

PRO FOOTBALL'S FIRST TV GAME -- 1939

By Jim Campbell

(Originally published in *Football Digest*)

Television's money is the key to pro football's fantastic success. Multi-million-dollar contracts pay the stars tremendous salaries and promote the game far beyond what would be possible if revenues were restricted to spectator and radio income.

In the 1940s television took pro football to the people and showed them that the game they'd been admiring -- college football -- was inferior to the skills of trained professionals. And as the nation developed its TV addiction, it got highest watching Bobby Layne, Johnny Unitas and Bart Starr perform. Instead of being watched by thousands in person, TV allowed millions to admire the pro's skill and agonize with their defeats. TV fulfilled the fantasies of the armchair quarterbacks and in the 1950s the country took the game to heart.

But when television first broadcast professional football, not only did few predict its far-reaching implications for the game, few even knew the game was on TV.

It was October 22, 1939, Pro football's first televised game. The Philadelphia Eagles vs. the Brooklyn Dodgers. The beginning of an era.

The game was played in Brooklyn's Ebbets Field before 13,000. The day before 70,000 had filled Yankee Stadium for a college game, but TV was going to change that pattern. The Dodgers, with the help of three 40-yard-plus field goals by Ralph Kercheval, subdued the Eagles 23-14. Two records were established that day -- Kercheval's 45-yard field goal was the season's longest and 6-0, 205 pound Brooklyn fullback Ace Gutowsky eclipsed Cliff Battles' lifetime rushing mark when a brief appearance netted him seven yards for a new standard of 3,399 yards. Pug Manders and Ace Parker also were Dodger standouts. Manders showed his fine running style, gaining 139 yards on 29 carries, and Parker tossed a pass which writer William H. Taylor described as "traveling close to 50 yards in the air," to end Perry Schwartz for a 47-yard touchdown.

For the Eagles, coached by Bert Bell, back Franny Murray ran and passed well all day and scored on a short sweep. Bill Hewitt, playing without a helmet, caught a six-point pass from 5-7, 150 pound Philly back Davey O'Brien.

But, so far as anyone can tell, none of the players knew the game was being broadcast to the approximate 1,000 TV sets in New York City.

"I didn't know about it," says Ace Parker today. Bruiser Kinard, Brooklyn's outstanding tackle, agreed: "I certainly wasn't aware of it," he says. "That sure is interesting."

The players might not have known about it, most thinking the equipment and announcers were radio men calling the game, but with this game television was on its way. A couple baseball games had been broadcast by NBC station W2XBS, actual transmission coming from a huge tower atop the Empire State Building. NBC had also broadcast a college scrimmage game a couple weeks before, but with the success of the Dodgers-Eagles game the network decided to broadcast Dodger games throughout the season and a genuine sports following developed.

The announcer for the game was Allen Walz, a former New York City Golden Gloves champion and NYU football star who did the sports for W2XBS.

"I remember the game," says Walz, today an executive with Norton Simon, Inc. "Pro football was a great game to do by television and the excitement of doing the game was fun."

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"It was late in October on a cloudy day and when the sun crept behind the stadium there wasn't enough light for the cameras. The picture would get darker and darker and eventually it would be completely blank and we'd revert to a radio broadcast.

"The people would stay with us, though. It was surprising what a fine, loyal audience we had. People would gather in homes to watch the games and there were a lot of people who would tell us how to do things better after the broadcasts.

"We used two iconoscope cameras. I'd sit with my chin on the rail in the mezzanine (boxes 143 and 145 in the balcony), and the camera would be over my shoulder. I did my own spotting and when the play moved up and down the field, on punts and kickoffs, I'd point to tell the cameraman what I'd be talking about and we used hand signals to communicate. The other camera was on the field, at the 50-yard line, but it couldn't move so we didn't use it much.

"Producer and director Burke Crotty was in the mobile unit truck and he'd tell me over the headphones which camera he was using.

"There wasn't a monitor up in the broadcasting box, but there was one on the field. I never really understood what that was for, but I think Potsy Clark (Brooklyn's coach) insisted on it. He was experimenting with scouting by television I think.

"We decided right away that the way to do television was to comment on the game, not tell what was happening like we did on radio. We wanted to describe the plays, the line-ups (Brooklyn used a single wing, I don't remember what Philadelphia used), the way the tailback cut because of the blocking or whatever. And, we had to be accurate. We were selling television at the time and people had to believe in television.

"Some of the fun of television was to tell the audience what was going to happen, to give them a clue of what to watch. For instance, the Dodgers used a buttonhook pass to Perry Schwartz all season and variations of the pass. Well, sure enough you could feel they were going to use it. The game wasn't so complicated then with only a few plays and we got to know them pretty well.

