

JOHN ALEXANDER: PRO FOOTBALL PIONEER

By Jim Campbell

John Alexander, though he never achieved the noteriety of Charles Lindbergh or Alexander Graham Bell, was not only the first man to do a very significant thing, but was later the last link with a bygone era.

Alexander was the first football player to play the game in a manner that parallels today's outside linebacker position and was the last remaining pre-NFL professional football player.

To say that John Alexander grew up in the New York City area -- he was born there on July 4, 1896 -- is somewhat understating it. In a time when terms such as "six-footer" and "two-hundred-pounder" were said with awe, Alexander reached his full size of 6-4, 245 shortly after graduating from Newark, New Jersey's, South Side High School.

Alexander worked in his diamond-merchant father's jewelry business before enlisting in the United States Army and helping General John J. (Black Jack) Pershing quell Pancho Villa and his banditos along the Mexican border in 1916.

Shortly after being discharged, Alexander found himself in the Army again -- this time as an officer -- during the First World War.

With two honorable discharges to his credit, Alexander enrolled at nearby Rutgers University. It was there in 1919 that he came under the tutelage of head coach G. Foster Sanford. As he was wherever he had played, Alexander was a tackle at Rutgers. The Scarlet Knights were 5-3 that year, winning from such diverse opponets as Ursinus, North Carolina, and Northwestern, while being defeated by equally diverse opponent such as Lehigh, Syracuse, and West Virginia.

It was at Rutgers that Alexander came in contact with the legendary All-America end Paul Robeson, who later became a celebrated, if somewhat controversial, singer, actor, and political activist.

Robeson was an assistant coach at Rutgers after being an All- America in both 1917 and 1918. As line coach he worked directly with Alexander and realized the large, rough-hewn Jewish youngster had great potential. According to Alexander it was Robeson's suggestion that led to Alexander experimenting with a new style of defense, and, thus, the outside linebacker-type position.

"Robby said, 'I want you to re-define the tackle position. Play it as you see fit. Don't be concerned with the way others play it. Don't worry what others tell you.'"

Robeson further added to Alexander's football education by taking him to Ohio with him to play pro football.

Alexander recalls, "Pro football had moved from where it was first born, Western Pennsylvania, to Ohio by then. Jim Thorpe was already a legend with the Canton Bulldogs. Ohio cities and others in the Midwest were where football was being played on Sundays for money. Robby and I went to Massillon. That's a fairly small city near Canton, but one that took its football seriously, and one that held its own against all comers.

"In 1919, there was no National Football League. There was no league, period. Oh, all the stronger teams always seemed to play one another, but there was no formal league before 1920.

"I'll tell you, that 1919 Massillon Tigers team was something. Like all the pro teams, there were a few college boys -- men who had played college football and graduated -- mixed in with just good-sized,

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rough customers from the area who hadn't played college ball. And there was another type of college boy -- I guess you could say I was in that category. Men who were still in college. 'Ringers,' I guess you'd call them. Some played under assumed names. Others didn't even bother changing their names. I didn't. Hell, I was a tackle. Who'd ever heard of me?

"Something else made that 1919 Tiger team memorable. Like Robby, other college coaches came to Massillon to play. You should have seen them. Knute Rockne was just at the beginning of his career at Notre Dame. He came in on Sundays. Of course, Rock didn't bother changing his name. He was too famous even then to have been able to have gotten away with it. Greasy Neale was another one. Sometimes he'd change his name, sometimes he wouldn't.

"The rest of the roster was like a who's who of college coaching. Mind you, not all were famous then, but there were a lot of 1919 Massillon Tigers who went on to become famous college coaches. Gus Dorais was one. So was Bob Higgins. Lou Little played. Jock Sutherland and Tiny Thornhill were two more. And Lud Wray played with us.

"We came close to winning the championship. It wasn't a cut and dried thing in those days. There was no formal or uniform schedule. You just played the best, and at the end of the season there were claims and counter-claims and then a showdown game was usually arranged. We had a game just like that with Canton. They were tough. Thorpe was in his prime. We lost to Canton for what was the professional championship of the United States by a three-nothing score. Know how they beat us? Thorpe kicked a field goal for the only score of the game. He was some football player, that Jim Thorpe."

