

A Football Man – Coach Bob Snyder

By Peter Vischansky

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Chicago Bears quarterback Bob Snyder received a request from the owner of the Chicago Bears, George Halas, that helped trigger a revolution in college football offenses. After playing the New York Giants at Soldier Field in 1941, he could not imagine why he was being summoned to Halas' office. As Snyder entered the office, Halas introduced Snyder to Frank Leahy of Notre Dame and his line coach Moose Krause. It would be a meeting that would help bring college football offenses into the modern era.

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Snyder, a descendant of German immigrants who moved to the United States in the 1800's, was born February 6, 1913, in Fremont, Ohio. His great-grandfather and grandfather worked in the world-renowned Hickle and Klaus shear factory in Fremont. On Armistice Day of 1918 his family moved to Toledo, Ohio. Snyder was four years old at the time.

Young Snyder attended Edward D. Libby High School where he earned thirteen letters in football, baseball and basketball and an additional letter in track. The future National Football League player was all-state in football in 1930 and 1931.

After high school he enrolled at Ohio University and in 1935 led the football team to an undefeated season, with a victory over Illinois of the Big Ten. Snyder kicked off, passed, ran, blocked, punted, kicked field goals and extra points, and, of course, in an era of limited substitution, played defense.

ROAD TO THE BEARS

After graduating from Ohio University, the quarterback signed with the then Pittsburgh Americans in the American Football League, a new league that tried unsuccessfully to compete with the NFL. Snyder did better than the league. Several NFL teams bid for his services. In 1937 he signed with the Cleveland Rams, technically an NFL expansion team but one descended from a 1936 AFL club.

The NFL had been trying to establish a team in Cleveland ever since 1920. The most recent attempt in 1931 had failed because the team was far too weak to excite Cleveland fans. In their first year, the Rams didn't seem to be much stronger than that failed 1931 team. Their only win came against a weak Philadelphia team.

But, by 1938, the team had improved considerably.

On October 9, the Rams shocked the powerful Chicago Bears 14-7 at Cleveland. Two weeks later, the Rams went to Chicago where the Bears hungered for revenge. In the opening quarter, Snyder passed to Jim Benton for a 45-yard touchdown, and the Rams went on to another upset 23-21.

Watching Snyder lead the Rams to two victories over the Bears impressed coach George Halas and he purchased Snyder's contract in 1939. Halas was building a powerhouse. Some of the players who starred for the Bruins during the next five years were Bulldog Turner, Bill Osmanski, Sid Luckman, Ray Nolting, Jack Manders, Joe Stydahar, Dante Magnani, George McAfee, George Musso, Ken Kavanaugh, and Bronko Nagurski.

In 1939, Snyder alternated with rookie Sid Luckman at quarterback, often starting the game. In addition, he punted, kicked field goals and extra points. Despite his admiration for Luckman, Snyder lists Sammy Baugh as the greatest quarterback who ever played, but when it comes to running backs, he picks

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teammate George McAfee as the greatest -- bar none. Snyder said of McAfee, "McAfee only played 31 minutes a game and still had outstanding stats. He would be a star today!"

THE "T"

The December 1940 championship game was a turning point in NFL history. At that time, virtually every college and pro team except the Bears ran from a singlewing formation. The Bears had been revising their "T" for years. In the championship game Chicago's new "T" worked beyond anyone's wildest dreams and became a formation that would usher in the modern era of pro football. The final score of 73-0 over the Washington Redskins represented not only the largest margin of victory ever in an NFL championship game, it's the greatest margin in any NFL game ever!

The T was the original offensive formation born in the 19th Century. However, it was very different from the modern version. The linemen lined up ankle to ankle from one end to another. The quarterback was a yard-and-a-half behind the center with three running backs packed tightly behind him. It had little deception and lacked power. Early in the 20th Century, the T lost out to the single wing in most places. Bob Zupke at Illinois continued to run a T, and Halas learned it there. When Halas began coaching, he installed the T. During the 1920s and 30s, the Bears were usually the only NFL team using a T. When Ralph Jones replaced Halas as coach from 1930 through '32, he made some important changes such as bringing the quarterback up under center and introducing the man-in-motion. Halas returned as coach in 1933. He continued to refine the T, often consulting with Clark Shaughnessy who was coach at the University of Chicago.

