

BLOCKING BACKS

by Stan Grosshandler

The blocking back of sixty years ago was fundamentally a hybrid of a running guard, a fullback, and a tight end. During the course of the season, besides running interference, he rushed, passed, and caught passes. In writing an article about blocking backs (BB), an immediate problem is encountered, i.e. what will the title of the story be? One possible title is "Great Forgotten Blocking Backs;" however it immediately becomes apparent there is no criteria to determine a great blocking back, and how can they be forgotten when nobody knew who they were in the first place?

A possible criteria to identify the better blocking backs is the success of their teams.

Between 1933 when the league formed the East and West Divisions and 1946 when most teams had switched to the T-formation, four teams dominated the NFL -- the Redskins and Giants of the East and the Bears and Packers in the West.

The Redskins ran from single and double wing formations until 1944 when Sammy Baugh was permanently installed as a T-quarterback. They had come into the NFL in 1932 as the Boston Braves, changing their name to the Redskins the next season. The 'Skins had little success until 1936 when they added Riley Smith, a blocking back from Alabama. Riley had been the second man chosen in the initial draft and when the number one choice, Jay Berwanger, passed up the NFL, Smith became the highest draft choice to sign a pro contract.

Smith exhibited great versatility as he ran, passed, caught passes, and kicked both extra points and field goals. Behind his blocking the 'Skin ace runners, Cliff Battles, and Pug Rentner, almost doubled their yardage. The Redskins won the division. Moving to Washington the following season, the 'Skins repeated and in 1938, Smith's final season, finished second.

Over the years, the Redskins had many notable blocking backs, such as Ernie Pinckert who came out of Southern Cal noted for his blocking. In 1940 all three Washington blocking backs were from Gonzaga, Max Krause, Ray and Cecil Hare.

The New York Giants employed the single wing until 1938 when Steve Owen added his A-formation. That was the main New York offensive formation until 1948 when Charlie Conerly and Paul Governali began taking their snaps from under center. The Giants had two blocking backs who had exceptionally long careers in an era not characterized by longevity in the NFL: Leland Shaffer from Kansas State and Joe Sulatis with no college experience. Shaffer joined the club in 1935 and played until 1945 with the exception of 1944. During this time he was not only a blocking back but played wingback and end on the offense and linebacker, end, and backfield on defense. Sulatis (1943-45, 1947-53) was also extremely versatile, playing blocking back, fullback, wingback, quarterback and guard on offense and linebacker and end on the defense. Though the team had switched to the T in '48, they continued to run plays from the A with Joe blocking as late as 1952.

The Giants had a long list of impressive blocking backs in Bo Molenda, Max Krause, Red Corzine, Tilly Manton, Nello Falaschi, and Steve Filipowicz (who also played for the baseball Giants).

The Chicago Bears had used the T-formation since their origin. They had several backs who blocked well, most notably Bronko Nagurski, but no position designated as blocking back.

Green Bay used Curly Lambeau's version of Knute Rockne's Notre Dame box. The Packers would vary the right halfback, playing him either as a wingback or slotting him between the tackle and end. In 1947 they went to the T, moving tailbacks Jack Jacobs and Irv Comp to quarterback.

Hank Bruder was the main blocking back from 1931 through '39. During this period, he shared the post with Buckets Goldenberg, a longtime Packer who is best remembered as a guard.

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In 1939 Larry Craig from South Carolina became the Packers' blocking back and the following season he also played defensive end, releasing Don Hutson to play safety. Not only was Don an exceptionally good defensive back, but many felt this move prolonged the thin end's career considerably. Craig was a Packer through 1949, playing defensive end and linebacker after the team's switch to the T obsoleted his blocking back position.

The only team to break the Bear-Packer lock on divisional titles from 1933 until 1945 was the 1935 Lions. The blocking backs were Frank Christiansen, who played but four years in the NFL, and Buddy Parker, who was to have a long pro football career. Out of small Centenary College, Parker was a rookie in 1935. He backed up both Christiansen at blocking back and Ace Gutowsky at fullback. Parker moved to the Chicago Cardinals in 1937 where he played through 1943. In 1949 Buddy became coach of the Cardinals and later was to have successful coaching careers with Detroit (1951-56) and Pittsburgh (1957-64).

