

The College Game is Easier

By Red Grange

With George Dunscomb

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“Red, you’ve played both college and professional football; do you believe a great college team, such as Notre Dame or Northwestern or Southern California, could beat one of the good teams in the National Pro League?”

That’s a question people ask me frequently. My reply is that I believe the college eleven would have little, if any, chance of winning. I add that the professionals’ margin of victory should be more than one touchdown. So saying, I bare my reddish locks to the storms of criticism which will fall on my head.

That belief in pro superiority isn’t prompted by commercial loyalty to the business which still yields an excellent living for me. It is grounded on the experience of three years of comparative skylarking on college gridirons and six bruising years in professional football.

I believe that in blocking the collegians have the edge on the pros; that in ball carrying it is about a toss-up; that in tackling and general defense the professionals are far superior; that in headwork and in cool sureness, in utilizing every ounce of immense brawn, the professionals have a marked advantage.

The college players have two things in their favor which can’t be laughed off. One is their pregame emotional frenzy which publicity, campus tension, the bands and fire-eating alumni create.

Where Fanaticism and Inspiration End

In my own university days, I was convinced that the fate of the nation hinged on whether we defeated Michigan. I believed that my dad would suffer intensely, might have a stroke, if we lost. The other advantage is the inspiration of great coaches such as Dick Hanley, of Northwestern; Howard Jones, of Southern California; Bob Zuppke, of Illinois, or the late and beloved Knute Rockne.

But a fanatical desire to win and the inspiration of a coach won’t take a halfback over, around or through a hard, fast line which averages 220 pounds from end to end. That’s what you face when you line up against the Green Bay Packers, for example.

On a college eleven of championship caliber there are usually one or two outstanding line men; if the line averages 185 to 190 pounds, it is considered exceptionally heavy. But on a winning professional team every position in the forward wall is filled by a man mountain who is agile and heady as he is big and powerful. Nearly every pro team puts up a front wall which averages 210 to 215 pounds, or more.

Link Lyman, of Nebraska, and Lloyd Burdick, of Illinois, who were our regular tackles on the Chicago Bears last season, weigh 240 and 245 pounds respectively, including the towels. Very little of that poundage is blubber. Picture a fast, trimly built athlete, some lightweight prize fighter you’ve seen in action. Then magnify him proportionately until he weighs 240 pounds; that’s Lyman. Then imagine Jack Dempsey two or three inches taller and fifty pounds heavier, and you have Lloyd Burdick.

Big as Life and Twice as Real

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The greatest tackle I've ever seen – or been pulverized by – is Cal Hubbard, of Green Bay, who is nearly six and a half feet high and weighs 270 pounds. I've often wondered how many foot pounds of pressure he develops when, traveling at full speed, he smashes into a halfback. This might be determined by an experiment to which I would gladly contribute my services – as a spectator, not as the halfback.

I cite those statistics as evidence of the kind of resistance a college team would meet in its progress toward the goal line of the professionals. No college forward wall is going to open many holes in that kind of line. No blocking halfback is going to take out or drive in big crafty ends like Luke Johnsos, formerly of Northwestern, now with the Chicago Bears, or Verne Dilweg, Marquette's former star, now with the Packers. The latter is the toughest end I've ever met, in college or out. You simply can't run around him. Sure, you can make a twenty-yard run – toward the sidelines. But start toward the goal line and you meet that villain Dilweg, big as life and twice as real. Once in four or five blue moons you may cut inside of him. Incidentally, the toughest, most alert end I encountered in my college career was Fritz Crisler, of Chicago, now head coach at Princeton.

My first blunt lesson in the superiority of the pro defense was administered on Thanksgiving Day of 1925, when I played my initial game with the Chicago Bears against the Chicago Cardinals. A twenty-five-yard return of a punt was my best effort in lugging the ball forward.

I was no "galloping ghost," in the eighteen games which we crowded into the next two and one-half months. I looked bad and disappointed the crowds. But they weren't half as disappointed as I was.

Part of my inability to gallop places was due to the wall-like defense the pros put up. Part of it was due to the fact that then, and during the following two seasons, I was compelled to play twenty-five minutes of each game, regardless of injuries, as per contract with our opponents. Once I went to the Polo Grounds on crutches, donned a uniform and played quarterback. I didn't carry the ball once. I couldn't. But to the crowd I was a "yellow bum." That hurt.

