

THE SCORING MACHINE

1950 Rams were potent force on offense

By Stanley Grosshandler

In a move that was to have a far reaching consequence on the development of the NFL, the 1945 champion Cleveland Rams left the cold, murky waters of Lake Erie for the warm clear Pacific shores. By 1949 they were again the Western Division champs.

"I give a great deal of credit for our great teams to Clark Shaughnessey and Eddie Kotal," says Dick Hoerner, the fullback on those teams. "Clark got rid of the trouble makers and slackards and molded us into a well oiled machine. Eddie Kotal, our personnel director, brought in excellent talent. We had a great gang. We lived, ate, and talked football. We never discussed our salaries with the press or even with one another."

"There was a real closeness in those days," added Elroy "Crazylegs" Hirsch, the star receiver. "We spent a lot of time together and became very close. Since we traveled by train and were often on the road several weeks we really got to know one another."

"While we took the Western Division in both '49 and '50 and the league in '51, I believe our best team was the 1950 one," said Hoerner. "In 1949 Van Buren slid to the title in the rain, while in '50 we outplayed the Browns only to lose to a last-minute field goal, 30-28."

"The 1950 team did have better talent," agreed Hirsch. "A good example was at tackle. Dick Huffman went both ways, while Bob Reinhard only played defense. Both were really great. We had Gil Bouley and Ed Champagne who played only offense yet were good enough to go either way. By the next season we had lost all four either by injury or retirement."

"Clark Shaughnessey had so many formations and plays it was unbelievable," added Crazylegs. "He evolved the three end system in '49 to confuse the opponents. One game I would play left half and flank right and in the next game I would be the right halfback and flank left. Tom fears was at left end and Bob Shaw, the right end. We even had a tackle eligible pass play that scored a couple times for us."

"Our leader was quarterback Bob Waterfield," went on Hirsch. "Bob was soft-spoken, a leader in a quiet way. He was the team captain, kicked off, led the league in extra points four times, was the top field goal kicker three times, and the best passer and punter in the league twice."

"At first Fred Gehrke held for his kicks and later I did. If Bob was having an off day we would bring in Norm Van Brocklin who was the direct antithesis. Norm was flamboyant, hot tempered, and impatient, but he sure could move the ball club. It was nothing for him to throw a TD pass the first play he was in. He, too, was a great passer and punter as he led the league in passing three times and punting twice."

"We had terrific speed at the halfbacks in 1950 with fellows like Glenn Davis, Vitamin Smith, Tommy Kalmanir and Paul Barry. Davis was our leading rusher. In college he set a career scoring record that has never been surpassed. Smith was the best kickoff return man in the game," Hirsch said. "We had four big, tough fullbacks who could catch the ball as well as run with it. They were Dick Hoerner, Paul "Tank" Younger, Deacon Dan Towler and Ralph Pasquariello."

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol 19, No. 1 (1997)

Hoerner had been the team's leading rusher the two previous years and their top TD man in '50. Towler, a 25th draft choice from Washington & Jefferson, led the league in rushing in 1952 and when he retired from the game to become a minister, he was the second leading rusher in Ram history. Tank Younger was signed as a free agent to become the first graduate of Grambling in the NFL. Used first as a linebacker, then as a two-way player, and finally as a rusher he ended up right behind Towler in all-time Ram rushers.

Hirsch smiled as he recalled the famous Bull Elephant backfield. "This came about as a quirk when the 1951 schedule pitted us against Frisco two weeks in a row. They clobbered us the first game, so Joe Stydahar, who had become coach prior to the '50 season, felt we had to come up with something different. The first game the 49ers had put small halfbacks in as linebackers so that they could catch our swift backs as they rounded the ends and followed them down field on the pass plays. We reasoned that if we put Hoerner, Towler and Younger in the same backfield we could four and five yard them to death. Well, it became a real chess game. We'd put in the Bulls and they'd put in the regular linebackers. We'd bring in our small halfbacks and they'd go back to their small defensive men. We'd also switch to our three end system with Fears and myself as the ends and Bobby Boyd, the flanker. We won that second game. For the season, each of the Bull Elephants averaged over six yards per carry.

