

THE 60-YARD CIRCUS OF 1932

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The year of 1932 saw the National Football League enter its thirteenth season. Triskaidekaphobia aside, the league had little reason to expect its thirteenth year to show any significant improvement over the last couple since the Depression struck. It had come a long way from its humble beginnings in Ralph Hay's Canton, Ohio, Hupmobile showroom, but it still had a long way to go. The 1920s had seen progress, but mostly of the two-steps-forward and one-step-back variety. Then the Depression had often reversed that ratio. Pro football was still a very distant second to the college game in popularity. And football in any form couldn't match baseball's hold on the nation's sports fans.

Calling The Roll

The NFL was bleeding franchises. Only eight teams answered the bell to start the season – the tiniest enrollment in league history.

In Chicago, the Bears still drew good crowds to Wrigley Field although no championship banner had flown at Wrigley since the 1921 Staleys came home first. Coach Ralph Jones continued sitting in for George Halas while Papa Bear concentrated on the business end of football. When he got the gig in 1930, Jones promised a championship within three years. He wasn't ready to say "I told you so," but he seemed to be making progress. He had added some flourishes like men-in-motion and flankers to the Bears' traditional T-formation and was building a big, aggressive line. Red Grange's knees hadn't quite reached the tissue paper stage.

Best of all, Bronko Nagurski was healthy again. The battering-ram fullback, limited by injuries in '31, was the stuff legends were made of.

When University of Minnesota coach Bernie Bierman told his story about stopping by a youngster plowing a field to ask the way to Minneapolis and seeing the kid point with his plow, Nagurski was the kid.

When New York Giants coach Steve Owen was asked how he would stop Nagurski, he answered, "With a shotgun as he's leaving the dressing room."

When Nagurski smashed through the line, smashed through the defensive backfield, smashed through the Wrigley Field end zone, and smashed into a Wrigley Field brick wall, he came up a little woozy. "That last guy hit me pretty good," he admitted.

Just about every player in the league had a story about how he tackled Bronko at the line of scrimmage and woke up eight, ten, or fifteen yards downfield.

Those Paul-Bunyanesque yarns may have been a tad exaggerated, but they held a deeper truth. Bronko was the most perfect design for turning opposing defenses into kindling wood God had yet come up with. So many stories are told about Nagurski's line-smashing that many later fans didn't know he was also a devastating blocker, good passer, and absolute fearsome linebacker. Green Bay's Clarke Hinkle, no small potatoes as a line-destroyer himself, always maintained that the hardest he ever got hit on a football field was when Nagurski tackled him.

Prospects were much dimmer for the southside Cardinals. For three seasons, the great Ernie Nevers had made them a respectable team capable of occasionally pulling off big upsets. Nevers was about the only fullback in the world – at least until after World War II – that anyone would even consider a match for Nagurski. But Nevers was retired. The Cards had no one to take up the slack.

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Tim Mara's New York Giants were still rebuilding. Coach Steve Owen had some good linemen to work with, but an uncertain offense. Neither the Brooklyn Dodgers nor the the Staten Island Stapletons inspired much hope. Of the league's eight teams, two were in Chicago and three in New York. Only the Bears had realistic hopes of contending for the title.

Ironically, the two teams most likely to become embroiled in a fan-pleasing championship race were from tiny towns where attendance was necessarily limited by the population. The Green Bay Packers, with a roster of stars like Cal Hubbard, Mike Michalske, Nate Barrager, Lavie Dilweg, and Johnny Blood, were odds-on favorites to win their fourth consecutive championship. One reason the Packers could collect so many good players was that they were not a big city. That appealed to some young players born and raised in small towns or on farms. Hinkle, for example, was a hotshot runner out of little Bucknell who'd been born and raised in Toronto, Ohio, a small town on the Ohio River that would never be confused with that big Toronto in Canada. The New York Giants thought he'd look just dandy in their backfield. With no draft in those days, Hinkle was free to sign with anyone he pleased. The Giants began courting him as soon as Bucknell's season closed in 1931. They brought him to New York, wined and dined him, and even took him to one of their games. Unfortunately, the game was against the Packers who prevailed over their hosts. Hinkle mentally calculated Winning Team plus Small-Town Atmosphere and signed with Green Bay.

