

TOO MANY GUNS: The 1950 Browns/Eagles "World Series"

by Jack Ziegler

In the late summer of 1950 the eyes of the professional football world turned toward Philadelphia's Municipal Stadium. There on September 16, a Saturday, the first game of the 1950 NFL season would take place, pitting the 1949 NFL champions, the Eagles, against the perennial AAFC champions, the Cleveland Browns. As a result of the AAFC/NFL merger, the NFL now consisted of 13 teams, up from 10 in 1949. But old-line "National Leaguers" remained skeptical of Cleveland, considering them "cheese champions" of a "cheese league" and Paul Brown a glorified high school coach who as yet had not proved himself in the big time.

Both teams brought solid credentials to the "World Series" of football. The Browns had beaten the Bears, Packers, Colts, Lions and Steelers in the preseason. The Eagles, though less successful in preseason (3-2, including a 17-7 loss to the College All-Stars), had won the Eastern title for the last three years and league championships in 1948-1949.

Besides sacrificing prestige in the All-Star defeat, the Eagles lost their two best rushers, speedy Bosh Pritchard and the indispensable Steve Van Buren as well as their best blocking lineman, tackle Al Wistert. Van Buren was the finest halfback in the league, having run for 1,146 yards in 1949 plus leading the Eagles to a 14-0 victory over the Rams in a muddy championship game in the Coliseum. But the fractured toe he sustained in the August 11 All-Star game and a subsequent operation on August 21 made "Wham-Bam" doubtful for the opener (Van Buren ultimately suited up but did not play).

Still Coach Earl "Greasy" Neale remained confident that Clyde "Smackover" Scott, a strong, fast, former 1948 Olympic hurdler, and Frank "Zoomer" Ziegler would fill in capably as halfbacks. Fullback Jack "Moose" Myers would block and catch short passes. Superb T-formation quarterback Tommy Thompson would have two excellent ends, Pete Pihos and Jack Ferrante, as targets. Chuck Bednarik, Vic Sears, Bucko Kilroy, et.al. would prove tenacious in the trenches, no doubt.

The Browns were also a T-formation club, though more attuned to the pass than the "running T" of the Eagles. Glue-fingered Mac Speedie and Dante Lavelli played end. Rex Baumgardner and Dub "Six O'Clock" Jones signed in at halfback with Jones often going in motion as flankerback (this in 1950!). At quarterback, Otto Graham owned virtually every passing record in the AAFC and could throw everything - short bullet passes, subtle timing patterns, the long ball.

If the opposition defended the pass to energetically, "Automatic Otto" (an All-American tailback at Northwestern) could kill you with option roll-outs or trap plays by the AAFC's robo-fullback, Marion Motley. At 238 pounds and with quick feet, Motley hearkened forward to another Browns' fullback, Jimmy Brown (except that Motley was a willing - and devastating - blocker). In the interior line, brutes like Frank Gatski, Lou Rymkus, Lou Groza and Bill Willis had ways of capturing opponents' attention.

Though kickoff wasn't scheduled until 8:45 p.m., the 26 ticket windows opened at 6 p.m. to accommodate the estimated 70,000 - 80,000 patrons. Entertainment was provided by the 85-piece U.S. Navy band and the bright green-clad Eagle band. Color guards from local American Legion posts as well as convalescent World War II and Korean veterans seated prominently on the infield's edge served as reminders that V-J Day was only five short years ago and that halfway round the world ferocious fighting raged along the Pusan Perimeter. When the "Star-Spangled Banner" was played, everyone surged to his feet to sing the national anthem - who among them would not have known a son, brother, husband or friend who had not served in Europe, the Pacific or, now, Korea?

The game began much the way the Eagles figured it would. Though Cleveland return man Don Phelps raced for a 64 yard touchdown, it was called back for clipping. Just as serious for the Browns was the loss of tackle and placekicker Lou Groza on the play. Forrest "Chubby" Grigg, who had never

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 14, No. 4 (1992)

placekicked in a pro game before, would be pressed into emergency service. The Eagles scored first midway through the first period as power dives and off tackle plays by Ziegler and Scott carried Philadelphia to the Cleveland 8. Denied a TD by a tenacious Browns' defense, the Eagles had to settle for a 15-yard field goal by Cliff Patton to go ahead 3-0.

After a missed 25-yard field goal attempt by Grigg, Cleveland struck back late in the first quarter on a 59-yard pass from Graham to Dub Jones. Graham, who had thrown three incomplete passes in his first series, was now hitting on all cylinders. Jones faked a sideline cut, then headed straight down the middle toward the goal post. Russ Craft, one of the finest defensive backs in the league, bought the fake and was left at the sidelines while Jones make an extended-arms catch on the Eagle 25, stumbled, then regained his balance and streaked into the end zone. Grigg's PAT made it 7-3 Browns.

