

The **White**, Night Football

by Alan Ross

It was nocturnal by nature. It once scored 73 points in a game. It was thrown by the likes of Sid Luckman and Otto Graham. It had been caught by Dante Lavelli, carried by Steve Van Buren, and returned by Charley Trippi.

Like owls and bats, it only came out at night. It was white.

The **white, night football** — with one black circle on each end; similar in every respect to its daylight contemporary, the prolate spheroid of traditional pigskin tone and character. One of its renowned tossers, Luckman of the famed Chicago Bears' "Monsters of the Midway" teams, says that its inception lies with George Halas, the father of pro football.

"Oh, George was the boss," confirms Luckman, the legendary quarterback who along with Halas perfected the innovative T formation that revolutionized football back in the late '30s. "In fact, he talked with me one time about it. I said, 'Gee, that sounds like a great thing for the spectators.' And actually, it really was — to see a white ball going through the sky."

Despite Luckman's enthusiastic support of Halas as the originator of the white ball, an account from Monsignor Ignatius McDermott, a legend in Chicago for his unflagging work with the homeless, indicates otherwise. Msgr. McDermott, at the 50th Anniversary reunion of the 1947 world champion Chicago Cardinals, vividly described instances in the early-to-mid 1920s when the Cardinals, under original owner and founder Chris O'Brien, would hold evening practices at the South Side's old Sherman Park after players got off from work. Thanks to some ingenuity from O'Brien, they practiced with a white football under two lamp posts beside the library, the best lit area in the park.

McDermott, now 85 years strong, was in high school then, in 1924. He sold scorecards for a dime at the Cardinals Sunday games held at old Normal Park on 61st St. and Racine, also helping Mrs. Chris O'Brien push Oh Henry! candy bars and soda pop at the park's one refreshment stand.

"O'Brien owned a paint shop — he painted houses in those days," recalls Msgr. McDermott. "With the inferior lighting at Sherman Park, O'Brien serviced the club with some of his skill: He painted the football white, so they could practice at night."

There are other stirring remembrances for McDermott: "The great drop-kicker, Paddy Driscoll, would take two balls and kick from all angles through the uprights in practice, starting at the 15-yard line then moving back to the 18, the 20, the 22, 25, and so on. I don't know if anybody else is alive who could corroborate this story," the monsignor adds thoughtfully, "but that's my recollection."

The first known official documentation of the use of a white football was recorded in the Providence (R.I.) *Journal* on November 7, 1929, roughly five years after Msgr. McDermott's account. Oddly, the game on November 6 at Kinsley Park in Providence gained historical notoriety for another reason at the time -- it is credited as the first night game ever in NFL history. Ironically, the Chicago Cardinals were one of the participants that night. Behind the running, passing and kicking of Ernie Nevers, the Cardinals upended the Providence Steam Roller, 16–0. In that game, a white ball was used to help offset bad lighting.

"We painted the ball white," said Pearce Johnson, the Steam Roller's assistant general manager, "and I suppose that helped some." It made no difference to the unstoppable Nevers, who scored every point in the Cardinals win, a feat he matched on numerous occasions.

The white ball was first manufactured for widespread use by Rawlings Sporting Goods Co. in St. Louis and was presented in its 1940-41 Fall-Winter sports catalogue. "Footballs for Night Play," the ad offered. Stripes and waterproofing optional. Another early employment of the albinic ball dates back to 1936 in

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the inaugural *Tribune* Charities game at the Polo Grounds, on September 8, that featured the Eastern College All-Stars against the New York Giants.

In addition to regular usage by the All-America Football Conference during the years 1946–49, the ball hit the bigtime on the evening of Sept. 16, 1950 — the much-anticipated NFL debut of the Cleveland Browns, the upstart newcomers and former champs of the recently absorbed/defunct AAFC, who would open the regular season against the incumbent NFL champion Philadelphia Eagles at Municipal Stadium in Philadelphia. It is considered one of the landmark games in NFL history, and the old white ball, a glorious jewel in the night, was a part of it.

“I didn’t like it,” flatly recounts Graham, the Cleveland Browns Hall of Fame quarterback, member of the NFL 75th Anniversary All-Time Team and star of that September 16th night in Philadelphia. “The white ball had two black stripes on it. The paint they used was slick and my thumb fell right on that spot whenever I gripped the ball. It was very slippery. It was not a good ball to throw. Your accuracy was affected immensely by it.”

Van Buren, the Philadelphia Eagles’ powerful, swift running back of the mid-to-late ’40s, who was injured and didn’t dress out for that famous 1950 season opener, was agreeably ambivalent about the ball:

“Day or night, I liked it either way.”

The white football made an exit from the field of play in 1956, ostensibly because teams wearing white uniforms held an unfair advantage that enabled them to, in effect, camouflage the ball on running plays. Enter the brown pigskin with white stripes on each end. It was employed for 20 years but was also summarily dismissed, in 1976, because of the aforementioned slipperiness of the stripes.

With the tidal-wave advent of nationwide television in the late ’50s and early ’60s, lighting standards at every stadium and ballpark in the country were raised to meet the uncompromising demands of color TV. As each shadowy end zone corner was blasted with glaring megawattage, the old white football, like some slowly fading ghost, spiraled into the night on its way to oblivion.

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