

BYRON WHITE'S ROOKIE SEASON

By John Hogrogian

Nineteen thirty-eight was a good year for Byron White. On New Year's Day, the 20-year-old senior led the unbeaten Buffaloes of the University of Colorado into the second annual Cotton Bowl game in Dallas. The Owls of Rice University beat Colorado 28-14 before about 37,000 fans. In a strong effort for the losers, White threw one touchdown pass and ran 53 yards with an interception for the other Colorado touchdown.

The Cotton Bowl capped a superb season for White. Every major selector had picked him for the All-American backfield. The powerful 185-pound tailback was the star runner, passer and kicker in the Colorado single-wing offense, and he also excelled in the defensive secondary. Although Clint Frank of Yale won the Heisman Trophy, "Whizzer" White was the most acclaimed college football player of the 1937 season.

With football over, Byron White took to the basketball floor for Colorado. The Buffaloes compiled a 10-2 conference record and were invited to compete in the first annual National Invitational Tournament in the Madison Square Garden in March. The Buffs would play NYU in the semi-final round on March 14, then, if successful, would play for the championship on March 16. The New York *Times* described Colorado as "a high-scoring outfit built around Jim (Swisher) Schwartz, a great shotmaker, and Byron (Whizzer) White, the All-American football back." Schwartz averaged an outstanding 17.7 points per game. White had been an all-conference selection as a guard for three seasons. The Buffs had good size, with the starting five averaging 6 feet 2 inches, with White standing 6 feet 1 inch and the smallest starter an even 6 feet.

On Monday evening, March 14, Temple beat Oklahoma A&M by a score of 56-44 in the first game of a double-header before an audience of 12,000 fans. In the second game, Colorado beat NYU 48-47 on a set shot by Don Hendricks with less than 10 seconds left in the game. White had given the Buffs a 46-45 lead with 40 seconds left when he "pivoted under the basket and popped in a short set shot," as The New York *Times* described it in an article by Arthur Daley. The *Times* also stated that:

The Buffs set up their plays cleverly from a double pivot with the scorers cutting around to tally. But White was the guiding genius of the team and its steadying influence. The Rhodes Scholar, with a build as solid as an oak tree, was all powerful on the defense and an excellent shot when he so chose.

The five Colorado starters played the entire 40 minutes without substitution. Swisher Schwartz scored 14 points, while Don Hendricks scored 12. White was third on the Buffs, with eight.

On Wednesday night, March 16, the Owls of Temple beat Colorado 60-36 for the tournament championship before about 14,500 fans. Temple ran out to a 10-1 lead and never let up, led by Don Shields's 16 points. Jack Harvey led Colorado with 11 points, while White contributed 10. In the second time in three months, the Buffaloes had lost to a team called the Owls in a title game. On March 18, the *Times* published a photograph in which Byron White and Don Shields compare prizes they received for their play in the tournament.

Byron White sat out the baseball season in the spring. Other things were on his mind. White ranked first in his class academically, was president of the student government, and had been awarded a Rhodes Scholarship to attend graduate school at Oxford University in England. It was a wonderful opportunity that he could not turn down.

Another good opportunity also presented itself. A few weeks before the Cotton Bowl, the Pittsburgh Pirates of the National Football League chose White in the first round of the NFL draft. Owned and

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operated by 39-year-old Art Rooney, the Pirates (renamed the Steelers in 1940) were a relatively weak entry in the 10-team NFL. They had compiled a 4-7 record in 1937. Rooney offered White a one-year contract for \$15,000, the highest salary of any player in the league. With White's skill and fame, Rooney's offer was the big move in a drive to assemble a championship-level team that would draw larger crowds to home games at Forbes Field. The 1937 Pirates had averaged only about 14,000 fans per home game. A near-full house of 33,000 fans for a game against the Giants, however, promised larger crowds if the Pirates could assemble an elite team on the field.

The dilemma that Byron White faced worked out very neatly. White postponed his entry into Oxford until January of 1939, which enabled him to play the 1938 season for the Pirates.

The College All-Star Games

Until about 20 years ago, the big event at the start of the football season was the College All-Star Game in Chicago. Started in 1934, this annual game pitted the NFL champions of the previous year against an all-star team made up of recently graduated college stars. The game was played (in the pre-World War II years) around the end of August. Crowds in excess of 70,000 would pay their way into Soldier Field to see the contest. In the late 1930's, the College All-Star Game was the nation's largest-drawing football game. The four games prior to 1938 resulted in two ties and one victory each for the pros and the collegians.

By 1938, the popularity of the concept led to a proliferation of such pre-season all-star games. At least eight all-star games were played that year between NFL teams and various conglomerations of just-graduated college players. The games were staged in August and September at Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Providence, Dallas, Birmingham, and St. Louis. The Chicago all-star team consisted of players from schools in all parts of the country. The all-star teams in the other games were made up mostly of graduates from schools in the local or regional area.

In mid-August, Byron White reported to Chicago to train with other top-notch graduates to face the 1937 champion Washington Redskins on August 31. The All Stars had a roster of 46 players and were coached by Bo McMillin of Indiana. Of the 46 players, 19 had been named to an All-American team (first, second, or third) by at least one of the three major wire services (Associated Press, United Press, International News Service).

On the evening of Wednesday, August 31, an audience of 74,250 assembled in Soldier Field to watch the College All-Stars whip the Redskins 28-16. Sammy Baugh of the Skins was the NFL's best passer, but Purdue grad Cecil Isbell outperformed him in leading the All-Stars to their upset victory. Isbell was voted the game's MVP, while The New York *Times* reported that Byron White "played only a short time" in relief of Isbell.

