

WEE DAVEY'S BIG DAY

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On January 3 of this year [1979], Bernie Kosar of Cleveland set a Playoff Game record by throwing 64 passes against the New York Jets. Hall of Famer George Blanda once tossed 68 passes in a regular season game for Houston. Joe Namath had 62 attempts in a game. A few other active NFL quarterbacks have topped 60. In an age when pro teams use the forward pass almost as often as John Madden uses "Boom!" such high totals are outstanding but certainly not unexpected.

Nearly fifty years ago, when the pass was still considered new and daring, when some teams used it only in desperation, when football was almost all feet, Davey O'Brien of the Philadelphia Eagles hurled an even 60 in one game -- his last as a pro. That wasn't just outstanding; it was outrageous!

O'Brien, who died in 1977, is remembered as the smallest and one of the best passers of pre-World War II football. He did a lot of fancy tossing but he was never better than the day he threw 60 passes. Nobody had ever been that good.

Today, his name sometimes comes up when cynics say Doug Flutie of the Chicago Bears is too small to be a successful NFL passer. Flutie would have towered over O'Brien.

When Davey trotted onto a football field, he looked like a little boy who'd sneaked in with the grown-ups. At 5'7" and maybe 150 pounds, he appeared more likely to carry the water bucket than the football.

But no one laughed when he started tossing the ball.

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The Philadelphia Eagles, perennial doormats of the National Football League throughout the 1930's, made Davey their first draft choice of 1939. In those days, every football player who could run across a yard line without tripping over it didn't hanker after a pro career. As a matter of fact, none of the three Heisman Trophy winners who preceded O'Brien had accepted an NFL contract. For a while it looked like Davey would make it four in a row. With his degree in geology, he allowed as how he'd rather hunt oil wells in Texas than touchdowns in Pennsylvania.

Here we go again, they said in Philadelphia.

Eagle owner and coach Bert Bell created the college draft idea for the NFL in 1936, but three seasons later he still didn't have much to show for his brainchild. One year he'd been unable to sign a single pick.

This time it would be different, he vowed. Showing the promotional courage that later made him a Pro Football Hall of Fame NFL Commissioner, Bell tendered O'Brien a fabulous offer -- \$12,000 a season, plus a percentage of the gate. That's small potatoes today, but it was top money in 1939 with the country still struggling out of the Depression. Davey thought it over and decided the oil wells could wait. If he stayed healthy and the weather held, O'Brien figured to make about \$15,000 a season. Shucks, there were Texans who OWNED oil wells not making that.

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In O'Brien, Bell expected both a great player and a box office winner. Davey was one of the most honored Texans of his time, and certainly one of the most popular. People joked about Texas Brag, but O'Brien was modest to a fault. He said one of his greatest thrills came when a T.C.U. teammate was named All- America, and he meant it. Davey was a certified straight arrow in an age when fans wanted their sports heroes to stand firmly for the flag, motherhood, and apple pie. As a little man in a game designed for bruisers, he got the underdog vote. And with a smile that stretched from Beaumont to El Paso flanked by ten- gallon dimples, he was cute as hell.

Best of all, he was so goldanged good, you just wanted to hug him till he popped.

In 1937, he succeeded fabled "Slingin' Sammy" Baugh as the premier flinger at Texas Christian University, when Baugh moseyed on to fame and fortune with the pros.

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O'Brien succeeded more than chronologically. He led the nation in passing in both 1937 and 1938. Before he finished at T.C.U., the pint-size thrower had broken all of Baugh's school passing records and led the Horned Frogs to the 1938 National Collegiate Football Championship. In ten games, he threw 167 passes, completed 93 (55.7%), for 1,457, and 19 touchdowns. His completion percentage, yards gained, and touchdowns all were national records. T.C.U. Coach L.R. "Dutch" Meyer added, "He was the best play selector and greatest field general I ever saw."

He closed out his college career with a great day in the Sugar Bowl, completing 17 of 28 passes for 228 yards and even booting a field goal in his team's 15-7 victory over sixth-ranked Carnegie Tech.

Naturally, he was on everyone's All-America team. Then the big awards began rolling in. The Touchdown Club of Washington gave him its Walter Camp Memorial Trophy as the nation's outstanding back. From Philadelphia came the Robert W. Maxwell Award. When the New York Downtown Athletic Club voted him winner of the Heisman Trophy as the country's top player, he became the first player ever to receive all three major individual awards.

