

WHEN IS A TOMMY NOT A LURTIS?

By Bob Carroll

A lot of people still use the old *Roger Treat Encyclopedia of Football* and there are some worthwhile features even if it's nearly twenty years out of date. Considering that there was really nothing in the way of a pro football encyclopedia before Roger got his first edition out in the early 1950s, Treat did a whale of a job.

That said, it also should be mentioned that most of us know we take the information Treat lists on 1920s players at great risk. Many, MANY of them were identified by guesswork and many, MANY of the guesses were wrong. Treat is better by the time he gets to 1930s players, and the 1940s are in good shape. After all, Roger started putting together his player lists (with the help of several pioneer researchers) before the '40s ended.

That's why it's so hard to figure where Lurtis came from.

He wasn't there at the start. In the first (1952) edition of Treat, the 1940s Philadelphia Eagles quarterback, is identified as "Tommy Thompson." But, somewhere between that first edition and the sixteenth edition (1979) he becomes "Lurtis (Tommy) Thompson." Lurtis?

Who?

Tommy Thompson, in case you've forgotten, was the underrated quarterback of one of the great teams in NFL history -- the Philadelphia Eagles of the late 1940's. All-Pro Eagles like runner Steve Van Buren, end Pete Pihos, and center Chuck Bednarik were better known, but it was Thompson who pulled the right strings to make it all go.

In 1947, Tommy guided the Eagles to a division title, but they lost an exciting Championship Game to the star-studded Chicago Cardinals. In 1948, Thompson had his best season, throwing for a league-high 25 touchdowns and ending as the NFL's top-rated passer. The Eagles and Cardinals met again in the '48 Championship Game under the worst weather imaginable -- a blizzard. Thompson did not make a mistake in a game that was bound to turn on a break. Then after a Cardinal fumble, he unerringly took the Eagles to a fourth quarter Van Buren touchdown that made them NFL champs, 7-0. The next year he quietly led the Eagles to another crown.

Tommy was a timely passer with excellent accuracy, surprising because he was blind in one eye -- a handicap that should have severely limited his depth perception.

What's in a Name?

Maybe he wasn't a Hall of Famer, but he was an authentic star. When he retired after the 1950 season, most of his NFL career passing totals ranked only behind Baugh and Luckman. You'd certainly think that by this time we could get his name right.

Lurtis?

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I dimly remember seeing that Lurtis somewhere else too, but I can't remember where. Maybe it was given by someone who read a late Treat. Anyway, when I wrote a short Thompson bio-sketch for David Porter's *Biographical Dictionary of American Sports 1989-1992 Supplement*, I gave Thompson's full name as "Lurtis Pryor Thompson." And I used it again in an expanded sketch I did for *The Coffin Corner*.

Soon afterward I heard from Jim Gallagher of the Eagles who'd received this from Thompson's widow: "I don't know where the 'Lurtis' came from and neither did Tommy."

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With all respect to Mrs. Thompson, I wasn't completely convinced. After all, did I tell MY wife every little thing about myself? Of course not! And, if my real name was Lurtis, would I tell ANYONE? Maybe a priest. On my deathbed.

Gallagher Investigates

Well, Jim Gallagher decided to follow up. He wrote to the University of Tulsa where What's-His-Name Thompson played in 1937-38. And he wrote to Paschal High School in Oklahoma where Whoozis Thompson graduated in 1936. He even wrote to the University of Alabama where Oh-You-Know Thompson enrolled in the fall of 1936 and dis-enrolled less than a month later. (I didn't know that!)

Well, to sum up, they all agreed he was "Tommy" more-or-less. His high school had an interesting version which I'll get to in a minute.

But first let me also throw in that the energetic Mr. Gallagher also checked NFL records and came out with wall-to-wall "Tommy." Also some really interesting stuff.