On the very next night, Thursday, September 1, White joined another College All-Star squad in Providence to face the Chicago Bears. With his energy undepleted by the game in Chicago, White starred in Providence. The Bears won the game by a score of 26-14 before 20,000 fans in Brown Stadium. The *Times* reported that "Byron (Whizzer) White of the All-Stars stole the show, however, with a dazzling display of fancy stepping. White carried eleven times in all for a net gain of sixty yards and completed three of six passes for thirty-two yards." He scored one of the touchdowns for the College All-Stars. He began his pro career the next day.

Joining the Pirates

On Friday, September 2, Byron White joined the Pittsburgh Pirates at their training camp at St. Francis College in Loretto, Pa. The Pirates were one of 10 teams in the NFL. The 19-year-old league had become a relatively stable operation, but its popularity and profitability were far less than those of big-time college football. The Eastern Division was composed of the Pirates, the Philadelphia Eagles, the Brooklyn Dodgers, the New York Giants and the Washington Redskins. In the Western Division were the Chicago Bears, the Green Bay Packers, the Detroit Lions, the Cleveland Rams, and the Chicago Cardinals.

The Pirates franchise was owned by Art Rooney, who had created the team and entered the NFL in 1933. The team played its games in Forbes Field before crowds that rarely exceeded 20,000 viewers. With revenues limited and the national economy depressed, Rooney ran a tight ship financially.

In 1937, the Pirates had compiled a 4-7 record and finished third in the Eastern Division. That was coach Johnny Blood's first year running the team. Blood was in his mid-30's and still played part time in the backfield. He had had a wonderful career with the Green Bay Packers and would eventually be enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton. He was a brilliant and eccentric free spirit, a better raconteur than football coach. He returned to coach the 1938 team, accompanied by his only assistant coach, Walt Kiesling, who also played part time in the line.

Byron White was a prize addition who promised to improve the team and increase attendance. Most of the 1937 backs returned to the team. The most prominent of them was Bull Karcis, a squat fullback who was a reliable short-yardage power runner. Of the returning linemen, guard Byron Genty, tackle Arnold Niccolai, and center Mike Basrak were the stand-outs. The biggest addition to the line was Ed (Eggs) Manske, a good pass-receiver obtained from the Chicago Bears.

The NFL roster limit then was 30 players. There were no offensive or defensive specialists, as players went both ways. It was rare for players to play 60 minutes, as subs would usually relieve the starters for parts of each half. Passing had become an integral part of the offensive repertoire (it had not been in the 1920's), but most teams still gained more yardage on the ground than in the air.

Sometime during the September 2-4 weekend, a team picture was taken at St. Francis College. Forty-one players assembled for the photographer, hopeful of making the final squad. A few players in camp were absent for the photograph. Sitting together at the right end of the second row are Byron White, Johnny Blood, and Art Rooney. The photograph was published in the 1939 Spalding NFL Guide.

The Pirates had been in camp for a couple of weeks and would play their only pre-season games on Saturday and Sunday, September 3 and 4. On Saturday, the Pirates played the semi-pro St. Rosalia Preps at Wilksburg, Pa. NFL teams rarely played other NFL teams in pre-season games. The Pirates won 54-0. In his second day with the team, Byron White caught two touchdown passes. On Sunday, the Pirates beat the Modern A.C. All-Stars 46-0 at Jeannette, Pennsylvania. White played only five minutes, during which he made a 59-yard touchdown run. The two exhibition games were not much of a test for the Pirates.

After the Sunday game, Rooney and Blood cut 16 players and signed rookie Frank Filchok, a talented passer and runner from Indiana. With the roster set, the Pirates headed into the regular season.

Week One (September 5-11)

The baseball Pirates were contending for the National League pennant, so the football Pirates found themselves closed out of Forbes Field for all but one Sunday in September. As a result, the NFL shuffled the football Pirates' schedule into a bizarre form. The Pirates would play two games in the first week. They would open on Friday night at Detroit, then host the Giants at Forbes Field. Playing two games in three days was a rarity then, but the Pirates did it several times in 1933.

On Wednesday, September 7, the Pirates broke camp at St. Francis college. The team took a train to Detroit, but Byron White stayed behind. According to the Pittsburgh *Press*, White, Art Rooney, and team attorney Martin Flanagan flew to Detroit on Thursday.

On Friday night, the Pirates faced the Lions at the University of Detroit Stadium. The Lions were shut out of Briggs Stadium (now Tiger Stadium) until the baseball Tigers would finish their season. An audience of 22,000 fans attended the game in rainy weather. As did most of the NFL teams, the Pirates used a single-wing offense, in which the ball was generally snapped deep to a tailback who did most of the running and passing. The deep snap resembled today's shotgun formation, but the single-wing was much more oriented to running. On the first play after the opening kickoff, White ran for six yards. The Pittsburgh offense sputtered, however, as could be expected of a unit whose key player had only joined the team a week earlier. The Lions took a 3-0 lead after five minutes and led 16-0 at the half. The Pirates shut the Lions out in the second half, but the only Pittsburgh touchdown was a two-yard run by White late in the game. In his NFL debut, White ran 13 times for 41 yards in a 16-7 Pirate defeat.

After resting on Saturday, the Pirates rushed back into action on Sunday. They hosted the New York Giants at Forbes Field. The Giants had a strong team that had finished second in the Eastern Division in the previous year. They had future Hall of Famers in coach Steve Owen, tailback Tuffy Leemans, and

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center Mel Hein. The crowd of 17,340 fans was a bit above the 1937 Pittsburgh average, but it was only half of the attendance at the previous year's Giants game in Forbes Field. The Pirates stopped the New York running game, but the Giants shredded the Pittsburgh defense with passes. Byron White played most of the 60 minutes and ran for more than 100 yards and one touchdown. The Pirates led 14-13 midway through the second quarter. The Giants, however, won by a comfortable 27-14 margin. The other Pittsburgh touchdown came on a 23-yard pass play from Frank Filchock to Ed Manske. The Pittsburgh *Press* reported that White's "name was on every tongue as the rather disappointing attendance filed out."

