

2012

The National Forgotten League

Dan Daly

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Daly, Dan, "The National Forgotten League" (2012). *University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters*. 110.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples/110>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Nebraska Press at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The National Forgotten League

Entertaining Stories and
Observations from Pro Football's
First Fifty Years | DAN DALY

University of Nebraska Press • Lincoln & London

[Buy the Book](#)

© 2012 by Dan Daly

Portions of this book originally appeared, in slightly different form, in the *Washington Times* as “The Unbeatable T” (August 31, 2000), “Bill Belichick’s Old Man Was Pretty Amazing, Too” (August 29, 2002), “Smith after Mark with Lots of Past” (October 12, 2002), “Sing Sing Was Tough in the ’30s” (May 26, 2005), and “Going Sideways into History” (October 17, 2007).

All rights reserved

Manufactured in the United States of America



Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Daly, Dan.

The national forgotten league: entertaining stories and observations from pro football's first fifty years / Dan Daly.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8032-4343-9 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Football—United States—History.

2. National Football League—History. I. Title.

GV954.D35 2012

796.323'64—dc23

2012007288

Set in Scala.

For Laurel, Danny, Patrick, and Ellen Crahan

Oh, it's a fine game, football—a noble game. Originated in England in 1823. An enterprising young man named William Weber Ellis—who studied for the ministry, by the way—found his team behind in a soccer game, so he picked up the ball and ran through the amazed opponents for a thoroughly illegal touchdown. And that's how football was born—illegitimately. So it moved to America, where someone took advantage of a loophole in the rules and invented a little formation called the Flying Wedge. So many young men were maimed and killed by this clever maneuver that President Roosevelt—Theodore Roosevelt—had to call the colleges together and ask them to make the game less brutal. He was, of course, defeated in the next election.—Football coach Steve Williams (played by John Wayne) in the 1953 film *Trouble Along the Way*

Contents

Preface • xi

Acknowledgments • xv

1. The 1920s • 1

2. The 1930s • 63

3. The 1940s • 157

4. The 1950s • 247

5. The 1960s • 315

Afterword • 377

Appendix • 385

A Note about Sources • 395

Bibliography • 397

Preface

Welcome to the last twenty years of my life.

That's how long I've spent gathering material for *The National Forgotten League*—just because, well, *somebody* had to. It's always amazed me how little literary attention has been paid to pro football's early days. Baseball historians have put the game under a microscope. There's probably a book out there that'll tell you what Babe Ruth ate for breakfast on the day he swatted his 714th home run.

The story of the NFL's formative years, on the other hand, is still largely untold. Not that there isn't a good reason for this. Newspaper coverage was sparse in the first few decades; there simply wasn't much reportage beyond the games. So it's hard to get a real feel for what pro football was like in that period—and even harder to learn much about the players and personalities who helped lift the league out of the primordial swamp.

Good luck, for instance, finding an article in *any* 1930s publication about John “Bull” Doehring, the Bears quarterback who could throw a ball 60 yards behind his back. If you want to write about Doehring—or any number of other subjects in this book—you have to do it brick by brick, gathering information here (game accounts), there (interviews with teammates), and everywhere (team media guides, the odd mention in the paper). There are no shortcuts.

Which is why *The National Forgotten League* was so long in the making. In the past two decades, I've read everything I could get my

hands on about the NFL's first half century—long-ago-published books, miles of newspaper microfilm, archival material at the Pro Football Hall of Fame. I've also talked to scores of players from the distant past . . . and gone to great lengths to come up with sound bites from people like Joe Carr, who served as NFL commissioner (1921–38) longer than any man except Pete Rozelle. Up to now, the game's early days have been a silent movie. I'm trying to turn them into a talkie.

To me, the first fifty years aren't just *Where It All Began*, they're *Where It All Happened*. You had football evolving from a ponderous running-and-kicking game into an explosive passing game. You had the invention of the modern T formation, which revolutionized offense (and rendered the single wing obsolete). You had the NFL surviving the Depression, the Second World War, and two pitched battles with rival leagues—the All-America Conference in the late '40s and the American Football League in the '60s. You had expansion to the west (Los Angeles, San Francisco, et al.), south (Atlanta, Miami, et al.), and in between (Dallas, Minnesota, et al.). You had blacks returning to pro football after being excluded from 1934 to '45. And you had television making the game more accessible—and profitable—than anyone could have dreamed.

It was also an era of ideas. In 1929 the Orange Tornadoes thought it would be cool to put *letters* on jerseys instead of numbers. Can you imagine that happening today? On a frigid December afternoon in 1942, Packers coach Curly Lambeau kept the Packers' subs in the locker room, all nice and warm, instead of having them freeze their butts off on the sideline. Can you imagine *that* happening today? In the first fifty years of pro football, people tried things—lots of things, just about *anything*.

The decades since have been—how shall I put this?—entertainingly anticlimactic. Once the NFL and AFL became a single entity in 1970, it all changed. When a sport ceases to have competition, it loses something—its creative edge, maybe. That's why this book ends with 1969. At that point the party, in my mind, was over. Pro

football will never again be as fascinating as it was from the '20s to the '60s. It's all about *maintaining* success now, protecting everybody's investment. And that breeds conservatism. The league moves so slowly these days that it took *thirty-six years* to fix the obviously flawed overtime rules (for the playoffs, at least). If the AFL were still around, prodding the NFL into being better, the correction would have come much sooner.