The next year, 1920, there really was a formal league. On a steamy Friday evening in the Hupmobile showroom of Ralph Hay in Canton, September 17, 1920, a group of hardy sportsmen -- George Halas was one of them -- formally drew up organization papers for the American Professional Football Association. The name would be changed to National Football League for the 1922 season.

John Alexander was not among the charter members of the NFL. He played football for money elsewhere.

"What you have to recall is that the National Football League was no big deal then. It was very young. The teams were located mainly in the Midwest -- Canton, Akron, Dayton, Toledo, Muncie (Indiana), Rock Island (Illinois), and places like that. It wasn't the only place you could pick up a few dollars for playing a game of football. There were other teams in other places."

Not all the strong professional teams in America were in the NFL. And by checking the records of some of the very early NFL teams, you'll see that not all NFL teams were strong.

"In 1920 and 1921," continues Alexander, "I played on non-league teams. Teams that certainly were on a par with the NFL teams of the day, but not members of the league. I would spend my Sundays in the Anthracite Coal Region of Pennsylvania or in South Jersey (New Jersey) playing for Gilberton, Coaldale, or Shenandoah (Pennsylvania teams), or Millville, Vineland, or the Melrose A.C. (Athletic Club) of Atlantic City (New Jersey teams).

"The Sunday games would also feature NFL players. Since Pennsylvania had "blue laws" -- rules that prohibited professional sports on Sundays -- the Frankford Yellow Jackets of the NFL could not play home games on Sunday. Sometimes they would hop on trains after playing in Philadelphia on Saturday and go to another out-of-state NFL city for a Sunday game, but a lot of the time a few of their star players would come down to South Jersey and play on one of those teams -- it was quite common.

"Atlantic City had two teams at times -- the Melrose A.C. and the Tornadoes. Melrose played at a dog racing track -- Atlantic Park -- which could barely handle a football field set up in the track's infield.

"Well, one time in about 1927 they were playing a Coal Region team -- Coaldale, I'm pretty sure it was -- and a call by an official got them so upset that they just walked off the field and wouldn't continue the game. Well, I want to tell you, there was a near-riot. I say near-riot, because the real riot was the next week. But that's getting ahead of things. Anyway, the Coal Region boys were so mad they just stormed

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out of the place. Forget it. That's it. The announcer -- there were no p.a. (public address) systems then, just a man with a megaphone who marched up and down the sidelines calling out what down it was and things like that -- told the crowd, which was getting a little restless, that next week all those who bought tickets to this week's game would be admitted free. They quieted the crowd -- for the time being.

"Next week, the people who paid their way in to the game that was called off when the team left the field came to the stadium expecting to get in free -- like they were told. What the announcer with the megaphone had forgotten to say was 'hold on to your ticket stubs.' When they saw a sign saying that admission was by 'ticket purchase only', they revolted. They stormed the wooden gates and just poured into the stadium. Once in, they scattered to the four winds. I doubt that more than a handful were caught."

It was time for Alexander to try his hand with an NFL team in 1922. Along with his old Rutgers cohort, Paul Robeson, he went West to play for the Milwaukee Badgers. The Badgers were quite a pioneering team.

"We didn't make such a big deal of it at the time," Alexander says, "but we had two of the first Negro players in the NFL -- Robby and Fritz Pollard. And I was Jewish. Pollard was even our coach. We had something the NFL is still looking for today -- a black head coach, Pollard.

"Like I was saying, nobody made a big deal out of it. I mean -- about Robby and Fritz being black. First of all, Robby was too big, and too good to mess around with. Pollard was a little different. He was small, only about 145 pounds. The other team would try to be a little rough with him in the beginning. You know, pile on after he was down. Maybe use a fist or an elbow. But I got to laugh even now when I think of Pollard. After he'd be tackled, once he'd be downed, he'd quickly turn over on his back and just kick his feet up in the air to keep these big bruisers from jumping on him. He looked like a man laying down peddling a bicycle. We had a few other players on that team who'd go on to make a name for themselves -- Bo McMillan and Jimmy

Conzelman. Bo was a quarterback and so was Conzelman. Bo went on to coach Indiana University in the 1930s and 1940s and later in the NFL. Conzelman won the NFL title in 1928 with the Providence Steam Roller and again with the Chicago Cardinals in 1947.