Week Two (September 12-19)

The two losses and modest gate receipts did not sit well with Art Rooney. He cut four players on Monday, but signed three of them back onto the squad during the week. In Monday's edition, the *Press* described an attempt by Rooney to bolster the Pirates' line:

A third development was a "rush" wire sent by Prexy Art Rooney to Joe Kuharich, outstanding ex-Notre Dame tackle, who had failed to come to terms here a few weeks back. Kuharich will meet Rooney in Buffalo tonight for a conference which may lead to his signing a Pirate contract.

A tenth-round draft pick, Kuharich did not sign with the Pirates. He would not play in the NFL until 1940, when he joined the Chicago Cardinals and began drawing attention from All-Pro selectors.

This week's league game was on Friday, a result of the reshuffled schedule. The Pirates would face the Philadelphia Eagles in Buffalo, New York. This was counted as a home game for the Pirates. An audience of 19,749 paid their way into Civic Stadium, later renamed War Memorial Stadium, to see the contest. The neutral-site crowd was larger than the crowd for the Pittsburgh home-opener the previous Saturday.

The Eagles had finished 2-8-1 in 1937 and had lost 26-23 to the Washington Redskins in week one. The Eagles looked like champions, however, when they beat the Pirates by a 27-7 score. Philadelphia halfback Jay Arnold scored three touchdowns in the first half. He caught one touchdown pass, recovered a fumbled punt return by Byron White, and returned an interception all the way. White gained 44 yards on 11 rushes for the afternoon. He scored the only Pittsburgh touchdown on a short run after he had completed a long pass to end Paul McDonough to bring the Pirates close to the endzone.

Art Rooney also set up a second game of the week, a non-league contest with the independent Boston Shamrocks on Monday night at Fenway Park. With the high cost of Byron White's salary pressing him, Rooney scheduled six non-league games during the season in addition to 11 NFL games. White's fame was expected to draw enough fans to these extra games to help offset Rooney's investment. On this Monday night, however, rain forced a one-week postponement until the following Monday.

Week Three (September 20-26)

Winless in three outings, the Pirates would play a league game in Brooklyn on Friday night, then return to Boston to face the non-league Shamrocks on Monday night. Ebbets Field and Fenway Park were charming sites for this week's action. Much of the newspaper coverage during the week was not charming. On Monday, September 19, the Pittsburgh *Press* reported that the Pirates had released fullback Karcis, blocking back Izzy Weinstock, and end Billy Wilson. Weinstock and Wilson had been starters on opening day. Karcis had led the Pirates in rushing in 1937 and had won some attention in the polling for an All-Pro Team. Karcis expressed surprise: "They said I wasn't playing as well as last year. They didn't give me a chance." He would sign on with the New York Giants.

In the same article, an anonymous "official" of the Pirates stated that there was "unrest and dissension" on the team. The cause of the bad feelings was coach "Blood's habit of random substitution in games in which the players were given only a few minutes to show what they could do." He dismissed speculation that the Pirate players resented Byron White's \$15,00 salary:

I'm positive the players aren't down on White. I believe they are for him, 100 per cent. But I

know they are kicking about Blood's methods of playing White. The Whizzer on kickoffs and punts hasn't had a good chance to show what he can do because he has been given no blocking protection. Why, the guy is likely to wind up in a hospital instead of Oxford.

In the 1938 *Spalding NFL Guide*, the only team officials listed other than Rooney were Vice-President Daniel M. Hamill, Treasurer Martin A. Flanagan, and Secretary John Maher.

The same article also contains some remarks on White by the departing Bull Karcis. He said, "Any dissension among the players is not caused by Whizzer White." He said that his teammates liked White and considered him a great player. He further stated that "I know the Whizzer is taking these losses pretty hard. He realizes the team is on the spot because of him. He has tried hard to make good. He hates to lose."

In Tuesday's edition of the *Press*, Art Rooney acknowledged dissension on the Pirates and promised to "dig to the bottom of it and perhaps come out with a startling list of discharges." He stated his support of coach Blood:

I'm backing Blood, positively. I think he's a good coach. I can't talk for the players. I will say, though, that the only players I have heard complain about Blood's tactics are the ones that have been released.

Blood took a weaker club last year and made them contenders. We have a hard schedule this year, something we can't help. We've got the highest priced team in the league. I know there's dissension, but I'm going to find out all I can about it. I may have to fire a lot of players, but I'll find it and try to overcome it.

The article indicated that some other players would soon be cut.

Two of the three players cut this week were quoted in the article. Bull Karcis repeated his opinion that he had not had enough playing time this year to display his ability. Izzy Weinstock stated that he and Blood had quarreled in the pre-season about the Pittsburgh offense. The *Press* quoted him as saying, "I could say plenty, but I won't." Both Weinstock and Karcis agreed that "every player on the team liked Whizzer White and that the Whizzer's \$15,000 salary was not the cause of the trouble."

The *Press* gave what amounts to a bill of particulars against Blood:

It was revealed by some who saw the Pirates lose their third straight league game, to the Philadelphia Eagles Friday night in Buffalo, that Blood played himself at quarterback for 45 minutes of the play. It was further said that Bill Davidson, one of the Pirate mainstays last year, got into only the last two minutes of play; that Karcis was not used until two other fullbacks had been hurt; that Blood's calling of plays was faulty and his blocking attempts weak.

The article further asserted that "Buffalo sports writers were unanimous in labelling Whizzer White a great player and the Pirates a sandlot team."