Anyway, that's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

My goal in *The National Forgotten League* isn't to be encyclopedic. The format, in fact, is more like a scrapbook, one that tells the story of the game through selected events, individuals, sidelights, and statistics. The idea is to "run to daylight," to delve into areas that have been largely ignored by historians — such as the evolution of soccer-style kicking or the awful secret carried around by Sid Luckman, the Bears Hall of Fame quarterback.

Each chapter has several common elements, starting with an information box (giving you a brief snapshot of the decade) and including a Top Ten list (e.g., "Ten Great Players Who Never Played in the NFL"), a Number of the Decade, and the What I've Learned feature — inspired by the one in *Esquire* magazine — in which a player, coach, or league figure expounds on his life and the game.

Beyond that, you're liable to find just about anything between these covers (even shameless name-dropping references to Bill Murray, Errol Flynn, Eva Braun, and Dr. Sam Sheppard). I've tried to make the book as unpredictable as a game — if such a thing is possible. When you turn the page, you shouldn't have the slightest clue what's on the other side.

Let other pro football histories bill themselves, however dubiously, as "the complete story." Think of *The National Forgotten League* as all the stories "the complete story" left out. And as you'll see, there are many.

Acknowledgments

So many people were so helpful during the writing of this book. As always, Pete Fierle and Saleem Choudhry at the Pro Football Hall of Fame rolled out the red carpet and gave me the run of their archives. They were terrific, too, about digging up old game tapes so I could watch, say, the Giants' Nello Falaschi plunge his cleats into an opponent's chest to break up the wedge on a kickoff.

Special thanks, also, to the staff at the Library of Congress. The folks in the newspaper reading room were good enough to fetch me armfuls of microfilm whenever I asked. Take it from me, the library is one of the most fabulous resources this country has.

Rob Taylor, my editor at the University of Nebraska Press, believed in this book from the start and did much to make sure it got into print. I'm grateful for his efforts, and especially for giving me the leeway to write the kind of unconventional history I wanted to write. I'm also appreciative of the fine work done by the staff at the press and of the feedback given by the two (mystery) peer reviewers who read the manuscript.

I came to Rob at the encouragement of John Schulian, who sang his praises and thought the University of Nebraska Press might be more receptive to my idea than other publishers. John's the hidden hero in all this. If he hadn't pointed the way, this project might still be on the drawing board.

I'm indebted as well to my volunteer copy editors — my son Danny,

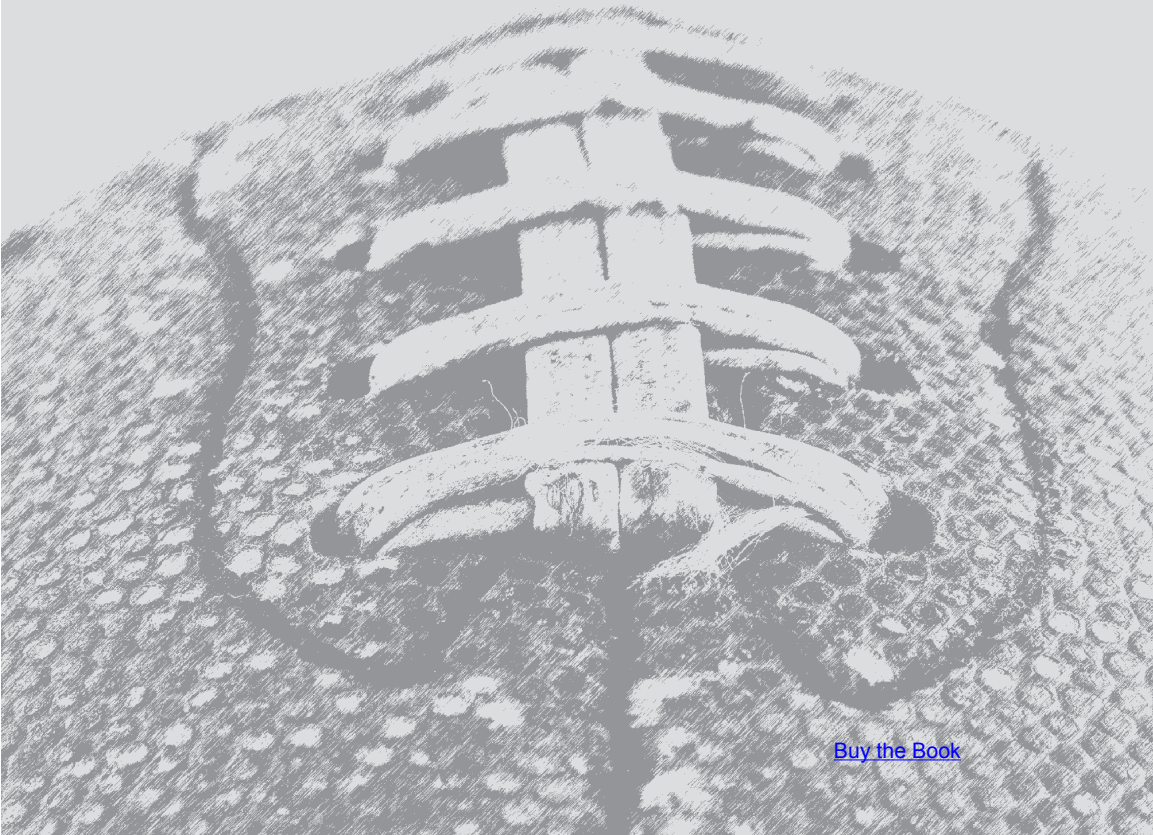
Mark Vershbow, Bob Cohn, and Dick Heller — for poring over these pages and helping to make them better.