"On the whole, though, once you proved you could play football, and I like to think that Pollard, Robeson, and I did that, we didn't hear that much about being black or being a Jew. You ignored the early taunts, played a little harder, and let things take care of themselves."

The 1922 Milwaukee Badgers weren't a very good team. They only finished with a 2-4-3 record, but it was at Milwaukee that John Alexander made his mark, made a move that would change the face of pro football -- if not immediately, then eventually.

Alexander recalls, "It was the first of October in '22. We were playing the Chicago Cardinals with Paddy Driscoll, who would later be inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. It was really a hot day, and the uniforms in those days were awful. They were heavy canvas or duck pants, wool jerseys that itched bad enough when you first put them on and got much worse as you sweat and they got tighter and wetter.

"Driscoll kicked a 30-yard field goal -- and dropkick, no less -- after about ten minutes of play. That was the only scoring. We lost 3-0. But it was in this game that I remembered what Robeson had told me about 're-defining' the tackle position. Oh, I'd experiment a bit. I'd change where I lined up a little. Nothing drastic. Just widen the space between me and the end. Or sometimes shift closer to the center. But for some reason on this very warm and humid day. I decided to do something a little different, maybe a lot different.

"You see, in those days, linemen would just put their heads down and charge straight ahead. The game was almost a tug-of-war in those days, without a rope. The teams were really bunched up, and nearly every play was a running play, although the forward pass was certainly legal.

"We got down 3-0 early, as I said, and I wanted to get us back in the ball game, if I could. So here's what I decided to do about it. Remembering what Robby said, I left my normal tackle position on defense. I

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took a step back off the line, which would have been pretty radical itself back then, but I went another couple of steps farther. I left my regular tackle 'hole', too. I moved outside of our defensive end, a chap named Al Garrett. He was a nice sized end from Rutgers and we had played together at Massillon in 1919. What you have to remember is this: there was little scouting in those days and it goes without saying that there was no film-study like they have now. So, nobody really knew exactly what it was that I was doing while I was doing it. Certainly no one called me an outside linebacker at the time. They -- the other team, the Cardinals -- didn't know what I was doing. They just knew there was no tackle in the line. I was pretty effective that day, but we weren't able to come back. I did have some big plays, because what I was doing -- where I lined up -- was totally unexpected.

"I didn't think that much about it. I just felt that we linemen looked pretty stupid with our noses stuck in the ground like a filly-foo bird and our rear ends up in the air. Normally, we couldn't see a thing. That is why I moved. To get a better view. To see what was coming at me. It didn't seem like much to me at the time -- just something to do to get my team back in the game, but it definitely did lead the way for what is known today as an outside linebacker.

"I'm proud of that. I don't look at myself as someone who'll go down in history, but I do feel I made a contribution to the game. Hell, all of us who played in the 1920s, just for the love of it, contributed to the game."

While the Chicago Cardinals, and even some of Alexander's teammates may not have known what he was doing that day, nor the significance of it, his new defensive tactic did not escape the notice of an unnamed Milwaukee *Sentinel* staff writer.

The unknown scribbler had this to say about Alexander's play, after noting that he arrived by train the night before the game: "Alexander, the tall Easterner, introduced a new style of playing defensive tackle that should work wonders."

Alexander's teammates were not overwhelmed with his innovation. "I doubt if anyone other than Garrett even noticed it. Sure, I'd get a pat on the back or an 'atta boy' after a good play, but I don't think many realized what I was doing. Pollard, our coach, didn't have much to say either. And since no one told me not to, and since it was pretty effective, I just continued to play that way -- a yard back and a yard outside."

