

THE LAST DROP KICK?

By John Hogrogian

I don't know who tried the last drop kick in the NFL regular season, but it wasn't Dutch Clark. For readers unfamiliar with the drop kick, it was an alternative way of kicking field goals and extra points. Rather than having a holder place the ball for him, the drop kicker would drop the ball as a punter would, kicking it as the point of the ball touched the ground. Before 1930, the drop kick was common because the ball itself was thicker than it is now and would stay upright on its end for a moment after it touched the ground. In the 1930's, the NFL used a slimmer ball that made passing easier but made it harder for a drop kicker to drop the ball so that it would stay upright on its end for even a moment. Place kicking became the standard way to kick for points, and by the late 1930's, drop kicking was a quaint relic of earlier times.

The last verified drop kick is a successful extra point by Ray McLean of the Bears in the fourth quarter of the 1941 NFL championship game, won by the Bears 37-9. As to regular-season play, folklore says that Dutch Clark of the Lions was the last drop kicker in the NFL. He was the last player to use the drop kick on a regular basis, but others tried the play after he did.

In 1937 Dutch Clark was the head coach and star tailback of the Lions. Over the first seven games of the season, he succeeded on six of ten extra-point attempts, all by drop kick. He also drop kicked a nine-yard field goal against the Cardinals on September 18. After October 31, he apparently did not attempt a field goal or extra point, leaving those tasks to place kickers Bill Shepherd and Regis Monahan.

In 1938, a bad ankle turned Clark into a part-time player. He also apparently abandoned drop kicking. According to the *1939 NFL Guide*, he kicked two field goals in two attempts. He also was two for two on extra points. On October 2, 1938, Clark kicked a 17-yard field goal and one extra point against the Cleveland Rams, both on place kicks. On October 30, he place kicked an 18-yard field goal against the Bears. On December 4, he place kicked an extra point against the Eagles in his final NFL game as a player. I have found no evidence of his attempting a drop kick in 1938.

Two other players, however, did try drop kicks in 1938. On October 23, Dick Tuckey of the Rams drop kicked two extra points in a 23-21 victory over the Bears. On November 13, Ralph Kercheval of Brooklyn drop kicked an extra point against the Eagles.

My review of newspaper accounts of all 1939 NFL games has not found any drop kick attempt. I have no idea whether anyone tried one in the 1940's. As of now, Ralph Kercheval is the last verified drop kicker in an NFL regular season game.

By the way, all of my information comes from reviewing game stories from contemporary newspapers. Given my innate fallibility, it would be nice if someone could replicate my research and verify (or disprove) my findings.