Only the Portsmouth Spartans, under Coach Patsy Clark, appeared to match the Packers in talent. The Spartans had come close in 1931 – many of their fans were certain they would have won the title if Green Bay had been willing to face them in a game at the end of the season. The Portsmouth backfield talent of Dutch Clark, Glenn Presnell, Ace Gutowsky, and Father Lumpkin was unusually deep. The line couldn't quite match Green Bay's depth, but Ox Emerson, Clare Randolph, George Christensen, and Harry Ebding were fine players.

Gone were three teams from 1931.

The Providence Steam Roller opted to pay league dues for a year but sit out the season, a sabbatical that turned into a permanent retirement by 1933. The Rollers had been league champions as recently as 1928 and had finished '31 as a .500 team. That wasn't enough to convince Providence fans to spend their precious dollars during such a time of economic turmoil.

The Cleveland Indians had played the previous season on spec, a league-sponsored team hoping to find local backing. The monied citizens of northern Ohio proved too shrewd for that siren song, and the Indians vanished unlamented.

The most conspicuous absence in 1932 was that of the Frankford Yellow Jackets, the league's outpost in Philadelphia. Actually, the Jackets had folded midway through the '31 season, leaving a pile of unpaid bills higher than a shanked punt. During the 1920s, President Joe Carr's Master Plan slowly replaced failing league members with teams from larger cities with more potential fans. Sometimes it worked – the New York Giants was several giant steps up from the Evansville Crimson Giants; sometimes it didn't work – witness multiple failures in Cleveland and Detroit. Philadelphia with the Yellow Jackets had seemed to be a successful upgrade. They'd won the 1926 championship. More important, they drew good crowds through the decade despite having to play their home games on Saturdays because of Pennsylvania Blue Laws. Only a few seasons earlier, Yellow Jacket crowds had been large enough to justify playing some games in Shibe Park instead of cozy Frankford Stadium. Then the Depression struck and the team owned and operated by the Frankford Athletic Association found that fans who could afford game tickets tended to show their loyalty to the local school teams. Losing Frankford cost the league one of its major "markets."

In the past, the league had been able to replace the drop-outs with new risk-takers. Only one new aspirant convinced the NFL owners it might make a go of pro football in 1932. On July 9, George Preston Marshall, Vincent Bendix, Jay O'Brien, and M. Dorland Doyle were awarded a franchise for Boston where a team had failed in 1929. The club played its first season in Braves Field and appropriately took the name of "Braves." Despite the presence of two rookies who would eventually be enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame -- halfback Cliff Battles and tackle Glen "Turk" Edwards -- the new team lost money and Marshall was left as the sole owner at the end of the year.

The Numbers Appear

One really new thing happened in 1932. For the first time, the NFL kept official statistics.

They didn't keep them very well, and even some of those that were right were misleading.

Bob Campiglio of the Stapletons was recognized as the league's a leading rusher with 504 yards on 104 attempts. Later checking has revealed that Cliff Battles gained 576 yards on 148 carries. The great Nagurski gained 533. Campiglio finished third.

The leading pass receiver was Luke Johnsos of the bears with 24 catches for 321 yards. No, he wasn't. When the Elias Sports Bureau checked they found the leader was New York Giant Ray Flaherty who caught 21 for 350 yards. It turned out Johnsos only caught 19 passes.

The scoring leader was Portsmouth's Dutch Clark with four touchdowns, six PATs, and two field goals for all of 39 points. The Dutch Clark part is right, but he scored 55 points on six touchdowns, ten PATs, and three field goals.

Amazingly, they got the passing leader – with probably the hardest numbers to keep track of – correct. The knowledge that Arnie Herber was officially the league's top passer probably helped him to be named to both of the important All-Pro teams picked in 1932. His 37 completions in 101 attempts for 639 yards and nine touchdowns look like a disaster to a modern fan, but they were fairly impressive numbers in 1932. His rating under the present system used by the NFL was 51.5 and only a couple of others did better. He was particularly adept at throwing long. That was perfect for leading the league because the passers were ranked on total yardage in 1932. It didn't hurt that Herber threw 23 more times than anyone else in the league.

Herber continued to be thought of as the NFL's premier passer until Sammy Baugh showed up in 1937. What no one knew -- or, at least, could prove with statistics -- at the time was that Benny Friedman, who was finishing his career as a part-season player with Brooklyn, had posted passing records in the late 1920's that were far superior to any season Herber ever had. As a result, succeeding generations were given a misleading picture of what constituted the passing game in this period. Taking Herber's 1932 record as the acme, and noting, that Arnie and others improved their marks as the decade went on, fans and even historians jumped to the conclusion that passing in the 1920's was far below the unimpressive standard Herber set.