And God bless Dave Kindred for trying his darnedest to set me up with an agent. (Alas, I flew solo on this one.)

A wide range of football folk, from front-office officials to fans, generously opened their doors to a total stranger — or spent hours on the phone — and shared their football memories. All are listed in the bibliography, but I wanted to single out a handful for going above and beyond: Sammy Baugh, Steve Belichick, Jim Black, Tom Keane, Ray Kemp, Emmett Mortell, Derrell Palmer, Joe Perry, Ede Prendergast, and Hal Van Every. Few of them were still living by the time I finished the book, and that pains me, because they added so much to it.

Finally, my family — Laurel, my infinitely tolerant wife, and Danny and Patrick, who make their dad so proud — gave me my space and were a constant source of support. I do this for me, but I do it for them, too. I hope they know that.

I. The 1920s



[Buy the Book](#)

1920s

NFL	1920	1929
Champion	Akron Pros	Green Bay Packers
Franchises	14	12
Roster size	At least 11	18
Teams with a player-coach	11	9
Games per season	Anywhere from 1 to 13	Anywhere from 6 to 19
Points per game	15.7	19.2
Shutouts	36 (40 games)	47 (71 games)
Ties	7	10
o-o ties	5	6
Run/pass TD ratio	46 run, 19 pass	102 run, 80 pass
Hall of Fame players	8	10
Hall of Fame coaches	1	3

Hall of Famers who played in 1920 (8): E Guy Chamberlin, HB Paddy Driscoll, HB Joe Guyon, T Ed Healey, T Fats Henry, HB Fritz Pollard, HB Jim Thorpe, C George Trafton.

Hall of Fame coaches in 1920 (1): George Halas (Bears).

Hall of Famers who played in 1929 (10): Driscoll, QB Benny Friedman, T Cal Hubbard, G Walt Kiesling, T Link Lyman, HB Johnny (Blood) McNally, G Mike Michalske, FB Ernie Nevers, HB Ken Strong, Trafton.

Hall of Fame coaches in 1929 (3): Jimmy Conzelman (Providence Steam Roller), Halas, Curly Lambeau (Packers).

Talking Points

- As you can see, this was the, uh, Fun Decade. Shutouts were epidemic, scoreless ties far too common, and touchdown passes . . . well, put it this way: In 1920, the year the NFL was launched (as the American Professional Football Association), there were nineteen thrown in forty games—about one every other game. Thrilling.

Of course, there was a reason for that: The game was screwed up—or rather, the rules were. Passes had to be thrown from at least 5 yards behind the line of scrimmage, which made them easier to diagnose, and you got *penalized* if a pass was unsuccessful. An incompletion resulted in the loss of a down, and an incompletion in the end zone cost you possession of the ball.

- On top of that, the ball was fatter—designed more for kicking than for throwing. And since this was the single-platoon era, with many players playing sixty minutes, energy conservation was a major concern. Nobody was too anxious to wear himself out running pass routes all day.

As the decade progressed, though, the forward pass became more prominent. It was still a low-scoring, grind-it-out game, sure, but in 1929 there were more TD passes (eighty) than games played (seventy-one), so things were beginning to loosen up a bit.

- All this makes the 1929 New York Giants pretty miraculous. The Giants scored 312 points that season, an average of 20.8 per game. The other eleven clubs averaged 8.3.

Here's something that's even more amazing, though: the Giants were responsible for 23.2 *percent* of the league's scoring output (1,344); one out of every four points, roughly, was the work of Benny Friedman and company. To put this in perspective, when

the 1950 Rams averaged an all-time record 38.8 points, their total (466) represented only 13 percent of the league's scoring. When the 2007 Patriots put up an all-time record 589 points, their total represented only 5.3 percent of the league's scoring.

How did the Giants do it, you ask? For starters, Friedman threw twenty touchdown passes, an outrageous number for that period. He also had an all-NFL fullback in Tony Plansky, who rushed for eight TDs and scored more points (sixty-two) than four teams. It helped, too, that the Giants played fifteen games, several more than most clubs. (Back then you could play as many as you could squeeze in.) Still, you could make the argument that — relative to their time — the Giants had the greatest offense in NFL history. The 1929 New York Giants. Think about that.

OK, that's enough thinking. On with the show . . .

Game Day in the 1920s

Jim Black grew up on Staten Island and followed the NFL's Stapletons in the 1920s and '30s, before and during their years in the league. I was lucky enough to bump into him later in life, when he was living just up the road from me in Bethesda, Maryland. We talked many times about pro football's early days, and Jim even typed up some recollections for me once. What it was like to be a Stapes fan:

I was the visiting clubhouse boy. Actually, "clubhouse" doesn't accurately describe it. A bungalow is what it was — a little bungalow that didn't have any heat. There were two dressing rooms, separated by a plasterboard partition. You couldn't talk in a normal voice because everything you said could be heard on the other side of the wall. So everybody whispered or used gestures. It didn't matter much, though, because coaches never had much to say in those days. Teams used maybe a half-dozen basic plays with variations.