Shaughnessy, whom Snyder credits as the man "who refined the T," would sometimes leave University of Chicago practice to his assistants and instead attend the Bears practices those chilly fall afternoons. One of his innovations was to set a halfback out as a flanker instead of sending him in motion. When the other halfback went in motion, defenses were thoroughly confused. Shaughnessy is also usually credited with spreading the line and splitting the ends, thereby creating blocking angles. Line coach Hunk Anderson invented new blocking techniques to take advantage of the new set.

With the possibilities created by flankers, men in motion, and split ends, every play the Bears had in their arsenal could be run in a half-dozen different versions. Reportedly, the first time Sid Luckman looked at the Bears' playbook, he sat down and cried.

The new T sputtered during the 1940 season. Only a couple of weeks before the championship game, the Redskins beat the Bears 7-3. In the week leading up to the title game, Shaughnessy reportedly added some new wrinkles to the Bears' offense. On the second play from scrimmage, Chicago's Bill Osmanski exploded for a 68-yard touchdown, and a new era began. Eventually, the Bears' T gave rise to numerous permutations such as the split-T, the winged T, the "I", the wishbone and other fast moving modern offenses.

In that same 1940 season, Shaughnessy left the University of Chicago and took over a Stanford team which had not won a game the year before. With the T-formation, Stanford went to the Rose Bowl and beat Nebraska 21-13. Shaughnessy was named Coach of the Year. Meanwhile, the Bears won three more Western Division championships and two more NFL crowns before World War II took most of their stars into military service.

While Shaughnessy honed the formation with the Bears, Snyder worked at quarterback and became a student of the T-formation. Within ten years, all but one professional football team would switch to the new formation. Colleges were desperate to learn the system, but in those first years only two teams in the nation, Stanford and the Chicago Bears, ran the offense and only a handful of coaches had expertise in its theory.

If Shaughnessy was the father of the T, George Halas was its prophet. Snyder stated, "Halas was determined to spread the T-formation," and Bob Snyder was Halas' chosen disciple.

NOTRE DAME, LEAHY, SNYDER AND THE "T"

In 1941, Snyder was still two years away from retirement as a player. Frank Leahy, along with his line coach Moose Krause came to Chicago to watch the Bears run their T-formation. Leahy had been at Boston College and in 1941 accepted the coaching position at Notre Dame.

After a Chicago and Giants home game was played, Halas summoned Snyder to his office. Waiting were Leahy and Krause; they had never seen the T-formation like this and were fascinated. After a lengthy discussion on the new formation, the four parted.

The following spring, Leahy called Snyder at Snyder's home. He requested Snyder come to Michigan City to discuss the T-formation. Snyder with his wife Elinor took a train from Toledo for a day's meeting with Leahy and Krause. From 1:00 p.m. to 4:30 they conferred. Realizing the meeting would run into the wee hours of the morning Snyder sent his wife Elinor back to the hotel. The next day Elinor returned to Toledo; three days later Snyder also returned home. It was agreed during the meeting that Snyder would help Notre Dame to install the formation during their spring practice. While at South Bend that spring, Snyder received a call from Skip Palrang, coach at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, requesting his help with the T at Creighton. Snyder's schedule was busy, Monday thru Thursday, Snyder labored at Notre Dame; Friday thru Sunday at Creighton University. At the end of spring practice, Snyder returned to Toledo to tend to his successful restaurant business.

That same summer of 1942, Leahy requested Snyder come to South Bend in the fall of 1942 and oversee the installation of the T-formation. Snyder, still an active player was uncertain of the trip, however George Halas offered, "Go and I'll pay you like you were on the roster for the season."

It was a formidable task. Except for Leahy and Krause, neither the coaches or players had even seen the T-formation.