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On Thursday, the *Press* printed a United Press feature article about White. Asked of his impressions of professional football, White replied positively:

It's tough, but it's swell. And to be perfectly honest with you, it's a lot tougher than I thought it would be. In a college game, there never were more than a couple of fellows who shook you up when they hit you. But the pros start 11 guys who half kill you on each play. When they get tired, 11 more just a little tougher come in. But, believe me when I tell you there is little or no dirty football. Every once in a while, somebody will give you a knee, but knees and fists aren't half as common as they are in college games. The pros hit you so hard, they don't have to resort to rough stuff. Take that Dave Smukler. No, on second thought, don't take him. He'll kill you.

(Smukler was a 225-pound fullback and linebacker for the Eagles.)

White also denied that his teammates resented his salary and were failing to block for him.

That's a lie. Everyone on this team, from Art Rooney down, has been swell to me. The players give me everything they've got. My failures are my own. I threw away that game to Philadelphia right at the start when I fumbled the ball. But there wasn't one word of criticism or one dirty look from any of the players.

He referred to a punt that he had fumbled and that the Eagles had recovered for a touchdown the prior week.

White was asked whether he was as good a player in the NFL as he had been in college. He responded:

I'm smarter. But I'm not as good a ball carrier or kicker or passer. The opposition in pro football has something to do with that, of course. But so has the strain I've been under. You know, I have been exhibited like a freak since I signed with the Pirates. Not that I'm complaining--if I paid a player \$15,000, I would exploit him to the hilt, too. It's tough to play your best game when you feel that nothing short of a 50-yard run or a 75-yard pass will satisfy the customers.

He concluded with the observation that "no player ever was as good as my publicity made me out to be. Well, maybe Dutch Clark is. But I'm no Dutch Clark. He's the tops." Clark was the veteran tailback of the Lions, then wrapping up a Hall of Fame career.

Thursday's papers also ran the first of the NFL's weekly statistical releases. White had 38 rushing attempts for 118 yards, second in the league in ground gaining. He tied for the league lead with 18 points. He was fourth in the league in pass receiving with seven catches for 88 yards. Remarkably, he caught no more passes in the eight remaining NFL games.

On Friday night, the Pirates faced the Dodgers in Ebbets Field before a crowd of 21,494 spectators. The Dodgers had had a 3-7-1 record in 1937 and had tied the Redskins 16-16 in their only league game so far this year. Their standout players were tailback Ace Parker and rookie tackle Bruiser Kinard, both

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future Hall of Famers. The owner of the franchise was Dan Topping, who would later buy a half-interest in the New York Yankees baseball team.

The Pirates apparently focused their crankiness on the Dodgers, winning their first NFL game of the season by a 17-3 score. The Pittsburgh defense kept Ace Parker off balance the whole game and held him to only seven pass completions in 20 attempts. The Dodgers returned the compliment by keying on Byron White and successfully bottling him up. White would end the day with a net loss of one yard on 15 running attempts.

At halftime, Brooklyn led 3-0. In the second half, Pittsburgh capitalized on turnovers to score two touchdowns. Brooklyn halfback Ralph Kercheval fumbled the ball on a carry in the third quarter, and Pittsburgh end Ed Manske scooped it up and sprinted 27 yards for the touchdown. Later, another Pirate end, Bill Sortet, intercepted a pass and returned it deep into Brooklyn territory. The Pirates promptly punched it over for the touchdown. Pittsburgh tackle Armand Niccolai (the team's primary place-kicker in this era before kicking specialists) added the two extra points and a field goal. Coach Blood played about half the game at quarterback (which was primarily a blocking position in the single-wing offense) and used 25 players in the game. With the recent cuts, the Pirates probably were not carrying many more players than that. One sour note was the season-ending broken ankle suffered by guard George Kakasic.

On Monday night, the Pirates finally did play the Shamrocks in Boston, beating them by a 16-6 score. A small crowd of 5,000 fans rattled around in Fenway Park. Although the Shamrocks do not appear to have had a formal relationship with the Pirates, 11 players who had been cut by the Pirates so far that season played for Boston. Byron White ran well and scored a touchdown in the fourth quarter. The Shamrocks went on to compile a 0-8 record for the season and disbanded in early November.

Week Four (September 27-October 3)

The Pirates had no extra non-league games scheduled for this week. They would play only their one NFL contest, a visit to the Polo Grounds in New York City to face the Giants on Monday night, October 3. For the third week in a row, the Pirates had no game on Sunday.

In its edition of Wednesday, September 28, The New York *Times* reported that "Coach Johnny Blood and his Pirates arrived in town yesterday from Boston and immediately repaired to the Garden City (L.I.) Hotel. Beginning today, the Pirates will work out daily on the St. Paul's School field." On the same page of the *Times* was the NFL's weekly statistical release. Byron White's rushing totals were now 217 yards on 53 attempts, still good enough for the third in yardage despite his negative total against Brooklyn last Friday. Another Pittsburgh rookie, fullback Ed "Scrapper" Farrell, ranked 10th in rushing with 73 yards in 25 attempts. White and Farrell had rushing averages of under three yards per carry, but they benefited from Pittsburgh's having played four league games in three weeks, more than any other team.

The Pirates also had leaders in the passing categories. Rookie halfback Frank Filchock was listed as fifth among the passers. He led the league both in passes thrown (51) and completions (22), and he had gained 287 yards through the air. Fifth among the NFL's receivers was end Ed Manske, with eight catches for 103 yards.

It turned out to be a very bad week for the baseball Pirates. In a first-place showdown in Wrigley Field, the second-place Cubs swept three games from the first-place Pirates on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. The Pirates fell out of the top spot, and when the World Series began the following week, the Cubs would represent the National League.

