

Don Hutson

by Chris Willis

Fifty years ago Green Bay Packers wide receiver Don Hutson embarrassed his last defender and hung up his cleats after eleven glorious seasons. Into retirement went the greatest wide receiver of all-time, a title that lasted most of those fifty years, recently passed to the incomparable Jerry Rice. Hutson was an early pioneer in the NFL's passing game, when throwing the ball was just as popular as the stock market crash. Aided with the help of two good quarterbacks and an innovative coach, Hutson propelled himself into a "special" Hall of Fame player. His skills can be seen in today's players; outstanding speed, instinctive moves, precise routes and great hands, all in one package. Any team today would make him a sure "can't miss" prospect, in the thirties they didn't know what they had or how to defend him. Hutson set a standard for any wideout playing.

Don Hutson was born and raised in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. His only claim to fame during his boyhood was the finest collection of pet rattlesnakes in the state. This was an early indicator he was a man apart, far different from the normal breed. Besides his rattlesnakes, Hutson was also a gifted athlete known more for his baseball skills than his football prowess. As an outfielder for his high school team, he showed enough promise for a shot at professional ball, but before his senior year he made a small decision that changed his sporting career.

Football held no interest for him in high school. He awakened to it only because the kid across the street was about to go to a pre-season training camp in the Ozarks in August of his senior year. Hutson went out for the team merely to qualify for the trip to the Ozarks, definitely a breed apart.

Hutson's senior year showed such great promise that Alabama awarded him a scholarship to play baseball and football. At six-foot-one and 160 pounds, Hutson didn't put any fear into opposing defenders, but his unbelievable speed and instinctive moves caught the coaches attention. By his senior year Hutson was still unproven and unheard of. In 1934 that was about to change.

The Crimson Tide went through the regular season undefeated (9-0), with only a 13-6 win over Tennessee as the only close contest, during which Hutson scored the winning touchdown. Alabama was then invited to play in the prestigious Rose Bowl, against powerful Stanford. Before a "frightful" crowd of 85,000, Hutson responded with the game of his life, by catching 7 passes for 165 yards and two touchdowns, to lead Alabama to a 29-13 upset. Hutson was a national hero and pro scouts started to recruit the star receiver.

Both Curly Lambeau of the Green Bay Packers and John "Shipwreck" Kelly of the Brooklyn (Football) Dodgers scouted Hutson at the Rose Bowl. Because there was no college draft, each coach was determined to sign him. Kelly assured Hutson that he would top any offer Lambeau might make.

After the game Lambeau mailed a contract to Hutson in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. The new "phenom" sent a collect wire to Kelly in Brooklyn, so that the bidding might begin. Kelly was vacationing in Florida, however, and by the time word from Hutson finally reached him Hutson already had signed the Green Bay contract and sent it to Lambeau. Kelly flew directly to Tuscaloosa and talked Hutson into signing a Brooklyn contract as well. Kelly told Hutson that Lambeau's contract was null and void, because at the time he signed it, he hadn't heard his offer. He told Hutson to sign his contract for \$500 a year more and leave the rest to him. Hutson signed the contract and Kelly sent it to the league

office.

A couple of days later NFL President Joe Carr was amazed when he opened his mail and found that Don Hutson had agreed to play for both Green Bay and Brooklyn – at slightly different salaries. Carr's ruling: the earlier contract to arrive would be valid, the other invalid.

Lambeau's letter, forwarding the signed contract and sent special delivery, had been stamped at 8:30 A.M. Kelly's had been stamped at 8:47 A.M. Seventeen minutes is all that separated both teams. Lambeau later thanked the postal service for landing Hutson and bringing the Packers back to power for the next decade.

The special delivered letter was also a blessing for Hutson as well as the Packers. Had he gone to Brooklyn, he might not have been in the league very long. The Dodgers had no quarterback, and Lambeau was the only coach at the time using the pass as his primary weapon. The recruitment of Hutson and other college stars convinced the league to finally adopt a system to allocate players, thus the college draft was born in 1936.

Hutson still had doubts about himself playing professional football and didn't know if he could play at this high level of competition. He was still only six-foot-one and weighing about 180 pounds, he realized the pro game was much faster and bigger. Lambeau had tremendous confidence in Hutson and knew what he could do when given a chance to play. He sat Hutson out of the season opener against the Chicago Cardinals, so he could play his rookie star against the Packers chief rival, the Chicago Bears.

Hutson voiced his concern to Packers Hall of Fame lineman Cal Hubbard in the dressing room. "I'm scared to death," he confessed to Hubbard. "I did all right in college, but these fellows are so much bigger and better. I'm not even sure I belong."

"Don't worry kid," growled Cal. "You belong."

On the very first play from scrimmage, Hutson proved he belonged and he never worried again.

The opening kickoff was returned by the Packers to their own seventeen yard-line. The first play from scrimmage was a designed pass play to Hutson. He ran a slow deliberate pattern to lure the defensive player then took off with his great speed. Eighty-three yards later, Hutson had a touchdown on his first play as a pro. The Packers went on to upset the Bears 7-0 on Hutson's touchdown. He was definitely a breed apart from the others.

Hutson's first play as a professional personified his whole career, one great accomplishment after another. He finished his 11-year career with 488 catches for 7,991 yards and 99 touchdown receptions, all records when he retired. He led the league in receiving eight times, as well as leading the league in scoring five times. In 1942 alone, he set single season records for catches (74), yardage (1,211) and touchdowns (17). No other receiver in the league that year had more than 27 catches, 571 yards or 8 touchdowns. He also led the league in scoring with 138 points, a record that lasted until Paul Hornung's 176 points in 1960, a record that still stands. Hutson won back to back NFL MVPs in 1941 and '42 and he was a charter member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1963.

Hutson went on to establish 19 NFL records, the nineteenth being, holding the most records. Although many of Hutson's records have been broken, nobody can take away his impact on the way professional football was played. His ability to run precise patterns and the great attention paid by opposing defenses to a end was unseen before Hutson.

Hutson combined his great athletic talent with an unbelievable work ethic. Hutson once said, "For every pass I've caught in a game, I caught a thousand like it in practice." The attitude of Hutson and his work habits bring up modern day images of Jerry Rice. The workouts performed by Rice have been well documented and Hutson's comment could

have been easily quoted by Rice.

Professional football has definitely changed since Hutson's playing era, an era when the forward pass was used as a desperate play to get a team back into the game. Hutson and the Green Bay Packers used it as their main weapon to win ballgames.

Last season the NFL announced its 75th Anniversary All-time Team, and only 48 players made the team. Only five players who played during the same time as Hutson made the squad; Sammy Baugh, Bronko Nagurski, Steve Van Buren and Mel Hein. That is proof of Hutson's excellence on the field, to be one of only five men who played most or all of his career before 1945. Without doubt, in his prime, Hutson could play today.