Coaching was different then. Alexander says, "The coach, during a game, was really not much of a factor in those days. There was no coaching from the sidelines -- you couldn't yell instructions, you couldn't even signal in plays. That would have been a fifteen-yard penalty if you got caught. The game was really played on the field by the eleven men you had out there. The captain was the key man on game day. He called the signals, He kept order and discipline. Not the coach. Coaches worked with us in practice and when the game came around they'd say, 'I did all I could. Now, you go out and play. I'm going to watch and enjoy the game.' There was a lot of truth to that. There were few timeouts. When there were, we didn't go to the sideline to discuss the upcoming plays. There were even rules in effect that kept the game on the field rather than on the sidelines. Did you know that if a substitute came into the game -- and there weren't many times that that happened -- an official went right into the huddle with him to make sure he didn't convey any messages from the coach to his team mates? Yep, that's right. There was a penalty if you talked to a teammate. If you said anything. Of course, after a play was run, then the substitute was allowed to talk. Some of the early referees like Bobbie Kahn, Tommy Hughitt, or (Robert) Tiny Maxwell would stay right with the waterboy when he came onto the field, or even the team doctor when he was taking care of an on- field injury. Those early officials took their responsibilities seriously."

Speaking of waterboys, Alexander uncovers this forgotten nugget. "Coaches were a suspicious and superstitious lot. They placed a great deal of emphasis on some of the most minute details. One was water. It wasn't uncommon for coaches to take along containers of water--many gallons--to away games. I guess they thought opposing teams could or would taint the water. Or that just a drink of strange water would effect a player adversely. It truly was a different game back in those rough and tumble days."

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Alexander goes on to point out other little known or long forgotten aspects of pro football's "rag-days." He says, "Coaches put a lot of emphasis on playing mistake-free football. Be conservative, and let the other team make a mistake. That's why lots of coaches would elect to kickoff if their team won the toss of the coin. They also thought that there would be 'high tension' at the very start of the game and a fumble was more likely. Better to let them have the ball and fumble than for you to have the ball and give it to them on a fumble.

"If you received a punt inside of your own 20 yard line, you usually punted it back to the other team on first down -- not even run one play. Sometimes the safetyman, who fielded the punt, would simply punt it back. That's right, he'd just catch the ball and give it a boot right back. Not even down it or return it and run a play before punting. Just punt the thing right back where it came from. That was legal. In many cases, no matter where you had the ball, unless you were real close to scoring, you punted on third down. The thinking there was that if your punter mishandled the snap or it went over his head or it was blocked, he could recover and try to kick again on fourth down. Teams also quick-kicked a lot. No matter what down, but especially on third, if their safetyman wasn't too deep you would quick-kick and try to get the ball over his head and hope for a long roll.

"There were some real kicking-duels in those days. Games were generally low scoring. The bigger the game, the tighter it was played. A lot of times the teams just punted back and forth and waited for a break.

"When it comes to runners that you remember, it seems to me, that you remember the ones that were great punt returners. I guess it's because our formations were bunched up that there really weren't that many long runs from scrimmage. But, oh, how some of those little men could field those punts on the dead run and get good yardage. Fritz Pollard was tremendous. So was Paddy Driscoll, but the best I ever saw was Jack McBride of the New York Giants. He had a real knack for it. You see, the best ones would time the catch so that they could field the punt on the dead run. I mean running at top speed, catch the ball, and be gone past the men that were coming downfield to cover the punt before they knew what went by. McBride, I think he was out of Syracuse (he was), was the best at this. I liked it when he was on my team, which wasn't often enough, and dreaded it when I had to play against him."

After playing with Milwaukee in the NFL in 1922, Alexander played the next few seasons on non-league teams, mostly in the New York Metropolitan area -- Newark, New Jersey, and Orange, New Jersey. He would not return to the NFL until 1926 when he joined the New York Giants.

Alexander got a preview of the Giants a year earlier when, playing for the non-league Newark Red Jackets, he played against his future team in a exhibition game.

