

One Big Problem

By Rick Gonsalves

Perhaps no other scoring play in pro football has posed so many problems as the simple extra point. But it was not always worth one point. When Walter Camp set up the scoring system in football in 1883, the extra point by kick was worth four points. Then in another scoring change in 1897, the extra point was reduced to one point and has remained at that value ever since.

The extra point too, was devised to help prevent tie games. But it was not always so easy to kick. In the early years of pro football, after a team scored a touchdown, the ball was placed on the 5-yard line. But it was straight on from where the touchdown was scored. The goal posts, at that time, were located on the back of the end zone. So if this angle was too sharp to make the attempt, the team was allowed to punt the ball out. The player who scored the touchdown would punt the ball out of the end zone to his teammates. Now, the extra point try came from the spot where the ball was caught. If the player punting the ball was not an accurate though, the angle of the kick would remain the same or become much worse. Still, many extra point tries came from bad angles which resulted in many missed kicks.

In 1920, the American Professional Football Association, which later became the National Football League in 1922, abolished punting the ball out. Instead, the extra point attempt would be made from directly in front of the goal posts 10 yards out and not straight back from where the touchdown was scored. And the goal posts were moved to the goal line.

However, another unusual method of kicking the extra point was instituted. The kicker now stood directly in front of the goal posts while players on the opposing team spread themselves out along the goal line. On a signal, the kicker, with no blockers in front of him, would try to boot the ball over the outstretched hands of the opponents' who were charging in on him. The kicker, at times, would most likely miss the try, because he was distracted by the players bearing down on him.

Even with these changes in rules regarding extra point attempts in the early 1920's, some kickers still became quite proficient in nailing the one-pointers. With the football shaped like a watermelon, dropkicking was the method used to boot extra points and field goals. Elmer Oliphant of the Buffalo All-Americans went 26 for 26 on extra points in 1921, while Pete "Fats" Henry once connected on 49 straight PATS over a four-year period. In between, 1922, a new rule allowed teams to either run or pass for the extra point.

In an effort to make kicking more challenging and not so automatic, the league voted to move the goal posts to the backline of the end zone in 1927. Then six years later in 1933, the NFL Rules Committee brought the goal posts back to the goal line to encourage field goal kicking and to break the number of tie games. In a year's time, the league total for field goals jumped from six to 36 and the number of tie games dropped from 10 to five.

With placekicking becoming more proficient over the next 26 years, kickers began to run off some incredible streaks of extra points. George Blanda hit a stretch of 156 straight PATS without a miss from 1949 to 1956. Tommy Davis of the San Francisco 49ers made 234 consecutive extra points, an NFL record, which spanned a seven-year period from 1959 to 1965. Placekickers now earned the title "automatic point makers" since they rarely missed.

Once more, in 1974, the NFL Rules Committee agreed to move the goal posts back to the end line. And once more, kickers found that the 10-yard increase made the extra point no longer an automatic score. Jim Turner of the New York Jets and Denver Broncos saw his string of 221 straight extra points end in 1974. All he needed was 14 more PATS to break Tommy Davis' mark of 234. Fred Cox of the Minnesota Vikings had his run of 199 extra points end too that season as did Mac Percival of the Dallas Cowboys whose streak stopped at 147.

This move too, effected soccer style kickers. Since they put a natural hook on the ball, before, it would split the uprights then hook. Now, the ball would sometimes veer off course before going through the uprights. But it didn't take long for them to adjust and they began to hit an incredible streak of PATS. Eddie Murray collected 250 consecutive extra points up to 1997 to break Tommy Davis' mark of 234 which lasted for 32 years. No sooner had Eddie set the record before Norm Johnson broke it the same year with 255 straight extra points. Jason Elam of the Denver Broncos holds the current mark with 371 extra points in a row.

Concerning the extra point, the clock does not run when the kick is attempted. So, a pro kicker can score at least one-third of his total points without ever registering a minute of playing time.