Those performances fired me with one resolve. I made up my mind that some day, somehow, I'd take another crack at the professional game, under better conditions, and show the sport world that I could still tote a football. Later I had that chance.

But I'm rambling away from my subject. It's hard not to do so, when I'm talking football. I've played it in organized form for fourteen years. It is still my biggest interest, the best part of my life.

The one chance a college team might have of scoring against a good pro team, in my judgment, would be by a forward pass; provided the passer could pick out his receiver and get the ball away before those big pro line men broke through and smothered him; provided also the pass receiver could elude the secondary defense of the pros, made up of experienced men who are hard to suck out of position by decoys and fakes.

College Stars Turned Professional

Forward passing of the college variety isn't feared by the professionals. Only one star who had a big reputation as a passer in college has continued to shine in that capacity in the pro league. I refer to Benny Friedman, formerly of Michigan, but last year with the New York Giants. Protected by his backs and his big line men, Benny drops back and hits his mark more often than I like.

We played three games with the Giants during the past season. In the first game, which we won 7 to 0, Benny was coaching at Yale and didn't play. He played the second time we met, but we managed to keep him bottled up and won again, 12 to 6. But in our third game Benny was hot. He completed pass after pass and gained many yards by running. That game found us on the short end of a 25 to 6 score. Benny Friedman can, and does,

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take a terrific pounding without crying about it. That, by the way, is my conception of a man!

Aside from Benny, no highly touted college passer has immediately made good in professional football; many have tried.

Chris Cagle, of Army, who is now a New York Giant, carried a big passing threat in his college days, but that threat is a minor one to our Bear defense. Chris is a dangerous man, however, when he gets into the open. He is a bit light for crashing the line; hence the Giants endeavor to shake him loose with lateral passes and forward passes. When in the clear he is one of the hardest men in the league to bring down.

“How would running backs like Pug Rentner, of Northwestern; Marchmont Schwartz, of Notre Dame; or Jimmy Purvis, of Purdue, fare against pro tacklers?” fans often ask.

If I managed a pro team and had my choice of those three backs, I would choose Purvis, of Purdue, even though I consider Rentner the greatest college halfback I've ever seen and Schwartz one of the best of the past decade. My reason for choosing Purvis, however, is that he is the kind of rugged, durable back with powerful leg drive who clicks in the professional game. Russell Saunders, of Southern California, who made good in his first year in the league, is that kind of runner. So is Ken Strong, former New York University star.

Rentner and Schwartz depend more upon shiftiness than upon sheer driving power. Rentner, in particular, might find the going hard, at first, in pro football because the kinds of plays on which he often scores in college aren't successful against the professionals. Some football authorities have said his running style closely resembles my style in college. Rentner scored many times on spectacular runs, often on sweeps outside an end; I also scored frequently on runs of that type.

But those wide end sweeps won't work in pro football, as Rentner will discover if he ever tries his hand at it. Just as I found it out in my first game in 1925. Giant pro line men break through to dump the interferences; the husky end, adept at using his hands to ward off the blockers, if any remains, get the runner himself, or chases him out of bounds, or maneuvers him into a position where the defensive half can smear him at the line of scrimmage.

“That's the result of poor work on the part of the blockers,” someone may contend. It is any easy answer, but hardly a true one. For not even Bronko Nagurski, of Minnesota, now Bear fullback, can knock the big pro ends in so that the half can run outside. With his 225 pounds of muscle and bone, Nagurski hits harder, the pros agree, than anyone in football.

The pros also agree that Nagurski and Herb Joesting both smack the line harder than Ernie Nevers, formerly of Stanford, later with the Chicago Cardinals. Nevers is generally conceded the edge in all-round ability – in passing, kicking, running and tackling – over any other gridster, past and present. But many believe that Jim Thorpe, the famous Indian, was greater than Nevers as a football jack-of-all-trades. I played against Thorpe only once – in a pro game in Florida in 1926. By then, Jim was old, fat and slow, yet he could still hit hard. He smacked me once and I still remember it!

