

The Truth About Beattie

By Bob Carroll

Did he or didn't he?

It seems like ever since Beattie Feathers had that remarkable season in 1934, Doubting Thomases have been trying to explain it away. Their reasoning goes something like this: No one ever did it before (gain a thousand rushing yards in one season) and no one has done it since (average 9.9 per on 101 carries for 1,004 yards), so Feathers must not have done it either.

Okay, but how do they account for his entry in the record book? It's obviously not a typo and it's been there for 51 years.

Several theories have been advanced. All of them turn on the idea that people in 1934 didn't know what they were doing. For example:

1. They didn't know how to measure. Back then, they didn't really measure yardage; they only estimated it. Feathers had quite a few long runs in '34 and 1,000 yards sounded nice so ...

1½. They knew how but for a while they didn't bother. They hadn't been keeping track but about midway through the season someone picked up on the idea that Feathers had been gaining a lot. They decided to see if he got to a thou. They estimated his yards up till then at 500 (or 750, or 999).

2. They lied. Somebody decided a thousand yard runner would make a swell PR gimmick and inflated Feathers' yardage.

3. The yards were right but the attempts were wrong. You know how primitive things were in 1934. They could barely make fire. Certainly they didn't understand about rushing attempts. Erroneously, they included punt returns (or pass receptions, or kickoff returns, or trips to the A & P).

Sooner or later someone will suggest that Feathers' mark was really measured in cubits!

None of these ingenious theories wants to admit that

a. Beattie Feathers was one remarkable runner. Had he not suffered a serious shoulder injury near the end of the '34 schedule, he probably would have enjoyed several more exceptional seasons.

b. Almost anyone – including George Halas himself – could have done well running behind the likes of Bill Hewitt, Link Lyman, Zuck Carlson, Eddie Kawal, Joe Kopcha, George Musso, and Luke Johnsos. And, with Bronko Nagurski leading the charge through the hole, Halas' mother-in-law could have made big gains!

and c. Folks in 1934 were not appreciably more stupid than folks in 1985.

However, somewhere in between those years (1934-85), a careless file clerk (no doubt, a basketball fan) apparently mislaid all the official game accounts from the early '30s. Maybe some day they'll turn up filed under W (for Way Back Then) but until they do none of us can examine Feathers' season with official game-by-game stats.

Fortunately, we have David Neft. He has undertaken the painfully slow and frustrating job of re-assembling early '30s (and '20s) stats from newspaper stories and published play-by-play accounts. Along the way he's collected more old newspapers than a World War II paper drive.

His findings will be available soon in his revision of *Pro Football: The Early Years*, the most complete and accurate survey of pro football stats (and rosters and player info and lots of other stuff) for the years 1920-1959 ever attempted. If that sounds like a plug, so be it.

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Anyway, if you want to know whether Feathers really did it, you go to David for facts instead of theories. But we'll save you the trip. What he will tell you is detailed at the bottom of this page.

Feathers played eleven games before he went out with a shoulder separation that kept him out of the Bears' last two games – both against Detroit, the NFL's toughest defensive club.

Of those eleven games, eight are completely recoverable through play-by-play accounts or have specific references to Feathers' yardage in game stories. Sure, a newspaper might have made a mistake (we can't prove that Washington really crossed the Delaware because no one brought a Polaroid) but there is no reason to believe they did. And, play-by-plays might be off a yard or two. But when David totals 633 yards for those eight games, you can bet your Ace Parker autographed football that Beattie got betwixt 630 and 640. To get those yards, Beattie ran 76 times. That's an 8.3 average – below his record 9.9 but within striking distance.

Significantly, the three games for which only partial information is available were against Cincinnati, Brooklyn, and Pittsburgh – three of the league's weakest teams. Stories for these games mention only a few of Feather's runs in these one-sided games (the local newshounds were awfully busy apologizing for the sad state of their neighborhood footballers). For example, the Pittsburgh *Sun-Telegraph* noted directly only a single 82-yard dash by Beattie but references elsewhere in the story indicate that he made several fine dashes.

For these three games against teams that considered showing up on time a moral victory, Neft has found 219 yards on only nine attempts. That's a higher average than some of us have IQs. The question is this – could Beattie have gotten another 152 yards on 16 attempts in those games?

Well, he could have.

It would have been consistent with what he did in other games against stronger foes.

There are lots of unaccounted-for yards by the Bears in those three games and indications that Beattie got some of 'em.

A few 20 or 30 yard runs that didn't lead to TDs would have been ignored in the abbreviated game stories.

