

Forgotten Firsts

By Bob Gill

These days it's no great feat to pass for 300 yards in a game – at least a couple of quarterbacks do it every week, But have you ever wondered who turned in the first 300-yard game?

Recently I came across the first 300-yard game documented by the NFL. Rookie tailback Pat Coffee of the Chicago Cardinals turned the trick in 1937 in a 42-28 loss to the Bears, completing 17 of 35 passes for 304 yards.

Interestingly enough, a week later the Bears were victimized in the title game by another rookie, Sammy Baugh, who passed for more than 350 yards in leading the Redskins to a 28-21 victory. Considering the caliber of the opposition and the importance of the game, that may well have been the best day any passer has ever had.

Thinking about record yardage totals, I wondered if anybody had passed for 300 yards in a game before the NFL began keeping track. I naturally called David Neft to ask if he could document any such games, or any other milestones, like the first 100-yard rushing day.

David discovered the following firsts, all taken, of course, from his research into play-by-play accounts from 1920-32. Keep in mind that most games in the '20s will never be accounted for, so there may have been earlier cases in each category; but these represent the best information available.

- **First 100-yard rusher:** Sid Nichols of the Rock Island Independents, Oct. 24, 1920. Nichols carried 9 times for 132 yards in a 7-0 win over the Chicago Cardinals.
- **First team with two 100-yard rushers:** Oorang Indians, Oct. 8, 1922. Joe Guyon (13 carries, 116 yards, 2 TDs) and Eagle Feather (16 for 109, 1 TD) piled up the yardage as the Indians beat the Columbus Panhandles 20-6.

Guyon and Eagle Feather got in just under the wire, because one week later Jimmy Conzelman (17 for 129) and Mike Casteel (12 for 131) of Rock Island matched their feat in a 60-0 laughter over the Evansville Crimson Giants. Conzelman also tallied five touchdowns, which stood as a record until Ernie Nevers' 40-point explosion against the Bears in 1929.

- **First team to rush for 300 yards:** Rock Island again, in that Evansville game. The Independents almost made it to 400, with 66 carries for 396 yards. The Crimson Giants had the ball for only 26 plays, and seven of those were punts.

And while we're on the subject of team totals, the Pottsville Maroons of 1925 did something that may not have been a record, but was certainly impressive: They rushed for 200 yards or more in seven of their 12 games. Not only that, but they had two other games of 199 and 196 yards. And they also took part in a game that established the following passing record, albeit a rather dubious one ...

- **First to throw 30 passes in a game:** Red Dunn did it in the Chicago Cardinals' showdown against Pottsville on Dec. 6, 1925. Dunn was one of the best passers of the early years, but not that day – he completed 14 of 36 for 157 yards, with 6 intercepted, as the Cards lost to the Maroons 21-7 in the game that could have decided the championship.

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- **First 200-yard passer:** Johnny Armstrong of Rock Island, Oct. 14, 1923. He completed 17 of 29 for 238 yards and 2 TDs, with 3 intercepted, as the Independents edged the Rochester Jeffersons 56-0. Rock Island hit on 22 of 36 for 306 yards – the first documented 300-yard game for a *team*.
- **First 100-yard rusher and passer:** Ernie Nevers of the Duluth Eskimos, Nov. 13, 1927. In a 13-7 loss to the Providence Steamroller, he ran 18 times for 111 yards and a TD, and also completed 9 of 21 passes for 106 yards.
- **First 100-yard rusher and 200-yard passer:** Benny Friedman of the Detroit Wolverines, Oct. 14, 1928. In a season-opening 35-12 win over the New York Yankees, he ran 16 times for 124 yards and TD, besides completing 12 of 22 passes for 217 yards and 4 more scores.
- **First 300-yard passer:** No, Coffee wasn't the first. On Oct. 19, 1930, playing with the New York Giants, Friedman completed 18 of 23 for 310 yards and 5 TDs in a 53-0 squeaker over the Frankford Yellowjackets.
- **First 100-yard receiver:** David didn't look this one up, but a check of *Pro Football: The Early Years* indicates that it was Tommy Hughitt of the Buffalo All-Americans in 1921 (can't tell which game). He caught 12 passes for 140 yards.

The NFL may not even keep this record, but the first man to punt for more than 600 yards in a game was Verne Lewellen of the Green Bay Packers. On Nov. 18, 1928, he punted 15 times for 630 yards, a 42-yard average, in a 7-0 win over the Giants.

David didn't check on anything after 1932, but for those years we have the NFL's figures. From that source I found another first.

- **First 200-yard rusher:** Cliff Battles of the Boston Redskins, 16 carries for 215 yards against the New York Giants on Oct. 8, 1933. Most of these milestones were achieved against the league's worst teams – Evansville, Rochester et al. But the Giants won the Eastern Division title in 1933 with an 11-3 record, so this one deserves special consideration.

Finally, one last record-breaking performance that also came against first-class opposition. On Dec. 1, 1940, in a 13-6 loss at Washington, Philadelphia's Davey O'Brien ended his NFL career in a blaze of glory by completing 33 of 60 passes for 316 yards, setting records in each category.

A less-publicized record was set in the same game by Don Looney, the Eagles' league-leading rookie receiver, who caught 14 passes for 180 yards. The 9-2 Redskins won the Eastern title that year and were generally considered the league's best team, so O'Brien and Looney weren't working against a bunch of patsies – though it might have looked that way a week later, after the Bears got through with the 'Skins.