Not Enough Fire for the Fans

Of this year's crop of college line men, Munn, of Minnesota, and Riley and Marvil, of Northwestern, constitute a trio who would probably make the grade in professional football, with further seasoning. I say “further seasoning” advisedly. Red Sleight, widely chosen as All-American tackle when he played with Purdue, furnishes a good case in point. Red was a fine college tackle, big and rugged. He entered pro football in 1930. During his first year he was a substitute and played only part of each game. Last year he played regularly. In 1930 and during the past season we designed special plays to take advantage of his weakness – that of playing wide. We shot plays inside of him

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successfully. To date I've played six games against him and in every game he has become tougher until right now he is one of the best. He has learned to vary his charge and mix his style. A man who performs his football chores according to fixed routine, who does the same job in the same way each time, as most college players do, is easy to fool.

"When you pro players are out there on the field," friends often say to me, "you don't have the snap that college kids have. You walk, rather than run, to the ball after each play. You look as though you're dead on your feet. Don't you keep in condition?"

That lack of bubbling enthusiasm on the part of the pros is good judgment, but bad showmanship; the fans like a display of fiery vigor. But running back to position, dashing up and down the line of scrimmage shouting encouragement to team mates, burn up energy. Soon after you enter the moneyed game you learn that energy is too precious to waste.

As to condition, the professional player must keep in good shape in self-defense. He is playing a game in which the purpose is for one man to run as far as he can before another knocks him down. A player who is out of condition is likely to clasp a lily in his folded hands. Furthermore, his livelihood depends on how well he plays. If he is not in condition to perform aggressively he soon staggers off the pay roll.

The pros work out five days each week; they play on the sixth, and have their day off on Monday, instead of on Sunday, as is the case in college. The three hours of practice are largely devoted to football fundamentals, even though most of the men have played for years. Two or three times each week we hold a blackboard drill, in which our own plays and those of our opponents are outlined and discussed.

Mention of blackboard drills brings to my mind another difference between college and professional football. A college team plays its rivals only once during the season; the pros meet other teams twice, sometimes three times. So every player on the Chicago Bears is required to make a written report immediately after each game. He must write his observations of the opposing team, particularly in regard to his individual opponent. He describes his opponent's style, charts the positions he assumed on offense and defense, the plays which worked, or failed, against him, and records any weaknesses he may have revealed. These reports are filed and used for blackboard reference before the next game with the same team. Special plays are planned to take advantage of weaknesses disclosed in the preceding game.

My own case furnishes one instance of how the pros quickly spot any weakness in a new man. When I broke into the league I had the habit of shifting my weight, unconsciously, ever so slightly onto the foot nearest the point where the ensuing play was headed. That tipped off our opponents to the spot where I would try to break through and they could quickly adjust their defense to stop the play. The pros got wise to it in my first game and played accordingly. I was told about the fault several games later, and corrected it. I had been doing the same thing in college, but no opponent, so far as I have been able to learn, ever noted it.

When the Defense Naps

Joe Savoldi, of Notre Dame, who played with the Bears near the close of the 1930 season, provides an example of how the pros are alert to every opportunity. Joe was one of the most rugged and hardest running backs who ever lived. That didn't keep him from being a victim of the professionals' delight in spoiling any little nap you take, even though you doze for only thirty seconds. Joe, playing defensive halfback, went up to the line of scrimmage to give Link Lyman an appreciative tap on the back for his brilliant tackle on the preceding play. While he was doing that our opponents quickly shot a pass into the territory Joe had left unguarded, with a long gain as their reward.

Perhaps a description of the defense which the Green Bay Packers developed to meet our attack in 1931 will indicate more clearly the kind of smart football the pros play.

During the past season most of our plays started from a simple, old-time formation. This consisted of a balanced line – three men on each side of the ball – with the quarterback directly back of the center and the full and two halfbacks spread back of the quarter. On nearly every play either the right or left halfback would smash into the line inside or outside of the opposing tackle. The quarter, taking the pass from center, would sometimes throw the ball down the line of scrimmage to one of the halfbacks as he smashed into the line. The latter would take the ball in stride and, if a quick opening presented itself, would go through for good distance. Meantime the other backs would be faking an end run or an off-tackle smash or a pass. On many other plays from this formation the half would not receive the ball as he dashed forward; instead, one of the other backs would actually execute a drive at the end or tackle, or attempt a forward pass.