Two blocking backs with unusually long and productive careers were Bull Karcis and Ben Kish. Karcis from Carnegie Tech, once a great eastern football power and now known as Carnegie-Mellon, played for the Brooklyn Dodgers (1932-35), Pittsburgh Pirates (1936-38) and New York Giants (1938-39, 1943). In 1942 he had a brief term as head coach of a very poor Lions team. Like many blocking backs of his day, the Bull frequently was turned loose at fullback.

Ben Kish joined the 1940 Dodgers from the U. of Pittsburgh. After two seasons as a Dodger and a year in military service, he became a member of the Eagle-Steeler "Steagle" combo of 1943 as a fullback. In '44 he stayed with the Eagles, playing for them through 1949. Showing great versatility, he played linebacker and defensive back. In 1943, he intercepted five passes, nearly a third of his career total of 16. Ben not only rushed but caught passes and even did some punting. His best season was 1948 when he rushed for 106 yards and intercepted three passes.

The Steelers continued to play the single wing until 1952. Their most notable blocking back was Charlie Seabright who joined the Rams in 1941, spent the next three years in service, and then played for the Steelers from 1946 through 1950. Behind him in 1946 Bill Dudley won a rushing crown while the 1947 team was one of the best the Steelers ever fielded until the 1970's.

The single wing was used by several teams in the All America Football Conference. The New York Yankees, with Lloyd Cheatham at blocking back used it for three of the four years the league existed. The Dodgers also used it during their entire lifetime in the league, while Chicago and Los Angeles each used it two years each.

There has been little acclaim given to blocking backs. No pure blocking back has ever been elected to the Hall of Fame though the flamboyant Johnny Blood occasionally played the position. As player-coach of the 1938 Pittsburgh Pirates, Blood played BB the entire season and helped his star Whizzer White lead the league in rushing.

As the game has changed, the venerable blocking back, as have several other positions, disappeared from sight. An interesting chapter appears in the 1945 edition of Football Facts and Figures by L.H. Baker. Chapter 14, entitled "Football's Forgotten Men -- the Blockers" laments the fact that so little attention has been paid to this important position and concludes with a list of "the ten best blockers" (college, of course) which includes both Ernie Pinckert and Nello Falaschi.

Pinckert played nine years for the Redskins; yet was only a blocking back twice and a third year split his time between blocking and wingback. He was a wingback the other six years.

A final trivia note. Irv Kupcinec, famous Chicago columnist, was a blocking back for the 1935 Eagles.

STAR BLOCKING BACKS

Hank Bruder - GB 1931-39; Pit 1940

Wendell Butcher - Bkn 1938-42

Frank Christensen - Det 1934-37

Red Corzine - Cin 1933; Cin-St.Louis 1934; NYG 1935-37

Larry Craig - GB 1939-49

Nello Falaschi - NYG 1938-41

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Roger Grove - GB 1931-35
Cecil Hare - Was 1941-42; Military 1943-44; BknA 1946
Ray Hare - Was 1940-43; Bkn 1944; NY-A 1946
Bull Karcis - Bkn 1932-35; Pit 1936-38; NYG 1938-39, 1943
Ben Kish - Bkn 1940-41; Military 1942; Phi-Pit 1943; Phi 1944-49
Max Krause - NYG 1933-36; Was 1937-40
Father Lumpkin - Port 1930-33; Det 1934; Bkn 1935-37
Tilly Manton - NYG 1936-38; Was 1938; Bkn 1943
Bo Molenda - NYY 1927-28; GB 1928-32; NYG 1932-35
Buddy Parker - Detroit 1935-36; Chicago Cards 1937-43
Ernie Pinckert - Bos 1932-36; Was 1937-40
Herm Schneidman - GB 1935-38; ChiC 1940
Charlie Seabright - Cle 1941; Military 1942-45; Pit 1946-50
Leland Shaffer - NYG 1935-43, 1945
Rhoten Shetley - Bkn 1940-42; Military 1943-45; BknA 1946
Vic Spadaccini - Cle 1938-40
Riley Smith - Bos 1936; Was 1937-38
Joe Sulatis - NYG 1943-45, 1947-53; Bos 1946
Fred Vanzo - Det 1938-41; ChiC 1941
Dick Weisgerber - GB 1938-40, 1942