

1940: THE TRIUMPH OF THE T

By Bob Carroll

The United States ended World War II with the biggest explosions ever seen on the planet up to then -- Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For pro football, the decade began with the biggest explosion ever on an NFL field -- the Chicago Bears' 73-0 blasting of the Washington Redskins. In the great scheme of things, happenings on a hundred-yard field may be of little importance compared to the events of a World War, but to a football fanatic the year 1940 is of crucial importance to the development of their game.

The Bears' one-sided win led to the eventual triumph of the T-formation in all its guises as the premier attacking system. Once the lethal qualities of the T had been so thoroughly demonstrated by Chicago, other teams began redesigning their offenses. The switch was not accomplished overnight -- the Pittsburgh Steelers held onto their single-wing attack until 1952 and a few college teams still resisted the T into the 1960s. But by the end of the war in 1945, the T had clearly become the dominant method of moving a football.

The T-formation lent itself to passing far better than the old wing attacks. The quarterback who began every play was the key man. By turning his back to the line of scrimmage as soon as he got the snap, the quarterback hid what he was going to do with the football from the defense. He might hand-off or pitch-out, and that froze the defenses long enough for him to spot a receiver and throw to him.

Sid Luckman of the Bears was the first superstar T-quarterback in the pro ranks. By 1945, Luckman's erstwhile rival, Slingin' Sammy Baugh of the Redskins, had moved from his tailback position up under center. Bob Waterfield of the Rams, Paul Christman of the Cardinals, and Tommy Thompson of the Eagles were making headlines with their passes out of the T, and purists were complaining that the game was becoming too much like basketball when a team might throw as many as 25 passes in a contest.

One of the last great tailback-passers played his final game in 1940, and he went out with a splash. Davey O'Brien, the Philadelphia Eagles' diminutive star saved his greatest day for last, closing his season and career by throwing 60 passes for 33 completions for 316 yards -- all astonishing records at the time -- in a vain effort to keep the Redskins out of the championship game. Sammy Baugh, the 'Skins peerless passer, had broken the old yardage record earlier in the season, but he played conservatively against the Eagles, washing out a predicted passer shoot-out between the two former Texas Christian stars. After the game, O'Brien left the NFL for a position with the F.B.I. Baugh, of course, went on to the infamous 0-73 game.

The Redskins were the class of the Eastern Division for most of the season, but they peaked too early and were clearly stumbling down the stretch. In their last four regular season games, they lost to the Dodgers, scraped by the Bears on a disputed call, were soundly whipped by the Giants, and then had to hang on by their fingertips to survive O'Brien's barrage. A smart bettor might have figured the Bears would trouble them in the title game, but not even Nostradamus could have predicted the plague that struck Coach Ray Flaherty's proud Washingtonians on December 8.

The Brooklyn Dodgers, after a decade of frustration, almost caught the Redskins. Their new coach, dour Jock Sutherland, deserted the University of Pittsburgh for the pro game, and his strict rule brought the Dodgers the best finish in their history. Paced by the brilliant tailback Ace Parker and on defense by staunch tackle Bruiser Kinard, Sutherland's men closed fast and just missed the brass ring,

New York's Giants, the 1939 Eastern champs, also improved as the season progressed but were embarrassed in their finale on December 1. A crowd of 54,993 turned out on "Mel Hein Day" to honor the Giants' great center, only to see their heroes lose to Brooklyn.

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Art Rooney renamed his Pittsburgh Pirates the "Steelers" before the season, but what they say about "a rose by any other name" proved true for the less sweet-odored Pittsburgh eleven. Reportedly, this was the origin of a phrase that was uttered around Pittsburgh for years until the Super Bowl teams of the 1970s. Whenever the club would lose -- which they did with monotonous regularity -- someone was sure to sneer, "Same old Steelers!" The story is that Rooney came out to watch his newly-named Steelers practice in August of 1940, and after a few missed assignments, dropped passes, and so forth, walked away muttering, "They look like the same old Pirates."

