

## Another look at interception stats

By Bob Gill

It's been a couple of years since we tackled this subject ("Another Look at the Baugh Legend," Vol. XIII, No. 5), so first let me explain what it's all about. The NFL didn't start printing interception totals until 1941, and as a result some of the game's greatest players and leading defensive backs – Sammy Baugh and Don Hutson, for instance – played several seasons for which there are no such figures available. But game articles from the earlier years often mention interceptions, which, after all, are pretty important plays in most games. So a careful look at newspapers of the time can yield partial interception records for those seasons.

Last time we looked at Baugh, who's credited with 28 interceptions from 1941 on. In fact, he also had at least eight more: two in 1938, three in 1939 and three in 1940. And the Redskins picked off 15 or 16 passes (in games Baugh played) from 1937-40 that weren't reported in the papers, so Baugh's totals could well have been higher. But we can definitely say he picked off at least 36 passes in his career.

That figure is particularly interesting, because it would mean Baugh held the career record for interceptions (along with all his others) when he retired in 1952.

However, Hutson is officially credited with 30 interceptions, and there's no record for the first *five* years of his career, 1935-39. He does have an edge over Baugh in this regard, because Hutson is listed with six interceptions for 1940, when the only "official" figures are those for the three co-leaders. (The others were Brooklyn's Ace Parker and Kent "Rip" Ryan of Detroit.)

So a check of the Packers' games for the five years in question could well move Hutson ahead of Baugh in the interception derby. OK, so he doesn't need another record any more than Baugh does. But it's an issue worth looking into, in part because it's a significant record anyway, and also because of the stature of the players involved.

With that in mind, I checked all the Packers' games from 1935-39 in the two Milwaukee papers, the *Sentinel* and the *Journal*. (I didn't have access to the Green Bay *Press-Gazette*, which may still have been printing play-by-play accounts then.) I also checked out-of-town papers for the Packers' road games. The results? Inconclusive, but interesting.

First of all, I found only four more interceptions by Hutson: one each in 1936, '37, '38 and '39. That's not too surprising when you remember that he played defensive end until midway in the 1939 season, when Curly Lambeau shifted rookie blocking back Larry Craig to Hutson's spot on defense and turned the all-pro receiver into a defensive back. And it gives Hutson a total (incomplete, remember) of 34 for his career – two short of Baugh.

However, more interceptions went unreported in the Packers' game stories than in the Redskins', partly because Green Bay was picking off a lot more passes. From 1935-40 their totals (from *The Football Encyclopedia*, by Neft and Cohen) were 27, 31, 22, 21, 26 and 40. To compare, the Redskins' totals for 1937-40 were 17, 19, 24 and 18. The highest number of interceptions I couldn't find for any Redskins season was seven, in 1938; the Packers' unreported interceptions exceeded that number every year except, oddly enough, 1938.

Anyway, the Packers picked off 127 passes from 1935-39, and I found 87 of them, Hutson had four, which is about one out of 20. Since 40 are missing, we might assume he had another two, which would give him 36 – same as Baugh. However, that same logic would also give Baugh another two interceptions (fewer were missing for the Redskins, but he had a higher percentage of the team's total), still leaving him ahead.

That's all hypothetical, though. All we can say for sure is that Baugh had 36 and Hutson had 34.

Or did he? One other thing I did was to check the Packers' game reports for 1940, since the team picked off 40 passes and no one else had an official total but Hutson. I found only 29 of those 40, but the results were disturbing: Hutson had only two of them.

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How likely is it that a player who made six of a team's 40 interceptions would have only two from a random sample of 29 of them? Obviously it's possible, but mathematically it's not a very good bet. So what's going on here?

Remember, 1940 was the first year the NFL counted interceptions, and the numbers underwent some changes during the season. As you may recall from the earlier article, the league's statistical press release of Nov. 7 listed Baugh as the leader in *interception return yardage* – but without his interception total. By the end of the year the league wasn't listing that any more, and in the Spalding guide for the following season there were no individual interception stats of any kind.

The designation of Hutson, Parker and Ryan as co-leaders didn't appear until a few seasons later, when they appeared as the first entry in a season-by-season list of league leaders. And who knows what those figures were based on?

Of course, they may be the correct totals. But considering the circumstances, including the absence of totals for anyone else in the league, I think you have to take Hutson's 1940 interception total with at least a grain of salt. And that would mean adjusting his career figures accordingly.

So there you have it. We can definitely say Baugh had at least 36 interceptions and Hutson had at least 34. And there's reason to wonder whether Hutson's figure is inaccurately inflated. Which leaves Baugh on top, right?