The Ty Cobbs of Football

This style of attack, while simple, was deceptive and gained ground consistently; it was difficult for our opponents to decide who had the ball. In Milwaukee I scored a touchdown, unmolested, while our opponents were busily tackling the other backs.

When we met the Green Bay Packers, whom I consider the world's smartest football team, it was a different story. They played a six-man line on defense and stationed a giant line man, August Michalske, of Penn State, just back of the line of scrimmage, giving him one single job. On every play in which either the right half, Joe Lintzenich, or I cracked into the line, Michalske tackled the man, regardless of whether or not he had the ball.

Naturally, it spoiled our party, so we took time out for hasty, impromptu consideration of ways and means to confound Mr. Michalske. We decided that both Lintzenich and I should crack into the line on each play, giving Michalske a choice of tackling either of two men running about twenty feet apart.

On the second play after we put this plan into effect, Michalske tackled me with unusual vigor, even for him. As he yanked me to my feet, he growled, "Make up your minds, you birds. I can't multiply myself and I'm not twins, you know."

Most college teams do things according to Hoyle. But when you play against the Green Bay Packers, you don't know what to expect next. They are the Ty Cobbs of pro football when it comes to pulling the unexpected, and they have the speed, power and confidence to make what is supposed to be bad football look like a million dollars. I've seen them try a forward pass with the ball on their own one-yard line and complete it for a long gain. This ability to keep their opponents uneasy is one of the big reasons why they have been champions of the pro league for the past three seasons.

Punting is another department of football in which the professionals excel. The best efforts of college punters are usually mediocre in comparison with the distance which the average pro kicker gets. There are no collegians who can kick the ball like Lewellen, former Nebraska star. His high, lazy punts regularly travel sixty yards through the air. Along with some ten or twelve thousand spectators, I once saw the ball travel between seventy-five and eighty yards from his foot to the point where it struck the ground. Dick Nesbitt, former Drake star, now a pro, and Ken Strong, of New York University, both get almost as much distance as Lewellen. So does Joe Lintzenich, of the Chicago Bears, but in a different way. He places the ball to spots where it is almost impossible for the safety man to catch it, so that it usually rolls for many extra yards. He practices punting for hours at a time, and can kick within ten feet of any designated point. A good punter can do a great deal toward keeping his team out of trouble and the opponents in the hole. If a college team and a professional team should clash, I believe the great pro kickers would put the collegians in tough spots during most of the game.

Another difference between the professional and college players lies in attempts to block kicks. Most college line men – not all – attempt to break through pell-mell and block every kick. The pros also frequently attempt to block punts, but when they do, instead of

charging wildly in, they use devices which aim to draw the backs who are protecting the kicker out of position, thus clearing the way for a team mate to slice in and bat down the ball.

Often, however, when it is obvious that our opponents must kick, two words travel along the Bear line. The words are, "it's on!" That phrase means that the line is not to charge in and attempt to block the punt; instead, every man is to concentrate his efforts on knocking down his opponent, so that our safety man may return the ball for a substantial distance.

"Who pulls the most rough stuff against their opponents – the college teams or the pros?" That's something many people want to know, judging from the number of times I've been asked that question.

It's hard to give an unqualified answer. The most honest one is that today neither the pros nor the collegians resort to dirty tactics to any marked extent. Both have undergone the same thorough training in sportsmanship.

Drilled to Play Hard and Clean

The most uncomfortable experience I've had, however, occurred in a college game, against a Big Ten team which shall go unnamed here. In that game, not one but several members of the opposing team, while screened by the pile-up of players, gnawed away at my hands, arms and bare legs. My legs and hands were dented with teeth marks when the ball game was over.

"You should have played on Friday," one wag said later when I related the experience. The ravenous team was not Notre Dame, I hasten to add; Notre Dame is not a member of the Big Ten, and, as I said before, this occurred in a Western Conference game.

But that experience isn't typical of college football. The men are drilled to play hard and clean.

The pros do not attempt to maim one another, but that does not restrain them from hard charging and smashing tackles. I can testify to that! After a game I'm a combination of all the races – red, black and yellow – with very little white.