At one point in NFL history, 1933, to be precise, many people involved in the sport were trying to get rid of the extra point altogether. They considered it a waste of time. In its place, they wanted to institute a sudden death period to break tie games. New York Giants' owner Tim Mara led the movement and later Commissioner Bert Bell continued it from 1946 to 1959.

In 1952, the NFL Rules Committee met to abolish the extra point and make the touchdown an automatic seven points. Ties would be broken by an extra period. Commissioner Bert Bell introduced this change but once more it was voted down.

No changes concerning the extra point came in professional football until 1960 when the American Football League began operating. It adopted the two-point conversion from college football which allowed a team to run or pass for it from the 2-yard line. This move brought the new league a great deal of attention since it was now in competition with the established NFL. The AFL figured that this two-point play would add more flair in place of a kick that became too automatic. It also contributed to the new league's move towards a more wide-open unpredictable offense as well. In light of this move, the NFL was not going to follow the lead of this fledgeling league and vote in the two-point conversion.

The NFL and AFL agreed to merge in 1966. Then in 1968, owners from both leagues decided to experiment with the extra point. In the 23 preseason interleague games that year, teams could with run or pass for a point from the 2-yard line. Kicks were not permitted.

In these 23 games, there were 98 extra point attempts, with a 55 percent success rate. Teams passed twice as much as they ran, 62 plays to 36 plays, which lead to a higher success rate of 58 percent. In view of this experiment, this change was not instituted particularly since it did not involve explicitly, the two-point conversion.

During the ten-year period the AFL was in existence (1960-69), a total of 3,190 touchdowns were scored. But coaches went for two points only 157 times, about five percent of the time. And less than a half of them, 85 attempts, were successful. When the merger between the NFL and AFL was completed in 1970, the two-point play was eliminated.

Finally, in 1994, the NFL 's Rules Committee voted to use the two-point conversion.

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TITLES AND LEAGUES

Most football fans know that Weeb Ewbank is the only man to coach teams to world's championships in the NFL (the 1958 and '59 Baltimore Colts) and the AFL (the 1968 New York Jets). And that Norm Van Brocklin is the only man to quarterback two teams to the NFL title, the 1951 Los Angeles Rams (with help from Bob Waterfield), and the 1960 Philadelphia Eagles. But not many know that Tobin Rote is the only man to quarterback teams to championship game victories in both the NFL and AFL.

In 1957, Rote replaced the injured Bobby Layne and led the Detroit Lions to the NFL title. And in 1963, he quarterbacked the San Diego Chargers to the championship of the AFL.

Another thing that makes Rote's titles unique are the scores of the championship games. In 1957, the Lions crushed the Cleveland Browns by a score of 59-14. And in 1963, the Chargers pounded the Boston Patriots 51-10. These victories make Rote the only quarterback to start in two championship games where his team scored 50 points.

Another unique AFL player was Paul McGuire. Yes, the same Paul McGuire on ESPN television, who played during the entire tenure of the league from 1960 to 1969. McGuire played linebacker and punted for the Los Angeles/San Diego Chargers from 1960 to 1963 and the Buffalo Bills from 1964 to 1969. From 1960 to 1966, he participated in six of the league's first seven championship games missing out only in 1962. He would be on the losing side in the first two, but from 1963 to 1965 McGuire would accomplish something that no other player in the history of professional football will ever be able to do. Paul McGuire played on three consecutive AFL championship teams.

In 1963, he was a teammate of Tobin Rote's when the Chargers crushed the Patriots 51-10. The next year he was traded to Buffalo where he became a part of a team that would defeat the Chargers in back to back title games by scores of 20-7 and 23-0 in 1964 and '65. McGuire had a chance to play on four consecutive AFL championship teams when the Bills made it back to the title game in 1966. But they lost to the Kansas City Chiefs who, as the Dallas Texans, had kept his Chargers out of the AFL's version of the big game in 1962, by a score of 31-7. Thus denying McGuire a chance to play in the first Super Bowl. A game in which he would never play.

But three consecutive league championships is still not half bad. And it keeps one Paul McGuire in the record books forever.

By Timothy Holland