

1930: NAGURSKI'S DEBUT AND ROCKNE'S LESSON

By PFRA Research

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For years it was said that George Halas and Dutch Sternaman, the Chicago Bears' co-owners and co-coaches, always took opposite sides in every minor argument at league meetings but presented a united front whenever anything major was on the table. But, by 1929, their bickering had spread from league politics to how their own team was to be directed. The absence of a united front between its leaders split the team. The result was the worst year in the Bears' short history -- 4-9-2, underscored by a humiliating 40-6 loss to the crosstown Cardinals. A change was necessary.

Neither Halas nor Sternaman was willing to let the other take charge, and so, in the best tradition of Solomon, they resolved their differences by agreeing that neither would coach the team. In effect, they fired themselves, vowing to attend to their front office knitting. A few years later, Sternaman would sell his interest to Halas and leave pro football for good. Halas would go on and on.

As the Bears' new coach, Halas and Sternaman chose Ralph Jones, the head man at Lake Forest (IL) Academy and a former assistant coach to Bob Zuppke at the partners' old school Illinois. Jones had faith in the T-formation, the attack mode the Bears had used since they began as the Decatur Staleys. While other pro teams lined up in more modern formations like the single wing, double wing, or Notre Dame box, the Bears under Jones continued to use their basic T. But Jones added new refinements such as split ends and a man in motion in the backfield, opening up the Bears offense to more passes and end runs. The changes he instituted with the Bears were the first shots in the T-formation revolution that would change offense forever a decade later.

Coach Jones climbed out on a limb and promised a championship within three years. To bring that off, Jones knew he'd have to replace the Bears' core of aging veterans with new young athletes.

One of the first casualties of Jones' housecleaning was veteran center George Trafton, who was considered washed up at 33. Trafton disagreed. He surprised everyone by showing up in camp and winning back his position.

To supplement veterans like Trafton, Red Grange, and Link Lyman, Jones brought in a large contingent of rookies. Number one on the list was Bronko Nagurski, a legendary figure out of the University of Minnesota where he'd earned All-America honors as both a fullback and tackle. He stood 6'2" and carried 216 pounds of muscle and bone. He ran with his head down like a battering ram. One time he tore through a goal line defense, smashed through the end zone, and collided with a brick wall. "That last guy hit me pretty hard," he admitted.

Nagurski challenged the Cardinals' Ernie Nevers for the title of the league's top power runner. Teammate Red Grange, who had the good fortune to face Nagurski only in practice, commented, "When you hit him, it was like getting an electrical shock. If you hit him above the ankles, you were likely to get yourself killed."

Nagurski's power up the gut made Jones' more open T-formation more effective because the first order for every Bears' foe was to avoid getting creamed by Bronko. A few years later, when Giants coach Steve Owen, a certified defensive genius, was asked how he planned to stop Nagurski, he said: "With a shotgun, as he's leaving the dressing room."

Buoyed by Nagurski's muscle and Jones' strategic innovations, the Bears bounced back from their dismal 1929 season to finish 9-4-1. Five straight victories ended the campaign on a high note.

Late in 1930, just after the college season had ended, Halas signed Notre Dame's popular

fullback Jumpin' Joe Savoldi. NFL president Joe Carr immediately slapped a \$1,000 fine on the Bears for signing a player before his college class had graduated, a no-no ever since Halas had signed Grange immediately after his last game for Illinois in 1925. There was a difference, Halas insisted. Savoldi had been expelled by Notre Dame for being secretly married. The fine stuck. Savoldi played three games for the Bears, running well, and then retired to pursue a wrestling career. He had no chance of unseating Nagurski as the Chicago starter.

Two-Team Race

The Bears were better, but they had a way to go. The Green Bay Packers and New York Giants still stood head and shoulders above the rest of the league. The Packers had essentially the same veteran squad that had roared undefeated through 1929. Cal Hubbard, Mike Michalske, and Lavie Dilweg anchored the line. The talented and deep backfield featured Red Dunn, Johnny Blood, Verne Lewellen, Hurdis McCrary, and Bo Molenda. A new face in the backfield was local hero Arnie "Flash" Herber. After a standout high school career, Herber had spent only a short time in college before returning to Green Bay. He was a good all-around player, but his forte was his ability to fire long, long passes with accuracy. Coupled with Blood, the best receiver in the league, he added an extra dimension to the Packer attack.