It turns out that TOMMY Pryor Thompson signed to play with the Chicago Cardinals on April 10, 1939, for \$135 a game. They hadn't drafted him. But then he didn't report in September and was placed on the inactive list on the 13th of that month. The Cards released him the following March 1, 1940, because it so happened that he wasn't eligible to sign anything in 1939 -- his class didn't graduate until 1940.

Ten days after the Cards released him, Thompson signed with Pittsburgh for \$150 a game. He played for the Steelers in 1940 (Yes, they were the Steelers, not the Pirates, in 1940!) and after that season, the Eagles and Steelers switched franchises. That got Tommy to Philadelphia. He signed with the Eagles for the same \$150 a game On June 9, 1941, but on July 17 he got a new contract for \$175 per game.

After that, they started paying him by the year: \$3,500 in 1942, and after World war II service in the army, a princely \$4,500 in 1945. This may have been pro-rated because he seems to have signed in October.

By 1946, with the AAFC making waves, a lot of NFL stars got raises. Tommy's '46 contract called for \$6,500 a season but he could have gotten another \$1,000 had the Eagles won the Eastern Championship. In 1947, there were no frills -- he made a straight \$9,000. He deserved it. He took the Eagles to the Eastern Title that year and came within a touchdown of the Cardinals in the championship game.

The Eagles were about to peak and they took no chances on losing their quarterback to the AAFC. They gave Thompson a three-year contract in 1948. It paid \$11,000, \$12,000, and \$13,000. You can look at it two ways. It WAS darn good money for those days, but on the other hand, what was a quarterback who led his team to NFL championships in 1948 and 1949 worth? And don't forget, he led the league in passing in '48. By 1955, Otto Graham was supposedly making \$25,000.

Tommy slumped a bit in 1950, but some of that was because his best weapon, Van Buren, was hurt. Once the AAFC merged into the NFL, a lot of players were offered pay cuts. I don't know what the Eagles offered Thompson, but in April of 1951 he was placed on the reserve list when he accepted a coaching position at the University of Arkansas.

Tommy with an "E"?

I've gotten a little away from the name thing, but I do have some more to say about it. Apparently, Tommy was never "Tom" or "Thomas." Everthing he signed was "Tommy" and that holds true for all the official documents I've seen.

However, Jim Gallager also came up with some pages out of the Paschal High School yearbook for 1936. On the pages showing Thompson as captain of the basketball team, co-captain of the football team, and wearing his graduation garb, Mr. Thompson is identified as "Tommye." That's right, "Tommye" with an "e"! It doesn't appear to be a nickname either.

Could he really have been "Tommye Pryor (Tommy) Thompson"?

Stay tuned.

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THOMPSON, TOMMY

QB

Tommye Pryor Thompson

6'01 195 Tulsa

Paschal HS [Ft. Worth, TX]

b: 08/15/16, Hutchinson, KS

d: 04/21/89, Calico Rock, AR

YEAR	TM	LG	G	PASSING									
				ATT	COM	PCT	YARD	AvgG	TD	TD%	IN	IN%	RATE
1940	Pit	N	11	28	9	32.1	145	5.18	1	3.5	3	10.7	17.7
1941	Phi	N	11	162	86	53.1	974	6.01	8	4.9	14	8.6	51.8
1942	Phi	N	11	203	95	46.8	1410	6.95	8	3.9	16	7.9	50.3
1943		MS											
1944		MS											
1945	Phi	N	8	28	15	53.6	146	5.21	0	0.0	2	7.1	38.7
1946	Phi	N	10	103	57	*55.3	745	7.23	6	5.8	9	8.7	61.3
1947	Phi	N	12	201	106	52.7	1680	8.36	16	8.0	15	7.5	76.3
1948	Phi	N	12	246	141	57.3	1965	7.99	*25	10.2	11	4.5	98.4
1949	Phi	N	12	214	116	54.2	1727	8.07	16	7.5	11	5.1	84.4
1950	Phi	N	12	239	107	44.8	1608	6.73	11	4.6	22	9.2	44.4
9 years			99	1424	732	51.4	10400	7.30	91	6.4	103	7.2	66.5

* - Led league