"We played them in Newark," he recalls, "in Dreamland Park. We went up and down the field for nearly sixty-minutes. Nobody scored. Then Oscar Hendrian, he was known as 'Dutch,' kicked a field goal, and that was the only scoring. This was the first game the Giants played -- 1925 was their first year. They opened the NFL schedule the next week against the Providence (Rhode Island) Steam Roller.

"Heinie Benkert was the star of the game for the Giants. He was a little behind me at Rutgers, and, like me, he grew up in Newark. That didn't stop him from running us ragged, though. He was great running off tackle and around the end, but we did manage to keep him out of the end zone. If only we could have gotten a few points ourselves and kept them from getting that field goal."

The last statement by Alexander gives you some kind of in sight into the man. Tenacious, competitive, and blessed with a long memory. Here is a man 90 years of age still not completely over a 3-0 loss in an exhibition game played in 1925.

"Like I said, this was the first game the New York Football Giants -- that's what they called them then and for a lot of years, because of the New York Giants baseball team -- and I got a first hand look at some of the men I'd be playing with next year. Of course, I didn't know it at the time.

"Players from the 1925 Giants that were still there in 1926 when I came were Joe Alexander, Jack McBride, Mike Palm, Earl Potteiger, Brad Tomlin, and only a couple of others I can't recall. What you

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have to remember is that turnover was tremendous in those days. You see, football wasn't really a career then. There were relatively few of us who played any length of time. I mean eight or ten years. What you had was a bunch of young men who didn't quite have all of their football out of their systems and needed to play a year or two before they settled down and got on with their life's work. There wasn't enough money in it for it to be otherwise. We got a hundred dollars a game most of the time. And since there were no yearly contracts you had to play to get paid. If you got hurt, that was tough. Not only were you hurt, but you were out of a pay day. You had to play to get pay. I think a coach phrased it that way once.

"Well, I joined the Giants in 1926. It was their second season in the NFL. They weren't too bad. Bob Folwell was their coach. He was a Navy man. Coached at Annapolis. He only coached them in '25. When I got there in '26 he was gone. I never knew the man, but the players that were holdovers told me enough about him that I didn't want to know him. They said he was very mean, very sour. What would have been called a stern taskmaster. I guess you could get away with those tactics in college, especially at a service academy, but the Giants' players of 1925 sort of revolted. They didn't want him back.

"Joe Alexander coached when I got there. I think some of the players thought we were brothers, or at least related. We weren't. We were both Jewish, but that was it. He was a doctor by then. He played at Syracuse and studied medicine at Columbia. He played while he was in med school. That's how he got the money to go.

"The Giants started up in 1925 and they had a pretty rough go of it. But in late November, the Bears with Red Grange -- he had just signed on with them after finishing his senior season at the University of Illinois -- came into the Polo Grounds and drew a terrific crowd. About 70,000. Now, I want to tell you, that was a crowd in those days. We felt lucky if we played before 5,000. Thirty five hundred was more the norm. Anyway, that game -- Grange against the Giants -- put pro football on the map.

"Well, in 1926 Grange and his agent (Charles C.) Cash and Carry Pyle started their own league. They called it the American Football League. I have to chuckle when people talk about "the old AFL" meaning the league that was formed in 1960. It might be old to them, but it isn't to me. Anyway, there was a New York team called the Yankees. That was to be the showcase team of the whole league. Grange played for them. There was also a team in Brooklyn in the AFL called the Horsemen. They had a couple of the famous Four Horsemen backfield from Notre Dame -- Elmer Layden and Harry Stuhldreier. Newark, my old home town, had a team too. Called themselves the Bears.

"The new league didn't do too well. I don't think it was a good idea to build the league around one man, which is what they did, even if the one man was the Galloping Ghost. Grange got hurt -- a knee injury, if I recall -- and that pretty much did in the new league. They were gone the next year.

"But I have to thank them for the year I played with the Giants in '26. Century Milstead, the great Yale All-America tackle, played with the Giants in '25, but went to the new league in '26 for more money. That opened the door for me. When Tim Mara -- he owned the Giants -- offered me \$100 a game, I jumped at it. It meant I could play close to home, didn't need to travel much, and was assured of a payday each week. By that time I was tired of going over to the Pennsylvania Coal Region or down to the Jersey shore to play. You never knew exactly who your teammates were going to be. You had to learn a new system each week, 'cause half the time there was a new coach, and I was just ready for a little stability.