Right after the Heisman was announced, Amon Carter, publisher of the Fort Worth *Star-Telegram* called up the New York Downtown A.C. on the telephone.

"What kind of parade you folks planning when Davey comes up?" he asked.

"None," came the answer.

"Well," harumphed Carter, "if there's no better celebration than that, we ain't comin'!"

But, of course, O'Brien came to New York. And he had a parade, too -- paid for by Carter. The newspaperman wasn't able to arrange for ticker-tape but he had everything else. First came a troupe of mounted and whooping cowboys. Then came Davey, decked out in boots and a ten-gallon hat and riding on a sparkling stagecoach pulled by six white horses. Behind came Paul Whiteman and his Orchestra, Postmaster Jim Farley, and showman Billy Rose.

Years later, O'Brien could laugh about it, but at the time he must have been embarrassed to death.

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College hooplah and deep dimples were fine, but standing up to the mayhem pro football would wreak on his slender frame was something else. No one questioned Davey's ability, but he was so small! Many wondered whether Bert Bell would get his money's worth.

Bell had his own reservations. He insured Davey with Lloyds of London. For every game Davey missed because of injury, the Eagles would receive \$1,500. The policy was partly for publicity of course, but it underlined the very real possibility that the diminutive Texan would finish his pro career in traction.

As the tailback in Philadelphia's wing formation, Davey not only passed the ball but ran with it too. In either case, the Eagles' blocking was strictly -- uh -- for the birds. Maybe it's a tradition in Philadelphia. The 1986 Eagles set an NFL record by allowing over a hundred sacks, but today's sieves would have been all-stars compared to some of the ineffective bumblers O'Brien had blocking for him.

Additionally, the little guy had to play defense in those days of one-platoon football.

All the worry was wasted. O'Brien showed an amazing ability to bounce back up every time he was smashed down by an opponent who outweighed him by 100 pounds or so. Happily, Bert Bell never collected a cent from Lloyds.

Davey's passing was even more amazing. Although the ragtag Eagles of '39 let every opponent monopolize the football, he got it often enough to set the NFL record for yards gained passing (1,324) in his rookie season.

It was all for naught. Despite O'Brien's personal heroics, the Eagles were hopeless. In game after game, opponents withstood his passes long enough to outscore Philadelphia. Headlines trumpeted "Little Davey and Goliath," but Goliath always won.

And Goliath did a number on Davey all season long. The NFL kept no record of sacks at that time, counting them as rushing attempts. Coach Bell seldom risked his star on a real running play, but O'Brien wound up listed with 104 rush attempts. Most were actually occasions when he ran for his life.

He was named to the Official All-NFL team, but that was small consolation for a season of losses.

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Losing game after game was a new experience for O'Brien. Even his kid sandlot team in Dallas, the Gaston Avenue Bulldogs, had been the best in the neighborhood. Later at Woodrow Wilson High, as a 118-pound All-Stater, he took his team to the state playoffs. Then came all his success at T.C.U.

Suddenly, in one year's time, he went from an undefeated, untied championship team to the hapless, ever-losing Eagles. The money was good, but it couldn't take the place of victory.

Davey began to think there might be something more important to do in this world than throw an inflated, leather spheroid around a chalk-lined field. Sometimes he listened to his cousin, an agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. "He was always telling me what a rewarding job it was," Davey recalled many years later. "He thought I might have a good chance of being accepted if I applied."

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He didn't like losing; he never would. But he'd learned how to accept it. "When I was a little kid I had a lot of bad habits," he explained in a 1977 interview with the Dallas *Morning News*. "I was a problem child -- bad temper. I didn't know how to lose. I got mad, sulked and treated my friends terribly."

"But each summer I went to a boys camp near Branson, Missouri, where the fella who ran it -- a man named Bill Lantz -- took an interest in me. He recognized the fact that I had problems and made it clear to me that he was going to straighten me out. He put up with me and worked hard with me, and a few summers later I got a medal for Being Best All-Around Camper."

O'Brien looked back on all his trophies. "Really, awards like the Heisman aren't individual awards. They go to the fella who has been fortunate enough to be a part of an outstanding team." His best camper medal was different. "It represented the fact that I was getting myself on the right track. It stood for something I had accomplished without the help of ten other teammates. There's no question in my mind that that little medal was the most important thing I ever won."

