PAPA BEAR'S SEASON

By Bob Carroll

1963 was George Halas' year. The 68-year-old Papa Bear was the last still active of those intrepid pioneers who sat on running boards in a Canton, Ohio, auto showroom in 1920 and designed the National Football League out of hope and faith. Back then, he and a very few others had held the absurd belief that professional football might become more than a small town, pass-the-hat, ugly stepchild of college football -- perhaps might someday even rival professional baseball for the spectator's begrudged and grungy dollar. In 1963, a lot of people were saying ol' George had been right all along.

In November, U.S. News & World Report said, "One of the strongest American business booms now under way is that in pro football." The NFL had taken 33 years -- until 1952 -- to reach two million in attendance. Six years later, the league passed three million. In 1962, the four million barrier was shattered. U.S. News predicted another increase in 1963, a prediction that proved accurate when attendance finished up nearly 10 percent to 4,163,643.

As for competing with baseball as the new National Pastime, the article pointed out that the average NFL crowd was over 42,000 and that baseball drew five times as many people over a full season. But baseball played 16 times as many games and sold its tickets for one-third the price. In Cleveland, the baseball Indians drew 562,000 over an 81-game home schedule; the Browns in seven home games plus a pre-season exhibition game topped them with 570,648.

The league's growing popularity was underlined by season ticket sales. The Giants sold only 17,000 season tickets in 1956 when they won the league championship. Seven years later they had to cut off sales at 51,000 to save a few seats for single game customers. The only way to get a season ticket in Green Bay, the league's smallest city, was to wait for someone to die and will you one.

Not only were the stands packed, but Sunday afternoon found millions of fans in front of their TV sets. Television revenue for the NFL had jumped from a $50,000 deal for the whole league in 1951 to a contract that paid each team $325,000 in 1963.

Operating costs were up, of course, particularly salaries. Cleveland's Jim Brown was the highest-paid at $45,000, almost twice the biggest paycheck in the mid-1950's. Nevertheless, with money flowing in and the future bright, U.S. News insisted, "Even most of the losers win at the National League box office."

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Any fan still waffling whether to peg pro football as a business or a sport got his answer on Sunday, November 24, 1963. While the rest of the nation observed a stunned day of mourning for President Kennedy slain in Dallas only two days before, the National Football League conducted business almost as usual. Obligatory moments of silence were observed and halftime entertainments and marching bands were cut, but otherwise the games continued. The product was sold.

And the fans bought it.

Although crowds were described as "subdued and listless" in the early quarters, they were nonetheless typical in numbers. Hundreds of telephone protests were handled by team offices Sunday morning, but attendance at seven NFL games Sunday afternoon wasn't noticeably down. In Milwaukee, Green Bay had its normal sellout of 45,905 for an easy victory over hapless San Francisco. The Rams and Colts drew 48,555 in Los Angeles -- about what had been expected -- for a game that meant nothing in the standings. Only 4,000 fewer Minnesotans than the norm showed up to watch the Vikings outduel the Lions, 34-31. The Browns had been slumping and the Cowboys were confirmed losers, but 55,096 loyal Clevelanders trooped into Municipal Stadium.

In Philadelphia, Mayor James H. J. Tate tried unsuccessfully to have the Eagles-Redskins game postponed, and Eagle owner Frank McNamee refused to attend. But a capacity crowd of 60,671 saw two tailenders play.

Across the state before 36,465 fans, the Steelers and Bears tied 17-17 -- a result that helped both clubs. After the game, Chicago's Mike Ditka, whose bull-like run stretched a short pass into a 63-yard gain to set up the tying field goal, expressed the mood of most players: "I think everyone felt something. Not having known the man, however, I think he would have not wanted it postponed. So we go out on the field, and it's business to us, and after the first kickoff all you think about is the Steelers."

Those who supported the NFL's games-as-usual policy generally started with the premise that John Kennedy had been an avid sports fan and built to a conclusion involving insight into his supposed wishes for the National Football League. For the most part, those who found distasteful the idea of "playing" in the face of national tragedy probably wouldn't have spent their Sunday afternoon near a football anyway.

The New York Giants offered refunds to all ticket-holders who chose to express their sense of loss by staying home, but the team announced it had received no such requests before the final gun. 60,800 turned out at Yankee Stadium to watch the Giants and Cardinals.