"We were eight and four in '26. The same record the Giants had in '25. Frankford, under Guy Chamberlin, won the championship. I knew that, but I had to look up their record -- 14-1-1. Frankford represented a section of Philadelphia. It was a neighborhood, not a suburb or an industrial town as some accounts say it was. They played quite a few years before coming into the NFL, but once they got in, they made themselves known. Two of the best tackles I ever saw played for them -- Weller and Weir. They were both from Nebraska. Bob Weller was a big man, about my size, Ed Weir was smaller, built more like a guard -- under six feet, a little less than 200 pounds, but, oh, could he play the game. He made Walter Camp's All-America team twice -- 1924 and 1925. He was a terror. And then they got Bull Behman. He was another big, strong guy from Dickinson. They used to give me a pretty rough time of it, but I know I gave them a bit of the same. In those days, the game was more like eleven individual wars.

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You were mainly concerned with the man across the line from you. You got to know him real well, too, because you stayed in for the whole sixty minutes -- offense and defense."

They weren't the only players on the Yellow Jackets Alexander recalls. There was Rae Crowther, an end who made a fortune in later years by getting patents on the two-man and seven-man blocking sleds. Alexander says, "I'm not surprised that Crowther did so well. He was always a smart, heady player. Just a little guy for an end. He was a good receiver and blocker, but he had to be smart to save himself when he moved to defense. Rudy Comstock, a very rugged guard is another I remember from that team. I used to really puzzle him when I would leave the line and take that outside linebacker position. I'd line up at tackle, but before the ball was put in play, I'd jump back and outside the end. We played what was called a 'seven-diamond' defense, and on many plays I was Comstock's man to block he had trouble finding me. After I'd make a tackle, he'd come up to me and say, 'Alexander how the hell'd you make the tackle? Where were you? Where'd you go?' I'd just smile and say, 'I was there all the time, Rudy.' I don't know if he ever figured it out. With no films of games to study, how could he?"

Although Alexander liked the stability of playing with the Giants he was not back in 1927. His last year in the NFL, officially, was 1926.

He says, "I really liked playing in New York, liked the guys -- we had such camaraderie in those days -- and it was great to be part of a new experiment. But when it came time to talk about next year -- that would be 1927 -- they told me I'd have to take a pay cut. They could only pay me \$75 a game. I had been playing for \$100. Well, I liked New York, but not that much. I could, and did, make more by playing on non-league teams -- up in Pennsylvania, down at the Jersey shore, and even in and around the Metropolitan area. In a way I missed the Giants, but we did play NFL teams in exhibition and there were men like me who played on non-league teams because, I guess, their NFL teams wanted to cut their pay too.

"After I left the NFL, it always meant a lot more to me personally to play against NFL teams or players from the NFL. Johnny Blood was one of my favorites. His right name was McNally, but no one ever knew that. He was wild in a way. He just didn't seem to care or take the game seriously, but that was a front. He was a real compptitor, very fast, and about as elusive a halfback as I ever tried to get a hand on. There wasn't much passing in those days, but Blood caught more than his share, usually for long yardage, too. I played with and against Fritz Pollard up in the Coal Region. Sometimes we'd both be with Gilberton -- just a little coal 'patch', as they called them -- but, other times I'd be with Shenandoah or Coaldale. At that time -- the late 1920s -- Pollard was still the smallest and best back on the field. He could run. Oh, how he could run."

"Probably the man I remember most," says Alexander, "is Bobby Marshall. Rube was his nickname. He was big. A tackle from the University of Minnesota and a fine gentleman. He was no spring chicken when I played him in the Midwest in the early Twenties. He graduated from college in 1906, so he was nearly forty years old when we played him. He was a colored fellow, but no one thought much about it. He was such an even-tempered man. No loud talk, no slugging, nothing like that. Remember, we were all pretty tough customers back then. What I remember most about him was the way he devised his own equipment. I guess after so many years of playing ball he got smarter than the rest of us. He'd take copies of The Saturday Evening Post or other magazines of that size and tape them to his shins for protection. He'd do the same thing with Harper's or another slightly smaller magazine and make forearm pads. One time he even made rib pads out of the corrugated metal from an old scrub board -- a washboard."

