

1949 LOS ANGELES RAMS

By Joseph Hession

Reprinted from *Rams: Five Decades Of Football*

Prior to the start of the 1949 season, the NFL took a giant step toward modernizing professional football when it adopted the free-substitution rule. Coaches were now able to platoon players and establish offensive and defensive squads, rather than have the same 11 players on the field for most of the game.

Among the team's draft choices in 1949 was a fourth-round pick from Oregon named Norm Van Brocklin. The Rams fooled everybody by selecting Van Brocklin because he was not scheduled to graduate until 1950. However, Van Brocklin had an accelerated curriculum that allowed him to graduate in time for the 1949 season. Elroy "Crazy Legs" Hirsch also joined the club after spending three years with the Chicago Rockets of the AAFC.

Although he already had two superb ends in Bob Shaw and Tom Fears, Coach Shaughnessy decided to move Hirsch from running back to flanker back. The new formation took advantage of Hirsch's speed and great hands and began a trend toward a wide-open passing game in the professional ranks.

Los Angeles opened the season with a 27-24 win over Detroit, then demolished the Green Bay Packers, 48-7. In the third game of the year, the Rams beat the Bears, 31-16, at Wrigley Field.

Waterfield was unstoppable against Chicago. He completed 16 of 33 passes for 211 yards and three touchdowns, kicked a 23-yard field goal, added four extra points and averaged 46 yards on punts. Fears, Hirsch and Shaw each caught a touchdown pass.

The offensive line, anchored by team captain Fred Naumetz, tackles Dick Huffman and Gil Bouley, and guard Milan Lazetich, outplayed the Bears' tough defensive line. It limited Chicago to one quarterback sack, and helped the Los Angeles running backs gain 124 yards on the ground.

Los Angeles posted a 6-0 record to open a three-game lead in the western division before being defeated by the defending NFL Champion Philadelphia Eagles. The Eagles completely dominated the game and held a 31-7 lead in the fourth quarter before Shaughnessy replaced the ineffective Waterfield with rookie Norm Van Brocklin. In one of his first appearances with the Rams, "The Dutchman" completed three of his eight passes and led the team to one score.

Los Angeles salvaged a 7-7 tie at Pittsburgh the following week when van Brocklin directed the club 60 yards with less than two minutes to play. Fred Gehrke scored on a one-yard dive with just 24 seconds in the game to tie it and preserve the Rams' two-game lead over Chicago.

The Rams played another thriller with the Chicago Cardinals a week later. The score was tied, 28-28, with 20 seconds left when Cardinal kicking specialist Pat Harder tried a 39-yard field goal. Fred Naumetz stormed through the Chicago line to block the kick and preserve the tie.

Los Angeles took over with 20 seconds remaining. On the first play from scrimmage, halfback Tom "Cricket" Kalminar scampered 51 yards to the Chicago 35-yard line. Waterfield then connected on a 24-yard pass to Fears, moving the ball to the 11-yard line with five seconds to play. Waterfield attempted a 19-yard field goal, but it was blocked and the game ended in a 28-28 tie.

Los Angeles went into the last game of the year against the Washington Redskins needing a victory to clinch the western division crown. The Redskins had struggled all year and brought a 4-6-1 record to the Coliseum. The Rams were atop the western division with a 7-2-2 mark.

The game was never in doubt. Los Angeles jumped out to a 20-7 first quarter lead and held on to win, 53-27. Waterfield completed 11 of 17 passes for 235 yards. His backup, Norm Van Brocklin, was spectacular. He completed six of 10 passes for 152 yards. Four of Van Brocklin's tosses were good for touchdowns. Sammy Baugh was spectacular in a losing effort for the Redskins. He completed 29 of his

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48 passes for 308 yards. The victory clinched the Rams' first western division title since moving to Los Angeles and set up an NFL Championship Game with the Philadelphia Eagles.

The game was played in a downpour at the Coliseum with only 25,245 fans in attendance. The muddy field hampered the Ram passing attack. They were able to cross the 50-yard line only twice and were unable to score.

The team's frustration mounted late in the third period with Philadelphia clinging to a 7-0 lead. Waterfield attempted a punt from his own five, but he slipped in the mud and the kick was blocked. Ed Skladany grabbed the loose ball for Philadelphia and rambled into the end zone to give the Eagles a 14-0 lead. It was the game's last score.

Eagle halfback Steve Van Buren took advantage of the soggy turf and churned out 196 yards on 31 carries to set an NFL playoff rushing record.

The 1949 season established Tom Fears as one of the league's great ends. He set an NFL single-season receiving record by catching 77 passes. The mark broke former Green Bay Packer star Don Hutson's record of 44 receptions in a season.

Despite leading the Rams to their first NFL Western Division title since moving to Los Angeles, Shaughnessy was fired at the end of the year. In two seasons with the club, he coached it to a 14-7-3 mark.

It was also Fred Gehrke's last year with the Rams. During his five seasons with the club, he gained 1,617 yards on 318 carries for a 5.1-yard average. His best season was 1945, when he helped the Cleveland Rams win the NFL Championship by rushing for seven touchdowns in 12 games.

LOS ANGELES RAMS 1949

8-2-2 .800 1st NFL-West

Coach: Clark Shaughnessy

?		H	*Washington Redskins	28-34	---	---
?		A+	*New York Bulldogs	21-14	---	---
?		A#	*Philadelphia Eagles	24-24	---	---
Wed	S-14 N	A@	*New York Giants	14- 7	---	---
Fri	S-23 N	H	Detroit Lions	27-24	W	17,878
Sun	O- 2	A	Green Bay Packers	48- 7	W	24,308
Sun	O- 9	A	Chicago Bears	31-16	W	42,124
Sun	O-16	A	Detroit Lions	21-10	W	19,839
Sun	O-23	H	Green Bay Packers	35- 7	W	37,546
Sun	O-30	H	Chicago Bears	27-24	W	86,080
Sun	N- 6	A	Philadelphia Eagles	14-38	L	38,830
Sun	N-13	A	Pittsburgh Steelers	7- 7	T	20,510
Sun	N-20	A	Chicago Cardinals	28-28	T	34,100
Sun	N-27	H	New York Bulldogs	42-20	W	38,052
Sun	D- 4	H	Chicago Cardinals	27-31	L	74,673
Sun	D-11	H	Washington Redskins	53-27	W	44,899
<i>Championship Game</i>						
Sun	D-18	H	Philadelphia Eagles	0-14	L	22,245

* Pre-Season Game

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