

Bigger is Not Always Better ... Not in the Era of Specialization

EVOLUTION OF NFL PLAYERS

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EDITOR'S NOTE: In 1984, Jim Campbell penned this survey of the position-by-position changes in pro football. Readers might like to consider what further changes have taken place in the last ten years.

When the organization that became the National Football League was formed in Canton, Ohio, on September 17, 1920, there were hardly any substitutes, much less today's highly specialized players.

Teams carried 16 men on a roster. The term "60-minute man" had meaning. If you started a game, you not only were likely to finish it, but you almost never got a breather. When your team gave up the ball, you just took the opposite role. You lined up against the same man, only you were on defense and he was on offense.

Free substitution, introduced in 1949, led to definitive offensive and defensive platoons. Specialization grew out of free substitution and led to an increase in roster sizes.

As specialization took hold, the physical requirements for positions changed. At one time, "bigger is better" was the general rule. Today's players are stronger and faster than the hardy pioneers of the early days, and some of them certainly are bigger. But, in 1984, players at certain positions actually are smaller than they were 10 or 15-not to mention 45 or 50-years ago.

Offensive and Defensive Ends

Sixty years ago, an end was more of a blocker and defender than anything else. Most teams operated out of the Single Wing, a powerful run-block offense. Passing did not become a significant part of pro football's strategy until it was popularized by Earl (Curly) Lambeau and the Green Bay Packers in the late 1920s. Writing an early "how-to" book, legendary coach Glenn S. (Pop) Warner said an end should be "one of the quickest and fastest men on the team, as well as one of the foxiest."

Offensively, early ends were key blockers on sweeps. On occasions when passes were thrown, they were the primary targets. There were no intricate pass patterns, nor was much work done on timing. An end blocked when his team had the ball, and protected the flanks when it didn't.

Taller, lighter linemen usually found themselves positioned at end. However, with the 1935 pro debut of Alabama's Don Hutson at Green Bay -- a man most observers concede could step right into the modern game with ease -- a premium was placed on pass-catching ability. Through the pre-World War II era, most ends stayed at the end of the line both offensively and defensively. But when Larry Craig, a rugged Single-Wing quarterback (or blocking back), joined the Packers in 1939, Lambeau moved Hutson on defense from end to the relative serenity of safety, which Craig normally would have played, and switched Craig to end. The move is logical now, but it was quite radical then. It undoubtedly prolonged Hutson's career and took advantage of Craig's aggressiveness.

After World War II, free substitution allowed players to play on offense or defense. The men who played defensive end were much bigger than their offensive counterparts.

Size and strength were required for a strong pass rush. Those attributes also helped in playing the run. But by the late 1970s, as more teams deployed 3-4 defenses, the end had to be more than just big. He also had to be fast and quick.

Platooning also allowed ends who were primarily pass receivers to play. Eventually, they were deployed as flankers and split ends and did little blocking.

The next major step was the creation of the tight end. Three standouts of the 1960s -- Ron Kramer, Mike Ditka, and John Mackey -- were the prototypes. More than just "third tackles," they caught a lot of passes.

Today's wide receivers vary in size and shape, but nearly all are fast, and possess great hands. Size -- or lack of it -- is secondary to getting open and making the catch.

Offensive and Defensive Tackles

At the time of the founding of the NFL, tackles usually were huge, heavy men such as Wilbur (Pete) Henry and George (Bull) Lowe, who were not necessarily very fast or mobile. Their job was to open holes offensively and anchor the line defensively. Even today, a tackle's responsibilities still are that to a large extent, although pass protection has become a significant duty of the modern offensive tackle.

More than any other position, the tackle always had size. Whether on offense or defense, he still is among the biggest men on the field.

As six-man defensive lines gave way to five-, four-, and even three-man lines, the size of tackles remained large, but the job requirements called for a different type of bigness. By the 1960s, the emphasis was shifting to speed. The inside pass rush demanded it. Henry Jordan, Bob Lilly, and Alan Page epitomized this type. Pursuit also was stressed, giving the defensive tackle a streamlined look. Merlin Olsen, and then Joe Greene signaled a return to the larger tackle, but they still brought quickness and speed for pursuit.

When four-man lines still were prevalent, the great defensive teams usually had outstanding combinations of ends and tackles. In Baltimore, Art Donovan policed the line of scrimmage while Gino Marchetti recklessly rushed the passer from end. In Los Angeles, Olsen policed his area, while David (Deacon) Jones applied relentless pressure from the outside.

