

OH! THOSE 23-17 OVERTIME GAMES

By Jim Campbell

Here's the question: When was the first "sudden-death" pro football game? You're a pro football fan if you rattle off ... December 28, 1958. That's the date of what is still billed by many as "Football's Greatest Game." It was the NFL title game and the Colts bested the Giants 23-17 in an overtime period. But if you're a New York Football Giant "loyalist" (and a trivia expert) you may have answered this way ... August 28, 1955.

Fully three-years before the first championship "sudden-death," the Giants and the Los Angeles Rams hooked-up in a West Coast pre-season game that was tied at the end of regulation play. "Sudden-death" was evoked, and the Rams won the prolonged contest by what was to become for the Giants and their followers a haunting 23-17 score.

The Saturday night game, as were many pre-season games of the time, was played at a neutral site, which was usually "virgin territory" as far as NFL franchises were concerned. In this case the locale was Portland, Oregon, in the Great Pacific Northwest.

The Giants, then under Jim Lee Howell, jumped out to a quick 10-0 lead on a short dive by Eddie Price, with Ben Agajanian adding the PAT and a later field-goal. However, the Rams countered with a "Tank" Younger TD and Tad Weed 25-yard fielder. Rookie Ronnie Waller put the Rams ahead in the third period of the game with a 52-yard return of a Tom Landry punt. With the conversion, like the first kicked by Les Richter, the scoreboard read: Los Angeles 17-New York 10.

The Giants' Johnny Williams, who finished the season with the 49ers, intercepted a pass from Norm Van Brocklin in the N.Y. endzone and brought it out to the 23-yard line. Charlie Conerly then went to work. Hitting receivers Kyle Rote, Mel Triplett and Bob Schnelker for the 75-yards worth, Conerly, who earlier in the game was replaced by Bobby Clatterbuck, had the Giants at the Ram two. Alex Webster, then a rookie running back down from the Canadian League went the final footage for the score. Agajanian's boot again knotted the score at 17 with about six-minutes to go. During the final minutes of the game, both kickers, Weed and Agajanian, had chances at potential winning three-pointers, but each missed from the vicinity of the 30-yard stripe.

Now, history was about to be made. The game was a promotion of one Harry Glickman, who later claimed to have no mystic powers when he asked for and received permission from NFL Commissioner Bert Bell to play-off a tie. should one occur. The "sudden- death' way of settling a tie in a championship game was made a part of the NFL rules in January of 1947, but a need for such an extra-period never arose under game conditions. After a brief time-out, a toss of the coin was held, with the Rams winning the toss and, naturally, choosing to receive ... Woodley Lewis bringing it back to the I.,A. 30-yard line. On a three-and-a half- minute drive, engineered by future Hall of Famer Van Brocklin, the Rams scored the historic winning touchdown.

"Corky" Tharp, who along with team-mate "Skeets" Quinlan and the Giants' Eddie Price, had an outstanding night rushing, was the bread' n' butter back on the winning 70-yard drive. Even though "Tank" Younger, another stick-out ball-carrier for the evening, got the decisive six-points, Tharp contributed heavily to the winning drive with runs of 15, 22, 3 and 10 yards. The rookie from Alabama, despite a brilliant performance which also included a 66- yard kick-off return, was unable to make the Ram roster and never surfaced again in major league football until the 1960 season, which he spent with the Titans of the AFL. Defensively, Cliff Livingston, then a pro sophomore, stood out for the New Yorkers ... something he would do over and over during his eight-year stay as a Giant.

Fan reaction to the "sudden-death" was mixed. Practically all of the 22,222 paying-customers enjoyed the "bonus." Some expressed the opinion that it placed too much emphasis on winning the over-time toss. While this would seem valid, it was not the case when history repeated itself three years later. If you'll recall, the Giants won the toss and had the ball before turning it over to the Colts for their dramatic drive. In further comparing the two games, the Colts' strategy in driving all the way for the winning TD in '58

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instead of a short, sure field-goal was questioned to a great extent in some quarters, but not a word was heard about this supposedly questionable judgment when used by the Rams three years before.