It turned out to be a very good week for the football Pirates. Fortified by victories last week in Brooklyn and Boston, the Pirates came into Monday night's game against the Giants with great confidence. The Pirates avenged their earlier loss to the Giants by winning the rematch by a 13-10 score. This was the Giants' home opener, with 18,805 fans in attendance, the smallest home crowd of the season for the New Yorkers. The Pirates scored twice on passes from Frank Filchock to Bill Sortet, in the second and fourth quarters. Byron White ran for 75 yards from scrimmage, while Scrapper Farrell ground out another 61 yards. The key to the game was Pittsburgh's improved pass defense. Although New York tailback Ed Danowski did throw one touchdown pass, the Pirates intercepted three New York passes. Byron White and Frank Filchock each grabbed one of the interceptions. The New York *Times* praised Pirate center Mike Basrak as the "standout lineman" of the game. Reserve tackle Ted Doyle suffered a broken arm that would keep him sidelined for the next month.

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Week Five (October 4-9)

The Pirates had only one game this week, but it was a big one. On Sunday, they would host the Dodgers in Forbes Field. With victories in their last two league games (both in New York City), the Pirates could even their record at 3-3 with a repeat victory over Brooklyn. The Dodgers were an attractive foe because their starting fullback was rookie Boyd Brumbaugh, a three-year star at local Duquesne University.

The weekly NFL statistical release showed Byron White in second place among runners, with 192 yards in 71 carries. His 2.7 rushing average was unimpressive, but he had carried the ball more than anyone else in the league. The league leader was Max Krause of the Redskins with 266 yards. In fourth place was Scrapper Farrell with 134 yards on 36 attempts. Boyd Brumbaugh of Brooklyn was sixth with 122 yards on 24 runs, good for a sterling 5.1 average. Among passers, Frank Filchock led the league with 337 yards gained. White, Farrell, Filchock, and Brumbaugh were all rookies.

The game was a sore disappointment for Art Rooney and the Pirates. Only 8,372 tickets were sold, resulting in a financial loss for Rooney. On the field, the Pirates lost 17-7 and dropped into last place in the Eastern Division. Finally, injuries to two starting linemen ended any ambitions for this season and turned Rooney's attention toward cutting his 1938 losses.

The Pirates suffered a stiff blow early in the game when center Mike Basrak broke his left leg. He would be particularly missed on defense, where he was a key linebacker. Before the day was over, tackle Ed Karpowich also suffered a broken leg. Both Basrak and Karpowich were out for the season.

The Dodgers scored first when, in the second quarter, halfback Ralph Kercheval intercepted a Byron White pass and returned the ball to the Pittsburgh 47-yard line. When the drive stalled, Kercheval kicked a 34-yard field goal for a 3-0 Brooklyn lead. The Pirates responded by driving 80 yards in five plays. Scrapper Farrell ran for 17 yards, then Byron White for six. White passed to halfback Tuffy Thompson for a seven-yard gain to midfield. White threw an incomplete pass, then connected on a long bomb to end Bill Sortet for a 50-yard touchdown. Armand Niccolai kicked the point for a 7-3 Pittsburgh lead. On the second play after the ensuing kickoff, Brooklyn star Ace Parker threw a 54-yard touchdown pass to end Jeff Barrett. Parker's kick made the score 10-7 in favor of Brooklyn.

Late in the third quarter, Ace Parker broke through the middle of the Pittsburgh line and ran 77 yards for a touchdown. Kercheval kicked the extra point, and Brooklyn held its 17-7 lead to the final gun. The final statistics were fairly even in yards gained and first downs, but the four Brooklyn interceptions of Pirate passes (with none by Pittsburgh) were a key to the Dodger victory. White ran for 24 yards on 10 carries, while Farrell ran for 42 yards on 10 carries. Frank Filchock passed for only 55 yards, less than White's aerial yardage. For Brooklyn, Boyd Brumbaugh gained 45 yards on 12 carries before seriously injuring his right elbow in the second half.

The afternoon was a disappointment on all fronts for the Pirates. Art Rooney immediately took decisive action.

Week Six (October 10-16)

The Pirates had two games on their schedule for this week. On Tuesday, they would visit Ohio to play a non-league game against the Cincinnati Bengals, a strong independent pro team. On Sunday, the Pirates were scheduled to host the Cleveland Rams in Forbes Field. Only one game would be played.

In Tuesday's edition, the Pittsburgh *Press* printed a story under the headline "'We Haven't Given Up,' Says Rooney After Sale of Stars." The article revealed that Art Rooney had dumped some young talent and their salaries in response to this year's football and financial losses. On Sunday night, after the loss to the Dodgers, Rooney had sold the contract of rookie fullback Scrapper Farrell to Brooklyn. The Dodgers had just lost Boyd Brumbaugh to injury and had been impressed with Farrell's performance. On Monday, Rooney sold the contracts of two rookie halfbacks, sending Frank Filchock to the Washington Redskins and Tom Burnette to the Philadelphia Eagles. At the same time, the Pirates shipped veteran end Ed Manske back to the Chicago Bears, from whom the Pirates had obtained him before the season. With the dropping of these players, it certainly appeared that Rooney had indeed given up on the 1938 season. A flurry of releases and signings of other, lesser players continued during the week.

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The *Press* described the negative finances that resulted from the small crowd at Sunday's game:

The Pirates took in \$6,400 at the gate in Sunday's game with the Brooklyn Dodgers. And they previously had won three straight games away from home, too. Of this amount, the visiting club received the league guarantee, \$5,000, leaving \$1,400 for Rooney to pay the highest priced team in the circuit.

Rooney was quoted as saying, "I wanted a winner this year, so I paid some pretty fancy salaries."

On Wednesday, the *Press* printed another article full of news about the Pirates. In their Tuesday night game in Cincinnati, the Pirates suffered a 27-0 drubbing. The Bengals were a cut above the independent Boston Shamrocks, whom the Pirates had beaten two weeks ago. The Pirates were apparently dispirited by the departures of key players.