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Davey returned to Philadelphia for the 1940 season, but the script didn't change. He passed and passed, and the Eagles lost and lost. For a while it seemed like they'd never win a game. Finally, in the next-to-last contest of the season, the Eagles edged Pittsburgh -- another doormat -- in a kind of Futility Bowl.

By then, Davey was looking forward to a new career. He and I.C. Hale, a teammate at T.C.U., had applied to the F.B.I. and both been accepted. They entered training the day after the NFL season ended.

He served for ten and a half years with the Bureau before finally going into the oil business. Three of those years were as a firearms instructor and the rest in the field. "The best place I ever worked," he remembered, "was East St. Louis, Ill. It was a rough place. For years it was something of a basic training for the hoods who would eventually go on to bigger things in Chicago. Everything in the world that was against the law was going on there. We were able to end a few gangster's careers early there."

Though he had many exciting experiences, he never found himself in a TV-type shoot-out. "The F.B.I. had a standard rule -- Mr. Hoover's rule -- that you always made sure you had the other side out-gunned. If you found yourself facing a one-on-one situation, you just didn't move in until you had help."

There's a certain irony there. His final game with the Eagles was hyped in pre-game publicity as a great one-on-one shootout between O'Brien and "Slingin' Sammy" Baugh.

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The game itself figured to be a blow-out. Baugh's Washington Redskins were the class of the NFL's Eastern Division. The Eagles were -- well -- they'd show up. Fan interest peaked over the anticipated passing duel.

It looked like a natural -- two great Texans throwing their hearts out in the nation's capital. Two T.C.U. grads competing for the title of "Mr. Forward Pass." Both were modest, self-effacing men, the kind you'd like to be your boy-next-door.

Physically they couldn't have been more different. Baugh was as slender as the Eagles' chances but tall. O'Brien was short enough to walk through a jammed turnstyle and hardly bend over. Imagine Frank Merriwell in cowboy boots as both Mutt and Jeff.

The expected shoot-out never really came off. Washington needed the win to clinch its division title, and Redskin Coach Ray Flaherty chose to play a careful game. Baugh hardly passed at all as the 'Skins kept the ball on the ground. Running against the Eagles was easy enough. Why take chances? By the fourth quarter, the Redskins

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had two ground-based touchdowns and a safe, 13-0, lead. O'Brien had passed well when he got the chance, but he hadn't put any points on the scoreboard.

The Eagles finally held Washington deep in Redskin territory, and Baugh dropped back to his goal line to punt. Besides being a great passer, Baugh was one of the best punters who ever laid foot to ball. This time he really belted one. When the ball stopped rolling, it was on the Philadelphia two-yard line -- a kick of 85 yards!

Fans began heading for the exits. The Eagles were dead -- or so they seemed.

O'Brien had nothing to lose. He began passing on every down. His tosses went here, there, everywhere -- but most of them found Eagle receivers. The suddenly-befuddled Redskins couldn't stop them. Philadelphia roared down the field on the strength of Li'l Davey's arm. When Frank Emmons gathered in a 13-yarder, it climaxed a 98-yard drive for a touchdown. The PAT was blocked but the Eagles still had a chance to tie.

The fans went back to their seats.

With time running out, Philadelphia got the ball again at its own 31. The 'Skins knew what was coming, and this time they stayed glued to Davey's receivers. Twice he tucked the ball under his arm and scampered for first downs. Each time his 150- pound figure disappeared beneath a pile of burgandy jerseys, it looked like the end. Each time he got up to throw again. And what throwing! Redskin fans, used to Baugh's brilliance, gaped as O'Brien connected again and again.

The fairy tale ended on the Washington 22-yard line with only seconds remaining as the Redskins proved themselves champions by batting down Davey's final toss. As the little passer left the field, 30,838 fans rose and filled Griffith Stadium with a roar. Even the Redskin players applauded.

He'd fired 60 passes, completed 33, and gained 316 yards. All were records at the time. As a comparison, the previous record for completions had been set earlier in the season by Baugh with 23 -- ten fewer than O'Brien's total. There had never been anything like it. It's hard to imagine a greater farewell performance in any sport. The next day, Davey left football for his new challenge with the F.B.I. His salary shrank to \$3,200 a year, but with World War II on the horizon, it was time for a real All-American to start throwing for Uncle Sam.

He received one more trophy. After that last game, Bert Bell gave him a plaque inscribed: "To the greatest player of all time. Small in stature with the heart of a lion. A living inspiration to the youth of America." Critics may disagree with the first assertion but never with the other two.