

Harlon Hill: The Lance Alworth of His Era

By T.J. Troup

Harlon Hill is the only rookie receiver in NFL history to catch passes for over 100 yards against a defending league champion in his first game in the last 50 years. His performance will be a portent of things to come. This essay will examine Harlon Hill's impact on his team, the Chicago Bears, and the rest of the league during his first three years. A man who football writer/historian Paul Zimmerman (Dr. Z) has stated is the "Lance Alworth of his era."

When you are a 15th round draft choice from Florence State Teachers College (North Alabama University) the expectations should not be very high. Harlon Hill was joining the legendary monsters of the midway, but these were less than monstrous Bears and had won just 9 of their previous 28 games entering the 1954 season. During this 28 game span the Rams and 49ers had won 19 games, and the two time defending champion Lions had won 21. Harlon Hill would be the spark to bring the Bears back into contention for the western division crown. After the first five weeks of the 1954 season the Bears record stood at 2 wins and 3 losses. The Bears trailed all three of the above mentioned teams in the standings. Chicago traveled to Kezar Stadium to take on undefeated San Francisco. That afternoon was the day Harlon Hill arrived as he set a team record that still stands. Hill caught passes for 214 yards, and the Bears needed all of them as they went on to win 31 to 27. Hill scored all four Chicago touchdowns on just 7 receptions. With the confidence of this victory, and spurred on by Hill's abilities the Bears went on to win six of their last seven games, and finished second to the Lions in the western conference (with a record of 8-4). Further, due to Hill's impact the Bears also led the league in first downs passing.

The announcement that the Papa Bear ... George Halas would retire from head coaching after the 1955 season was a rallying point for the Bears. After three weeks, Hill had scored just one touchdown and the Bears were winless. After defeating the Colts, the Bears made their seasonal trek to Kezar to play the 49ers. Since the Bears again trailed both the Rams and 49ers in the standings, victory was paramount if the Bears were to win in Papa Bear's final season. Since Hill had caught 17 passes for 411 yards in his previous three games against San Francisco, Phil Bengston, the 49ers defensive coach, decided to "take away" Harlon Hill from the Bears offense. Bengston strategized and assigned tough fearless John Henry Johnson to hit Hill as he came off the line of scrimmage.

George Halas made the necessary offensive adjustments at half-time. He used Harlon as a decoy and ran the offense away from his side of the field in a variety of power formations. The Bears gained 252 yards rushing and outscored San Francisco 24 to 6 in the second half to win 34-23. The Bears continued on their win streak as Hill caught 20 passes for 422 yards and 7 touchdowns in the next four games. The first place Bears were upset by the Cardinals on November 27th and for the first time since early in his rookie year Hill did not catch a pass. Now in second place the Bears had to win and hope the Rams would lose. Hill's only catch against Detroit was a 20 yard game winner with five minutes left in the 4th quarter in a 21-20 victory. Though the Bears defeated the Rams twice during the season, Los Angeles won the western conference title. On January 15th, 1956 at the Pro Bowl game in Los Angeles Harlon received the league's MVP trophy for his performance for the 1955 season. Hill now had been selected rookie of the year and most valuable player in his first two seasons.

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Chicago opened the 1956 season in their usual way ... with a loss to the Colts, though Hill gained 102 yards receiving (his 11th 100 yard receiving game in just 25 games). The Bear rushing attack was the best in the league during 1955 & 1956. The Bears were the only team to attempt over 1000 rushing plays over the course of these two seasons; while gaining 4,856 yards (202 a game). Since this powerful ground attack was so successful, the Bears attempted only 250 passes all season in 1956. Would it be possible for any receiver to gain over 1,000 yards when his team passes so infrequently? Hill gained 1,013 yards receiving and caught 10 touchdown passes in the Bears nine victories and one tie!