Today, most NFL teams use the 3-4 defense. The defensive tackle really doesn't exist in the 3-4. His place has been taken by a nose tackle, who plays facemask-to-facemask on the center. The nose tackle is more compact. He has more space to patrol and absorbs more physical abuse. He must control the center. In the 1970s, Houston's Curley Culp became the prototype modern nose tackle, and players such as Fred Smerias and Bob Baumhower continue to fill the role.

As passing became more a part of the offense, and pass rushing became a vital function of the defense, the offensive tackle had to become adept at pass protection. One missed block -- especially from the quarterback's blindside -- could ruin a team's season. The best pass-blocking tackle usually plays on the left to protect the vulnerable side of right-handed passers. Modified blocking rules have added emphasis to tacklers' upper body strength, hand strength, and quick feet. Today, coaches seek tall players with long arms to play tackle.

Offensive and Defensive Guards

"He has few chances to make spectacular plays, and yet the backs could gain little ground but for his aid and protection." That's how Pop Warner described guards in the NFL's early days. The same holds true today.

At first, guards tended to be as big as tacklers, but, as plays evolved that required "pulling," they became lighter, more compact, and had a lower center of gravity. Speed also became a requirement.

Until the 1950s, when five- and four-man lines were used, the guards on defense played in the middle of six-man lines, clogging the center of the line.

A key step in evolution of the defense was to drop one of the guards a yard off the line much like a latter-day linebacker and insert a larger man directly over the center. Detroit's Les Bingaman, a 349-pounder, filled the gap well. But so did Cleveland's Bill Willis at 210. This position, called middle guard, was akin to today's nose tackle in the 3-4.

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The next step literally, was that -- a step. Bill George, young middle guard with the Bears, was having trouble dropping back on pass coverage from his down position in the line. He and George Connor, a tackle, discussed the problem. George stood up and played a yard off the line -- the middle linebacker became a new position. By the mid-1950s there no longer was a designated defensive guard.

When platoon play allowed guards to play on either offense or defense, the offensive guard stayed the same size for a number of years. He still was somewhat squat, was quick enough to pull, was strong enough to block straight ahead, and was tenacious enough to pass block.

Gradually, guards again got as big as tackies. Pulling no longer is required on many teams.

Centers and Linebackers

The primary job of the center always has been to get the ball to the quarterback. At first, facing the quarterback, he shuffled the ball back to him. Later, in the Single Wing, the center made the head-between-the-legs long snap, and eventually, with the coming of the T-formation the hand-to-hand exchange. But from the first, the center was a big, tough guy -- George Trafton, Mel Hein, Alex Wojciechowicz, Clyde (Bulldog) Turner. He was an important blocker, but he often gained his fame on defense by knocking people down. In the standard "seven diamond" defense, he usually was the only man between the runner and a long gain.

The introduction and widespread use of the modern T-formation in the 1940s made life a little easier for the center. He no longer had to make the long snap to the back and then block. He still had a man on his nose, but he could look him in the eye. As the middle guard dropped off the line to evolve into a middle linebacker, the center was even less concerned with the initial impact, but he needed quickness to cut off a defender. This gave rise to lighter, quicker men such as Jim Ringo and Ray Wietecha.

As defenses became more complex, with stunts and disguises, a center needed more than just heft and quickness. It became a thinking man's position. The center is responsible for calling out blocking assignments, often changing them at the line of scrimmage like a quarterback calling audibles.

Like fullbacks, with whom they shared linebacking duties in the old standard 6-2-2-1 defense, centers became linebackers exclusively in the two-platoon era. All except the Philadelphia Eagles' Chuck Bednarik, that is ... but that's another story.

While the original fullbacks tended to gravitate toward becoming outside linebackers, centers -- being somewhat bigger -- found their niche as middle linebackers.

In recent times, a linebacker simply, is that. He has been born and bred to play the position, but he still has many of the attributes of the original fullbacks and centers.

Linebacking has become a glamor job. Outstanding athletic ability leads to spectacular plays, and these take place in the open, where people can see them.

Quarterbacks and Safeties

Pop Warner said, "Without a doubt the most important position of the team is quarterback."

Whether or not it is the most important position, it is the most visible. Modern day quarterbacks are quick to point out that they get too much blame when things go bad and too much credit when things go good.

