

BENNY FRIEDMAN

By Jim Campbell

Paul Gallico, the most respected sportswriter of the 1920s-early '30s said, "The things that a perfect football player must do are kick, pass, run the ends, plunge the line, block, tackle, weave his way through broken fields, drop and place kick, interfere, diagnose plays, spot enemy weaknesses, direct an offense, and not get hurt. I have just been describing Benny Friedman's repertoire to you."

Benjamin "Benny" Friedman was born on March 18, 1905 in Cleveland, Ohio. He was raised, the fourth of six children, by his parents, immigrants from Russia, Louis and Mamie Atlevonik Friedman. His father worked as a furrier and a tailor, while his mother worked at home rearing Benny and his brothers and sisters.

His first athletic endeavors were "street games" with his brothers and other boys from the predominantly-Jewish East Side neighborhood. Though compactly built, Benny was never tall in stature. Impatiently waiting to grow, Friedman went against conventional wisdom of the day and lifted weights -- something that coaches feared would result in athletes becoming "muscle bound" -- and exercised. He threw heavy medicine balls and squeezed a handball to strengthen his grip. He lifted a heavy broom by the very end of its handle. He raised a chair overhead by the bottom of one leg, and tossed it from hand to hand, catching it by the bottom of one leg.

To widen his grip to accommodate the fat, melon-shaped football of his youth, he would press down his hand and force his thumb and little finger into a straight line, holding it in that position for as long as he could stand the considerable pain it caused.

As a sophomore at East Tech High School, he was cut from the football squad after two weeks of pre-season practice. When his family moved in 1921, Friedman made the varsity at Cleveland's Glenville High. As a senior he led his team to the 1922 Cleveland city football championship, defeating East High, 13-0, and during the regular season stunning East Tech -- the school whose coach deemed him too small, 31-0. Glenville went on to lay claim to the mythical national high school championship by defeating Chicago's Oak Park High in a post-season game.

College representatives came to Cleveland to recruit the all-around athlete. Penn State, where it appeared Friedman would matriculate, turned lukewarm after deciding he was too small at 5-8, 172. A group of University of Michigan supporters suggested a visit to Ann Arbor.

Friedman entered Michigan in the fall of 1923. To supplement his savings, he played drums in a Chinese restaurant, was a theatre ticket-taker, and worked in the University book store for 40 cents an hour. Later, his godfather, Max Rosenblum, paid his tuition.

Friedman played well and further honed his skills as a passer with the Wolverine freshmen team, but at one time was so discouraged that he seriously considered transferring to Dartmouth.

His sophomore season, under head coach George Little, was more discouraging. He didn't even play in the traditional game against the Michigan Aggies (now Michigan State). The next week, as Illinois and Red Grange victimized Michigan (Grange scored four touchdowns before the first quarter was over), Friedman played after the outcome of the game was decided and threw several successful passes. Fielding Yost, who had retired from coaching the year before, instructed coach Little to start Friedman the next week versus Wisconsin. Friedman led the Wolverines to a 21-0 victory, as he ran for a touchdown and passed for two others.

In 1925, Little moved on to coach Wisconsin and Yost came back from retirement to coach again. Friedman now had a sophomore end -- Bennie Oosterbaan -- to catch his passes. At season's end, as Michigan breezed past all opponents but Northwestern (a 3-2 loss), Friedman and Oosterbaan became

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 20, No. 2 (1998)

the first pass-catch combination to be named All-America. Yost would say, years later, "My nineteen-twenty five team was the best I ever had at Michigan."

As a senior Friedman repeated as a consensus All-America -- so did Oosterbaan, as the Wolverines had another fine season. Friedman's heroics were responsible for a pair of crucial victories. He threw for two touchdowns, kicked the extra points, and then won the Ohio State game, 17-16, with a dramatic 43-yard field goal. Trailing Minnesota, 6-0, Friedman's reliable toe kicked the winning conversion after Oosterbaan's 57-yard score to give Michigan a 7-6 victory. Only a 10-0 loss to Navy marred the season.

Friedman's career statistics (233 attempts, 86 completions for 1,688 yards) seem modest when taken out of the context of the times but his 27 touchdown passes are outstanding in any era but the most modern. Regardless, he earned a reputation as college football's greatest passer through that time.

Now fully matured at 5-10, 183 and with a bachelor of arts degree in literature, Friedman joined the Cleveland Indians of the struggling National Football League (NFL) in 1927. The next year, he moved on to the Detroit Wolverines. He so impressed Tim Mara, owner of the New York Giants that when Mara could not deal for Friedman, he bought the entire team just to get Benny -- and then paid him the highest salary in the league, \$10,000 a year. From 1929-1931, Friedman was an outstanding team leader and drawing card -- people came just to see him throw the football.

NFL statistics did not become "official" until 1932, but subsequent research shows that from 1927 to 1930 Friedman threw more than 50 touchdown passes, leading the league each season -- his closest rivals accounted for 27. In games where newspapers listed his yardage, Friedman gained 5,653 yards passing, again leading the league each year -- his closest rivals gained 3,770.

He made every All-Pro team of that era and revolutionized the game. Until then, passing was mainly a desperation measure on third down. Current Giants owner Wellington Mara (himself an inductee of the Pro Football Hall of Fame said, "He changed the game. Benny would throw on first down, or any down. That was not done before."

Friedman was hired by Yale as backfield coach in 1930 -- the same year he married Shirley Immerman -- but continued to play for the Giants and keep the team contending for the league championship.

In 1932, after Mara would not let Friedman buy into the team, Benny became player-coach of the Brooklyn Dodgers. His passing statistics paled as his playing time lessened, but he still was the game's leading proponent -- and most successful practitioner -- of the forward pass.

He coached CCNY from 1934 to 1941. After World War II, he became the football coach and athletic director at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. When Brandeis dropped the sport in 1963, Friedman left the football scene. In 1964, however, he did begin a camp in Oxford, Maine, where he instructed aspiring young quarterbacks.

Despondent over the amputation of a leg, and suffering from a heart condition, Friedman ended his life by a self-inflicted gunshot November 23, 1982, in New York City. He is buried there.

Friedman's greatness is well-documented. In 1930, he made the college All-Time All-America team. In 1947 he was chosen for the All-Time All-NFL team. And he was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in its charter class, 1951.

He lobbied enthusiastically for his own induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame and may have caused a "backlash," but many football historians, especially in light of heretofore unknown statistics of his early - - and best -- pro years, now concede he is worthy of serious consideration for induction.