

SUTHERLAND

By P.F.R.A. Research

Around Pittsburgh there are people who will tell you that no matter how many Super Bowl rings Chuck Noll puts on his fingers, he will still be only the SECOND-best coach the Steelers ever had. The best, they will insist, was indisputably Dr. John Bain "Jock" Sutherland.

In many ways, the two are alike. For example, the following could have been written about either man:

He had all the flamboyance of a load of gravel. An intensely private man, he was the despair of sportswriters who found him as quotable as the nearest oak tree.

Or this one:

He showed early in his coaching career that he was a strong defensive coach and a master of the running game. Later, this former guard proved he could win with a passing attack, for that was what his teams did again and again -- WIN!

John Sutherland came to this country as a youth in less-than-comfortable circumstances. But these were the days of Horatio Alger and Sutherland set out to emulate that fictional hero. He worked his way through Pittsburgh University, graduating in 1918 with a degree in dentistry -- hence the "Dr." that usually precedes his name.

However, Dr. Sutherland's success was to come among moleskins rather than molars. At Pitt, he went out for the football team coached by Glenn "Pop" Warner. Curiously, he played in the first intercollegiate game he ever saw. Under Warner, Sutherland became a top lineman and, in 1917, received some All-American mention.

He played a few pro games for Massillon, but his real future lay in coaching. In 1919, he took charge at Lafayette College, and, over the next five years, he made the little Pennsylvania school into a national power. His 1921 team, with Charley Berry at end, posted a 9-0-0 record and was rated by some the top college team in the country.

When Warner left Pitt to move on to Stanford in 1924, Sutherland returned to coach his Alma Mater. It was at Pitt that he gained his greatest success. In fifteen years, he never had a losing season. Four of his teams went through the regular season undefeated. Three times Pitt was rated the top eleven in the country.

Some credited Pitt's success to the awesome running attack generated by Sutherland's single-wing attack. Some credited Sutherland's defensive mastery. But Lou Little simply called Sutherland the best all-around coach he ever knew.

If there was a cloud in Pitt's sky during Sutherland's tenure, it was the Rose Bowl. Three times -- in 1927, 1929, and 1932 -- Pitt rolled through the regular season only to lose at Pasadena. Finally, the 1936 team put an end to the jinx with a 21-0 whitewashing of Washington.

In the late 1930s, Sutherland had some of his best Pitt elevens, boasting numerous All-Americans, but the administration was hell-bent on de-emphasizing football. At last, Sutherland ended the dispute by resigning after the 1938 season. It took Pitt until 1976 to produce a team that compared with those the Doctor turned out on a regular basis.

In 1939, Sutherland kept his hand in by coaching the Eastern All-Stars for their game against the New York Giants. Some fans of college ball were disappointed to see Sutherland associate himself with the pros. They were shocked the next year when he actually agreed to coach a pro team -- the ragtag Brooklyn Dodgers.

Most observers figured Sutherland had bitten off much more than he could masticate. The Dodgers had been determined losers for ten years. They did boast a few good players, including fullback "Pug" Manders and tackle "Bruiser" Kinard. Their brightest star was "Ace" Parker, but he was a passer. Critics asked what Sutherland -- famous for his crushing ground game -- could do with a passer.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 1, No. 9 (1979)

What he could do was prove himself a master of still another phase of football. The Dodgers rode Parker's passes into second place behind eastern champ Washington. Parker was voted the league MVP.

Again in 1941, Sutherland's Dodgers finished a strong second, but World War II ended the Doctor's Brooklyn career. In July of 1942, he resigned as coach and was commissioned a lieutenant commander in the Naval Reserve at the age of 53. He served until late 1945 and then was recalled to coach an all-star service team in the Pacific Sports Carnival in Tokyo.

Sutherland returned from Tokyo, made a quick visit to his mother in Coupar Angus, Scotland, and then back to Pittsburgh where he maintained quarters at the Pittsburgh Athletic Club. There he was approached by Bert Bell, who at that time shared ownership of the Steelers with Art Rooney. A short time later, Pittsburghers were thrilled to learn that the legendary Doctor had become the new Steeler coach.

