Gillette's running (17 attempts for 101 yards), and Jim Benton's pass receiving (9 catches for 125 yards and 1 TD). Equally important was the stellar play of the younger, faster Ram line. Aside from opening holes for Gehrke and Gillette, tackles Eberle Schultz and Gil Bouley, guards Mike Lazetich and Riley Matheson and center Mike Scarry held Washington backs to a measly 32 yards rushing, the lowest total in a championship game since the 73-0 game in 1940. Leading Washington rusher Frank Akins' major contribution was a game-opening 8-yard gain on which he suffered a broken nose inflicted by "Rattlesnake" Matheson (no face guards, remember).

The 1945 championship game had it all--arctic winds, and icy playing surface,hard-hitting offense and defense, crucial substitutions, a missed extra point, and a freak safety. When all was measured and weighted, columnist Shirley Povich of the Washington Post coined the game's fittest epitaph: "...the goal posts have been the twelfth man in the Rams' lineup.

Washington	0	7	7	0	-	14
Cleveland	2	7	6	0	-	15

Cle- Safety, Baugh's pass hit goal post

Wash.- Bagarus 38 pass from Filchock (Aguirre)

Cle- Benton 37 pass from Waterfield (Waterfield)

Cle- Gillette 44 pass from Waterfield (Waterfield XPM)

Wash.- Seymour 8 pass form filchock (Aguirre)

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1st downs	8	14
Rushing yds	35	180
Passes	9-20-2	14-27-2
Passing yds	179	192