

COACH STEVE OWEN: THE GREAT INNOVATOR

By Stan Grosshandler, et.al.
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Professional football has advanced from a simple to complex game. To a great extent, this is due to the imaginative genius of the coaches.

In the early years the innovators were George Halas, Curly Lambeau, Greasy Neale and Jimmy Conzelman. Later Paul Brown and Vince Lombardi came along. Today [ed.: 1970s] we have Tom Landry, Don Shula, Hank Stram and George Allen to mention a few.

Seldom mentioned; yet one of the great innovators of all time is Steve Owen, for 23 years the guiding genius of the New York Giants. Stout Steve came up with innovations like the A-formation and the Umbrella Defense. These were not only catchy names, but effective weapons. The Giants under Owen won eight division and two league championships.

What is even more remarkable about Owen is that he stressed defense when few of his contemporaries did. His kind of football began with blocking and tackling. "Football is a game played down in the dirt and it always will be. There's no use getting fancy about it."

Often criticized by Giants fans as ultra-conservative, he may have been the first NFL coach to elect to kick off to start a game. He often chose to go for a sure field goal rather than gamble for a touchdown, and that further upset New York rooters. Eventually, however, the rest of the league came around to his way of thinking. When Stout Steve stepped down as Giants coach in 1953, George Halas said, "Steve was the first to stress the importance of defense and the advantage of settling for field goals instead of touchdowns. Every team strives today to do what Owen was doing twenty years ago."

"Steve really stressed that defense," said Hank Soar, an American League baseball umpire who played nine years for Owen. "He was a strict disciplinarian and definitely not a gambler. I was the only one who could talk back to him. We fought like cats and dogs yet he let me have complete control of the defensive backfield when I was on the field."

"Even as a player Steve was conscious of the importance of a good defense. He tried to convince his coach to use such radical departures from the standard defenses as five and six-man lines. When he became coach of the Giants he put his ideas into action. We had stunting linemen, rushing linebackers although we did not call it the blitz, and as the safety man I often performed what is now called the safety blitz. We had a very good pass defense and fellows like Baugh, Isbell and Hutson seldom had good days against us."

Stout Steve the Tackle

Owen was born in the Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) where his father had claimed land when the Cherokee Strip was opened to settlers. His mother was the area's first "school marm."

His first athletic ambition was to become a jockey, but his growth doomed that. In his pro football prime he weighed as much as 260 pounds, perhaps a bit more than even Secretariat or Cigar could handle.

He entered Phillips University in 1916 and by 1917-18 had become the team's captain and star tackle. For a couple of years, he tried different things: one year as coach at his alma mater, time spent in the oil fields, even wrestling professionally under the name "Jack O'Brien" to preserve his amateur standing.

In 1924, he became a professional football player with the new Kansas City Blues in the young National Football League. The team lasted three seasons, playing mainly on the road as a sort of football wild-west show. In its final year, the team name was even changed to "Cowboys."

Although K.C. actually had a winning record in 1926, the restructuring of the league after that season meant the Cowboys were out. Their coach, Roy Andrews, and many of their players wound up in Cleveland with a new team formed around Benny Friedman, but the Giants reportedly paid Kansas City \$500 for Owen's contract.

It was money well spent. Steve became one of the main cogs in what may have been pro football's greatest defensive team of the decade -- the 1927 NFL Champion Giants. In sweeping to an 11-1-1 record, New York shut out their opponents in ten games and gave up a mere twenty points for the season.

When the Giants slumped badly the next year, New York brought in Friedman to lead the offense and Roy Andrews to coach. For 1929-30, the Giants were 26-5-1 and scored 620 points! The next strongest offense mustered only 432 points. New York had the best show in the league. But that was only good enough for a pair of second-place finishes to the Green Bay Packers.

Andrews was let go with two games left on the 1930 schedule, with Friedman and Owen serving as co-coaches for the last two tilts -- both victories.

Owen had a formidable reputation as a tackle, but Friedman was on a par with Red Grange and Ernie Nevers as one of the most famous names in the league. Moreover, Benny was acclaimed as a brilliant offensive strategist (and, if anyone forgot that, he was always quick to remind them).

So it must have come as a shock to many New York fans when the coach for 1931 was named -- Steve Owen!

Steve Owen the Coach

Owen received no contract. His agreement with the Giants for 1931 and for the rest of his stay was a simple handshake.

In opting for Owen, the Giants cast themselves in a role that would become their character until long after Owen was gone -- the team that lived by its defense. No doubt the team's persona peaked with the Robustelli-Huff-Modzelewski-etc. DEE-fense of the late 1950s under Owen's successor Jim Lee Howell, but it was Owen who set the Giants on the trail. In his best years, Owen's defense dominated. In bad years -- and the Giants had some seasons when the talent was thin -- the team might lose by three or four touchdowns, but fans could take solace in the thought that under another coach it would have been worse.