On the same day the Bears were massacreing the Redskins, Rooney finalized a deal to sell his seldom-victorious-and-never-loved team to wealthy young Alexis Thompson, heir to a New York drug manufacturing company. Then Rooney turned around and bought a half interest in Bert Bell's Philadelphia Eagles, the team that for so many years had vied with Pittsburgh for the cellar in the NFL East.

It turned out that Thompson had no love for Pittsburgh. Before the spring thawed, he switched places with Bell and Rooney putting them at the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela and Thompson in the shadow of Independence Hall.

A far less bizarre transaction had taken place in early February when Dick Richards, the man who had brought the Lions to Detroit, sold them to Fred L. Mandell and associates for a reported \$225,000. That figure was ten times what Richards had paid when he bought the old Portsmouth Spartans franchise back in 1934.

At its annual meeting in April, the NFL owners had set the cost of a new franchise from a modest \$10,000 to a hefty \$50,000. If the report of the Lions' price was accurate, Richards made a heck of a deal!

Mandell brought back Patsy Clark as coach. He'd been in charge in the early years when the Lions won a championship, and Mandell hoped he could work his magic once more. Clark got a fine season out of Whizzer White, who returned from England where he was a Rhodes Scholar. The Whizzer led the league in rushing, but his team was strictly mid-level. The Bears' main competition for the Western Division title came from Green Bay, the 1939 league champs. Two losses to the Bears sank the Packers. Curly Lambeau's team was erratic. They smashed the Lions 50-7 a week after managing only three points in a loss to the Giants. Still, any team with Don Hutson was nearly assured of a record on the plus-side of .500.

The Bears were equally erratic, occasionally exploding with scoring binges but struggling on other days. To a large extent the Halasmen relied on defense until they got their tricky T-formation running smoothly.

On December 8, it ran perfectly.

1940 NFL CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

Griffith Stadium, Washington, D.C., December 8, 1940.

Attendance: 36,034

WASHINGTON REDSKINS 0

Bob Nowaskey	LE
Joe Stydahar	LT
Danny Fortmann	LG
Bulldog Turner	C
George Musso	RG
Lee Artoe	RT
George Wilson	RE
Sid Luckman	QB
Ray Nolting	LH
George McAfee	RH
Bill Osmanski	FB

CHICAGO BEARS 73

Bob Masterson
Willie Wilkin
Dick Farman
Bob Titchenal
Steve Slivinski
Jim Barber
Charley Malone
Max Krause
Sammy Baugh
Ed Justice
Jimmy Johnston

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Washington Redskins	0	0	0	0	- 0
Chicago Bears	21	7	26	19	- 73

1st Quarter:

ChiB: Osmanski, 68-yard run (Manders PK)	0:56
ChiB: Luckman, 1-yard run (Snyder PK)	10:50
ChiB: Maniaci, 42-yard run (Martinovich PK)	12:25

2nd Quarter:

ChiB: Kavanaugh, 30-yard pass from Luckman (Snyder PK)	11:45
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3rd Quarter:

ChiB: Pool, 15-yard interception return (Plasman PK)	0:45
ChiB: Nolting, 23-yard rush (Plasman PK failed)	4:25
ChiB: McAfee, 35-yard interception return (Stydahar PK)	5:12
ChiB: Turner, 20-yard interception return (Maniaci PK failed)	12:55

4th Quarter:

ChiB: Clark, 44-yard run (Famiglietti PK failed)	4:47
ChiB: Famiglietti, 2-yard run (Maniaci, pass from Sherman)	6:15
ChiB: Clark, 1-yard run (Snyder, pass failed)	12:36

Substitutions:

CHICAGO BEARS - Ends: Dick Plasman, Ken Kavanaugh, Jack Manders, John Siegal, Phil Martinovich, Hamp Pool, Eggs Manske; Tackles: Ed Kolman, Joe Mihal; Guards: Al Baisi, Aldo Forte, John Torrance; Center: Frank Bausch; Backs: Bernie Masterson, Solly Sherman, Harry Clark, Bob Swisher; Ray McLean, Gary Famiglietti, Bob Snyder, Joe Maniaci, Manders.