Even Herber, who was eventually ensconced in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, could not throw with the accuracy of the Giants Benny Friedman. The former University of Michigan great, was a good runner, a fair placekicker, and, until a leg injury slowed him later, an excellent defensive back. He would have been a star had he never tossed a pass, but it was the magic he produced through the air that lifted him to superstar status along with Grange and Nevers. In 1930, he passed for over a thousand yards -- unofficially, of course -- for the fourth straight season. Friedman, who took the bromide "a coach on the field" seriously, shocked fans and teammates alike by occasionally calling for passes on first down. His willingness to let fly was risky, especially considering the bloated football and restrictive rules of the day, but he produced the league's highest scoring team. The Giants averaged 18.1 points per game, the champion Packers 16.7. No other team could average 13.

Friedman's favorite target of 1929, red-haired Ray Flaherty, retired to coach Gonzaga's football team, but New York came up with a strong replacement in Red Badgro, another carrot-top. Badgro had been out of football for two seasons, concentrating on a baseball career as a St. Louis Browns outfielder. When curveballs proved he'd never become the next Babe Ruth, he returned to the grid game. In addition to being an excellent receiver, Badgro was a terrific defensive end, with a knack for making the big, turn-around play.

The Giants added three useful rookies to their roster: tackle Len Grant, guard Butch Gibson, and a versatile halfback in Dale Burnett. After two easy victories, the Giants travelled to Green Bay on October 5 and dropped a 14-7 decision. They rebounded to rip through eight straight wins.

Night Games Gain

On October 16, the Giants played the first Polo Grounds night football game, beating the Chicago Cardinals with Ernie Nevers 25-12. Governor Al Smith was among the 15,000 in attendance. On November 6, 1929, the Cardinals had played the NFL's first night game in Providence. Less than a year later, night games had become common around the league in hope of offsetting some of the Sunday fans lost to the Depression.

With the aid of mid-week night games, the Newark Tornadoes, relocated from Orange, squeezed twelve games into a six-and-a-half week schedule. They might have set a record had they not withdrawn from the league at the end of October. As it was, they managed to employ 43 players (the NFL roster limit was 20 players per game) and produced only a single win to nestle comfortably in last place.

A new team, the Portsmouth Spartans also scheduled numerous night games but with better success than Newark. The Spartans, playing in a city with a citizenry of only 42,000, were out of step with the prevailing NFL trend toward locating franchises in large population centers. Despite a good record in 1929 as an independent, the Spartans might have seen their bid for an NFL franchise go unheeded except for Portsmouth's location. The league was badly split geographically. Minneapolis, Green Bay, and the two Chicago teams were in the upper midwest; the Giants, Frankford, Brooklyn, Staten Island,

Providence, and Newark were all on the east coast. The historic originators of the league in Ohio and Indiana were defunct. Portsmouth, situated on the Ohio River, made a convenient stopover payday on trips east or west.

Green Bay was about 5,000 souls smaller than Portsmouth, but the Packers had two things going for them that kept them alive in this, the first crushing year of the not-so-Great Depression. First, they were owned by the town's citizens. That assured them of a fairly consistent crowd at undersized City Stadium. It also made it impossible for a panicky owner to relocate the team to some town where the grass might be greener. The Packers' second advantage was that they picked just this time to field a championship team -- and a pretty good show. The popular combination of stellar play and famous players made the Pack a good draw on the road. League owners were willing to accept a break-even trip to Green Bay in exchange for a bulging house when the Packers came visiting.

Season Climax

By November 10, the Packers stood 8-0 and the Giants 10-1, their only loss being to Green Bay. Surprisingly, on November 16, both teams were upset. In Chicago, Ernie Nevers led the Cardinals to a 13-6 victory over the Packers with his running and defense. Meanwhile, in New York, the Chicago Bears bushwhacked the Giants, handing them their only shutout all season, 12-0.

One week later, the Packers came to the Polo Grounds for a game that was expected to settle the championship. A crowd of 45,000 showed up, drawn not only by the season's biggest game but also by the professional debut of Chris "Red" Cagle, West Point's All-America runner of 1929. Cagle's appearance in a Giants uniform was unspectacular but few in the crowd complained -- New York won 13-6. A long pass from Friedman to Badgro provided the Giants with one touchdown and an 84-yard run by veteran Hap Moran set up Friedman's one-yard plunge for the winning touchdown. The Giants, at 11-2, moved into first place ahead of the 8-2 Packers.

Only four days later, in a Thanksgiving Day contest at Staten Island, the Giants tumbled back out of first place by losing to the Stapletons 7-6. A full house of 12,000 jammed into Thompson's Stadium to cheer for the Stapes. The Stapletons

had a strong running attack with player-coach Doug Wycoff and Ken Strong, but they struggled with one of the weakest passing games in years. But on this day, Wycoff completed two long passes to set up a short run by Strong for a touchdown that tied the score. Then Strong, one of the best kickers of his day, booted the extra point that eventually was the margin of victory.

