

The Season of '41

by Stan Grosshandler

On January second Stanford, using the resurrected T-formation, defeated Nebraska in the Rose Bowl illustrating the speed and deceptiveness of this formation. The following day the National Intercollegiate Football Rules Committee initiated unlimited substitution and recommended players be numbered according to their position.

On the fourth, a Pro All-Star game was played at the Polo Grounds between the 1940 champion Bears and an All-Star team chosen from the rest of the NFL. The Bears won 35-24.

On January sixth President Franklin D. Roosevelt proposed that when the war raging throughout the rest of the world ends all people should be guaranteed four freedoms: speech, worship, from want, and from fear. His new budget has 60% dedicated for national defense. In March the monumental Lend-Lease act allowing the U.S. to supply the Allies with much needed materials was passed by Congress.

During the April meetings of the NFL Bert Bell and Art Rooney, co-owners of the Philadelphia Eagles announced they were trading franchises with Lex Thompson who had bought the Pittsburgh Pirates from Rooney the previous year. The entire rosters of each team would swap cities with the former Eagles becoming the Steelers and vice-versa..

Next, the league announced that Elmer Layden, coach and A.D. of Notre Dame, was appointed Commissioner. The old fullback of the Four Horseman would have powers equal to those of Baseball Commissioner Judge Kenesaw Landis.

Baseball captured, and held tight, the attention of the nation as Joe DiMaggio compiled his incredible batting streak, Ted Williams attempted to become the first man in a decade to bat .400, and the Dodgers and Cardinals put on an exciting race for the National League pennant. The baseball season this year has come to be known as "The Last Great Baseball Season."

Almost unknown was the war in North Africa, as the British valiantly fought Nazi Germany and her Axis allies back and forth across the arid desert. Undoubtedly more Americans were concerned about sports than the Luftwaffe's bombing of London and the R.A.F.'s retaliation by hurling tons of bombs on the major cities of the Third Reich.

On June 22nd, the Axis invaded Russia with the greatest military attack in the history of mankind. By fall they had Leningrad under siege and were fighting at the gates of Moscow.

Though the "new" T-formation was widely acclaimed only two of the NFL's teams planned to use it in the fall. The Bears who had dominated the league in 1940 and the Eagles where Greasy Neale was brought in as coach and Tommy Thompson, a man with vision in only one eye, was installed at quarterback.

In the Western Division the Packers retained the Notre Dame box with their great passing tailback Cecil Isbell, future Hall of Fame fullback Clarke Hinkle, brilliant blocking back Larry Craig who played end on defense, and wingbacks Andy Uram and Joe Laws.

The Lions had the legendary Byron "Whizzer" White who had abandoned his Rhodes Scholarship because of the war and returned to the NFL with Detroit the previous season. He had replaced Kent Ryan at tailback, who for some long forgotten reason, had been a hero to my school mates and me.

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While with the Pirates in 1938 White had led the league in rushing. He repeated with the Lions in 40. Until Eric Dickerson won titles with L.A. and the Colts over forty years later, Whizzer was the only man to win rushing titles for two different teams.

The Cleveland Rams had Parker Hall at tailback and Johnny Drake at full, two of the more glamorous players of pre-TV NFL.

The perennial losers, the Chicago Cardinals, had the old "Dream Backfield" ace Marshall Goldberg struggling along within a great group of mediocrity.

Over in the East, Steve Owen of the Giants continued to baffle the league with his A formation featuring a galaxy of great backs, too numerous to mention here. His cross-town rivals the Brooklyn Dodgers had put together a pretty fair team under the dour dentist Jock Sutherland. Ace Parker, the ultimate triple threat hero, was the tailback of his single wing.

Washington had the immortal Sammy Baugh sharing tailback time with Frankie Filchock; while the Steelers, who would not discard the singlewing until 1952, presented a cast of unknowns that eventually won but a single game.

The first Official National Football League Roster & Record Manual appeared replacing the Spalding Guides (1935-40). It was 79 pages, 6 3/4 by 5 inch, comb bound paper back with a photo of Clarke Hinkle on the cover. There are only records and no information, other than rosters, about individual teams.

Also Pro Football Illustrated, published by Elbak, made its first appearance that fall. The cover was a game photo of what appears to be the Cards and the Redskins. There are stories on Automatic Jack Manders, league history, 1940 records, rosters, many many photos; but no write ups on the teams!

On August 28 the annual Pro-College All-Star Game took place before 98,203 fans in Chicago's Soldier Field. The Bears demolished the collegians led by Tommy Harmon, one of the most publicized college players in the history of football, 37-13.

Though the All-Stars had a galaxy of stars, just one man was to be elected to a professional Hall of Fame, a somewhat obscure right halfback out of UCLA. He scored the second All-Star TD when in the last period he took a 39-yard pass from Charlie O'Rourke and ran the remaining seven into the end zone.

This obscure young man was to be elected to Cooperstown for his feats in baseball. His name was Jackie Robinson.