Well, not exactly. While checking the Packers' interceptions I also found four more for a fellow named Johnny Blood: one in 1935 and three in '36. And while checking on the Redskins earlier I found one for Blood when he was playing with Pittsburgh in either 1937 or 1938. David Neft credits Blood with 32 interceptions through 1934, and these new discoveries give him 37, enough to make him – *voila!* – the new leader.

Blood's claim to the title is more convincing when you remember that his total is far less complete than Baugh's or Hutson's. His interception stats cover pretty much every game in 1928, when he played with Pottsville, and for 1929-33, when he was in Green Bay. But he has only partial stats for 1925-27 and 1934-36, and none at all for 1937-38, except that one against the Redskins. So the odds are that complete stats would only serve to extend his lead over Baugh.

It seems pretty clear, then, that Johnny Blood wins this battle of the Hall of Famers. He held the career record for interceptions until at least 1954, when the relatively unheralded Don Doll retired after picking off 41 passes in a six-year career with the Lions, the Redskins and the Rams.

Though he certainly wasn't unheralded, Blood himself is sometimes cited as one of the less-qualified members of the Hall of Fame. That argument is apparently based on the fact that he didn't do well in the all-pro voting; he made a few second teams in 1929 and '30, a few first teams in 1931, and that's it. That kind of contemporary record is often a good measure of a player's value, but in this case it's wrong.

Blood was an anachronism, a great receiver and defensive back in a game that didn't put much emphasis on the pass. He retired with at least 178 receptions and 3,153 yards, plus 37 touchdown catches – all career records. Unfortunately, no one knew it at the time, because all those passes he caught, like all those he picked off, had gone largely uncounted. And even if his receiving records had been recognized, they would have paled beside those of Hutson, who shattered them all within two years of Blood's retirement.

Still, we're talking about a player who retired with every career record for pass-catching, plus the interception record. Maybe the observers of his own time weren't sure how valuable that package was, but we know better now.

I should also mention another contender for the career interception record who emerged from this research: Packer halfback Joe Laws. David Neft credits him with 22 interceptions, and he picks up 11 more here, including a high of six in 1938. That gives him at least 33 for his career – the same number as Irv Comp, another Packer (1943-49) who holds the official pre-1950 record.

Then there's Charley Brock, the Packers' center and middle linebacker from 1939-47. Brock picked off 17 passes from 1941 on, including a high of six in 1942. But he topped that figure in his rookie season, when

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he picked off at least seven; and he added at least four in 1940, giving him the team lead for the second year in a row, according to the available information.

Brock isn't a very familiar name, but in his day he was a fine player, earning mention as a second-team all-pro in 1943 and '44, and a first-teamer in 1945 and '46, despite the presence of Bulldog Turner and Mel Hein for all but one of those years.

In the interest of completeness, here are the (incomplete) interception totals for the Packers for all the years I checked, including 1940:

**1935:** Nate Barrager 1; Johnny Blood 1; Hank Bruder 3; Milt Gantenbein 1; Buckets Goldenberg 1; Arnie Herber 1; Clarke Hinkle 2; Cal Hubbard 1; Swede Johnston 2; Joe Laws 1; George Sauer 3; George Svendsen 1.

**1936:** Wayland Becker 1; Johnny Blood 3; Hank Bruder 3; Arnie Herber 1; Clarke Hinkle 4; Don Hutson 1; Joe Laws 1; Paul Miller 2; Bob Monnett 1; George Sauer 2; Bernie Scherer 1; George Svendsen 3.

**1937:** Hank Bruder 2; Milt Gantenbein 1; Buckets Goldenberg 1; Clarke Hinkle 4; Don Hutson 1; Ed Jankowski 1; Paul Miller 1; Bob Monnett 1; George Svendsen 1.

**1938:** Bob Monnett 2; Clarke Hinkle 2; Don Hutson 1; Cecil Isbel 12; Joe Laws 6; Paul Miller 1; Herm Schneidman 1; Roy Schoemann 1.

**1939:** Charley Brock 7; Clarke Hinkle 1; Don Hutson 1; Cecil Isbell 2; Joe Laws 3; Moose Mulleneaux 1; Bud Svendsen 1; Andy Uram 1.

**1940:** Bob Adkins 2; Frank Balasz 1; Charley Brock 4; Lou Brock 2; Harry Buhler 2; Larry Craig 1; Tom Greenfield 1; Arnie Herber 1; Clarke Hinkle 2; Don Hutson 2; Cecil Isbell 1; Bill Lee 1; George Svendsen 1; Andy Uram 2; Hal Van Every 3; Dick Weisgerber 3.

Before leaving this subject, let me add that anybody who has access to the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* from 1935-40 could do a lot for football history by checking on the Packers' interception stats for those seasons. Assuming that the paper was still printing play-by-play accounts, that would answer a lot of questions.