Notre Dame would be quarterbacked by Angelo Bertelli, who as the field general for the T, would become the first Notre Dame Heisman Trophy winner. When Bertelli was inducted into the Marine Corps during the 1942 season, Johnny Lujack took over at quarterback.

Notre Dame and Leahy would go on to an unprecedented decade from 1942-1953, using the T-formation to produce six unbeaten teams and four national championships.

Snyder returned to the Chicago Bears in 1943 as a player for his final season, capped by another NFL championship. He retired after the 1943 season, but he was in demand shortly afterwards. Over the next several years, he helped several colleges install the T.

INTEGRATION OF PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL

In 1945, two years after his retirement was under contract to still another college for his T-expertise. The general manager of the Cleveland Rams, Chili Walsh, wanted Snyder for the Rams and got him released from his contract so he could become a Rams assistant coach.

After the 1946 season owner Dan Reeves, who had a brokerage firm in Los Angeles, moved the Rams to that city. Because the Rose Bowl was reserved for USC and UCLA, the Rams played their games in the Los Angeles Coliseum. Los Angeles politicians decreed that to play in the Coliseum, the Rams must sign some of the black players who had starred in West Coast football.

Reeves signed two African-American players. There had not been black players in any professional sport in the modern era. They signed the two players almost simultaneously -- Woody Strode, a big receiver from UCLA, and Kenny Washington, who had spent the early 40's toiling in the Pacific Coast Professional Football League.

Referring to Kenny Washington, Snyder said "He could have been the greatest running back ever, however by the time we got him his legs were all beat up from years of playing in semi-pro ball. Those legs had to be drained weekly".

It was not until 1947, that Branch Rickey signed Jackie Robinson to break baseball's color barrier amidst much sensationalism.

Dan Reeves called on Bob Snyder in 1947 to become head coach of the Rams. At thirty-four years of age he became the youngest head coach in the National Football League.

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Los Angeles sportswriter Maxwell Stiles wrote of Snyder: "He is one of us. He talks our language. He never evades a question. Bob Snyder will always give you an answer direct and true. At least you know Bob Snyder's honest opinion and have his honest answer. It was easy to see the players would like him. He is one of them too. Several men on his present team played with him or against him. They will fight their hearts out for him. They too want to see him make good."

After the 1948 season, Snyder left the Rams and had coaching stints at University of Toledo, Calgary Stampeders (CFL) and the Toledo Tornadoes. He was called on to install the T-formation at Notre Dame, University of Southern California, Creighton, Maryland, West Virginia and Villanova. He also had assistant coaching jobs with the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Green Bay Packers. All the while he spread the word of the T-formation. Among the quarterbacks he coached along the way were Johnny Unitas, Bob Waterfield, Jim Finks, Jim Hardy, Johnny Lujack, Angelo Bertelli, and Frankie Albert

FOOTBALL TODAY

Bob Snyder and his second wife, Maggie, still reside in Toledo. The Snyders are blessed with seven children, seventeen grandchildren and eight great grandchildren.

Not one to mince words concerning football today, Snyder said, "I don't have a problem with the players; only the owners. The owners pamper and overpay the players."

The former quarterback bristled at the suggestion players of the 1930's and 1940's couldn't compete today. "You can't compare players of different eras. There was no free substitution, two platooning or specialization. In our 73-0 win over the Redskins six different players kicked extra points".

Then Snyder illustrates his point. "The Dallas Cowboys offensive line during their Super Bowl years averaged 328 pounds. How would they have done running downfield on kickoffs, punts, and playing defense?"

The old quarterback made his point as surely as those he used to kick for the Chicago Bears.

Honors

Edward D. Libbey High School Hall of Fame
Greater Toledo Hall of Fame
Toledo High School Hall of Fame
Ohio University Hall of Fame
"The Green and White Ohio University Award"
Buckeye Conference (Mid-American) Hall of Fame
National Football League Legends List

Chicago Bears World Championship Teams (1940, 1941, 1943)