The season opened like the Indianapolis 500, in staggered starts. Pittsburgh played Cleveland at Akron on September 7. The following Saturday (September 13) New York opened at night in Philadelphia. The next day the Lions were at Green Bay. On Tuesday the Cleveland Rams opened at night with the Chicago Cardinals. A full schedule was finally played Sunday, September 21 with Cleveland at Green Bay in Milwaukee, Philly at Pittsburgh, and Detroit at Brooklyn.

Bert Bell had attempted to coach the Steelers but after two loses abdicated, giving the job to the highly successful Duquesne U. coach, Aldo "Buff" Donelli. Buff's game plan was to coach the Steelers in the morning and Duquesne in the afternoon.

This worked fine until November 8th when the college team was scheduled to play in California and the pro team in Philly the following day. Donelli had planned to fly to the East Coast after the game; however a snow ruined his plans. At this point Commissioner Layden, an old Duquesne coach himself, stepped in and told Buff he must choose between the college and the pro teams.

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Donelli chose the college and led it to an undefeated season -- something he couldn't hope to do with the rag tag Steelers. He was replaced by Walter Kiesling who was to frequently replace dismissed Steeler coaches in the future.

During midseason Clarke Hinkle attained a career 3,504 yards to pass Ace Gutowsky and become the all time rushing leader. His teammate Don Hutson scored three touchdowns and two conversions to run his season total to 95 points, the most points ever assembled in a single season.

Whizzer White again bid farewell to the NFL on November 30th when he joined the Naval Intelligence Service on his way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

There were basically two decent teams in each division: the Giants who finished 8-3 and the 7-4 Dodgers in the East and the Bears and Packers in the West.

On December 7th, as the Dodgers were beating the Giants for the second time of the season, a startling announcement shook the stadium. Every person in military service in the stadium was ordered to immediately return to his post. This was the day that President Roosevelt was to call the "Day of Infamy" - Pearl Harbor Day - The United States was now officially at war!

Over in the Western Division the Bears and Packers had traded loses and each wound up 10-1. This resulted in the first divisional playoff in NFL history. Fortunately the league had, that very year, provided for not only playoffs, but in the case of a tie game, the Sudden Death overtime.

As the NFL prepared for their playoff and championship games, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States and Japan occupied Guam, a key possession in the Pacific. General Douglas MacArthur prepared to evacuate the Philippines.

Sudden Death was not necessary in either the playoff or championship game as the Bears demolished the Packers 33- 14 and the Giants 37-9.

The season's top rusher was Clarence "Pug" Manders of Brooklyn with a mere 486 yards on 111 attempts, the least yardage to ever win a rushing title. He beat George McAfee of the Bears by 12 yards; however George had only run the ball 65 times. No Bear ran the ball more than 81 times as a total of ten men shared the ball carrying role.

Isbell led the league in passing with Hutson leading in both receiving and scoring. Baugh topped the punters, White led in punt returns, and Goldberg led in both kickoff returns and pass interceptions. Clarke Hinkle led in both field goal attempts and successes with fourteen and six.

The '41 Chicago Bears, frequently overshadowed by the 73-0 team of 1940, are arguably one of the greatest teams in NFL history. Several years ago I had the opportunity to ask George McAfee which club was the better '40 or '41 and without a moment's hesitation he cited the '41 team. Though Bill Osmanski voted for the 1940 group, his choice was challenged by Clarke Hinkle who pointed out "Bill had lost the start to Norm Standlee in '41."

Future Hall of Famers were Coach Halas, Sid Luckman and McAfee in the backfield and Clyde "Bulldog" Turner, Danny Fortmann, George Musso, and Joe Stydahar on the line.

Other dominating players were Young Bussey and Bob Snyder at QB, fullbacks Standlee, Osmanski, Joe Maniaci, and Gary Famiglietti, plus halfbacks Ray Nolting, Hugh Gallerneau, Bob Swisher, Harry Clark and Ray McLean.

On the line were ends Dick Plasman, Ken Kavanaugh, John Siegal, Hamp Pool, George Wilson, and Bob Nowaskey, tackles Lee Artoe and Ed Kolman, and guards Al Biasi, Ray Bray, Aldo Forte, and Hal Lahar.

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The Packers had future Hall of Famers Hutson, Tony Canadeo, Hinkle, plus some greats of the era as Charley Brock, Bill Lee, "Baby" Ray, "Buckets" Goldenberg, Paul Engebretsen, and Russ Letlow.

Future Canton enshrines on the Giants were Alphonse "Tuffy" Leemans and Mel Hein; while the Dodgers had Parker and Frank "Bruiser" Kinard.

Other future HOFers that season were Baugh, Washington Coach Ray Flaherty, Philadelphia's "Greasy" Neale, and Bert Bell.

The top college teams of 1941 were undefeated Minnesota, undefeated (but tied) Notre Dame, Duke who played in the transplanted Rose Bowl, Texas, and Georgia.

Only 44 players had been lost to the military in 1941; but in the next four seasons the league was decimated, losing 1,354.

Five players who played the '41 season never came back: Young Bussey who reported immediately after the Bears won the title, Don Wemple of the Dodgers, Nick Basca of the Eagles, Packer "Smiley" Johnson, and Jack Lummus of the Giants. Many more returned safely; but never again to the fields of the NFL.

Unlike baseball, the year of 1941 cannot be considered pro football's last great year.