

CECIL ISBELL

A Short Time in the Spotlight

Compiled from Isbell's 1985 obituary in *The Sporting News* and other sources

Sid Luckman and Sammy Baugh are Hall of Fame passers from the early 1940s and deservedly so, but for a couple of seasons Cecil Isbell outshone them. Had he stuck around the NFL a few more years, he well might have a bust in Canton himself.

Cecil Isbell?

If you're too young to remember the name, he was the standout passer for the Green Bay Packers who followed Arnie Herber and preceded -- well, Bart Starr. He later served as Purdue University's football coach and as the original coach of the Baltimore Colts.

Being a passer for the Packers was special in those days. Curly Lambeau, the Pack's Hall of Fame founder and coach, had also been their passing star in the 1920s. Most teams passed little or not at all, but Curly made his team the exception. He was years ahead of everybody else offensively. Unofficial records indicate he was probably the first NFL pitcher to throw for over a thousand yards. Brett Favre might do that today in three weekends, but it was unheard of in the defense-dominated Twenties.

After Curly retired as a player, he found another top thrower in hometown boy Arnie Herber. "Flash" Herber specialized in throwing the bomb, and he had two great bomb-catchers in first Johnny Blood and then Don Hutson. They combined well enough to make Herber the first *official* passing leader in 1932 and to give him two more crowns during the decade.

Lambeau, Herber, Benny Friedman, Ernie Nevers and a few others pioneered the passing game in the NFL. Then in 1937 Baugh arrived and the air game took a giant step. Sort of like Lindbergh of the NFL. Baugh begat Luckman who begat Waterfield who begat Graham who ...

But wait! We left out a big begat. The year after Baugh arrived and the year before Luckman, Cecil Isbell joined the Packers.

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Isbell, who died in 1985, operating as tailback in Green Bay's single wing, was the National Football League's leading passer in 1941 and '42, and he led the Packers in rushing in 1938 and '39 as he gradually took over the tailback job from Herber. In the 1939 title game, when the Packers beat the New York Giants, 27-0, for the next-to-last of their six NFL championships under Curly Lambeau, Isbell threw a touchdown pass to running back Joe Laws.

One of his most interesting plays came in 1940. The Packers trailed the Cleveland Rams 6-0 as the last minute of play approached. Green Bay had the ball, but deep in their own territory. Isbell whipped a couple of passes to

Hutson that put the ball on the Cleveland 35 yard line. By now there was less than a minute to go.

You could have bet Grandpa's pension that Isbell would be throwing to Hutson again, so everyone was surprised to see Isbell line up at flanker. The tailback was Joe Laws who was to passing what pickles are to ice cream. No one, they later swore, really believed a do-or-die pass would be entrusted to Laws arm.

Sure enough, at the snap Laws handed off to Isbell circling back on a reverse. Every Cleveland player not otherwise occupied made a bee-line for Hutson. Isbell surveyed the field and then tossed to Laws who had continued on his merry way down the field. Green Bay 7-6.

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Lambeau was once asked to name the best passer he had ever seen. He replied, "Cecil Isbell was the best, with Sid Luckman a close second and Sammy Baugh a long third. Isbell was a master at any range. He could throw soft passes, bullet passes or long passes."

In 1941, Isbell completed 117 of 206 passes for 1,479 yards and 15 touchdowns. The following year, he set NFL records with 146 completions, 2,021 yards gained and 24 touchdown passes. In that 11-game season, Hall of Fame receiver Don Hutson of the Packers caught 17 touchdown passes and scored 138 points (he also kicked 33 extra points and one field goal). The record of 17 TD catches stood until 1984, when Mark Clayton of Miami had 18 in 16 games, and the points mark stood until 1960, when Green Bay back Paul Hornung scored 176.

The Packers were 41-12-2 in regular-season games and 1-2 in playoff games in Isbell's five years. He threw touchdown passes in 23 consecutive games in 1941 and '42 and his 24 scoring passes in 1942 lasted as the Packers' record until Lynn Dickey connected for 32 in 1983. Isbell passed for five TDs in one game against the Cleveland Rams in 1942 and gained 333 yards with just 10 completions against the Chicago Cardinals that same year.

Isbell's longest scoring pass was a 92-yarder to Hutson in 1939 and his shortest was also to Hutson -- a play measured as four inches against Cleveland in '42. That stood as the NFL's shortest scoring pass until 1960, when Eddie LeBaron of the Dallas Cowboys threw one that was recorded as two inches.

After the '42 season, Isbell, then 28 and at the height of his career, left to become an assistant coach at his alma mater, Purdue, for one-third his Green Bay salary of \$10,000. He explained, "I saw Lambeau go around the locker room and tell players like Arnie Herber that they were done. I vowed it would never happen to me."

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Isbell became head coach at Purdue in 1944 and the Boilermakers had a 14-14-1 record in his three years. In 1947, he moved to Baltimore to become the first coach of the Colts, who were joining the AAFC as the transplanted Miami Seahawks. The principal result of that 2 1/2-year pro coaching stint was that Isbell developed Y.A. Tittle into a topflight passer. Isbell was backfield coach for the Chicago Cardinals in 1950 and '51 and backfield coach at Louisiana State the next two years before going into business.

Isbell's records are amazing considering that he played with a dislocated left shoulder. The Houston native suffered the injury in his first Big Ten game, against Northwestern in 1935. Twice, the Purdue trainer went onto the field and popped the shoulder back into place so that Isbell could finish the game.

"After that, they decided I should have a chain on my left arm, so I couldn't raise it too high," said Isbell. "I wore the chain both at Purdue and with the Packers."

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Cecil and his older brother, Cody Isbell, played in the same backfield at Purdue from 1935 through '37, the year Cecil was voted the Boilermakers' most valuable player. Two younger brothers also played college football, A.W. (Dub) Isbell at Rice and Tulsa and Larry Isbell at Baylor. Larry, in fact, was a 1951 All-America selection.

Cecil Isbell was elected to college football's Hall of Fame in 1967 and in 1972 he was named to the Green Bay Packer Hall of Fame. He lived in Calumet City, Illinois, the last 13 years.

A pair of all-star games provided highlights in Isbell's career. In the summer of 1938, before joining the Packers, he was named the collegians' MVP in leading the College All-Stars to a 28-16 victory over the NFL champion Washington Redskins at Chicago's Soldier Field. Then, after the 1942 season, he was selected to play in the Pro Bowl, a postseason charity event matching the NFL champs against an all-star crew. Though he had to learn a welter of Chicago Bears plays (the squad was loaded with Bears players), he led the All-Stars to a 17-14 victory.

CECIL ISBELL

TB-DB-HB Cecil Frank Isbell 6-01 190 Purdue
 Sam Houston HS [Houston, TX]
 b: 07/11/15, Houston, TX - d: 06/23/85, Hammond, IN (69)

Year	Team	LG	Passing							Rushing				
			Gm	ATT	COM	Pct.	YRDS	AvgG	TD	IN	ATT	YDS	Avg	TD
1938	GrbB	N	11	91	37	40.7	659	7.24	7	8	85	445	*5.2	2
1939	GrnB	N	11	103	43	41.7	749	7.27	6	5	132	407	3.1	2
1940	GrnB	N	10	150	68	45.6	1037	6.91	8	12	97	270	2.8	4
1941	GrnB	N	11	*206	*117	56.8	*1479	7.18	*15	11	72	317	4.4	1
1942	GrnB	N	11	268	*146	54.5	*2021	7.54	*24	14	36	83	2.3	1
5 years			54	818	411	50.2	5945	7.27	59	52	422	1522	3.6	10

* - League high