In actual fact, as shown by careful reconstruction of records from the '20s, several throwers had seasons superior to the one that won Herber a title in 1932. Among the best were Ernie Nevers, Curly Lambeau, and Red Dunn. Friedman, of course, was far ahead of even these when it came to winging the football.

Errors or not, it was a start. Probably a far more important beginning than anyone realized at the time. Statistics had been used to evaluate baseball players since the 19th Century. Baseball fans could quote batting averages and home run records galore. Maybe they never saw Babe Ruth hit a homer, but they knew what 60 meant. Football fans when talking about their heroes were in the same position as the fellow who saw a UFO on the day he left his camcorder home. They could tell you about all the great runs Paddy Driscoll made, but they couldn't show you the numbers. You had to be there. It's hard to imagine modern pro football existing without enough stats to drown a whale. Modern fans pore over them, compare them, invent new ways to use them, and even play Fantasy Football games all because the statistics are there. As much as we sometimes complain that TV analysts blab too many stats and too often, we've come to expect and even demand the numbers. They shape our perception of the game. Would Eric Dickerson have made the Pro Football Hall of Fame if he'd only gained "a whole lot of yards"?

By keeping statistics for the first time, the NFL took one halting step toward making the game more fan-friendly. Unfortunately, they did nothing to solve the big problems. Charitably, they weren't quite ready. More likely, they were so petrified by the Depression they feared making a wrong move and so did nothing at all.

In Need, Indeed

In baseball, the local team can have an early-season losing streak, right itself, and get back into the pennant chase. In 1932, baseball teams played 154 games. Losses in May could be made up by wins in September. Football teams played one game a week from mid-September to early December. That

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limited the season to about twelve games. A few early-season losses might not put a team out of the race mathematically, but that was how its fans were likely to view it.

Any excitement of a championship race was lost by mid-October for many teams. The league had nothing resembling parity and no plan for achieving it. Too many championship races had seen runaways by one or two clubs while the rest of the league maneuvered to stay out of last place. The league needed a way for more teams to sustain interest later in the season.

Since at least 1927, league owners had been talking about splitting the league into divisions so there could be two title races and, as a season-ending extravaganza, a championship game. But the result was only talk. The NFL went into yet another season under championship rules established more than a decade earlier -- a single race determined by winning percentage.

Even those teams who rewarded their fans by staying in the race risked upsetting them at the end. Because all teams were not yet required to play the same number of games and the official schedule was not yet set in stone, the door was open to such controversies as the one in 1931 when the Packers decided a late game with Portsmouth had only been "tentatively" scheduled.

But the worst problem the NFL faced was that the product was often boring. The league had too many dull, low-scoring games. In 1931, half of the league's teams averaged a single touchdown plus extra point or less per game. On those occasions when a team got two touchdowns ahead in the first half, the game was as good as over. Too many fans asked why they should spend their hard-to-get entertainment dollars on games that weren't very entertaining?

The NFL played under virtually the same rules as college football, but the perception of the two games by the fans was different: college football, awash in ancient rivalries and hoopla, was exciting; pro football, with its low scores, was not. The only major change in the rules for 1932, a substitution change allowing a replaced player to return in a subsequent quarter, had little effect on the lack of scoring. In 1932, NFL games averaged only 16.4 points *for both teams*, the lowest per-game record since 1926. Ironically, at a time when the NFL showed the least offense in years, the league decided to keep official statistics.

The 1932 season began as a continuation of the previous season, but before it ended, it pointed the way toward solving some of the problems besetting pro football.

The Season

In midseason, the Green Bay Packers looked like a sure bet to win their fourth straight NFL championship. On the eve of their annual trip east, they had won seven games, including victories of 15-10 over the Portsmouth Spartans and 2-0 over the Chicago Bears, and had been held to a scoreless tie by the Bears. The unbeaten Pack flexed its defensive muscle, posting five shutouts in the eight games. The rival Spartans and Bears had no losses other than those with the Packers, but both teams had won fewer games and had been tied more often. After the games of November 6, the Packers would meet the relatively weak clubs in Boston, New York, Brooklyn, and Staten Island, then end the season with key games in Portsmouth and Chicago.