Long wooden benches lined each wall. A potbellied coal stove was used to heat the water for the single shower stall. Half the guys didn't even bother to take a shower after the game because they didn't want

to wait. Before one game, Verne Lewellen of the Packers gave me fifty cents to buy him two packs of cigarettes. I'm still waiting for the tip.

Thompson Stadium, the Stapes' home field, was built, owned and operated by the man who owned the lumber yard next door. A narrow dead-end street led up to the stadium, which consisted of unpainted plank stands and was enclosed by a high wooden fence. A little, roped-off walkway ran between the stands and the field and served as a restraining area. That was all that separated the fans from the players.

The Stapletons sold season tickets for three dollars a pop. It was just a ticket with numbers printed on it. As you went through the gate the ticket was punched. Not many season tickets were sold, though, because none of the seats were reserved. Besides, general admission was only a dollar, and there was never a sellout. Anybody who came to the game with a buck got in. There was always room for one more.

The ticket sellers stood in booths the size of telephone booths in the middle of the street approaching the stadium. The two entrances were manned by two ticket takers facing each other. They were usually the roughest-looking characters in town. There were no turnstiles, and as the patrons would present their tickets they would get stared at in a suspicious manner. You couldn't blame the ticket takers. They were probably still mad from the last game, which had been seen by eight thousand fans even though only six thousand or seven thousand had paid to get in.

It wasn't too tough to crash the gate. Climbing the fence was the hard way. It was much easier to wait until the takers were overwhelmed by the crush of the crowd, and just squeeze your way in. Of course, another way was to get a friend with a ticket to start an argument with the taker and distract him.

It was common back then for male fans, who made up the vast majority of the crowd, to stop off at a speakeasy on the way to the stadium and buy a bottle. That was about all a fan took to a game—himself and his bottle. There was no team paraphernalia to wear or wave. After they emptied their bottles, fans would drop them down through the stands, and there would be the continual sound of broken glass.

As the game progressed, the effects of bathtub gin would become plainly noticeable. Drunks would drift out of the stands and wander aimlessly up and down the narrow aisles, and now and then a well-plastered fan would attempt to stagger across the field.

The Stapleton scoreboard was quite a thing for its day. It was one of the first to tell you what yard line the ball was on, what down it was and how many yards were needed for the first down. Here's how it worked: Bugs Avery, a local mailman, would position himself along the sideline wherever the action was. As soon as a play was over, Bugs would signal to someone standing in front of the scoreboard in the end zone—either by tapping his head or chest or otherwise wigwagging. The man running the scoreboard would then post the information by hanging up numbers. There was also a scoreboard clock that was operated by moving the hand on the clock face. Fans didn't pay much attention to it, though, because it was so unreliable, especially when the visiting team was knocking on the door with very little time remaining.

One day the Duluth Eskimos came to Staten Island. Their uniforms were all white. Eskimos—snow—see? Anyway, they'd put leather strips on either side of their jerseys so it looked like everybody had a football tucked under their arm. The Stapes made 'em turn the jerseys around. It held the game up for about an hour.

There was no full-time grounds crew. When they needed to get the field in shape, they'd bring over some workers from the lumber yard next door. Getting a wet field in shape basically involved dumping loads of sand in the puddles. And there were plenty of wet fields, because there was no tarpaulin. But only once was a game ever called on account of the weather, and that was when—after a week of snow—a blizzard hit on the day of the game. Even so, many fans showed up and thought the game should be played, the snow drifts notwithstanding.

Beany Bramhall was the Stapleton cheerleader. The team had one cheer, which consisted of spelling out S-T-A-P-E-S. Helping Beany were six men wearing black sweaters with a single letter on the front. If they lined up properly—which wasn't always the case—they would spell

out “Stapes.” Beany would take the guys to a section of the grandstand, point to each letter, and the crowd would shout out the letter.

Rarely would a team have an experienced trainer. Sometimes the assistant coach would double as the trainer, but if not . . . anyone given custody of the first-aid kit was the trainer-of-the-day. A severely injured player would be dragged to the sideline — no stretchers were used — and laid out in front of the bench or taken to the hospital. Players on visiting teams were hardly ever held over for observation, though. They usually went home with their teammates, even if they had to be carried.

After the game, the players would play craps in the bungalow. I once saw [the Stapes’] Doug Wycoff lose his entire salary — eighty dollars — on one roll.

Officiating, 1920

In the first game between the Decatur Staleys and the Chicago Tigers in 1920, Decatur’s opening kickoff caromed off the crossbar and back onto the field, where one of the Staleys grabbed it and ran into the end zone. According to the *Decatur Review*, “Referee Thomas first called it a touchdown, but was soon convinced by the Tigers that it was a touchback.”

Going Topless

Pudge Heffelfinger, the original pro football player, thought helmets were “sissy stuff.” Duke Osborn, the ol’ Canton Bulldog, was similarly scornful — and donned his lucky baseball cap instead.

Were these guys nuts or what?

They weren’t alone, either. All kinds of players went bareheaded in the early years — for all kinds of reasons.

Bert Shurtleff, a lineman with Providence and Boston in the ’20s, said he just plain “didn’t like those helmets. In those days they barked the signals [rather than huddling], and I couldn’t hear a thing with that darn thing over my ears.”