The first quarterbacks were "coaches on the ficid." They had to be. It was illegal to coach from the sidelines until 1944, and the few substitutes who entered the game were forbidden to talk to a teammate until at least one play had been run.

Early on, the quarterback's primary duty was to hand off to the runners, and occasionally to pass. With the advent of the Single Wing, he became the blocking back, but he still called the plays. It wasn't until the T-formation became popular that he became predominantly a passer. Many of the first T-quarterbacks had been Single-Wing tailbacks who were adept at throwing. Sammy Baugh, Sid Luckman, and Bob Waterfield made the transition. The evolution of the position continued through Norm Van Brocklin, Y.A. Tittle, Johnny Unitas, and Bart Starr.

Along the way, other prototypes were tried. Minnesota's Fran Tarkenton brought scrambling into the game. Chicago's Bobby Douglass, who once rushed for 968 yards in a season, added another dimension Dallas's Roger Staubach incorporated the best of the running, passing combination.

Today, mobility is prized, but it is used to buy time to throw rather than to gain yards. Joe Montana and Joe Theismann best exemplify this and Jim McMahon has shown the knack.

While many quarterbacks have been relieved of play-calling, they still must possess a thorough knowledge of the game, and the team's system. Reading defenses is still the key to success.

In the early years, quarterbacks also played as safeties on defense, but they seldom got involved in many plays. In some cases, they stood as far as 35 yards behind the line of scrimmage -- as the last line of defense. Later their main responsibility was pass defense. Still later, safety was refined into "free" and "strong," each different from the other. Free safety allowed for a roving, roaming center-field style of play. Strong safety required covering the tight end. In a man-to-man defense, the safety was responsible for the opposing quarterback, in effect leaving him "free."

St. Louis's Larry Wilson popularized the safety blitz or red dog. Variations of that tactic are used today from all secondary positions.

The complexity of the game today makes safety nearly as cerebral as quarterback, but today's safety still is a throwback to the old days.

Offensive and Defensive Halfbacks

About the time the NFL was formed, a popular song suggested, "you gotta be a football hero to get along with the beautiful girls." Without saying so, the hero undoubtedly was a halfback. From the very start, it was a glory position -- Jim Thorpe, Red Grange, Paddy Driscoll, Johnny Blood (McNally).

Size mattered little in the beginning -- it was speed and elusiveness that counted. It wasn't until the time of Cliff Battles (in the 1930s) that fast runners also were sizable.

In addition to running and catching the ball, halfbacks had defensive duties -- tackling, knocking down passes, intercepting.

With platoons, some halfbacks became receivers (flankers). The Rams' Elroy (Crazylegs) Hirsch and Cleveland's Dub Jones were among the earliest and best.

Philadelphia's Steve Van Buren became the prototype running back in the late 1940s, combining speed and size. Ollie Matson, Hugh McElhenny, Rick Cesares, and Jim Brown followed.

In the early 1960s, Vince Lombardi made things happen in Green Bay using a big-back offense. But after that the pendulum swung back toward runners who could produce, no matter what their dimensions, smallish runners like Washington's Larry Brown, Denver's Floyd Little and, Otis Armstrong, and the Raiders' Greg Pruitt are examples. So are Waiter Payton, Tony Dorsett, Billy Sims, and Curt Warner. Runners such William Andrews, Ottis Anderson, O.J. Simpson, and Franco Harris have physical tools and talents that defy cataloging. And Eric Dickerson has the moves and speed of a halfback and the size of a fullback.

The halfback on defense is the cornerback. It's a place where you can't hide; the whole world knows when you've been beaten by your man, unless you are playing zone. There, failures can be disguised. And chances are your man is one of the NFL's most skilled athletes.

Cornerbacks such as the Raiders' Lester Hayes and Mike Haynes are fearless man-to-man defenders. Other corners rely on zone and combination coverage. But no matter what, all cornerbacks occasionally get burned. Size and speed are needed, but so are reaction and mental toughness. A mistake usually costs six points, and it takes a special breed to bounce back from that. The defenders must move up to force the run and often make tackles.

Offensively, halfback still retains some of the original glory, but defensively, only interceptions can compensate for the toughest, most thankless job in football.