Though he had so many outstanding games during the 1956 season, there is one game that stands out. The Bears and Lions were tied for first with 7-1 records, and neither team could afford a loss. In Yankee Stadium before a crowd of over 58,000 fans the New York Giants defense completely shut down the league's leading ground gainer Rick Casares. The Bears trailed 17-3 entering the 4th quarter, and again Harlon Hill would prove to be the "difference maker" as he caught a 79 yard td pass from Bill McColl (a play called the Goose Special), and a 56 yarder to tie the game. This final td is Hill's greatest catch as he grabbed, juggled, and finally latched onto the ball just inches off the ground with a Giant defender wrapped around his legs as he crossed the goal line.

Harlon Hill's accomplishments during his first three years read as follows: 1) he was chosen for the Pro Bowl all three seasons and his 134 catches was the 3rd most in the league (behind Bill Howton & Billy Wilson). 2) In the 26 games the Bears either won or tied (25 wins 1 tie) Hill caught 102 passes for 2,265 yards (22.2 yards per catch), and 26 touchdowns ... an amazing average of one per game. 3) Due to his impact on defenses the entire Bear offense improved to the point that Chicago score 958 points during this 36 game span, which was the most of the 12 teams in the league at that time.

Hill struggled with injuries and personal problems during his next four seasons at split end, and for the 1961 season George Allen convinced Papa Bear Halas that possibly a move to free safety would help the Bear secondary and give new life to Harlon's career. Hill's 24 yard interception return to set up one of the Bear touchdowns during the historically significant shut-out of the 49ers on October 22nd, 1961 (the unarming of the shotgun) and was a shining moment for Hill and the Bears.

The Bears traded Hill to the Steelers for a draft choice before the 1962 season. Former Detroit Lion head coach Buddy Parker was now coaching Pittsburgh and hoped that Harlon Hill could recapture his pass catching skill. During the first half of the season Harlon ran a few reverses and caught seven passes. At the mid-point of the season the Lions acquired Hill and he finished this final season of his career in Detroit.

Teaching, coaching, and leadership became the goals after Harlon Hill's football career ended. His distinguished thirteen years as Principal at Brooks High School in Killen, Alabama was a high point. Former administrators who served with Hill expressed their respect and admiration for his guidance and leadership. Harlon Hill was an exemplary man both on and off the field, and the Lance Alworth of his era.

Rising in the East

When the National Football League took in four teams from the All-America Football Conference in 1950, the Cleveland Browns of the AAFC were put into the American Conference, which would later become the Eastern Conference, where they joined NFL originals the New York Giants, Philadelphia Eagles, Pittsburgh Steelers, Chicago Cardinals, and Washington Redskins. The Browns had won every championship in the four year history of the AAFC and, after joining the NFL, kept right on winning. In fact, from 1950 to 1963, with the exception of 1960 when the Philadelphia Eagles won the East, the only competition that the Browns would face came from the New York Giants.

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The Browns and Giants would rule the East with one or the other winning the title 15 out of 16 years from 1950 to 1965. Cleveland won the first six from 1950 to 1955 before losing out to the Giants in 1956. The Browns would come back to win the title in 1957 before the Giants ran off five division championships in six years. New York won the East in 1958 and '59 then followed up with three straight titles from 1961 to 1963. Cleveland would come back to reclaim the division with wins in 1964 and '65, before the Dallas Cowboys, coached by former Giant assistant Tom Landry, ended the Browns/Giants dominance by winning the title in 1966 and '67.

The Browns would come back to defeat the Cowboys in the Eastern Conference playoffs in 1968 and '69 to finish off their title run before moving to the American Football Conference after the merger with the American Football Conference was completed in 1970.

From 1950 to 1965, Cleveland would play in nine NFL championship games winning it all in 1950, '54, '55, and '64 for an overall record of 4-5. The Browns also lost in the title game in 1968 and '69 making their overall championship game record 4-7. The Giants would fare much worse winning only once, in 1956 and losing in 1958, '59, '61, '62, and '63 for an overall record of 1-5.

--- Timothy Holland