

FIFTEEN YEARS WITH THE SAME TEAM

By Stan Grosshandler

There have been 29 players in the NFL who have worn the same uniform for 15 or more years. With the advent of free agency that has resulted in players frequently changing teams, longevity with a single club will soon be part of history like the leather helmets, single wing, and the reserve clause.

Few players in the early years of the league had long careers in general much less with one team for several reasons.

The compensation of professional football was quite poor. Far below Major League Baseball. Bob Reynolds, who had been an All-American tackle at Stanford and later to become the president of the California Angels, said "Professional football was something you did until you could get a real job. I played two years for the Lions and then got a job announcing in radio."

As players went both ways and usually played the entire 60 minutes, the body was under great physical stress and could not take it for many years.

Until the mid part of this century there was no such thing as sports medicine with sophisticated surgical techniques and scientific training and rehabilitation programs. Injuries that ended careers are now treated successfully and the player returned to action.

Finally, service in World War II prematurely ended many a promising career.

Only two players who started their careers in the 1930's lasted 15 years with the same team, Hall of Famers Mel Hein and Sammy Baugh.

Mel Hein joined the Giants in 1931 as a center/linebacker. It was his exceptional talent that enabled Steve Owen's unique A formation to be so successful. Mel was so versatile that the Giants would line up leaving him as an end and then throw him a pass.

All-League Bear guard Joe Kopcha tells how one day he tried to divert Mel's attention. "I lined up over him and said Mel, what makes you so great? Without looking up he replied, playing against bums like you." For once the loquacious Kopcha had no answer.

Hein finished his active career in 1945 and became director of NFL officials.

Sammy Baugh joined the Redskins in 1937 and played through 1952. He was the ideal back as he could run, pass, punt and play a magnificent defensive game. He has admitted that switching to T quarterback in 1944 significantly prolonged his career.

Nine other members of the Hall of Fame wore the same uniform 15 or more years.

Lou Groza joined the Cleveland Browns of the AAFC in 1946 as an OT and place kicker. He tried to retire in 1960 but returned the following season. In 1962 he confined his talents to place-kicking that enabled him to spend a record 21 years as an active player.

Bart Starr quarterbacked the Packers 1956-71/16 yrs; while three Raiders spent 15 seasons in the silver and black uniform – C, Jim Otto, '60-74; OT, Art Shell, '68-82; and G, Gene Upshaw, '67-81.

Other 15 year men in the Hall of Fame are DT Merlin Olsen of the Rams '62-76; Packer LB Ray Nitschke '58-72, Dan Fouts, San Diego QB '73-87, and Steeler C Mike Webster '74-90.

Both Jeff Van Note and Pat Leahy wore the same colors for 18 seasons. Jeff played C,G, and T for Atlanta '69-86 and Pat kicked for the Jets '74-91.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 20, No. 5 (1998)

As would be expected QBs lead in longevity as eight remained with one team for 15 or more seasons. Included are John Brodie of San Francisco '57-73; Patriot Steve Grogan '75-90; and Ken Anderson of Cincinnati '71-86.

A total of four kickers were long timers. Besides Groza and Leahy were Jim Bakken of the Cardinals '62-78 and Viking Fred Cox '63-77.

Long term DB include Bill Bates, Dallas '83-97; Ken Riley, Cincinnati '69-73; and Jimmy Johnson, 49ers '61-76.

Joe Scibelli played G for the Rams '61-75 while Doug Wilkerson was a San Diego G '70-84. Roy Winston backed up Viking lines '62-76.

Cowboy defensive end Ed "Too Tall" Jones joined the team in 1974 then took 1989 off to pursue a career as a boxer. He returned the following year playing through 1989.

Longtime active players are Darrell Green, Redskin DB '83-98; Bronco QB John Elway '83-98; Oiler G Bruce Matthews '83-98; and Miami QB Dan Marino '83-98.

These four may well be the last of the breed.