Green Bay coach Curly Lambeau traveled east with a squad that had undergone several changes. The veteran line featuring Cal Hubbard, Mike Michalske, Lavie Dilweg, and Nate Barrager was unchanged, but the backfield had an injection of youth. After two years of inactivity on the bench, Arnie Herber won the starting tailback job with long-range passing that more than offset his lack of speed afoot. By the end of the season, he ranked as the league's first official leading passer. Powerful rookie Clarke Hinkle from Bucknell settled in for a long stretch as the Packer fullback. Second-year men Hank Bruder and Roger Grove also saw increased playing time in the backfield. Of Green Bay's veteran backs, Johnny Blood still played most of the time, but Verne Lewellen and Hurdis McCrary slipped into reserve status, Red Dunn retired, and Bo Molenda was traded to New York. With a brand new backfield, the Packers kept winning.

The road trip began with a 21-0 victory over the Boston Braves on November 13. The Braves were the league's only new team for '32, George Preston Marshall and his partners presumably having purchased the 1931 Newark franchise, but a \$46,000 loss this season left Marshall the sole owner for the future. The Braves could not match the Packers, but they did have a respectable club. Its star was Cliff Battles whose open-field running made him the first official NFL rushing champion after the recount. While the Braves and Packers met in Boston, the Bears and Spartans, true to habit, fought to a 13-13 tie in Chicago.

One week later, the Packers made their annual pilgrimage to the Polo Grounds. The Giants had a different look from the powerhouse squads of 1929 and 1930. Benny Friedman had moved across the East River to play parttime with the Brooklyn Dodgers after Giants owner Tim Mara turned down his bid for part ownership of the club. The Giants relied on Chris Cagle, the former Army All-America, as their main running threat and selling point in advertisements. To throw the bulk of their passes, the Giants reacquired veteran Jack McBride who had starred for their first team in 1925 and their championship squad of 1927.

Without Friedman, the Giants shuffled into the game 2-5-1. Before 30,000 fans, however, New York smothered the Packers' offense and built a McBride-to-Ray Flaherty touchdown pass in the first half into a 6-0 upset. The Bears and Spartans both won their games. All three contenders had one defeat apiece, but the Packers had won eight, the Spartans five, and the Bears only three.

The Packers finished their eastern swing without further trouble, beating the Dodgers 7-0 in Ebbets Field on Thanksgiving Day and the Staten Island Stapletons 21-3 three days later in tiny Thompson Stadium. Meanwhile, the Bears defeated the never-say-die but Ernie Nevers-less Cardinals, 34-0 on Thanksgiving and met the Spartans the following Sunday in a rematch which, of course, ended in a tie 7-7.

The Spartans hosted the Packers on December 4, and, in a couple of hours, the Green Bay dynasty was over. Eleven Spartans played the entire game. Portsmouth's Dutch Clark, Father Lumpkin, Ace Gutowsky, and Glenn Presnell outperformed the Green Bay backs as the Packers' offense went to pieces, completing only one pass in sixteen attempts. The 19-0 Spartan victory dropped the Packers out of the race with two losses to go with ten wins and a tie. Additionally, it assured Portsmouth with a 6-1-4 mark of finishing in at least a tie for first place.

The Bears were still alive. The same afternoon the Spartans were ending Green Bay's hopes, Chicago beat the Giants at Wrigley Field 6-0 to stay within a half game of Portsmouth. The Giants finished fifth in an eight-team league with a 4-6-2 mark. The Maramen needed some new blood, but Coach Steve Owen would stay on to supervise the rejuvenation.

Portsmouth had completed its schedule, but the 5-1-6 Bears still had one more game left to play -- with Green Bay no less. On December 11, Green Bay faced the Bears and a heavy snowstorm in Chicago. The Packers' offense continued to flatline, but after three quarters the score stood 0-0. Then, in the final period, the Bears put up nine points to bring Chicago at 6-1-6 into a tie with 6-1-4 Portsmouth for first. Despite all the disputed championships in the league's first dozen years, this was the first race since 1921 to actually end in a tie.

Had the league compiled its standings as it does now -- counting a tie game as a half win-half loss -- the championship would have gone to Green Bay with ten-and-one-half "wins" to Chicago's nine and Portsmouth's eight. However, the rules established in 1921 were in effect. Winning percentage, based strictly on wins and losses, determined the order of finish; ties were simply ignored.

The Playoff

The league office hastily arranged a playoff game for a week later in Chicago. As an extension of the season rather than a championship game, the playoff would count in the regular season standings. That meant the loser would slip to third place behind Green Bay.