"I had some trouble with Potsy Clark predicting plays. He didn't like that and after we had a talk I stopped doing it.

"Our pre-game show was nothing like they do now. I'm fascinated by Gifford and those guys today -- they really do a job. We talked about the game and showed the band, but at halftime we'd go off the air and they'd fill in with something from the studio.

"Afterward, I'd interview players, but it was too dark by then to do television and the players probably thought I was just another of the radio men there."

The game was typical of the times, distinguished only by some of the great men of pro football history who participated. But it was the beginning of the golden age of television sports. It was pro football's first televised game, and as such, one of the great moments in pro football history.

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Featured on the cover of the Dodger-Eagle game program (which could be purchased for 10 cents) was one of the best linemen in pro football's history. Even by pre World War II standards, Frank Kinard was small for a tackle at 6-1 and 210, but he more than made up for his so-so size by being tough, fast, durable, and so aggressive that he was better known by his nickname -- "Bruiser."

Twice an All-American at Mississippi, he was all NFL four times and all AAFC once. In 1971 he was inducted into Pro Football's Hall of Fame.

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TEAM ROSTERS - 1939

Brooklyn Dodgers

Name	Pos	Wt.	Ht.	College	Yrs.
					Pro
Kercheval, Ralph	HB	193	6-1	Kentucky	5
Carnelly, Ray	QB	190	6-2	Carnegie Tech	0
Janiak, Len	FB	195	6-1	Ohio Univ.	0
Nardi, Dick	HB	200	5-10	Ohio State	2
Young, Waddie	E	205	6-3	Oklahoma	0
Parker, Ace	QB	168	5-11	Duke	2
Manders, Pug	HB	210	6-0	Drake	0
Francis, Sam	HB	210	6-0	Nebraska	3
Gutowisky, Ace	FB	205	6-0	Oklahoma City	7
Mark, Louis	C	195	5-11	N. Carolina St.	1
Hodges, Herman	E	195	6-2	Howard (Ala.)	0
Hill, Harold	E	200	6-1 1/2	Howard (Ala.)	1
Kaplanoff, Carl	T	235	6-0	Ohio State	0
Humphrey, Paul	C	195	6-0	Purdue	0
Golemgenske, John	T	225	6-2	Wisconsin	2
Haak, Robert	T	245	6-1	Indiana	0
Ratica, Joe	C	205	6-0	St. Vincent	0
Kinard, Bruiser	T	210	6-1	Mississippi	1
Posi, John	C	210	5-10	Niagra	1
Disend, Leo	T	224	6-1	Albright	1
Sivell, James	G	200	5-8	Auburn	1
Feathers, Beattie	HB	185	5-10	Tennessee	5
Butcher, Wendell	HB	200	6-1 1/2	Gus. Adolphus	1
Schwartz, Perry	E	200	6-2	California	1

Head Coach -- George (Potsy) Clark

Philadelphia Eagles

Name	Pos	Wt.	Ht.	College	Yrs.
					Pro
O'Brien, Davey	B	150	5-7	TCU	0
Harper, Maurice	C	229	6-4	Austin	2
Murray, Franny	B	201	6-0	U. Of Pacific	0
Ramsey, Herschel	E	192	6-0	Texas Tech	1
Smukler, Dave	B	224	6-1	Temple	3
Dow, Elwood	B	195	6-0	W.Tex.Teach.	1
Woltman, Clem	T	212	6-1	Purdue	1
Kolberg, Elmer	E	201	6-4	Oregon St.	0
Carter, Joe	E	201	6-1	SMU	6
Britt, Rankin	E	206	6-2	Texas A & M	0
Somers, George	T	242	6-2	LaSalle	0
Reese, Hank	C	216	5-11	Temple	6
White, Allie	G	212	5-11	TCU	0
Coston, Zed	C	222	6-2	Texas A&M	0
Kriel, Emmett	G	199	6-2	Baylor	0
Giddens, Hereshel	T	224	6-2	Louisiana Tech	1
Keeling, Ray	T	255	6-3	Texas	1
Hughes, Bill	G	232	6-1	Texas	2
Mortell, Emmett	B	178	6-1	Wisconsin	2
Arnold, Jay	B	207	6-0	Texas	2
Ellis, Drew	T	216	6-1	TCU	1
Bukant, Joe	B	223	5-11	Washington	1

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Cuppoletti, Bree	G	205	5-9	Oregon	5
Schuehle, Jake	B	196	6-0	Rice	0
Pylman, Bob	T	215	6-4	S.Dakota St.	1
Newton, Chuck	B	204	6-0	Washington	0
Schmitt, Ted	G	214	5-11	Pittsburgh	1
Riffle, Dick	B	197	6-1	Albright	1
Hewitt, Bill	E	191	5-9	Michigan	7

Head Coach -- Bert Bell