When a pro player is hurt and his opponents know it, they carefully avoid aggravating his injury. This is not because the pros have an extra quota of the milk of human kindness. Their consideration is based on common sense. An injured man is comparatively easy to handle. Plays can be worked through him and he can't contribute his full share to the offense. If he received further injury which removed him from the game, he would be replaced by an able-bodied and much tougher substitute.

"Do you professional players miss the glamour, excitement and organized cheering which accompany college football?" we're often asked.

Tears and Jeers for the Losers

We do, particularly for the first year or two out of college. When a college team loses, the student body is usually loyal; it is a tradition to stand by the team in defeat. When a pro team loses, its supporters have no hesitancy in giving the eleven a right royal razzberry.

But the pro players still get a big kick out of the game. Most of them are former college players and have been trained as competitors. They are out there to win. In the dressing room I've seen hulking pro gridsters shed childish tears after losing a bitterly fought game. I've shed a tear or three myself when the Bears have dropped a close one.

The pro players must like the game, for the pay isn't large and there are easier ways to make a living. The average pay for a professional squad is about \$125 per player, per game; a team plays from fourteen to eighteen games each season. The highest salary

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any player in the league receives, I believe, is about \$10,000 a season. Only highly publicized players, who draw fans to the box office, draw compensation which might be called substantial. The high paid men in the league now are Benny Friedman, Bronko Nagurski and a fellow named Red Grange.

When a player is injured his hospital and doctor bills are paid by the club, and even though he may not return to the line-up, he draws his salary for the remainder of the season. The contracts between the clubs and the players are patterned closely after those governing the major baseball leagues. Players can be sold or traded.

The people who believe that college football in actual play is superior to the pro brand must, I believe, be largely those who have gained their impression from the earlier days of professional football. In those days fat, panting pro gridmen gave rather laughable exhibitions. But the league is now run on a businesslike basis. It is making rapid progress; in 1931 the professional season was the most successful, financially, in history, although college football receipts slumped. The material for the teams has improved in caliber. So many college athletes are now trying out for the pro teams that a newcomer is treated as a mere recruit, who may or may not make the grade, regardless of his college reputation.

The quality of the coaching has been stepped up greatly. In former days the pros had no coaches; it was assumed that the players were experienced enough to need no supervision. Today experienced football men direct the teams; such men as Ralph Jones, formerly coach at the University of Illinois; Patsy Clark, another famous Illini; and Curly Lambeau, formerly of Notre Dame.

The coaches maintain strict discipline. They are as absolute in authority as a major-league baseball manager. They do not give pep talks, exhorting the players to fight; they don't use psychology on the men. The squads are too adult to take seriously any of the old-time gags. The efforts of the pro coaches are devoted to strategy, conditioning and discipline.

While I'm on the subject of coaches, I want to say how I feel about Coach Zuppke, who directed me during my career at the University of Illinois. So far as I am concerned, Zuppke rates a place in the all-time top flight of college football coaches. He has had a couple of lean years and the wolves have already begun to howl for his job. But give him only average material and he will fashion a team that is far above average. You take Dick Hanley, or Pop Warner, or Howard Jones; I'll take Zuppke.

Suppose we get back to my opening contention. It's hard to see how any college eleven would have much chance against a leading pro team, when all the foregoing facts are added up. The best judges – the players who have had experience in both college and professional football – are unanimous in declaring the pro game much tougher and the players more proficient. They believe that there is almost as wide a gap between professional and college football as between major and minor league baseball. When a charity game was proposed last fall between the Chicago Bears and some outstanding college team, the pro players were tremendously disappointed when the game fell through. Every man on the Bear squad would have donated his services for the chance to settle once and for all the question of superiority.

In conclusion, there is one thing in which I take plenty of pride. It is not in the fact that I gained more than two miles of ground in my twenty games at Illinois – thanks to superb blocking by the Illini, particularly by Earl Britton, Wally McIlwain and Jim McMillen, a trio of the finest blockers who ever played football.

I do take pride in the fact that during 1931 I led the Chicago Bears, for the season, in average gain from scrimmage, carrying the ball 605 yards in 114 attempts, an average of 5.3 yards on each try. On many of those yards I carried a 225-pound line man on my back for company. If ball carrying in pro football gets any harder, I'll simply have to take up bridge.