Then a weather disaster descended on Chicago. For a week, bitter cold and heavy snow ruled out all possibility of football at Wrigley Field. Bears owner George Halas remembered his team and the Cardinals had played a charity game indoors at Chicago Stadium in 1930; he suggested that as a site for the playoff. The snow continued to fall. By Friday, the Spartans agreed.

Chicago Stadium was a nice site for its usual tenants -- hockey teams and circuses. The field was absurdly small for football -- 45 yards wide and 80 yards long. Rounded corners further cut into the playing space. With two half-moon endzones, a mere 60 yards remained between the goal lines. At least they wouldn't play on hockey ice. A circus was scheduled into the stadium a few days later so a six-inch layer of dirt covered the floor. Apparently the dirt was recycled from an earlier circus; several of the players who appeared in the game insisted that years later they still had the smell of elephant manure in their nostrils.

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To accommodate football on a postage stamp, several special rules had to be put in. Kickoffs were made from the ten-yard-line. When a team crossed midfield, it immediately was set back twenty yards. Because a solid fence surrounded the field only a few feet from the sidelines, the ball was moved in ten yards after each out-of-bounds play instead of starting the next play right at the edge. A team lost a down each time. College football had legalized this a year earlier, but this was the first use of "hash marks" in the pros. Another special rule dictated that touchbacks were brought out to only the ten. Field goals were banned.

The game's major influence on the future of how pro football came to be played would surface during its playing.

Ralph Jones, the Bears' coach, had all his weapons ready. Fullback Bronko Nagurski was unrivaled as a line smasher. Versatile quarterback Keith Molesworth could reel off long runs, and Red Grange was still a dangerous runner despite traveling on the knees of a man twenty years his senior. Guards Joe Kopcha and Zuck Carlson were all-pros, and Bill Hewitt was so fast at defensive end he constantly had opponents screaming he was offside.

In contrast, Spartans coach Potsy Clark came into the game at a severe disadvantage. Dutch Clark, his star tailback and the league's 1932 scoring leader, had contracted to begin work at Colorado College as basketball coach with the expectation that his NFL season would be over with Portsmouth's last scheduled game. School officials wouldn't release him from his basketball commitment to return east for the unexpected playoff.

Nevertheless, the Spartans fought the Bears on even terms for three quarters. Neither team scored. The 12,000 fans who braved snowdrifts to get to the game began to suspect yet another tie was in the making.

Then Chicago halfback Dick Nesbitt intercepted an Ace Gutowsky pass and returned it ten yards before being knocked out of bounds at the Portsmouth seven. The ball, as per the special rule, was brought into the field ten yards, costing the Bears a down. On second down, Nagurski blasted six yards to the one, but on his next try, he lost a yard. Fourth and two! Nagurski faked a line smash, retreated a few steps, and fired a pass to Grange in the endzone.

The rules stated that a forward pass could only be thrown from five or more yards behind the line of scrimmage. The Spartans screamed that Nagurski was not the required distance from the line of scrimmage. The officials disagreed; the touchdown stood.

The Bears added the conversion and, a few moments later, a safety. The 9-0 win allowed Ralph Jones to make good on his promise.

The Portsmouth *Times* called it "a sham battle on a Tom Thumb gridiron," but the game had more significance than its immediate effect on the standings. The idea of bringing the ball into the field instead of starting play at the sideline opened up the game and the loss-of-a-down penalty was dropped. The dispute over whether Nagurski had tossed his scoring pass from the required five yards back led to the dropping of that constricting rule. Potsy Clark was quoted as saying the league might as well legalize throwing from anywhere behind the line of scrimmage because players "were doing it anyway."

But the game's most important lesson was the interest generated among fans by a game for all the marbles at the end of the season. By the next year, the league finally would be split into divisions with a championship game at the end.

The NFL was stepping into a brand new world.

When Franklin Roosevelt was inaugurated President of the United States on March 4, 1933, his inspiring words, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," exhorted Americans to move forward with confidence. Easy for him to say. He didn't own a pro football team.

1932 FINAL NFL STANDINGS

	W	L	T	Pct.	PTS OPP	
Chicago Bears	7	1	6	.675	160	44
Green Bay Packers	10	3	1	.769	152	63
Portsmouth Spartans	6	2	4	.750	116	71
Boston Braves	4	4	2	.500	55	79
New York Giants	4	6	2	.400	93	113
Brooklyn Dodgers	3	9	0	.250	63	131
Chicago Cardinals	2	6	2	.250	72	114
Staten Island Stapletons	2	7	3	.222	77	143