

THE 1920s ALL-PROS IN RETROSPECT

By Bob Carroll

Arguments over who was the best tackle – quarterback – placekicker – water boy – will never cease. Nor should they. They're half the fun. But those that try to rank a player in the 1980s against one from the 1940s border on the absurd. Different conditions produce different results. The game is different in 1985 from that played even in 1970.

Nevertheless, you'd think we could reach some kind of agreement as to the best players of a given decade. Well, you'd also think we could conquer the common cold. Conditions change quite a bit even in a ten-year span. Pro football grew up a lot in the 1920s. All things considered, it's probably safe to say the quality of play was better in 1929 than in 1920, but don't bet the mortgage.

The most-widely published attempt to identify the best players of the 1920s was that chosen by the Pro Football Hall of Fame Selection Committee in celebration of the NFL's first 50 years. They selected the following 18-man roster:

E:	Guy Chamberlin	C:	George Trafton
	Lavie Dilweg	B:	Jim Conzelman
	George Halas		Paddy Driscoll
T:	Ed Healey		Red Grange
	Wilbur Henry		Joe Guyon
	Cal Hubbard		Curly Lambeau
	Steve Owen		Ernie Nevers
G:	Hunk Anderson		Jim Thorpe
	Walt Kiesling		
	Mike Michalske		

Three things about this roster are striking. First, the selectors leaned heavily on men already enshrined in the Hall of Fame. There's logic to that, of course, but the scary part is that it looks like they didn't do much original research. That may be only the appearance. Still, for the record, the Hall has not elected a player with a significant part of his career in the 1920s since 1966. In 1976, Ray Flaherty, a great end, went in – but as a coach! In other words, the selectors believe that every worth-while candidate from the '20s was taken care of in the first four years of the Hall's existence.

In choosing their roster, the selectors were faced with problems at end and guard. Only Chamberlin and Halas were HOF members at end; only Kiesling and Michalske were members at guard. That's apparently how Dilweg and Anderson made the list.

A second striking feature of the roster is that four men are probably in the wrong decade. Michalske, Hubbard, and Kiesling all spent more years playing in the 1930s than in the 1920s. Lord knows why they put Cal in the '20s, since they had to bump Link Lyman to do it, but Mike and Walt are there because they were short on guards.

The fourth man out of his era is Jim Thorpe. Okay, what's an all-time team without Big Jim? For starters, an honest one. Thorpe played more seasons after 1920, but his great years were from 1915 to 1919. Since the committee didn't pick a team from the teens, they shoved Ol' Jim into the '20s. That's nice for Jim, but it's hardly fair to a dozen or more backs who played better football during this era.

A case might be made against Red Grange; he was hurt in 1927, out in 1928, and just getting used to his repaired knee in 1929, but he was darn good for several years in the '30s. On the other hand, 1925 was fabulous for Red, and he had his very own league in 1926. He's not a bad choice.

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By far the most striking feature about this roster is the number of coaching greats it holds. Count 'em: Guy Chamberlin, George Halas, Steve Owen, Jimmy Conzelman, Curly Lambeau all won NFL championships; Paddy Driscoll, Hunk Anderson, Walt Kiesling, and George Trafton were famous assistant coaches, and the first three had success in short stints as headmen. Even Thorpe, Nevers, and Henry were head NFL coaches.

The natural question: were these all great players who became great coaches, or were some great coaches who were only remembered as great players?

Pro Football Digest took a shot at Decade All-Pro teams a few years later. They came up with an eleven-man team that has the benefit of some new names, and the liability of at least one old one. Mostly, they seem to have relied on Ken Cotanch's retrospective All-Pro selections made in the 1960s. In a paperback anthology published in 1973, they insisted, "There can be little argument with the selection."

Oh, yeah!

E:	Guy Chamberlin	C:	George Trafton
	Lavie Dilweg	Q:	Benny Friedman
T:	Wilbur Henry	H:	Paddy Driscoll
	Bull Behman		Jim Thorpe
G:	Swede Youngstrom	F:	Ernie Nevers
	Mike Michalske		

It's a good team, but it could be better. Since we can look at contemporary All-Pro teams of the '20s, thanks to John Hogrogian's meticulous research, let's name a team that is made up of those players who came out on top most often then, before memory faded and subsequent successes changed the picture. We'll use the Hall of Fame's 18-man roster. They are ranked in order of All-Pro selections.

E:	Lavie Dilweg	B:	Paddy Driscoll
	Guy Chamberlin		Verne Lewellen
	Ray Flaherty		Doc Elliott
T:	Ed Healey		Benny Friedman
	Wilbur Henry		Ernie Nevers
	Cal Hubbard		Joe Sternaman
	Gus Sonnenberg		Rip King
G:	Swede Youngstrom		
	Jim McMillen		
	Mike Michalske		
C:	George Trafton		

Half the squad is not in the Hall of Fame.