

CLIFF BATTLES

By John Seaburn

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Cliff Battles' illustrious football career began, humbly enough, on the playing fields of Kenmore, Ohio near Akron in the Roaring Twenties. It continued at West Virginia Wesleyan College in Buckhannon, W. Va. and concluded with an impressive stint with the Washington Redskins.

Thirty-one years after his last professional season of 1937, Battles was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1968.

Oddly, Battles left the game after the 1937 season, at the height of his 6-year pro career and after he had led the NFL in rushing. Washington owner George Preston Marshall had refused to grant him a pay raise.

Battles, who went to West Virginia Wesleyan with Kenmore High teammates and brothers Art, Forrest and Howard Bachtel, had joined Preston's Boston Braves in 1932. He proceeded to leave his mark on the club and on the pro game by gaining 3,542 career yards. He averaged 4.2 yards on 839 career carries, and scored a total of 23 touchdowns. He was the NFL's leading rusher in 1933 and in 1937.

An all-Pro selection three times, Battles became the first pro player to rush for more than 200 yards in a game, shredding the 1933 New York Giants for 215 yards.

Before the 1937 season began, Marshall moved his Boston franchise to Washington and added former Texas Christian quarterback Sammy Baugh to the roster. The Redskins went 8-3 and beat Chicago 28-21 in the championship game.

After the season, Battles asked Marshall to raise his annual salary from \$2,500 to slightly more than \$4,000. Marshall refused, in part because the Redskins owner had been distracted from negotiations with Battles by word that Baugh was considering a baseball career. When Marshall turned his attention to Baugh, Battles, just 28 years of age, quit.

A New Career

Baugh received a lucrative salary and remained with the Redskins into the early 1950s. Battles? He did earn his \$4,000 in 1938 -- as a member of Lou Little's coaching staff at Columbia. Battles remained at Columbia until he joined the U.S. Marines in 1942. He coached the El Toro Marines football team in 1944. Battles was head coach of the All-American Football Conference's Brooklyn Dodgers in 1946 and 1947, then became an executive with General Electric in Maryland.

His Brooklyn Dodgers met the Cleveland Browns at Ebbetts Field in the 1947 season, and it was during pregame warm-ups that Browns coach and general manager Paul Brown and Dodgers owner Bill Cox got into a heated argument.

"Brown became very angry and threatened to run the Dodgers out of the league," said Battles, who resigned at the end of that season. "Then he turned fullback Marion Motley loose on us. Looking back (Cleveland won 55-7), I'm not sure Brown didn't run us out of the league that day."

Battles' college and pro careers were played out during a momentous and historic time in the sport:

-- Legendary coach Amos Alonzo Stagg paced the University of Chicago sideline,

-- Army met Navy at Chicago's Soldier Field IN 1926 and the crowd totaled 110,000, the first college crowd to exceed 100,00,

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-- In 1933, NFL owners imposed a ban on black players that remained in place until 1946, and

-- Big-time professional football began to leave the places of its birth.

Teams that had begun in Akron, Canton and Massillon died out as players aged or moved on. Other teams gained stability through relocation and the NFL's reorganization of 1928.

The Chicago Bears were once known as the Staleys when they played in Decatur, Ill. The Detroit Lions were once the Portsmouth, Ohio, Spartans.

Like so many players of the day, Battles had a nickname, "Gip" (sometimes spelled Gipp) that apparently stemmed from his admiration for Notre Dame all-American George (Win One For the Gipper) Gipp.

Battles captained West Virginia Wesleyan's football, basketball, track and baseball teams. He was a Phi Beta Kappa scholar and Rhodes Scholar candidate.

"I always thought of Gip as a good fellow and gentleman on the field as well as of ," Art Bachtel said. "He never had the so-called big head. I never saw him angry or heard him swear at someone for dirty play or unnecessary roughness."

A football triple-threat, Battles was named to several all-America teams and was the first small college player to be enshrined in the College Football Hall of Fame.

Author Allison Danzig, in his book, *The History of American Football*, wrote, "In 1931 the East produced not only one of the best players of the year but of all time in Cliff Battles of West Virginia Wesleyan."

Battles also was inducted into the National Touchdown Club of Washington and the Summit County, Ohio Hall of Fame, and his name is on the Wall of Stars at Robert F. Kennedy Stadium in Washington, DC

Phil Dietrich, 92, a retired *Beacon Journal* sportswriter and longtime PFRA member, was at the head table for the Cliff Battles Day luncheon at Akron's Mayflower Hotel on Aug. 2, 1968, one day before Battles was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Dietrich said, "I never actually saw Battles play a football game. But I was fortunate to spend some time with Battles the day of the luncheon, and he was a wonderful person. And, of course, he certainly helped make Akron, Kenmore High and West Virginia Wesleyan College famous."