In attendance was NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle, the man who'd made the decision to play the games. Twenty-seven years later as he left office, Rozelle called his decision to play on that day the greatest regret of his years as Commissioner, but on that November day in '63 he said, "I discussed it with some owners and then decided. I did not feel it was disrespectful to the memory of our late President that the games were played. I went to church this morning and paid my respects, and I'm sure so did most of the people who came to Yankee Stadium."

Several Monday morning game accounts described the players as "sleep-walking" or otherwise seeming unable to marshal full intensity. "Big men were playing a boy's sport at the wrong time," Arthur Daley of the New York Times, wrote. He compared the ambience at Yankee Stadium to that at the Polo Grounds on December 7, 1941. But New York quarterback Y. A. Tittle said he had no trouble getting up for the game. "When all those guys pile on you, you don't have time to think of anything else."

Daley pinpointed the exact moment when the New York crowd became caught up in the excitement of the game as six minutes into the second quarter. That was the first time Tittle had to signal for silence. "From that point on," Daley wrote, "the fans bubbled as noisily as usual. They were caught up by the growing excitement, and thoughts of their grief were swept aside. If that be an indictment, it would take a learned psychologist to offer interpretation."

Lay psychologists emerged on both sides of the issue. The pro pros extolled the merits of a few hours free from mental anguish. The antis praised the catharsis of giving vent to grief. All in all, Daley spoke for fans and writers across the country: "It was not a satisfying afternoon. Under the circumstances, how could it be?"

Satisfactory or not, the afternoon cost the NFL next to nothing in its growing prestige. The American Footlall League, which respectfully pushed its schedule back a week, received only a few kind words for the gesture. If anything, the tacit admission that AFL games weren't more important than a Presidential assassination only underlined the young league's second-class status. Apparently the NFL-rival succeeded only in lengthening its championship race. The NFL was on a roll and virtually immune to PR disaster.

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The year had kicked off with an ugly situation in Cleveland. It's a truism that every coach is hired to be fired, but it had never happened to Paul Brown. In a triumphant career that stretched from Ohio high school championships at Massillon, through a number one ranking at Ohio State, wartime wins with the Great Lakes Training Center team, and an unprecedented string of titles with the Cleveland Browns, the dapper little coach had seemed exempt from failure. To most fans he WAS the Cleveland Browns. Why, the team had even been named after him!

But on January 9, the earth stood still. Cleveland owner Art Modell, refusing to use the word "fired," announced that he was "removing" Brown from his duties as coach and general manager. Brown was a minority stockholder and his contract had six more years to run at a reported $75,000 per. Modell said Brown was "agreeable" to remaining as vice president and would perform unspecified "other duties" to fulfill his contract. In effect, the Cleveland owner was kicking his employee upstairs to an empty attic. For most NFL fans, it was the first they heard - - or at least noted -- that anyone other than Paul Brown had the final say on anything in Cleveland Brownsville.

How could such a thing happen? All Modell would say was, "The only reason I will give for the change is that I believe it will serve the best interests of the Cleveland Browns."

From the time he'd organized the Browns for their first season in the All-America Football Conference in 1946, Paul Brown had made every important decision from players and plays to uniform design. His cool, aloof manner -- some would say arrogant -- had made him few friends, but his dictatorial control had won football games. He'd so dominated the AAFC through four straight championships that the league died for lack of competition -- "Snow Brown and the Seven Dwarfs." In 1950, Brown and the Browns moved smoothly into the NFL and into another championship. Two more league crowns and six more division titles followed, but none since 1957.

Brown had been football's most innovative coach in the post- World War II period, pioneering a new passing game, inaugurating detailed study of films, concentrating his offense by calling all plays from the sideline and communicating them to his quarterback with "messenger" guards. But five years without a championship had produced whispers that "the game has passed him by." The most damning criticism was that Brown's offense was predictable. Significantly, some of the grumbles came from Cleveland players chafing under Brown's totalitarian regime.

"It's no good to play under a feeling of tension, of suppression of the individual," Jim Brown told a reporter. "I like to have freedom of expression."

The Browns had suffered only one losing season in their history -- way back in 1956. But their disappointing 7-6-1 mark in 1962 was cutting perilously close to .500.