Swede Johnston, a back with the Packers (among others) in the ’30s, was convinced “I could run better” without a headgear. And

Dick Plasman, an end with the Bears and Cardinals in the '40s, ditched his helmet because whenever he looked up to catch a pass, “the flap always fell down over my eyes so that I couldn’t follow the flight of the ball. . . . One day, after a pass bounced off my chest, [George] Halas said I wouldn’t have to wear a helmet anymore.”

Other players were what you might call selectively helmetless. Kickers like the Giants’ Jack McBride and the Redskins’ Bo Russell, for instance, would remove their headgear before booting the ball. (They did this, I’m guessing, for the same reason Plasman did: Leather helmets didn’t always fit snugly, and they didn’t want them to slide over their eyes when they looked down.)

Then there’s this description of Frankford Yellow Jackets back Jack Finn in 1924: “Finn . . . always rushes into the game with a headgear and the best intentions in the world of keeping it on. But as soon as he gets one real hard bump, off comes the head piece and Finn settles down to playing football furiously.”

Finally, a player might rid himself of his helmet because the weather was so blasted hot. That’s what Fritz Pollard did during Akron’s 1926 opener against Frankford.

Red Corzine, a teammate of Johnston’s in St. Louis, once told me, “These guys who didn’t wear helmets, they just wanted to show people they were he-men. You showed your manhood in those days.” And there’s some truth to that, no doubt. But clearly there were other factors involved. It wasn’t just a macho thing.

And anyway, if Plasman hadn’t been driving with the top down, as it were, he might not have been knocked cold when he ran into the Wrigley Field wall while chasing a pass in 1938. And if he hadn’t been knocked cold, he wouldn’t have met the woman of his dreams in the hospital—the nurse who kept him supplied with aspirin.

“We got married a few years after that,” he later said. “It took her a while to make up her mind.”

(Worse, from that day forward, according to Plasman, whenever they disagreed, his wife would be sure to say, “You know something? You never did recover from that head injury.”)

Frankford's Mike Gulian might have come up with the best excuse of all for playing without a helmet. One day in 1924, after a teammate caught a punt against the Cleveland Bulldogs, Gulian took off his headgear, tucked it under his arm, and pretended *he* had the ball. Some of the Bulldogs were so confused they began chasing him — and the real returner got far downfield before he was finally tackled.

Plasman is generally credited with being the last bareheaded player in the NFL — in 1941. After that he went into the service for two years, and while he was gone the league made helmets mandatory. But he wasn't the only player that season, I've discovered, who was running around without a headgear. So were Redskins guard Vic Carroll and back Andy Farkas (as the tape of their November 23 game against the Giants, stored away at the Hall of Fame, shows). Plasman might be the "last" simply because the Bears played in the '41 title game and the Redskins didn't.

No discussion of the last helmetless pro football player would be complete without mentioning CFL legend Annis Stukus. In 1951, a decade after Plasman played, Stukus kicked for the Edmonton Eskimos without wearing headgear or shoulder pads. It's quite a tale.

Stukus, you see, had been retired for several years and was the Eskimos' coach and general manager. But then the regular kicker got hurt, and Annis was pressed into service. He waved off padding of any kind, though, "because it was my intention," he said, "to get the hell out of there once I kicked the ball."

But in the playoffs against Winnipeg, Stukus had a field goal try blocked, and the ball bounced past him toward the Edmonton goal. The *Canadian Press* described the action thusly: "The bareheaded, padless Stukus was a valiant figure as he pitted his 37-year-old legs against young Tommy Lumsden in the race for the ball. No one else was near it. Stukus was about to drop on the ball at the Edmonton 40 when Lumsden pushed him from behind and was penalized for interference. Lumsden was a cinch for a touchdown if he had reached the ball first."

It was the biggest play of the game. The Eskimos won the low-scoring battle by just three points (their margin being a 10-yard Stukus field goal).

Stukus, by the way, was also known for wearing a wristwatch while kicking—a wristwatch, but no helmet or shoulder pads. Go figure.

Practically Neighbors

One of pro football's lovelier coincidences is that Red Smith, the celebrated sports columnist, was born and raised in Green Bay, Wisconsin. It's a shame Red didn't hang around and chronicle Curly Lambeau's Packers—or at the very least, produce a nostalgic masterpiece like Bill Gildea's *When the Colts Belonged to Baltimore*. Because he didn't, an early history of the franchise, *The Green Bay Packers*, wound up being written by Arch Ward, sports editor of the *Chicago Tribune*. Sacrilege.

Smith lived only a few blocks from Hagemeister Park, where the Packers played their first games. He and Lambeau both graduated from East High School—as did future Four Horseman Jim Crowley, who was just a grade ahead of Red (or “Brick,” as he was called in those days).

Growing up in such a heroic environment, how could Smith not have been a sportswriter?

Just out of curiosity, I decided to find out how far Red's house was from Lambeau's. If MapQuest is to be believed, it was about a mile—0.97 mile to be exact—from 1535 Morrow Street (the Smith manse) to 1173 East Walnut Street (Curly's home in 1918).