The *Press* also reported that Sunday's game against the Cleveland Rams had been canceled and would be played on December 4 in Chattanooga, Tenn. The article reported that Rooney had obtained consent to the postponement from Thomas B. Lipscomb, president of the Rams, on Tuesday night. On Wednesday, however, Lipscomb urged NFL President Joe Carr and all of the NFL team owners to expel the Pirates from the league. Lipscomb stated, "This postponement is a terrible blow to us. Our team has been going hot, and we don't want them to cool off.... I personally think Rooney is a swell fellow, but this postponement is a telling blow to us." The Rams had just beaten the Detroit Lions and Chicago Bears on the past two Sundays.

Rooney needed to justify the move and dismiss Lipscomb's grievance to the league:

Why, that guy! He was satisfied last night over the postponement. A postponement won't hurt football. it's done in the major leagues of baseball. Teams do it so they can schedule doubleheaders. Besides, I've got a lot of ball players hurt. The postponement won't cost him a penny, and it'll help us.... If he gets the club owners to take a vote, they might wind up by throwing him out. They'll laugh at him. Why, I'm the one that went to bat for the Rams to get them in this league.

Rooney's finances overshadowed Lipscomb's concerns about keeping his Rams active while on a winning streak. Nothing came of Lipscomb's complaint, and the game would be played on December 4 in New Orleans, not Chattanooga.

The NFL's weekly statistical release listed five Pirates among the league leaders, but three of them were no longer on the team. Byron White led the league in rushing yardage with 216 yards and in rushing attempts with 81 carries. Scrapper Farrell was third in yardage with 176 yards on 46 carries. Frank Filchock ranked second in the league in passing. Pittsburgh ends Bill Sortet and Ed Manske tied for seventh place among receivers, with nine catches each.

On Sunday, the Pirates stayed idle. The *Press* speculated that Byron White might return to the Pirates in the future. Although White was expected to spend two years at Oxford University, the *Press* noted that "he is only 21 years old, his Rhodes Scholarship is good for only two years, and on his return to the country in 1941, he may want to continue his studies on the side and foot the bills with his gridiron talents." Art Rooney called him "the nicest kid I've ever known in professional football," while Johnny Blood called him "a great player and a fine fellow personally." World events would soon render obsolete any predictions relating to football in the 1940's.

Week Seven (October 17-23)

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The Pirates practiced at Greenlee Field in Pittsburgh all week, they caught a train on Saturday for Green Bay, Wis. Although the NFL roster limit was 30 players, only 22 players made the trip for the Pirates.

Even before the Brooklyn game on October 9, the Pirates had been short-handed. Veterans Bull Karcis, Izzy Weinstock, Swede Hanson, and Bill Wilson had all been cut and not replaced. Two linemen, George Kakasic and Ted Doyle, were out with broken bones and also went unreplaced. Thus, the Pirates had suited only 24 players against Brooklyn.

After the loss to the Dodgers, Rooney sent Filchock, Farrell, Manske, and Burnette to other teams. He also cut end Paul McDonough, guard Lindy Mayhew, and center Karl McDade. In addition, center Mike Basrak and tackle Ed Karpowich had suffered season-ending leg injuries against Brooklyn, while end Bill Sortet hurt a knee that would take a month to heal. With all the subtractions, the Pirates were down to 14 players.

Rooney signed eight new players to bring his squad up to minimal strength. End George Platukas, tackle John Nosich, center Joe Maras, and back Bud Lee had all been cut by the Pirates earlier in the season and had been playing with the independent Boston Shamrocks. Lee was from Villanova, the other three from Duquesne. The other newcomers were end Jess Tatum, guard Vince Farrar, center Lou Tsoutsouvas, and back Bob Douglas. All eight were NFL novices.

Thus, at Green Bay, coach Johnny Blood started himself, Byron White, Stu Smith, and Tuffy Thompson in the backfield. In reserve were veterans Max Fiske and Bill Davidson, rookie Clarence Tommerson, and newcomers Lee and Douglas. The starting ends were Mac Cara and newcomer Tatum, with fellow newcomer Platukas in reserve. Veterans Armand Niccolai and Joe Cardwell started at tackle, backed up by rookie Red Rorison and newcomer Nosich. The starting guards were Byron Gentry and John Perko, with newcomer Farrar and assistant coach Walt Kiesling coming off the bench. Both centers were newcomers, with Tsoutsouvas starting and Maras subbing. Over one-third of the Pirate players had not been with the team for its most recent game, two weeks ago.

On a chilly afternoon, the undermanned Pirates played hard but lost a 20-0 decision to the Packers, who were on their way to a Western Division championship. Packer tailback Cecil Isbell ran 38 yards for the first touchdown five minutes into the game. Early in the third quarter, Packer halfback Joe Laws intercepted a White pass and returned it for another touchdown. The final Packer touchdown came on a pass from Bob Monnett to Carl Mulleneaux in the fourth quarter. For the Pirates, Byron White shouldered the burden as his team's only true offensive weapon. He ran for 72 yards from scrimmage on 17 carries and also handled most of Pittsburgh's passing and punting. He also intercepted a pass on defense.

The cold weather held the crowd in Green Bay down to 12,000 fans. Byron White may have thought wistfully of the large crowds that had seen him play in college. In Pittsburgh, however, pro ball took a back seat to the colleges. On Saturday, while the Pirates were traveling to Green Bay, the University of Pittsburgh beat Fordham University 24-13 in Pitt Stadium before a crowd of 75,000 enthusiasts. For White, such crowds were a thing of yesterday.

Week Eight (October 24-31)

With their league record standing at 2-5, the last-place Pirates had no NFL game this week. Rather than resting or seeking out a strong independent opponent, the Pirates opted instead to play two lesser semi-pro teams from the local area on Sunday and Monday. They beat the Warren Redjackets 23-0 on Sunday and then beat the McKeesport Olympics 21-6 on Monday. The Pirates visited these teams on their home fields, capitalizing on the fame of Byron White to draw extra fans to the game.