Paul Brown and Modell were at odds during the 1962 season over Ernie Davis, the former Syracuse All-America halfback diagnosed as having leukemia during training camp for the '62 College All-Star Game. The young star's relationship with Modell had grown beyond the normal owner-player association. When his disease had gone into remission in October, Modell wanted to activate Davis. He knew that Ernie would never play in a game, but he thought that simply practicing with the squad would help him. Brown, despite his chilly reputation, was never unsympathetic to Davis' situation. But realistically, he felt he needed to be able to use every player on his 36-man roster to win. Brown won that battle, but in January he lost the war.

His abrupt dismissal made Brown, perhaps for the only time in his career, a popular figure with sportswriters, as Modell was generally cast as the villain of the piece. In truth, it was no more than a clash of two strong-willed men over which would have the final word. In such disputes, sympathy traditionally goes to the coach, but the smart money rides on the owner. In the long view, Modell did what was best for Modell, probably what was best for the Cleveland Browns, and, ironically, ultimately what was best for Paul Brown.

On May 18, a little over five months after Brown had been fired, Ernie Davis died in Cleveland's Lakeside Hospital.

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Only a week before Ernie Davis died, the football world was rocked by another death. In Baltimore, fun-loving Gene "Big Daddy" Lipscomb, the legendary 290-pound defensive tackle, died fron a drug overdose. To the average football fan in 1963 America, drugs were something that happened only in sleazy back alleys to the dregs of society. Never to star athletes.

Worse, "Big Daddy" wasn't just any star. His size and skill made him an All-Pro with the championship Baltimore Colts teams of 1958-59 and he was still a force at 34 with the Pittsburgh Steelers. His size and sense of humor made him popular with fans. TV announcers could hardly get through one of Lipscomb's games without quoting his self-professed method of tackling: "I just gather 'em all up and peel 'em off one by one 'til I find the one with the ball."

To this day, Lipscomb's friends energetically deny his overdose was self-induced. They insist he was clean, indeed hated needles of any kind, and theorize that he was the victim of a mugging. The chief medical examiner cited a half dozen needle marks on "Big Daddy's" arm and closed the case. Whatever the truth behind the tragedy, fans were shocked by the juxtoposition of football and drugs.

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They were still trying to cope with football and gambling.

Pro football lives in mortal fear of a fix scandal. Any suggestion that a game might not be played on the up and up sends shock waves and nightmares of the whole ediface tumbling into the same category as pro wrestling. Fans in the stands and in front of TV's must believe the big hits on a football field are real collisions of bone, muscle, and plastic instead of the spectacular tumbling exhibitions of the mat world. Happily, the NFL had emulated Caesar's wife since 1946 (when two players were suspended for not reporting a bribe offer). But late in 1962 odious rumors began swirling.

San Francisco offensive tackle Bob St. Clair was said to be somehow keeping time with mob figures. Chicago Bears fullback Rick Casares was said to be keeping bad company. And Colts owner Carroll Rosenblum was suspected of placing bets. In early January, news leaked to the press that George Halas had asked the league to look into some things he'd heard involving "a member of a Midwestern team."

On the afternoon of April 17, Commissioner Rozelle announced he had suspended indefinitely two of the NFL's greatest stars -- "Golden Boy" Paul Hornung of Green Bay and "Bad Boy" Alex Karras of Detroit -- for betting on games. Both were consistent All- Pros and Hornung had been MVP in 1961.

The spectre of "fix" leaped to most minds, but Rozelle tried to allay that by introducing his report with three general conclusions: "There is no evidence that any NFL player has given less than his best in playing any game. There is no evidence that any player has ever bet against his own team. There is no evidence that any NFL player has sold information to gamblers."

He also set the record straight on St. Clair, who had done nothing more than invest (along with many other innocents) in a legal oil venture seven years earlier. It was subsequently learned that some of the promoters had mob connections but St. Clair had done nothing wrong. Unless you count his losing $7,000 on the deal. The league's investigation also cleared Casares and Rosenblum.

What then had the miscreants Honung and Karras done? They'd bet on their own teams to win and on teams in games they were not involved in themselves. To many fans that didn't sound so bad. Merely putting their money where their muscles were, right?