After Red's career had taken him to New York—to the *Herald Tribune* and then the *Times*—he would occasionally do a column on his Olde Towne Team. Here are a few lines from one that ran before the 1960 championship game, lines that only a Green Bay native could have written:

For a city of modest size, Green Bay is ordinarily a lively place. Drop

into Honey's Tavern any night for a beer and a plate of fried perch, or maybe bay crabs boiled in dill, and you can depend on finding a gay and knowledgeable crowd. Right now, though, it's the dullest spot west of Singapore — with 52,000 people in town and only one topic of conversation.

A pretty sure way for a stranger to get himself slugged is to mention to the gang in Cropsey's Bar that he comes from New York. The boys in Cropsey's do not care deeply for New York at the moment. They've heard the Giants want to steal Vince Lombardi, their coach. Nothing has roused Green Bay so much since the night they cracked the Farmers' Exchange Bank.

Funny thing is, the Packers actually had a player named Red Smith in the late '20s — a squatty back who later coached under Lambeau for several seasons. In fact, Red Smith the football player went to Notre Dame with Red Smith the writer.

The football-playing Red Smith knew how to handle himself. A 1928 story in the *Sheboygan Press* refers to his “slam bang tactics” in one game. He also played Major League Baseball briefly and, as a coach with the Chicago Cubs, once got himself fined \$150 and suspended for five days for “using his bulk to keep other players and policemen from stopping [a] fight” (in the words of the *United Press*).

The sportswriting Red Smith, not as physically blessed, was content to let his typewriter do his talking. You just wish he'd done more of it about the Packers, the team of his youth.

Chase Scene

In the climactic game of the 1921 season between the Chicago Staleys and Buffalo All-Americans, Dutch Sternaman kicked a field goal late in the third quarter to break a 7–7 tie and give George Halas his first NFL championship.

What happened next, though, was almost better.

Play was held up for “three or four minutes” after Sternaman's

boot, the *Decatur Review* reported—and no, it wasn't because fans spilled onto the field and started celebrating.

“Dutch drove the ball over the [Wrigley Field] wall, and some kid made away with it,” the newspaper said. “Five minutes later a big copper came in at the bleacher gate with the kid and the ball. The ball was put in use while John Law marched the kid up to headquarters. They are sure there when it comes to catching boys.”

New Letterhead

The National Football League wasn't always called the National Football League. In the first two years of its existence it was known as the American Professional Football Association. The reason for the change?

“The other name stunk,” Bears boss George Halas explained.

Best Touchdown Celebration

The 1922–23 Oorang Indians were exactly that—a team made up of Native Americans, the most famous being Jim Thorpe. They had a fullback named Eagle Feather and a left tackle named Lone Wolf.

A *Chicago Tribune* sportswriter once had great fun at the expense of Long Time Sleep, the Indians' center. “Long Time Sleep . . . then dozed off and made a bad pass,” he wrote. And later: “[The Bears'] Sternaman and Knop carried the ball to the visitors' 20-yard line, where Sternaman fumbled and Long Time Sleep awakened in time to recover.”

The Bears licked the Indians pretty soundly both years, 33–6 and 26–0. In the fourth quarter of the '22 game, though, Thorpe managed to spoil the shutout by crashing over for a touchdown. The *Decatur Review* described the spectacle that followed: “Six Dakota braves, garbed in war bonnets and paint, who had put on some dances before the [game], ran on the field and gloatingly went through an original snake dance.”

Best of all, there was no penalty flag. The term “excessive celebration” hadn't found its way into the NFL rulebook yet.

Before Michael Vick

According to Andy Lotshaw, the Bears' longtime trainer, end Duke Hanny and tackle Ed Healey "both had a bulldog. They would tie them to the radiator in the clubhouse and bet which could whip the other. Invariably, before the dogfight was decided, Healey and Hanny would be fighting, and I mean battling."

Ten Sportswriters Who Officiated NFL Games

Stan Baumgartner, *Philadelphia Inquirer*

Ed Cochrane, *Chicago American*

Walter Eckersall, *Chicago Tribune*

Irv Kupcinet, *Chicago Times*

Tiny Maxwell, *Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger*

Paul Menton, *Baltimore Evening Sun*

John B. Old, *Los Angeles Herald Express*

Jack Reardon, *New York Times*

Gus Rooney, *Boston Traveler*

Wilfrid Smith, *Chicago Tribune*

Notes

Smith (1920–25, mostly with the Cardinals) and Kupcinet ('35 Eagles) played in the NFL. . . . College football's Maxwell Trophy is named for Tiny, who weighed in at three hundred pounds. Ring Lardner once wrote of him, "Any trouble arises, Tiny just falls on it and irons it out." . . . Cochrane was the umpire in the 1937 and '39 NFL title games, and Kupcinet was the linesman in the '40 game. They often worked on the same crew during the regular season. . . . Early in his career, when he was with the *Kansas City Journal*, Cochrane was assaulted by a Minor League Baseball player who took exception to some of his columns. The case went to court, and the judge hit the player with a whopping ten-dollar fine. . . . Baumgartner pitched in the Major League at the age of nineteen. His best season was 1924, when he won thirteen games for Connie Mack's

Philadelphia A's and had an ERA of 2.88, fourth best in the American League. . . . Menton's whistle blowing wasn't confined to football. He also refereed the title game of the 1944 NCAA basketball tournament (won by Utah over Dartmouth in overtime, 42-40). . . . Rooney made a bit of radio history in 1926 when he did the play-by-play for the first Boston Red Sox game to go out over the airwaves. . . . Old, near as can be determined, was the last sportswriter-official. He was still doing games in the All-America Conference in 1946. The next time you watch *Pride of the Yankees*, keep an eye out for him. He has a cameo as a reporter.