WASHINGTON - Ends: Wayne Millner, Bob McChesney, Sandy Sanford; Tackles: Bo Russell, Bob Fisher, Mickey Parks; Guards: Clyde Shugart, Clem Stralka; Centers: Steve Andrako, Vic Carroll; Backs: Erny Pinckert, Bob Hoffman, Boyd Morgan, Frank Filchock, Roy Zimmerman, Wilbur Moore, Bob Seymour, Jim Meade, Dick Todd, Andy Farkas, Ray Hare.

Statistics	ChiB	Was		ChiB	Was
First Downs	17	17	Pass intercepted by	8	0
Rushing Yardage	381	5	Punting	2-46	3-41.3
Passing Yardage	138	226	Fumbles Lost	0	0
Passing	7-10	20-51	Yards Penalized	25	70

Referee: William Friesell; Umpire: Harry Robb;
 Head Linesman: Irv Kupcinet; Field Judge: Fred Young.

Each Bear received \$873.99; each Redskin \$606.25.

At first glance, the most amazing aspect of the 1940 NFL championship game was that Washington was favored to win. Yet right up to kickoff and for the first fifty-six seconds, that seemed the most likely scenario. The Redskins had football's best passer in Sammy Baugh, the NFL's best record at 9-2, and home-field advantage. The Redskins used a modern, high-powered single-wing attack, while Bears coach George Halas still insisted on using the stodgy T-formation that had gone out of style about the same time as the bustle. Moreover, only a few weeks earlier, these same Redskins had bested these same Bears, 7-3, on this same Griffith Stadium field.

The Bears hadn't taken that defeat gracefully. They complained long and loud that they should have won on a disallowed touchdown pass. All that got them was a sneer of "Cry-babies" from Redskins owner George Preston Marshall -- a newspaper headline which Halas posted prominently in the Chicago dressing room. At kickoff, the Bears were in no mood to take prisoners.

It took fifty-six seconds for the Bears to score. George McAfee rocketed through the Redskins for seven yards and then Bill Osmanski, aided by a crushing George Wilson block, swept 68 more around left end for a touchdown.

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Washington may have been stunned but they struck back. They marched down the field to the Chicago 26. Baugh lofted a perfect pass to sure-handed Charley Malone in the end zone. He dropped it!

The Bears drove 80 yards, scoring on a Sid Luckman sneak. Before the first quarter ended, Joe Maniaci duplicated Osmanski's jaunt around left end, this time for 42 yards and a third touchdown. The fourth TD came in the second quarter on a 30-yard Luckman to Ken Kavanaugh pass.

With a 28-0 lead at intermission, Chicago might have gone conservative in the second half. Perhaps they did and no one noticed. Washington kept throwing the ball in a suicidal attempt to make something good happen. Bears kept snatching the ball out of the sky and running for touchdowns. Three Redskins passes were returned for touchdowns in the third quarter. Other interceptions -- there were eight on the day -- set up Bears TDs all during the 45-point half. All told, 73-0 was the highest score for a team and the greatest margin of victory ever recorded in an NFL game -- much less a championship game.

After the game, a reporter asked Baugh if things might not have been different had Malone not dropped that sure touchdown pass. "Yep," said Baugh. "It would have been 73-7."

In the aftermath, fans marveled at the precision of Chicago's T-formation which accounted for over 500 yards. This wasn't the "old" T, the experts observed; this "new" T had flankers, and men-in-motion, and splits in the line. Of course, Halas, his line coach Hunk Anderson, and Clark Shaughnessy, the former University of Chicago coach, had been tinkering with those things for several years; all the new wrinkles just happened to come together in one game -- aided in no small measure by errant Redskins passes, fast Chicago backs, and a roster of very grumpy Bruins.

Still, it was the new T that caught everyone's attention. A few weeks later, Shaughnessy and his T completed their first year at Stanford by taking a team that had won only three games under his predecessor and going undefeated with a Rose Bowl win. The T-formation was made.