"We had a fine defensive team in '50," added Hirsch, "even though they gave up a lot of points. I think they would get lax on occasions because we were so high scoring. Stan West was a terrific middle guard, while Larry Brink, Jack Zilly and Bill Smyth were fine defensive ends. Larry was one of the first defensive men to get some degree of publicity. Don Paul, Fred Naumetz and Tank Younger backed the line with Jerry Williams at safety. Woodley Lewis, Tommy Keane and George Sims played halfback."

Under new coach Joe Stydahar, the Rams opened the 1950 season by bowing to the Bears. They then beat the New York Yanks, 45-28, and the 49ers, 35-14. The Eagles clobbered them, 56-20.

"The Eagles always had a jinx on us," put in Crazylegs. "They had that great defense with all those big guys on the line and their linebacker, Chuck Bednarik, really gave me fits. He would hold you up at the line and it was like trying to get around a mountain. Once you were past him you were okay. Now Tony Adamle of the Browns not only wouldn't let me get past him, but he could follow me all the way down the field."

Detroit was beat, 30-28, and a new scoring record was set when the Rams demolished the Colts, 70-27. On the first play of the Colt game, Davis threw Hirsch a 58-yard TD pass. The Colts then scored but Vitamin Smith took the kickoff back 95 yards. During the game Smith and Hirsch scored again and Bobby Boyd caught two scoring passes. Hoerner, Pasquariello, and Waterfield also scored. Bob set a record of nine PAT's that game.

The next week it was a 65-24 rout of the Lions as the Rams scored 41 points in the third period. Van Brocklin threw scoring passes to Hirsch, Davis and Fears, and Towler plunged for a fourth score. After the Lions managed to score, Smith ran the kickoff back all the way. In all, he did this three times during the season. Van Brocklin hit Boyd for the sixth Ram score.

The Rams went on to take the 49ers, 28-21, Packers, 45-14, and Yanks, 43-35, but the Bears beat them, 24-14. It was after this game that coach Stydahar told the press he felt the Bears, who had lost only two games, were in. While the Rams were annihilating the Packers, 51-14, the Bears were upset by the Cards and a divisional playoff was necessary.

There was some fine talent in the line to do the blocking for the Rams with Art Statuto at center and guards Jack Finley, Vic Vasicek, Dave Stephenson, Harry Thompson and Milan Lazetich. Milan, whose son is a top draft choice of the Chargers, along with Waterfield and Bouley were the only leftovers from the Cleveland team.

In the divisional playoff against the Bears, the Rams were down, 7-3, in the second quarter when Waterfield hit Fears with a 68-yard bomb. He followed this with a 27-yard scoring pass to Tom and a 22-yarder to the great left end. The last pass was one in the flat that Fears took and ran through six Bears to score.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol 19, No. 1 (1997)

The Scoring Machine, 1950 Rams, scored a record 466 points and rushed and passed 5,420 yards for another record. They also set records for the most first downs, most passes attempted, most passes completed, most scoring passes, most PAT's, and most yards gained passing.

Tom Fears won his third straight receiving title with a record 84 catches, while his 18 in one game has never been surpassed. Both Hirsch and Davis caught 42 passes. The following year Elroy Hirsch caught 17 touchdown passes to tie the record with Don Hutson. His 1,492 yards on passes that season still stands. Fears, Hirsch, Waterfield and Van Brocklin are all in Pro Football's Hall of Fame.

The Rams bowed to the Browns in the title game on Lou Groza's last-minute field goal. Yet this loss cannot wipe the luster from this great team. Dick Hoerner sums it up when he says, "Having played with those great teams that won three divisional and one league championship, I played with the greatest bunch of football players ever assembled."