Still, some fans yearned for a more risk-taking club. Owen was a great defensive coach, they'd agree, but he just wasn't an innovator.

They should have paid closer attention.

Steve's first division championship came in 1933. And he almost beat the mighty Bears in the Championship Game with a razzle-dazzle pass play that saw quarterback Harry Newman pitch out to halfback Ken Strong who lateralled back to Newman who then passed to Strong in the end zone.

The next year, Owen won his first NFL title on an icy Polo Grounds field by outfitting his football team with sneakers for the second half. That's standard stuff today, but in 1934 it was revolutionary.

As the 1930s wore on, Owen developed the first two-platoon system. Rules at the time restricted substitution. If a player left the field, he couldn't return until the next quarter. Obviously, such a thing as today's offensive and defensive units was an impossibility. Coaches -- even those with teams deep in talent -- started their best all-around, eleven players and then substituted piecemeal. A sub would go in when the starter was winded or hurt, or when the sub's special talent was needed. Generally, the starters would play at least two-thirds of the game. Naturally, they were often used up by the fourth quarter.

Owen set his sights on developing two units of equal ability on offense and defense. One unit would start the game and play to the middle of the first quarter. Then the other unit would come in and play to the

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middle of the second quarter when the original unit would return. The same pattern continued in the second half. As a consequence, Owen's players were normally fresher than their opponents.

The A

"In 1937, Steve came up with the A-formation" Hank Soar recalled. "He split his lineman (another innovation) and placed four on the right side of the center and just an end and tackle on the left. He put the wingback behind the weak side end, the blocker behind the weak side tackle, the tailback four yards behind the center with the quarterback a yard in front of him and to his right. Owen had planned to use several formations so he called this the A-formation with the others to be called B, C, and D; however he ended up using this one almost exclusively.

"Steve regarded our 1938 team as his best," said Soar. "We had two backfields of equal strength which he alternated. In one backfield Ward Cuff played the wingback. He was a fine receiver and one of the best place kickers I have ever seen. Nello Falaschi played the blocker, I was the tailback and Ed Danowski, a great passer, played quarterback. The other quartet included Dale Burnett, Leland Shaffer, Bull Karcis, and Tuffy Leemans, another fine passer. For spares we had John Gildea, a punter, Kink Richards, and Len Barnum."

Soar went on to relate how Owen detested taking chances. "One game I was tackled near the goal and lateraled to 'Tarzan' White who scored a touchdown. Owen pulled me out and gave me hell, he kept reminding me we could have fumbled.

"On defense we used the five-man line with Falaschi, John Dell Isola, and Hall of Fame center Mel Hein as linebackers. Shaffer and Cuff played the halfbacks and I was the safety. On the line there was Jim Poole and Jim Lee Howell at the ends, Ed Widseth and John Mellus tackles and Orville Tuttle and Pete Cole guards.

"We finished with an 8-2-1 record and played the Packers for the title. I caught the pass that won the game. I was just inside the end zone and went up between two Packers, I don't recall who they were, and caught the ball. To this day I do not know how I did it, but we won and that's all that counts."

A part of football that has all but disappeared is the colorful nicknames that were so plentiful on that Giant team. Nicknames such as "Tarzan" White, "Bull" Karcis, "Ox" Parry, "Kayo" Lunday, "Tuffy" Leemans, and "Jiggs" Kline are probably gone forever.

Owen stuck with the A-formation though other coaches were switching to the T and in 1948 he obtained Mississippi star Charley Conerly to run it.

"I played tailback my first year with the Giants," said Conerly. "The A was a powerful formation up the middle and fellows like Bill Paschal and Eddie Price won rushing titles going right up the middle. However, it was a little weak going around the ends.

"The next year," Charley went on, "Steve decided to use the T more, so he brought in Allie Sherman to help install it. I was selected as the first Giant T-formation quarterback. I was a little reluctant to try, but Steve and Allie convinced me it would prolong my career, so I went along with them."

Steve proved a prophet as Conerly played 14 years, led the league in passing once, and took the Giants to four divisional and one league title.

The Umbrella

When the All-America Football Conference collapsed, Owen picked up almost half his defensive team by adding backs Tom Landry, Otto Schnellbacher, and Harmon Rowe, guard John Mastrangelo and tackle Arnie Weinmeister.

"In 1950 we developed a defense against the Browns that came to be known as the Umbrella," recalled Em Tunnell, later a Giant assistant coach. "Our ends, Jim Duncan and Ray Poole, would drift back and cover the flats while tackles Arnie Weinmeister and Al DeRogatis and guards Jon Baker and John Mastrangelo were charged with rushing the passer and containing the run. The lone linebacker, John Canady, was told to follow the Brown fullback wherever he went.