The Packers celebrated Thanksgiving by carving up the Frankford Yellow Jackets 25-7. The Jackets had been one of the league's strongest teams since they entered in 1924, but the Depression proved their undoing. Aging stars were replaced by less expensive talent, attendance fell making even less money available for players, and more losses followed. Starting on November 8, the Jackets and Minneapolis Redjackets, another weak team, began pooling their players on days when only one team was scheduled. The two-fer was against league policy, but NFL president Carr closed his eyes in interest of putting competitive teams on the field.

On November 30, the race ended. The Packers beat the Stapes 37-7 on Staten Island while the Giants were upset at home by the Brooklyn Dodgers 7-6. The Dodgers were another new team, having acquired the Dayton Triangles franchise after the 1929 season. They managed a winning record in their first season, mostly through the efforts of Giants castoff Jack McBride, who led the league in scoring with 56 points. He scored all of the Dodgers' points in the Giants' fourth loss. Benny Friedman missed the game with a leg injury, but the New Yorkers had no alibi for three losses in four games at the key stretch of the race. The slump cost coach Roy Andrews his job. Friedman and Steve Owen split duties for the Giants' last two games.

The Giants beat Frankford the next Saturday and Brooklyn on Sunday while the Packers lost on Sunday to the Bears, but the title was already in hand for Curly Lambeau's squad. On Sunday, December 14, the Packers tied the Portsmouth Spartans 6-6 to clinch the championship over the Giants, who had no league game that day. The Packers finished at 10-3-1, the Giants at 13-4-0, with Green Bay champions by four percentage points.

Rockne Rocked

But while the Giants had no league game on December 14, they did play a game with great significance for pro football in New York. With the Great Depression growing worse, the Giants agreed to meet an all-star team of Notre Dame graduates in the Polo Grounds, with all proceeds going to the New York Unemployment Fund.

Knute Rockne coached the Notre Dame squad, which included the Four Horsemen and other more recent graduates. Rockne and much of the public held pro football in low regard and expected an easy Notre Dame victory.

Benny Friedman and the Giants, however, found the game a great opportunity to convince Rockne and the public of the quality of pro ball. Before a crowd of 55,000, Friedman led the Giants to a pair of quick touchdowns while allowing the Notre Dame players not even a first down.

Legend has it that Rockne went over to the Giants' dressing room at halftime and begged the pros to take it easy on his boys in the second half. Even though most of the New York regulars sat out the second half, the final score was a one-sided 22-0. The New York Unemployment Fund collected \$115,153. Another legend holds that Friedman urged Giants owner Tim Mara to give only \$100,000 to the fund and spread the remainder among the New York players. Like the Rockne legend, this one may be more fantasy than fact. Rockne was disliked by many players for his anti-pro statements and Friedman was more admired than liked by his teammates. Although Mara turned every cent over to the Unemployment Fund, the Giants profited from the enormous publicity the press gave the contest. No longer could the public shrug off the pros as clumsy goons.

On that same December 14 and much less publicized at the time, the Chicago Bears

defeated the Cardinals 9-7 in a charity exhibition game played indoors at Chicago Stadium, the first indoor pro game since 1903. The truncated 80-yard field was covered with a six-inch layer of dirt. Two years later, the same setting would be used for one of the most significant games of the era.

All top pro players were not in the NFL. Some excellent players preferred to play with the independent teams in non-league cities where they held full-time jobs. Some strong independents, such as the Stapletons and the Portsmouth Spartans, eventually joined the NFL, but others, equally strong, continued to play with no league affiliation. NFL teams often played mid-week or post-season exhibition games with these independents, and some of the wildcatters were quite competitive. The Memphis Tigers, Long Island Bulldogs, Milwaukee Badgers faced NFL teams in exhibitions during 1930.

None, however, matched the Ironton (Ohio) Tanks' 1930 achievements. The Tanks and Portsmouth Spartans had been strong independent rivals for many years. When the Spartans joined the NFL, they kept the Tanks on their schedule. The Tanks, coached by Greasy Neale and led on the field by former Nebraska star Glenn Presnell, managed one victory in three 1930 meetings with the Spartans. But, late in the season, they caught the New York Giants between strides and beat them 14-13. On November 23 at Cincinnati, they humiliated the Chicago Bears 26-13, with Presnell scoring two touchdowns, one on an 88-yard run. Sadly, it was a last hurrah for the Tanks; the Depression would wipe them out before the 1931 season began. But other independents would survive through the 1930s, bringing often quite respectable pro football to places that might otherwise not have seen it.