David makes a few other points based on his study of all the Bears' games:

Feathers was used as a "scatback" by the Bears, running almost exclusively off-tackle or wider. He seldom got the ball until Nagurski, Ronzani, Manders and the other "big" backs had knocked opponents silly with up-the-gut smashes. This tended to limit his attempts and maximize his yards.

Had Red Grange's aching knees been what they were in 1925, we'd probably be celebrating his thousand-yard season. Red usually started but went to the sideline after a few token runs.

Finally, people have long underrated the record keeping of 1934. The weekly published rushing leaders (David has found six examples) are consistent with what we know about Beattie's season. The season's end total (107 att., 1,052 yds) was later adjusted downward, indicating someone took the time and effort to go back and check the official game accounts with care.

So – did he do it?

David Neft, canny researcher that he is, will not go out on a limb and say absolutely yes. He will say instead something like "in so far as we know there is no information available to contradict Feathers' published record."

Golly, that sounds an awful lot like yes to me.

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| DATE | OPP. | SCORE | TEAM RUSHING | | | FEATHERS' RUSHING | | | TOTAL IN WEEKLY PUBLISHED NFL LEADERS | | OTHER FEATHERS' STATISTICS PASSING | | | | | RECEIVING | | | PUNT'G | | PUNT RETURNS | | | | | |
|-----------------|------|-------|--------------|-----|----|-------------------|------|----|---------------------------------------|------|------------------------------------|----|-----|----|----|-----------|-----|-----|--------|------|--------------|-----|----|-----|----|---|
| | | | Att | Yds | TD | Att | Yds | TD | Att | Yds | Co | At | Yds | TD | In | No | Yds | TD | No | Yds | No | Yds | TD | | | |
| S-23 | G.B. | 24-10 | 43 | 183 | 2 | 7 | 42 | 0 | - | - | 1 | 1 | 18 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 40 | 0 | 5 | 212 | 3 | 55 | 0 | | | |
| S-30 | Cin. | 21- 3 | | 270 | 3 | (5 | 99 | 1) | - | - | | | | | | 0 | | | (1 | 5) | | | | | | |
| O- 7 | Bkn. | 21- 7 | | | 3 | (3 | 38 | 1) | - | - | | | | | | 1 | 53 | 0 | | | | | | | | |
| O-10 | Pit. | 28- 0 | 46 | 247 | 2 | (1 | 82 | 1) | 32 | 413 | | | | | | 0 | | | | | | | | | | |
| O-14 | ChiC | 20- 0 | | 209 | 1 | 15 | 98 | 1 | 47 | 511 | | | | | | 0 | | | (2 | 105) | | | | | | |
| O-21 | Cin. | 41- 7 | | 223 | 3 | 7 | 114 | 2 | | | | | | | 0 | | | | | (2 | 71 | 0) | | | | |
| O-28 | G.B. | 27-14 | 57 | 358 | 1 | 18 | 158 | 1 | | | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 18 | 1 | 3 | 104 | 0 | | | | | |
| N- 4 | N.Y. | 27- 7 | | 185 | 1 | 8 | 45 | 0 | 77 | 835 | (1 | 1 | 8 | 1 | 0) | 0 | | | | (2 | 33 | 0) | | | | |
| N-11 | Bos. | 21- 0 | | 225 | 1 | 11 | 80 | 0 | 88 | 915 | | | | | | 1 | 42 | 0 | | (2 | 34 | 0) | | | | |
| N-18 | N.Y. | 10- 9 | | 185 | 1 | 7 | 74 | 1 | | | | | | | 0 | | | (3 | 96) | (1 | 13 | 0) | | | | |
| N-25 | ChiC | 17- 6 | | | | 3 | 22 | 0 | 107 | 1052 | | | | | 0 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| N-29 | Det. | 19-16 | | 116 | 0 | | | | 107 | 1052 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| D- 2 | Det. | 10- 7 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Final Published | | | | | | 101 | 1004 | 8 | | | 4 | 12 | 41 | 1 | 1 | 5 | 153 | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| Complete Games | | | | 8g | 76 | 633 | 5 | | | 2g | 1 | 2 | 18 | 0 | 1 | 11g | 5 | 153 | 1 | 2g | 8 | 316 | 2g | 3 | 55 | 0 |
| Inc. Games | | | | 3g | 9 | 219 | 3 | | | 9g | 1 | 1 | 8 | 1 | 0 | | | | 9g | 6 | 206 | 9g | 7 | 151 | | |

Partial statistics for incomplete games are given in parentheses ().