

Bill Hewitt: The Offside Kid

By Don Smith

Bill Hewitt made his mark in nine National Football League seasons in a number of ways, but two stand out.

First, he shunned the use of a helmet until the NFL finally forced him to wear this protective device in 1939, his eighth season. Hewitt's reason was simple – he felt a helmet handicapped his play.

Secondly, he was known as "The Offside Kid," because most people felt he was perpetually offside. Actually this was rarely the case – he just got such a terrific jump on the center snap that many times he was bringing down the rival ball-carrier almost before the ball arrived. The ordinary observer just couldn't fathom how a man could always react so quickly.

These are only the signal points in the Hewitt career. Many still call him the best "two-way" end pro football ever produced. Almost every point one makes about Hewitt must start in the superlative range and then improve. For instance, he was an official all-NFL player three of his five seasons with the Chicago Bears and then won all-NFL honors his first season with the Philadelphia Eagles in 1937. He was the first pro ever to win all-league honors with two different clubs.

Hewitt, who died in an automobile accident in Pennsylvania in January 1947, was a terror on offense and was constantly thinking of gimmicks to fool the opposition. His most famous gimmick found him the middle man of a forward-lateral concoction, a dandy that he first dreamed up in the huddle between plays of a game.

This particular play became so much a Hewitt trademark that a picture of the play used in the NFL championship game in 1933 has become the model that will be used for the mural of Hewitt in his official niche at the Pro Football Hall of Fame. The 1933 title contest was the first for the NFL after it devised the two-divisional system the winter before and, late in the game, the Bears trailed the New York Giants, 21-16. Chicago, behind the bull-like smashes of Bronko Nagurski, drove desperately to the Giants 36.

Again, Nagurski lowered his head for an apparent smash into the crowded defenses, then he stopped short and lobbed a pass to Hewitt, who had maneuvered behind the New York defense. After a few steps, Hewitt scooped the ball to Bill Karr, who raced to the winning touchdown.

Hewitt was considered to be one of the best of his time on offense, but it was on defense that he had no peer, according to his contemporaries. He became the first to make spectators take their eyes off the ball – not just once but constantly during the game – just to watch him play defense. Perhaps it was because of his quick jump at the snap or the finality in his method of tackling people or because he had the knack of making the big play when it was needed most, but Hewitt had the fans watching him every moment he was in action.

Hewitt, a native of Bay City, Mich., really showed little of the outstanding gridiron ability that was to make him an all-time pro great until he joined the Bears. He first played football in his senior year in high school and enjoyed only average success.

At Michigan, his career was undistinguished and he missed most of his junior season with a broken ankle, the only crippling injury Hewitt ever experienced as a gridder. Once he reached the Bears, though, it was a different story.

Many will say that Hewitt's finest all-round season came in 1933, his second in the NFL. Sophisticated statistics such as are kept today did not exist in 1933, but Hewitt is unofficially credited with throwing enemy ball-carriers for at least 300 yards total loss during the season. Armed with an uncanny sense of timing, with speed and strength and a great desire to play the game, Hewitt seemingly could do no wrong the entire year. Even if he guessed wrong, it turned out right, Chicago writers will tell you.

Hewitt had a so-so season in 1935 and then bounced back with a brilliant performance in 1936, a year that saw him play 60 minutes almost every game because of injuries that decimated the Bears' end corps. After

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 27, No. 2 (2005)

the season, he decided to retire because "it's a lot more fun to quit with cheers, rather than boos, ringing in your ears."

But Bears owner George Halas worked out a trade with the Eagles and Eagles owner Bert Bell made such a fine offer that Hewitt forgot his retirement plans and responded with another all-NFL performance in Philadelphia.

The Eagles never had the winning marks the Bears had enjoyed but Hewitt's standards never lowered a bit and, right up until his last game, he was still playing superb football. He finally quit after the 1939 season and then returned for one more try in 1943 with the war-necessitated Phil-Pitt eleven.

Hewitt was a master of doing his best, either on offense or defense, when the going was the toughest. Now that the day of the two-way player has passed, it is safe to say: "There'll never be another like him!"