Headline of the Decade

"Grid Player Chokes to Death on Wad [of] Tobacco."

The unfortunate player was Chester Mares, a twenty-three-year-old fullback for a semipro team in Willoughby, Ohio, in 1923. According to the *Associated Press* Mares had just released a pass when a defender drilled him. As he fell to the turf "a wad of tobacco became lodged in his throat. Efforts of physicians on the field to prevent death failed."

Of course, football players, being football players, went right on chewing tobacco during games. Luckily, nobody else, as far as I know, ever suffered the same fate.

• • •

The first forward pass ever thrown must have been tossed by a broken-down back too tired to run. — Steve Van Buren, Eagles Hall of Fame running back

• • •

Sports Medicine, 1920s-Style

The summer before the 1921 season George Halas, the Chicago Staleys' (soon to be Bears) legendary player-coach, started having trouble with his knee. So off he went to Youngstown, Ohio, to "spend a few days with Bonesetter Reese," the *Decatur Daily Review* reported.

Doc Reese was the Dr. James Andrews of his time . . . except for one thing: He didn't have a medical degree — just the know-how he'd picked up observing lay healers in the steel mills of his native Wales. But he was such a miracle worker that the Ohio legislature granted him special permission to do, well, whatever it was he did.

John D. Reese functioned much as a chiropractor or physical therapist might today, manipulating bones and muscles until he achieved the desired effect. Countless athletes sought him out to cure what ailed them — nonathletes, too. Indeed, traveling to Youngstown could be like making a pilgrimage to Lourdes. There was something almost mystical about the man with the “million-dollar hands,” as newspapers described them.

“Large, sinewy and knotty, they are the sort you'd expect to see upon a steel worker,” Bill Jones wrote in the *Syracuse Herald*.

The very sight of them created the impression of power, but gives no hint of the wonderful delicacy of touch that enables him to locate instantly a displaced muscle or a tiny broken bone.

A callus on the knuckle of each middle finger is [indicative] of the great number of cases Reese has treated. These calluses, about the size of a five-cent piece, and as hard as a stone, are the result of his bone-setting practice. It is with the knuckles of his middle finger that Reese forces broken bones together. These calluses, his sensitive fingers, and powerful arms and shoulders are his only instruments.

Halas went to Bonesetter several times over the years to fix various hurts — of both the football and baseball kind. (George was a good enough outfielder to get a brief trial with the New York Yankees.) The Doc was renowned for his ability to revive pitching arms; Cy Young, Ed Walsh, and Smoky Joe Wood all sought out his services, as did boxers, jockeys, and circus acrobats.

Once, David Lloyd George, the British prime minister (and a fellow Welshman), showed up at Reese's door, complaining of strain caused by shaking so many hands on his U.S. tour. Bonesetter

cured him with a “gentle handshake and quick wrench,” according to *Time* magazine. (Another of the Doc’s patients was the daughter of Charles W. Fairbanks, Teddy Roosevelt’s vice president.)

Reese generally avoided publicity, though, despite his occasional mention in *Time*. In a rare interview in 1913 he said, “I despise notoriety, and I don’t know what I can say that will be of interest. I know very few ballplayers. While it is true enough that I have treated hundreds of them, I rarely ask a player’s name. In fact, I haven’t asked a man his name since 1908.”

But then, there was little about Reese that was orthodox. He didn’t, for instance, charge his patients set fees. “If you feel like giving me something,” he would tell them, “whatever you like will be all right.” Thus payment could range from a ten-cent cigar to a luxury car. No one was ever turned away from 219 Park Avenue. At his peak, he saw eighty patients a day.

Among the healed was a young girl named Elma H. Wilkins, who wrote about the experience years later in the *Washington Post*. The picture she painted: “My father and I boarded the Youngstown train. We found ourselves members of a little army of cripples. Some hobbled and leaned heavily on canes; others slumped still more heavily between crutches. There seemed a sort of ‘misery-loves-company’ spirit among us. Before long we became acquainted, and spent the time telling stories about the different accidents which had brought us together on that particular train.”

Sitting in the waiting room outside Reese’s office gave you the willies, Wilkins reminisced. “Nerve-racking shrieks” were intermittently heard through the door, and patients wondered what on earth was going on in there. But then a girl, on crutches not long before, walked happily out with her mother — the first of a “succession of miracles” performed by the Doc.

In 1921, when Halas paid him a visit, Bonesetter was sixty-six years old. His hair — what was left of it — had turned white, and his bushy moustache, round features, and ruddy complexion gave

him an avuncular look. His wife, Sarah, had passed away in 1914, but he had five daughters to dote on him. The youngest, Gertrude, was said to have inherited his gift for healing.

Reese never entirely understood athletes. He and his daughter attended to them “night and day, getting the ballplayers’ muscles and bones fixed up,” he said in 1927. “Then we turn them back to the leagues in perfect condition and go off to recuperate from our strenuous efforts while they are getting themselves smashed up again.”