Analysts were quick to point out the jeopardy of a player putting himself in thrall to gamblers, the possiblities for leaks of "inside" information, and even the fact that a player's pattern of bets might tip interested parties to the likely outcome of a game. What would gamblers make of a situation wherein a player who'd bet on his team all season <u>didn't</u> bet on a game? And since most bets were made on point spreads, might a kicker like Hornung try for a field goal to widen a lead when running out the clock would be better strategy? Of course, Hornung didn't make the decisions as to when the Packers would or would not try for field goals, but there was always the danger ...

In Detroit, Alex Karras didn't see any danger at all and threatened to bring suit against the NFL. "I haven't done anything that I'm ashamed of and I am not guilty of anything," he said. Surprisingly, it had been Karras' own admission that he bet on games during a TV interview that had helped fuel the NFL's investigation.

According to Rozelle, Karras met "individuals described by Detroit police as `known hoodlums' through a business associate. He continued associating with these individuals after learning of their backgrounds and habits." The NFL investigation had found no evidence of criminal wrongdoing on Karras' part, but his choice of friends constituted a "guilt by association" cloud that enveloped much of the Detroit team.

Rozelle cited a report in which Karras, guard John Gordy, end Darris McCord, and linebacker Wayne Walker supposedly traveled in the company of "known hoodlums." It turned out that Walker and McCord weren't involved at all and the "traveling" consisted of Karras and Gordy returning from a 1962 pre-season game in Cleveland on a bus chartered by some of the bad guys. Gordy apparently had no more than a nodding acquaintance with his hosts.

When Lions coach George Wilson received a police report on the affair, he ignored it, possibly because he knew that some of it was erroneous. Nevertheless, his failure to forward the report to the league office, as well as a certain laxness in passing out sideline passes, cost the Lions a $4,000 fine. "In a case like this," Rozelle explained, "I hold the club responsible for the action of its employees."

Five other Detroit players were fined $2,000 each for making $50 bets on the '62 championship game between the Packers and Giants. Gordy, Walker, defensive back Gary Lowe, end Sam Williams, and all-pro linebacker Joe Schmidt had assembled at the Florida home of one of Karras' buddies to watch the game on TV and placed bets through the friend during the contest in what was, according to Rozelle, "basically a group action ... of extremely rash judgment but one abnormal for each (player)." The fines were the maximum possible under the league constitution. They look paltry by today's standards but represented a sizable chunk of a player's salary in 1963.

Karras, of course, would lose all his 1963 paychecks at least. The 250-pound defensive star had made "at least six significant bets" on NFL games since entering the league in 1958. Four of them had been for $50. One, his Florida party bet, had been for $100 as had an earlier bet on the Lions against Green Bay during the past season.

Hornung, one of the league's most visible players, was the biggest catch of all. Between 1959 and 1961, the former Heisman Trophy winner had regularly placed bets -- some up to $500 -- on college and pro games through an unnamed West Coast businessman. Rozelle specifically noted that the businessman was a personal bettor, not a bookmaker. Hornung, he said, had generally broken even but one year won $1,500.

Unlike Karras, Hornung readily and contritely admitted his error.

When asked if Hornung's betting had anything to do with his limited use by the Packers in 1962, Rozelle explained any absences by Hornung had been because of a knee injury. "Green Bay never was advised not to play Hornung," he said. That Green Bay games were often left off the betting line in some cities was due to "uncertainty about Hornung's condition and also the club is a team that runs up 49-0 scores."

In truth, the Packers had beaten both the Bears and Eagles by exactly that score in 1962.

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It was easy to blame Hornung's suspension when the Packers failed to win the NFL's Western Division title for the first time in four years. But the world of Might-Have-Been is populated by If-Only's. Favored by everyone and his grandmother to promenade to another championship, the Packers lost only two games in 1963. That was enough.

The Bears opened the season at Green Bay with an astonishing 10-3 win over the Packers. "We both played lousy," Vince Lombardi said, "only we played lousier." For once the Packer coach was mistaken. As the season gained momentum it became obvious that the Bears' victory in the opener was no fluke. Admittedly quarterback Billy Wade's nickle-and-dime passing attack lacked flair and the running game was out of the Woody Hayes school -- three yards and a pile of grunts. As victories piled up, the offense earned the phrase not yet coined: "Winning ugly." But when the other guys had the ball, the Bears became a Thing of beauty. This Chicago team had a DEE-fense!