Week Nine (November 1-6)

On Sunday, the Pirates would play their third and final home game of the year. They would host the Washington Redskins in Forbes Field. Of their 11 NFL games this season, five were originally scheduled as Pittsburgh home games. Because of the early season schedule shuffle in expectation of a World Series in Pittsburgh, the September 16 game against the Philadelphia Eagles was transferred to Buffalo. The game against the Cleveland Rams that had been canceled on October 16 would be played on December 4 in New Orleans. With attendance in Pittsburgh low, Art Rooney found more profit in taking his team on the road. After Sunday's game, the 1938 Pirates would not be seen in Pittsburgh again.

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In this week's NFL statistical release, Byron White slipped to fifth place among the league's leading rushers. After being idle in league play in two of the last three weeks, the Pirates had now played seven games, the league average. Billy Shephard of Detroit led the runners, with 308 yards, only four yards ahead of Andy Farkas of Washington. The next three runners were Cecil Isbell of Green Bay (295 yards), ex-Pirate Scrapper Farrell of Brooklyn (291 yards), and Byron White (288 yards). White still led the NFL with 98 rushing attempts.

In Saturday's Pittsburgh *Press*, a chatty sports column spoke favorably of the Pirates' star player:

Byron (Whizzer) White, who really has proved a worthy player and friend of Art Rooney even though the Pros are having a bad season, has confided to friends that he plans definitely to sail for England around the new year. He has said 'Playing for Mr. Rooney has been fine and I've tried to earn my money, but more so I want that education at Oxford University. I want to be a good attorney when I'm through with my studies.' One needs only to talk with White to know he's a brainy fellow.

By all indications, he was liked by his teammates and his bosses.

On Sunday, the Pirates still had only 22 players in uniform. Tackle Ted Doyle had recovered from his broken arm, but tackle Red Rorison sat out the game with an injury. End Bill Sortet needed one more week to get ready to play after his leg injury. The Pirates put up a good fight, but they lost 7-0 to the strong Redskins before 12,910 fans. Both teams succeeded in blunting the other's main offensive weapon. Sammy Baugh of the Redskins completed only three of 12 passes, while White ran for only 13 yards on 10 carries. The Redskins failed to cash in on numerous scoring chances, finally scoring in the fourth quarter on a 39-yard pass play from Baugh to George Karamatic. Late in the quarter, the Pirates moved to the Washington 13-yard line on a 41-yard pass play from White to Bill Davidson. Three running plays got nowhere, and White's fourth-down pass into the end zone went incomplete. The Pirates did not have another scoring opportunity.

The *Press* addressed the financial aspect of the game in its Monday report:

The Pirates' most disastrous home season in six years of professional football was written into the records today, enabling owner Art Rooney to throw away a fountain pen that has written in nothing but red ink since early September.

For the remainder of the season, which is three league contests and a couple of exhibition games, the payoff will become somebody else's worry as the Pirates collect the visitors' checks.

* * *

Although the Bucs were handed their sixth league defeat yesterday by the champion Washington Redskins, 7-0, Rooney got what must have amounted to a pleasant surprise from the fact that 12,910 paying customers, exclusive of five Veterans of Foreign Wars bugle corps and marching societies, twirled the Forbes Field turnstiles. That figure, in promoting parlance, didn't get him 'off the nut,' but it was only a shallow gouge in his pocketbook as compared with the Brooklyn game a month ago.

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Pro football was not yet a very profitable business.

Week Ten (October 7-13)

No league game was scheduled this week. The Pirates would play two games against the independent Los Angeles Bulldogs, probably the strongest pro team outside the NFL. The teams would meet on Friday in Colorado Springs and on Sunday in Los Angeles. With trans-continental air travel both novel and expensive, the Pirates set out by train on Tuesday for their Friday game in Colorado.

Friday was Armistice Day, a national holiday, and the Pittsburgh-Los Angeles game was the inaugural event in the new Will Rogers Memorial Stadium. Colorado Springs was home for the Tigers of Colorado College. An Alumnus of the University of Colorado in Boulder, Byron White had somewhat of a homecoming in the game. The crowd of 15,000 fans saw Los Angeles beat Pittsburgh by a 17-6 score. One of the Bulldog touchdowns came on a 39-yard return of a fumble by White.

The teams both headed west and met again on Sunday in Gilmore Stadium in Hollywood. The Pirates bounced back from Friday's defeat to grind out a 14-14 tie before a crowd of 18,000 fans. White rose to the occasion by running for over 100 yards, scoring one touchdown, and making one key interception. The Bulldogs were not pushovers, as they stocked their roster with talented graduates of West Coast colleges who did not care to journey east to play with an NFL team. The Bulldogs played five games this season against NFL opponents, winning two, losing two, and tying one.

Week Eleven (November 14-20)

After the long train ride back, the Pirates were scheduled to play the Eagles on Saturday in Charleston, W. Va. This was a home game for the Eagles, but they transferred this event out of Philadelphia, probably for financial reasons similar to those plaguing Art Rooney. Oddly, neither of the Pittsburgh-Philadelphia games was played in Pennsylvania this year.

In this week's NFL statistical report, Byron White ranked seventh among the league's runners. He had 301 yards on 108 carries. Comfortably in first place was Bill Shepherd of the Lions with 443 yards on 95 carries. He had suffered a rib injury against the Packers this past Sunday, however, and he would gain only another 12 yards for the rest of the season.

On Saturday, it rained in Charleston, so the Pirates-Eagles game was put over to Sunday. A modest crowd of 6,500 fans assembled at the local high school field to watch the Eagles beat the Pirates 14-7. Byron White had an excellent game. He ran for 133 yards on 11 carries and also intercepted a pass on defense. In the third quarter, he broke away for a 79-yard touchdown run. In the final quarter, however, Philadelphia halfback Dick Riffle ran 54 yards to set up the game-winning touchdown for the Eagles. In the second week in a row, the Pirates lost by one touchdown given up in the fourth quarter.