Akronite David Shaw attended West Virginia Wesleyan in the late 1940s. Shaw remembers a Battles story repeated often by football coach C.B. Ross.

As Ross told it to Shaw and other candidates for the team, Wesleyan was playing Washington and Jefferson, considered an Eastern collegiate football power because it had fought California to a scoreless tie in the 1922 Rose Bowl six years earlier.

"As C.B. recalled it, sportswriters had cautioned W&J not to punt the ball into Battles' area of the field. But W&J ignored the warnings and twice punted to Battles. Each time, Battles gathered in the ball, ran over to the Wesleyan sideline, winked at C.B. and then returned those punts for touchdowns.

"Even in 1949, more than 20 later, C.B. still got a kick out of telling that story."

Battles' finest collegiate moment might have come in Wesleyan's 51-6 victory over Salem on Nov. 14, 1931. In just three quarters, Battles gained 463 yards and scored seven touchdowns.

Bachtel said: ""He was the greatest open-field runner I ever saw. He didn't run but seemed to lope along. It was his natural way of running. Whenever we broke him through the line, it was almost certain to be a touchdown.""

As did many of his peers, Battles played semipro football while a collegian. And, as did many of his peers, Battles did so under a false name that allowed him to get paid but still keep his college eligibility.

Battles played for the South Akron Awnings under the name Jones -- a subterfuge not revealed until 1947.

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Al Santoro, then sports editor of the Los Angeles *Examiner*, wrote a column in 1947 about a 1929 game between the South Akron Awnings and the Ironton, Ohio Yanks that decided the Ohio Semipro Championship. Santoro wrote: ""The Awnings won because a man named "Jones" was the star of their backfield.

"Jerry Corcoran, a talent scout for the 1929 Buffalo Bisons, was in the stands and approached Jones after the game.

"Corcoran knew everyone in football and asked Jones if his real name was Cliff Battles.

"Battles said, 'Shhhhhh.'

"Corcoran retorted: 'OK, but how about signing a contract?'

"Battles thought for a minute, then said, 'Come see me after my last game my senior year at Wesleyan.'

Battles' football heroics had drawn the attention of George Preston Marshall, who saw Battles play against Navy and Georgetown. Marshall dispatched Corcoran, now a scout for Marshall's Boston club, to sign him.

Corcoran visited Wesleyan in 1931, and Battles showed him numerous letters and telegrams he'd received from NFL teams.

According to Santoro, the highest bid for Battles' services was \$150 a game from the New York Giants.

Corcoran raised his bid to \$175, and that's how Battles came to play for the 1932 Boston Braves. The Braves became the Boston Redskins in 1933 and moved to Washington in 1937.

At Akron's Kenmore High, Battles played for coach Clyde T. Monroe in 1925 and 1926. During those years, Kenmore's Cardinals were members of what was called the Trolley League. A trolley line connected the Ohio communities of Wadsworth, Kent, Ravenna, Bedford, Cuyahoga Falls and ran past Kent Roosevelt High. Kenmore today honors athletes who carry on Battles' tradition, those who letter in three sports their senior year, with the Cliff Battles Award.

There is also a Battles Avenue in Kenmore, although a distant cousin, Ralph Battles, says the street is named for a cluster of Battles families that made their homes in the area. Frank and Della Battles, Cliff's parents, made their home at 2134 13th St. SW.

"There were five or six Battles families, maybe more, living where that street is now," Ralph Battles said. "In fact, a Battles farm was nearby. My father and his six brothers and sisters grew up there."

Clifford Franklyn Battles was born in Akron May 1, 1910, the son of a saltworker for Goodrich and Firestone tire companies. Battles died in Clearwater, Fla. April 28, 1981, and is buried in Parklawn cemetery in Rockville, Md. One of his pallbearers was Byron (Whizzer) White, the former US Supreme Court justice.

"I played football in Washington a little while after Cliff retired in 1937, but I remember his as a tremendous player," White said at the time.

"When I came to Washington, we became close friends. We played golf for many years (Battles was a member of the board of directors of Congressional Country Club, retiring in 1979), and he was always a fine player and a gentleman."

Battles' pallbearers included Redskins quarterbacks Sonny Jergensen and Ralph Guglielmi and the late Earl Schreiber, former president of the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Here's a capsule look at Cliff Battles' rushing totals in his six NFL seasons:

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>TEAM</u>	<u>ATT</u>	<u>YDS</u>	<u>AVG</u>	<u>TD</u>
1932	Boston Braves	148	576	3.9	3
1933	Boston Redskins	136	737	5.0	3
1934	Boston Redskins	96	511	5.0	6

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1935	Boston Redskins	67	230	3.4	1
1936	Boston Redskins	176	614	3.5	5
1937	Washington Redskins	216	874	4.0	5
TOTALS		839	3,542	4.2	23