In the second quarter the Eagles looked to come back after Motley fumbled at his own 37. The Eagles moved the ball to the Brown 3, but then could move only one more yard as Cleveland's resistance stiffened. Motley, inserted as a linebacker on this goal line stand, made 3 of the 4 tackles to turn away Philadelphia. Moreover, the Eagles' best back, Clyde Scott, suffered a season- ending broken shoulder on this series, forcing coach Neale to use defensive back Russ Craft in his place for the game's remaining 35 minutes.

Though few in the stands realized it, the game's crisis had been reached. Twice the Eagles had been inside the Browns' 10-yard- line and had only three points to show for it. They would not get many more chances.

Late in the first half, Graham engineered a pretty 71-yard drive featuring short passes to Speedie, Motley and Jones. The capper was an exquisitely executed 26-yard touchdown pass to Dante Laveli who used a goal post to screen closely following defensive back Frank Reagan. Grigg's placement made it 14-3 Browns at the gun.

Though concerned, The Eagles were not despairing, as they figured their professionalism and toughness would wear down Cleveland in the second half. Their illusions were quickly dispelled as Cleveland took the third quarter kickoff and moved irresistibly down the field, Graham completing five passes in a row. On the seventh pass of the series, Graham eluded two would-be Eagle tacklers (one of whom, the ferocious Norm Willey, momentarily had Graham in his grasp) to fire a touchdown pass to Speedie. Grigg's conversion made it a one-sided 21-3, Cleveland.

In desperation the Eagles went to their "Z-wide" formation with Craft replacing Scott. Philadelphia penetrated to the Cleveland 33 before Thompson's interception killed the drive. Late in the third, the Eagles began their only touchdown drive of the day as Bill Mackrides replaced the ineffective Thompson at quarterback. From his own 45, where Bud Sutton had intercepted Graham, Mackrides moved the Eagles in for the score on a 17-yard touchdown strike to Pete Pihos. Patton's PAT proved good; it was 21-10, Browns.

Philadelphians' hearts gladdened for a time till Cleveland began its penultimate touchdown drive midway through the last quarter. The Browns' offensive lines blew the weary Eagles' D off the line of scrimmage as Jones, Baumgardner and Motley carried on a series of power plays. At his teammates' insistence in the huddle, Graham scored the fourth Browns' touchdown on a one-yard keeper. Griggs' kick made it 28-10, Cleveland.

Eagles fans hoped the worst was over but there was one last bitter draught in the cup. After Warren Lahr intercepted a Mackrides' pass, Dub Jones scampered around and past the now exhausted Eagle defense for 57 yards, Reagan hauling him down on the 7. With 23 seconds left Baumgardner scored on a 2-yard sweep. Grigg's PAT proved good and the new kids from Cleveland had mortified the old pros from Philly, 35-10.

Of the some 70,000 stunned Philadelphians in Municipal Stadium no one was more shocked than Greasy Neale. Neale had gambled heavily on his team's physical strength to overwhelm Graham and his receivers and had failed miserably. While Eagle defensemen had jammed the middle against the run, holding Motley to 48 yards, Graham and his receivers had a field day. Graham threw for 346 yards and three touchdown passes. Even superior defensive players like Alex Wojciechowicz and Russ Craft could not contain talented Browns pass receivers Mac Speedie and Dub Jones. By the late third quarter the vaunted Eagle defense was hopelessly confused. Consider assistant coach Blanton Collier's reply to

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 14, No. 4 (1992)

Paul Brown's questions on how Philadelphia was covering Cleveland's receivers: "Truthfully ... I don't know. I can't tell because I'm sure they don't know what they're doing themselves."

In defeat, Neale was as magnanimous as he had been arrogant beforehand, bemusedly noting "Jeez ... they've got a lotta guns, haven't they? ... a lotta guns," and praising Graham as an "ideal passer." When some reporter offered the ready-made excuse of an injured Steve Van Buren, Neale did not rise to the bait: "We'd probably have had another touchdown if Steve had been in there . maybe two more. But as for winning the game - well, that's something else."

At the time, many "National Leaguers" felt the Browns' victory over the Eagles was an early season aberration. Surely the Eagles would even the score when they next met the Browns on December 3 in Cleveland. They didn't - the Browns beat them 14- 9. In reality, the "world series" game was a landmark contest, marking the rise of a new dynasty and the fall of an old one. In 1950 the Browns went on to win their division and beat the Rams in the championship game, 30-28.

Over the next seven years, with the exception of 1956 when the Giants won the title, Paul Brown's club exercised a AAFC-like mastery over the Eastern Division. The Eagles' sun, on the other hand, was going down. In 1950 they stumbled to a 6-6 record as Steve Van Buren never recovered his old form and Tommy Thompson turned in a sub-par year (his last).

The low point was certainly the 7-3 Polo Grounds loss to the Giants when Neale and frustrated Eagle owner Jim Clark almost came to blows at half-time over Neale's coaching decisions. At the end of the year, Neale, a Quaker City institution since 1941 and architect of the famed Eagle defense, was let go. He never coached in the NFL again. Without Neale, the Eagles degenerated into mediocrity. They did not win another divisional title until 1960.