So great was Sutherland's prestige that when he opened his training camp at Hershey all Steeler season tickets had been sold. Rooney said later that the Doctor had saved the franchise: "He gave Pittsburgh fans the kind of teams they were looking for. If it hadn't been for the Doctor I never would have been able to continue in pro football."

Sutherland's Steelers opened at home against the Chicago Cardinals who boasted a backfield of Pat Harder, Paul Christman, Elmer Angsman, and former Pitt star Biggie Goldberg. 30,000 Steeler fans showed up although the Cards were favored -- the Steelers had won a paltry two games the year before. However, the Pittsburghers showed that the 1946 edition under the Doctor would be a different matter. They upset the Cardinals 14-7. It was a sign of how badly the Steelers had done before that their final season mark of 5-5-1 -- the only Sutherland team to ever fail to win more than it lost -- was considered a rousing success.

The team's big gun was Bullet Bill Dudley who led the league in rushing and interceptions, and the Steelers in punting, punt returns, kickoff returns, passing, and kicking. He was easily MVP of the NFL.

But Dudley and Sutherland developed a deep dislike for each other. Several versions of the feud have been written. Suffice to say that at the end of the season Bullet Bill threatened to retire if he was not traded. His wish was granted and he was dispatched to Detroit.

Without Dudley, the 1947 Steelers were given little chance, but Sutherland molded a group of starless, hardnosed hitters into a surprising team. In October, they came from behind to score three times in the last quarter and dump Greasy Neale's Philadelphia Eagles, 35-24. At the end of the season, the Steelers had tied the Eagles for first place in the NFL East. That was the best finish by a Steeler team until the 1970s.

The playoff proved a disappointment. The Steelers only effective passer, Johnny Clement, was injured and Pittsburgh went under 21-0. Still, Sutherland was called "The Miracle Man of the Steel City," and fans looked forward to 1948.

But Sutherland had startled friends in '47 by missing occasional practice sessions because of severe headaches. In the spring of 1948, he left on a scouting tour of the south. On April 7, he was found walking in obvious distress along a country road in Kentucky. He was rushed to Pittsburgh and operated on for a brain tumor. On April 11, he died.

Arthur Daley wrote: "The news of the sudden death of Dr. John Bain Sutherland was so stunning that it hasn't yet been fully comprehended. Jock was in apparent good health when he was stricken, as tall, erect, and powerfully built as one of his own Pittsburgh Steeler tackles. That's why his death is such a tremendous shock. His loss is a grievous one to American football because he was one of the greatest coaches who ever lived.

"There was something awe-inspiring about the Doctor both as a man and a coach. He was grim and unsmiling, with his laughter more in his eyes than on his lips. He was dignity personified Even his fellow coaches gave him a most respectful, 'Hello, Doctor.' He commanded that respect by his demeanor and by his record. It took an awfully long while to discover that there was warmth and approachability beneath that stern and forbidding outer shell."

SUTHERLAND'S COACHING RECORD

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 1, No. 9 (1979)

LAFAYETTE (32-8-3)

1919 6-2-0
1920 5-3-0
1921 9-0-0
1922 7-2-0
1923 5-1-3

PITTSBURGH (111-20-12)

1924 5-3-1
1925 8-1-0
1926 5-2-2
1927 *8-0-1
1928 6-2-1
1929 *9-0-0
1930 6-2-1
1931 8-1-0
1932 *8-0-2
1933 8-1-0
1934 8-1-0
1935 7-1-2
1936 #7-1-1
1937 9-0-1
1938 8-2-0

*-Lost Rose Bowl

#-Won Rose Bowl

BROOKLYN DODGERS (15-7-0)

1940 8-3-0 2nd-E
1941 7-4-0 2nd-E

PITTSBURGH STEELERS (13-10-1)

1946 5-5-1 3rd(t)
1947 8-4-0 1st(t)-Lost Playoff

CAREER - 171-45-16 .792