Week Twelve (November 21-27)

This was Thanksgiving week, and the Pirates would play on Sunday in Washington. The two holiday games on Thursday were the Giants visiting Brooklyn and the Bears visiting Detroit.

On Wednesday, Art Rooney announced that Johnny Blood would return in 1939 as coach of the Pirates. This answered speculation that Blood would not survive his team's terrible season.

The weekly NFL statistical report listed the top three runners as Cecil Isbell of Green Bay with 445 yards, Bill Shephard of Detroit with 443 yards, and Byron White of Pittsburgh with 434 yards. Given that the Packers had finished their 11 regular-season games and that Shephard was hurt, White had a clean shot at the rushing title with two games remaining. The only other runners near him were Scrapper Farrell of Brooklyn with 410 yards and Tuffy Leemans of New York with 407 yards.

On Sunday, the Pirates played before their largest crowd of the season. A crowd of 25,335 fans assembled in Griffith Stadium to watch the Redskins beat the Pirates 15-0. The two teams fought on an even basis for most of the game. The Redskins scored on a field goal in the first quarter, and the score remained 3-0 into the fourth quarter. A Pittsburgh scoring threat died on downs on the Washington three-

yard line. In the final quarter, Sammy Baugh of the Redskins connected on a pass to end Wayne Millner on the Pittsburgh 38-yard line. As reported by *The New York Times*, "[t]he former Notre Dame end side-stepped Whizzer White, the Pirates' scholarly star, and raced to a touchdown." Another Baugh touchdown pass raised the final score to 15-0, with the Redskins failing on both extra point attempts. White played a total of about 45 minutes out of 60, gained 52 yards on 20 carries, and intercepted a pass on defense. The loss dropped the Pirates to a 2-8 record, while the Redskins rose to 6-2-2. The Redskins would play the Giants next week to decide the championship of the Eastern Division. The Pirates would end their season with a game against the Cleveland Rams in New Orleans, with no significance on any championship.

Week Thirteen (November 28-December 4)

On Sunday, the Pirates and Rams played the game that had been canceled on October 16. On a warm, sunny afternoon, a disappointing crowd of about 10,000 fans watched the first regular-season NFL game ever played in New Orleans. This was billed as Byron White's farewell to pro football. He came into the game with a 32-yard lead over Tuffy Leemans of New York for the NFL rushing leadership. The Rams focused their defensive energy on bottling up White, and they succeeded for most of the game. Cleveland scored first in the first quarter on a long touchdown pass from Bob Snyder to Jim Benton. The Rams took a 13-0 lead in the second quarter when they blocked White's punt to set up a quick 11-yard touchdown drive, with the extra point failing. The Pirates made no progress on offense. When the running game was stopped, the Pirates began passing with disastrous results, as the Rams would make six interceptions. The Rams held on to their 13-0 lead until the final minute of the game. The Associated Press story on the game describes Pittsburgh's last hurrah:

Hopelessly trailing, 13-0, as the timer announced the game was in its closing seconds, Pittsburgh had the ball on her own 47-yard line, where it had been placed by means of a White pass to Blood for a first down. White dropped back to heave another pass and was rushed. He dashed away to the left side of his line, cut back and wound up in the far right-hand corner of the field 11 yards from goal, a dash of 42 yards.

Tackler after tackler either missed or bounced off as the great Coloradan made his final gesture at the game which has given him \$15,000 for a season of play before he goes to England on a Rhodes scholarship.

The field announcer said time for but one play remained. White drifted back and hurled a liner straight into the arms of Sortet, substitute right end, who took the ball one yard from the goal line and fell over for a touchdown that one minute before had seemed utterly impossible.

With their 13-7 loss, the Pirates ended their season with a 2-9 record and a last-place finish in the Eastern Division.

Afterward

On December 7, the *Pittsburgh Press* reported that Byron White had thrown a party for his teammates in the Hawaiian room of the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans, presumably on Sunday night. The team disbanded there, with the players heading to their homes from New Orleans. Rooney and Blood arrived back in Pittsburgh on Wednesday, then left on Friday for New York to participate in the NFL draft of graduating college players. White headed back to the family homestead in Wellington, Colo.

The final NFL statistics showed White as the rushing leader with 567 yards on 152 attempts, the league high in both categories. Tuffy Leemans was a distant second with 463 yards.

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On Sunday, December 12, the New York Giants beat the Green Bay Packers 23-17 in the NFL Championship Game before 48,120 fans in the Polo Grounds. The Giants had lost twice all season, once to the Pirates back in October.

In January of 1939, Byron White went to England to begin his Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford University. His stay was cut short. When Great Britain declared war against Germany in September, the American students were sent home. White had an enviable fall-back plan. He entered Yale Law School and played pro football on the weekends in 1940 and 1941 with the Detroit Lions, which had purchased negotiating rights from the Pirates, which became the Steelers in 1940. White would serve in the Navy during the war, serve as a law clerk to Chief Justice Fred Vinson of the United States Supreme Court, practice law successfully in Denver for 14 years, join the Kennedy Administration as Associate Attorney General, and become an Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court from 1962 to 1993.

Byron Raymond (Whizzer) White

Tailback

6-1 187 Colorado

Born: 6/8/17, Ft. Collins, CO

RUSHING

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>TEAM</u>	<u>LG</u>	<u>ATT</u>	<u>YDS</u>	<u>AVG</u>	<u>TD</u>
1938	Pitt	N	*152	*587	3.7	*4
1940	Detroit	N	*146	*514	3.5	5
1941	Detroit	N	89	238	2.7	2
3 years			387	1319	3.4	11

* Led NFL