It particularly vexed him that he would prescribe rest for a player and “the next day I would pick up the paper and see his name in the box score.” By the end of his life he had stopped treating athletes, he claimed—though some, no doubt, still sneaked unannounced into his office. His celebrity had raised expectations so high, he said, that players would “feel that I should guarantee a sure cure. I have enough work to keep me busy without treating [them].”

When Bonesetter died in 1931, testimonials poured forth. Nobody “could unkink snarled muscles and joints and break and reset broken fingers” quite like Reese, said syndicated columnist Westbrook Pegler. The Doc “contributed to the fame of Youngstown . . . almost as Schlitz contributed to the renown of Milwaukee.”

Believe It or Not!

For athletes in the early twentieth century, being featured in a *Ripley’s Believe It or Not!* cartoon—a hugely popular newspaper feature—was like making *Sports Illustrated’s* “Faces in the Crowd” today . . . or maybe the *SportsCenter* Top 10. A number of NFL players (and future NFLers) got the Ripley nod for various feats on and off the field. The ones I’ve come across:

- October 22, 1923—HOGE WORKMAN of Ohio State (1924, 1931 Cleveland Bulldogs/Indians, 1932 New York Giants) “made a 100-yard punt against [the University of] Chicago” in 1922. (How did he manage *that*, you ask? Well, according to one account, he boomed

one “from his own goal line” that “roll[ed] across the Chicago goal, a distance of 100 yards.”)

- October 30, 1925 — RED GRANGE (1925, 1928–34 Chicago Bears, 1926–27 New York Yankees) “averaged 10 yards gain each time that he carried the ball in 1924” for Illinois. Stats: 244 touches, 2,444 yards.
- December 9, 1925 — HARLAN CARR (1927 Buffalo Bisons/Pottsville Maroons) “scored a touchdown, a field goal, a safety and kicked a goal after touchdown” in Syracuse’s 16–5 win over Columbia in 1925. (Turns out he scored the safety for the *other* team. Rather than punt from the end zone in the late going, he took the snap and “grounded the ball intentionally,” the *New York Times* reported.)
- December 9, 1925 — GRATTAN O’CONNELL (1926 Hartford Blues, 1927 Providence Steam Roller) “played 35 consecutive games of football” at Boston College. “He asked for time out twice.” (The date, by the way, is not a misprint. Carr and O’Connell were actually included in the same cartoon.)
- November 20, 1926 — HOUSTON STOCKTON (1925–26, 1928 Frankford Yellow Jackets, 1929 Boston Bulldogs/Providence Steam Roller) “threw forward passes for average gains of 136 yards a game” as Gonzaga’s quarterback in 1923.
- March 16, 1927 — BRICK MULLER (1926 Los Angeles Buccaneers) “caught a football dropped from the top of a 25-story building” in San Francisco.
- October 29, 1929 — SWEDE HANSON of Temple (1931 Brooklyn Dodgers, 1932 Staten Island Stapletons, 1933–37 Philadelphia Eagles, 1938 Pittsburgh Pirates) “kicked a football 175 yards — with the wind” on April 15, 1929.
- October 20, 1930 — BUSTER MOTT (1933 Green Bay Packers, 1934 Cincinnati Reds/Pittsburgh Pirates) ran 56 yards for a Georgia touchdown “the first time he touched the ball in a college game. The next time — he ran 65 yards.”
- October 29, 1930 — DUTCH SPECK (1920–23, 1925–26 Canton Bulldogs, 1924 Akron Pros) “played professional football 25 years.”

- December 9, 1931 — TOMMY DOWLER (1931 Brooklyn Dodgers) scored a touchdown for Colgate “in the first five minutes of every game he played in 1929 (eight games).”
- December 12, 1931 — BUTCH GIBSON (1930–34 New York Giants) “can tear a deck of cards into SIXTEENTHS with his BARE HANDS!” (Glenn Presnell, the old Portsmouth Spartan, told me something else interesting about Gibson. Butch didn’t wear a conventional leather helmet, Presnell said, “He wore one of these boxer’s headgears.” It probably gave him better protection against cauliflower ears, being a lineman and all.)
- December 28, 1936 — BYRON HAINES (1937 Pittsburgh Pirates) “scored all the points for both teams” in Washington’s 6–2 win over Southern California in 1935. (Haines fumbled the opening kickoff near his goal line, the *United Press* said, and “in the scramble for possession, [he] nudged the ball over the goal and USC automatically took a pair of points.”)
- November 20, 1937 — ED LYNCH of Catholic University (1925 Rochester Jeffersons, 1926 Detroit Panthers/Hartford Blues, 1927 Providence Steam Roller, 1929 Orange Tornadoes) “made 98 tackles in one game.” (Jimmy Conzelman, who coached and played with Lynch in Detroit and Providence, said Ed was “one of the finest ends I ever saw. He thought that only sissies wore pads. So he played without any protective equipment except the muscles he was born with. Brother, that was plenty.”)
- November 1, 1939 — VERNE MILLER (1930 Minneapolis Red Jackets) “scored nine touchdowns and kicked three [PATS]—a total of 57 points in 18 minutes” for St. Mary’s College (Winona, Minnesota) vs. Dubuque in 1929.
- December 3, 1945 — WARD CUFF (1937–45 New York Giants, 1946 Chicago Cardinals, 1947 Green Bay Packers) is an “ambidextrous athlete [who] kicks with either foot, throws with either hand, bats right-handed and left-handed.”