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"Tom Landry played the left corner, Harmon Rowe the right, I was the strong safety and Otto Schnellbacher the weak. If you would look at this alignment from high in the stands it looked like an opened umbrella. In truth, it was the same 4-3-2-2 used today. We did go into other formations, but mostly we used this 4-3 arrangement. It was so successful against the Browns that we beat them twice. The first time we played them we shut them out, the first time that had ever happened to them."

Tunnell was one of football's all-time great bonanzas. A graduate of Iowa, he walked into the Giants' office and requested a tryout, which Owen gave him. Em fancied himself a running back, but Steve saw him as a defensive man. For 14 years Tunnell was one of the best safeties in the game. His 79 career interceptions and 258 punt returns are NFL records. He is a member of the Hall of Fame.

After the 1953 season, Steve Owen turned the Giants over to Jim Lee Howell, who had starred for him for nine years. Today a member of the Hall of Fame, Steve left behind a legacy of leadership, innovation and winning.

OWEN, STEVE

Stephen Joseph (Stout Steve) Owen
Tackle - Coach 6-10 237 Phillips University
Born: 04/21/98, Cleo Springs, OK
Died: 05/17/64, New York, NY (66)

NFL Playing career 1924-25 KC; 1925 Cle; 1926-31, 1933 NYG
NFL Coach: 1930-53 NYG * 155-108-17

The A-formation: From *Pro Football: The Early Years*, David S. Neft, et.al.:

LE LT OC LG RG RT RE
WB BB
QB
FB

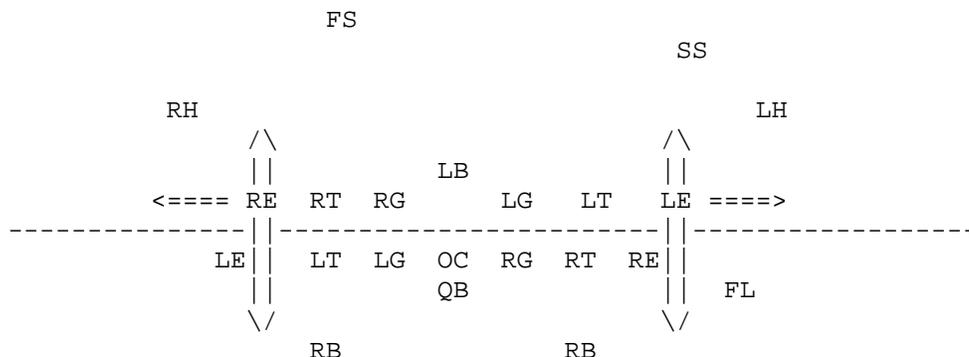
This formation is quite unique in that a great center such as Mel Hein could snap to any of three men who had the option to go in either a left or right direction. This is also a great running formation designed to put pressure on the defensive tackle facing the strong side of the line.

The following are the differences from the Standard Single Wing:

- When the line forms right, the backs are strong left. When the line forms left, the backs form strong right.
- The quarterback, who is the primary passer, lines up closer to the line of scrimmage than the tailback in the Single Wing.
- The fullback is a potential passer. The advantage of this formation is that because of its versatility in using any of three men, the defense is constantly off- balance. On the other hand, such a formation is a disadvantage in that it could not be effectively executed unless a team had a great center such as Hein. Perhaps for this reason the Giants were the only team to use this formation, giving them an advantage difficult to overcome.

The Umbrella Defense

Owen unveiled the Umbrella Defense on October 1, 1950, stopping the Browns, 6-0, at Cleveland. Three weeks later, the Giants beat the Browns 17-13 at the Polo Grounds. These were the Browns' only losses in 1950. Nevertheless, New York matched their 10-2 season record, forcing a playoff for the division title. Cleveland still didn't solve the Umbrella, but they held the Giants to a single field goal and won 8-3.



The Umbrella set up as a normal 6-1-2-2 defense. Giants defensive ends sometimes rushed and at other times dropped back at the snap to become linebackers, changing the defense to a 4-3-2-2. But the Umbrella really "opened" when the ends floated out into the flats. This disrupted the Cleveland passing game. In the 1950 season-opener, Cleveland had used passes into the flats to destroy the 1949 NFL Champion Eagles.

Sometimes overlooked in discussions of the Umbrella is the importance of New York's two great defensive tackles, Al DeRogatis and Arnie Weinmeister. With the ends taken out of their traditional pass rushing mode, it was left to the tackles to put pressure on Cleveland passer Otto Graham while at the same time closing down Browns' fullback Marion Motley, the league's leading rusher.