

Did Nevers ever say never again?

By Bob Gill

Though he might have been the greatest player of his time, Ernie Nevers had about the shortest career of anyone in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. He retired twice – once after 1927, his second season, and again after 1931. In between, of course, he'd returned in 1929, but he never came back after his second goodbye.

Or did he? Well, he never played in the NFL again, but Nevers occasionally turned up for the next couple of years in postseason exhibition games against touring teams on the West Coast. Eventually he broke his ankle in one such game, which put an emphatic end to that practice.

Those games were true exhibitions, involving hastily assembled teams of "all-stars" who hadn't practiced together. At the end of the 1932 season, though, Nevers played what was probably his last game with a real team, when he joined the Memphis Tigers for a Dec. 18 game against the Boston Braves. The Tigers had been one of the best independent teams in the country since 1929, regularly playing NFL clubs and sometimes winning. The Braves, a new team featuring Hall of Famers Cliff Battles and Turk Edwards, were the first and only NFL squad to play the Tigers that year.

Actually, Nevers' former team, the Chicago Cardinals, had been scheduled to play Memphis on Dec. 11, and Nevers was on hand for that one too. But rain forced its cancellation and shortened Nevers' "comeback season" to a single game.

Unfortunately, the weather may have been worse a week later: It wasn't raining, but the field was covered with snow and ice. Only about 1,000 fans turned out to watch the Tigers and Braves battle to a scoreless tie.

Considering the conditions, Nevers did pretty well. The Memphis *Commercial Appeal* spoke enthusiastically of his "great booming punts," and he was responsible for the game's only offensive flurry: He passed to Garland Grange for eleven yards, to Bunny Belden for nine, then plunged for three more and a second consecutive first down. To put it in perspective, those were the only first downs of the game.

Earlier Nevers had carried the ball four times in a row but come up inches short of another first down. And he also turned in the game's longest run, a 27-yard jaunt; but that one ended with a fumble. He was apparently the game's leading ground gainer by a substantial margin – not bad for a guy who'd sat out the whole season up to that point. And a fitting epilogue to one of the great careers – even if it was a little on the short side.