Fullbacks and Linebackers

Mention fullback, and legendary names such as Bronko Nagurski and Ernie Nevers come to mind. From the first, fullbacks were the big, burly, power runners, blockers who cleared the path for the halfbacks. And when they switched to defense, they backed up the line, clogging the paths of the other team's runners. Green Bay's Clarke Hinkle, somewhat smaller, but no less tough than Nagurski, spoke for all two-way players when he responded to the question of how long he played in the NFL. Said Hinkle, "Twenty years -- ten on offense and ten on defense."

Eventually, platoons eliminated the need for fullbacks to go both ways, but they still had a less glamorous job than their fellow backs. Fullbacks primarily were blockers such as the Browns' massive Marion Motley, or short-yardage pounders such as the Giants' Eddie Price. College fullbacks, such as Mike Curtis, Ray Nitschke, and Jack Pardee, became star NFL linebackers. Still, there was a little glory for the running back who evolved from the original fullback position. Jim Taylor and Larry Csonka typified the latter-day fullback -- more raw power than polished finesse.

In the mid-1960s there were no more fullbacks. They and the halfbacks all became "running backs." Some teams had two halfback types, others had two fullback types (Green Bay). Still others had a halfback type and a fullback type. Eventually, it came down to a runner and a blocker. The blocker usually was the fullback type.

The next step in the evolutionary trend was one back. John Riggins is perhaps the best example of a fullback becoming the one back. Earl Campbell is another.

Fullbacks are a dinosaur of the NFL. Now, they are known as running backs. But their job has stayed pretty much the same, except in the one-back system. They do the power running and they block -- pretty much what Bronko Nagurski and Ernie Nevers were doing in the twenties and thirties.

Defensively, once the split into platoons was made, many fullbacks became linebackers exclusively. This also applied to centers. Eventually it became impossible to separate the two -- a linebacker was a linebacker was a linebacker. You no longer could say he was a defensive center or defensive fullback.

Until the mid-1970s, bigger was again better as far as linebackers were concerned. Dick Butkus at 245 pounds stood at the top of the heap-sometimes literally. But then Washington's Chris Hanburger and Pittsburgh's Jack Ham changed the standard; they were lighter, faster, and more active in passing situations.

More recently, Tampa Bay's Hugh Green and the New York Giants' Lawrence Taylor have become the yardstick to measure ideal linebacking prospects. They are just as fast and just as active but much larger.

No matter what, the original fullback position still is played by hard-nosed men.

Special Teams

In a way, the first NFL players all were specialists. They specialized in 60-minute football, in doing everything the game required. However, the first true specialists were kickers. In the days before free substitution, each team had several players who could punt and placekick. Likely as not, the kicker was a lineman -- such as Bears tackle Lee Artoe, Giants guard Len Younce, and Eagles guard Cliff Patton.

Jack Manders gained notice for his kicking in the 1930s, but he was the Bears fullback, too. Ken Strong was known for his punting and kicking during his career with the Giants, but it was only at the end that he was strictly a kicker.

Free substitution again led to the specialization. In 1946, Ben Agajanian of the Los Angeles Dons of the All-America Football Conference, who had lost several toes on his kicking foot in an elevator accident, was the first man to perform his speciality without also playing a regular position. Cleveland's Lou Groza, the first really famous kicking specialist, also was an all-pro caliber offensive tackle for 14 of his 21 years in the pros.

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Until Pete Gogolak joined the Buffalo Bills in 1964, all kickers were conventional or straight-on. Today (1984), only Mark Moseley of the Redskins is not a soccer-style kicker.

From burly lineman or linebacker types, today's placekicker has shrunk in size to where Gary Anderson of the Steelers is not atypical at 5-11, 156.

Punting also has changed. At first, punting out of bounds -- for the "coffin corner" -- was a standard procedure. Then the emphasis switched to distance. Today, the punter's buzz words are "hang time," the time a punt is in the air, allowing for better coverage. Kick coverage teams have become so adept at their jobs that kickoff and punt return averages have dropped nearly 10 yards over the years.

But the kick returner still is vital to the game. He might not produce the average yardage, but he still is capable of breaking a long one. Speed, vision, and courage are essential to him.

In addition to the kicking game, specialization has crept into all facets of football. There are designated pass rushers, short-yardage power runners, linebackers for passing situations, running backs who mostly block, defensive backs (Nickel and Dime backs) who play only on passing downs, receivers who make only possession catches, and so on.