Even in losing years, Chicago had been rough. Guys like huge defensive end Doug Atkins and gritty linebacker Bill George could make opponents pay for yardage by the bruise. But other teams found ways to avoid the Bruins predictable all-out blitz. By the '60s, what had worked so lethaly a decade before only lent fuel to a rising complaint in Chicago that football had passed George Halas by. Perhaps he'd caught the same bug that had struck down Paul Brown, but Halas didn't have to worry about an impatient boss. He owned the Bears himself.

Halas handed assistant coach George Allen more control of the defense. Though Allen would later win fame as "The-Future- Is-Now"-Man, in the early '60s he saw the Bears' future as the zone defense. In 1962, Allen began assembling and drilling. The results were spotty at first, but Chicago pitched three shutouts in their nine wins. In '63, Allen's men were ready. Only the front four led by Atkins crashed in all the time. The rest of the defenders harried rival quarterbacks with rugged unpredictability. The best linebacking trio in the league -- George flanked by Larry Morris and Joe Fortunato -- might blitz, might stay put, or might even drop off to cover a receiver. Given the extra help, the secondary of Richie Petitbon, Rosey Taylor, Bennie McRae, and Dave Whitsell turned into accomplished pass thieves.

The Bears intercepted 36 enemy tosses and recovered 18 fumbles. Meanwhile, the play-it-safe offense did its darndest not to screw things up. They turned the football over a stingy 25 times for a golden, plus-

29 ratio. It was a simple formula, but good for eight wins in the first nine games. Only an incredibly uncharacteristic performance at San Francisco in week six marred the record.

Still, the dream was expected to evaporate on November 17 when the gory, storied, and equally eight-victoried Packers came to town. Surely, Green Bay wouldn't "play lousy" this time.

The Bears proved that everybody played lousy against the Chicago defense. Hornung's replacement, Tom Moore, managed to rush for 50 yards, but thousand-yard-man Jim Taylor got a mere 23. And when Green Bay passed, Bear defenders had a field day, picking off five errant aerials. Chicago's 26-7 win put them firmly in the lead for the division title.

Then they almost blew it. They needed Ditka's spectacular run with a short pass to tie the Steelers, 17-17, on the day most of the country mourned President Kennedy. The next week, they let the Vikings tie them by the same score. Fortunately for the Bears, ties didn't count in the standings. Two wins in the last two weeks gave them an 11-1-2 mark to edge out the Packers at 11- 2-1. The defense held season opponents to 144 points -- the lowest team total since 1950 when teams played two fewer games.

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If the Bears' defense was the Immovable Object, the New York Giants' offense was the Irresistible Force. Pro football's once dominant defense of Andy Robustelli, Sam Huff and company had slipped a tad, but a souped up pass attack more than made up for any loss. Riding the 37-year-old arm of Y.A. Tittle and the receiving of Del Shofner, Frank Gifford and Joe Morrison, the Giants amassed 440 points. Yat threw a then-record 36 touchdown passes.

The Cleveland Browns, under new coach Blanton Collier, won their first six games before being gunned down by the Giants, 33- 6, in Cleveland. After that it was nip and tuck until Detroit put the Browns out for good in the season's next-to-last game. Freed of the constraints of Paul Brown's dictatorial system, megaback Jim Brown enjoyed his finest season. Collier introduced option blocking along the offensive line. The blockers could take their men in or out, whichever worked, and Brown chose the available hole. "Blanton gives us the opportunity to play instinctive ball," Brown said. By mid-season, he had over a thousand yards, and his 1,863 for the year made him the first pro back to rush for a mile.

On the day President Kennedy was assassinated, a former New York Giants placekicker teaching junior high school in Florida got one of his first chances in front of a microphone. When the school principal was too upset to make the P.A. announcement, Pat Summerall stepped in.

New York would have had a smoother road to the Eastern Division title had it not been for those pesky ties. Even though they went into the season finale with a 10-3 record, they could still be cut off at the pass by a loss to the 7-3-3 Steelers, ties being non-games as far as winning percentage was concerned. On paper, Pittsburgh didn't impress, but they played sometimes inspired football to give the Steel City hope for its first ever division title. In the second game of the season they pasted a 31-0 loss on the Giants.

For thirteen games, journeyman quarterback Ed Brown had his best season. Unfortunately, he had one of the worst games of his career in the fourteenth, missing some of his receivers by as much as ten feet. Tittle had no such problem as New York ended Pittsburgh's dream 33-17. In the third quarter, the Steelers trailed only 16-10 and seemed to be gaining momentum, but Gifford made a spectacular one-handed catch to keep a Giants drive alive and New York took back the initiative. "I was only trying to bat it up in the air," Gifford said, "but it stuck in my hand." Moments later, New York scored another touchdown and the game was as good as over.

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Two weeks later in Chicago, the slightly-favored Giants made their third straight championship game appearance and sixth in eight years. Despite an eleven degree temperature, a crowd of 45,801 packed Wrigley Field.

New York got a break early when the Bears did just what they'd avoided all season. Bear quarterback Billy Wade fumbled at his own 41 and defensive back Erich Barnes recovered for the Giants. From there, New York showed little regard for the Chicago defense, moving smoothly down the field. Tittle mixed running plays with an 11-yard toss to Morrison to get to the 16. Then Gifford evaded Bennie McRae in

the end zone to take Tittle's TD throw. On the play, the Bears buried Tittle under a just-too- late rush, slightly injuring his left knee. The score stood 7-0 with 7:22 of the first quarter gone.

A few moments later, the Giants were knocking on the door again, but all-pro Del Shofner dropped a Tittle pass in the end zone. What seemed like a momentary reprieve became a turning point for the Bears when Larry Morris picked off a screen pass and lumbered toward the New York goal line.

"For the first 34 yards I was praying no one would tackle me," Morris said. "Then I was praying someone would. I was getting pooped real quickly." New York guard Darrell Dess knocked him down at the five. On first down Wade handed off to halfback Ronnie Bull who blasted to the two. Then Wade sneaked the remaining distance for the tying touchdown.

In the second quarter, Tittle and the Giants drove to the three before the Bears dug in and stopped them. Don Chandler set up shop at the 13 and booted a field goal to make the score 10-7. After the kickoff, the Giants stopped the Bears again and got another drive going themselves. They seemed about to take control of the game.

Tittle moved his team to a first down on the Chicago 32. Then he flipped a little sideline toss to Gifford who went out of bounds at the 29. That little play turned out to be the biggest of the game. Back at the 40, Tittle lay on the ground in agony. Larry Morris had brushed past two blockers and smashed into him just as he threw.

"His left knee was rigidly set on the ground," Morris explained after the game, "and I slammed him just at the knee. I guess that's what hurt him."

Tittle had a different explanation: "I fell over my own body after that pass. I had slipped going back to pass and just fell badly."

Regardless of the details, Tittle limped off with torn ligaments in his left knee. Under his replacement, young Glynn Griffing, the Giants' drive petered out, ending in a missed field goal.

After two injections to kill the pain, Tittle hobbled back in for the second half, but he couldn't plant his left leg and his throws lacked their normal snap. Late in the third quarter, Bears defensive end Ed O'Bradovich moved in front of a soft Tittle screen pass intended for Morrison at the 24. The 6'3", 255-pound O'Bradovich thundered to the 14 before a host of Giants pulled him down.

It took the Bears five plays to negotiate the fourteen yards to a touchdown, but when Wade sneaked over from the one behind center Mike Pyle, Chicago went in front for the first time.

More than seventeen minutes remained in the game, but Tittle was on one leg. Gallantly he rallied his troops, but he couldn't put his weight into his desperate passes and they floated invitingly. Twice the Bears intercepted him in the end zone, the last time with only ten seconds left.

Although Tittle's game game-legged performance was admired, his five interceptions crippled New York's offense and led to both Chicago touchdowns. He completed only 11 of 29 passes for 147 yards. Chicago's Wade was even worse -- 10 of 28 for 138 yards -- but he avoided any interceptions and scored both Bears touchdowns on sneaks.

With his sixth league title in hand, George Halas quieted the critics who'd said he was over the hill, at least for a while. In a sense, the Bears' victory was a vote for good, old- fashioned, rock 'em-sock 'em football, as his Immovable Object defense proved superior to the Giants' Irresistible Force -- at least when the Force was hobbled on one leg.