While Marshall went all out for added protection, some players of the day disdained even the bare essentials. Alexander recalls, "Some of the players didn't wear helmets. I don't know if it was a sign of manhood -- macho, they call it now -- or what, but there were quite a few who only had what Mother Nature gave them on top of their heads for protection. I always wore a helmet. I still remember an old leather job, with what must have been ten coats of white paint, that I had with the Giants.

"Other pads were just as skimpy in those days. Like our helmets were soft leather, our shoulder pads weren't the big, bulky ones you see today. They, too, were leather. They started out fairly rigid, but after several years -- and we wore them a long time -- they'd soften up. The hip pads were just a quilted,

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padded material that was usually part of the football pants. That was about it. Helmet, shoulder pads, pants, and shoes. No hip pads, as such, no rib pads, and of course no face mask. You could always tell a football player when he smiled -- missing teeth.

In Alexander's time, the most popular formations were the double and single wings. They were basically running formations. Little deception and lots of power typified by double-team blocks at the point of attack. Usually that was off-tackle. Tackles, thus, became key men -- both as blockers and defenders. Alexander was in a good position to note the changing face of pro football.

"In the late 1920s, we noticed there was more passing. Curly Lambeau had his 'Packers passing. He was usually the one throwing. And Benny Friedman was as good a passer as I've ever seen. He'd been an All-America quarterback at the University of Michigan, and he could throw. He was the first one I recall who made the pass a set part of the offense -- especially when he was with the Giants and (Brooklyn) Dodgers. He delivered a pretty spiral right into the hands of his ends. I saw Sammy Baugh play for the Washington Redskins after I got out of football, but Benny was as good as the best. I also saw Sid Luckman in college at Columbia and with the Chicago Bears later but Benny was as nifty as any. I don't know what's keeping him out of Canton (the Pro Football Hall of Fame.)"

As great as some of the early passers were, there were rules that kept passing from becoming a more common method of attack, and Alexander cites some. "The rules in the Twenties provided for a five yard penalty if you threw two consecutive incompletions. If you threw a pass that was incomplete and went out of bounds, it was the other team's ball where it went out. If an ineligible receiver caught a pass -- I guess I should say forward pass, because in those days they were always termed forward passes -- the ball was given over to the defense at the spot where it was caught. Clipping was a 25-yard penalty then. Oh, there were lots of rules that forced teams to use the forward pass as a near-desperation measure. To only resort to it when you were far behind and not much hope was left. Something else to remember from those pioneer days -- there were only three officials. We had a referee, an umpire, and a head linesman. I don't think that had anything to do with the rules that made passing so hard -- unless they didn't want to chase after the ends or loose balls -- but the entire time I played, we only had three officials.

"It's interesting who those officials were, too. In a lot of cases, they were sportswriters. Tiny Maxwell of Philadelphia was probably the most famous. They named the Maxwell Club and the Maxwell Trophy for him. But a lot of other writers officiated. Wilfred Smith, a big tackle I played against in the Midwest in the early years of my career, later wrote for the Chicago Tribune. I think it was a smart move on the part of the team owners and promoters. They would give the writers a chance to earn extra money, and, if they were lucky, the writer would show his appreciation by writing up the game in his paper. In those days, any publicity was very valuable."

Alexander continued to play until he contracted tuberculosis in 1930. He saw many changes in the game from the start of his career until the end. "When I first started playing. We'd just hop on a train on Saturday -- sometimes we'd get to the city where we were playing late that night; other times we'd arrive early Sunday morning -- and as likely as not there'd be several touring cars to meet us at the station. We'd get in these cars and go over the signals and plays on the way to the field. The captain or the coach would give them to us. They were, out of necessity, quite simple. By the time I got to the Giants and later, we had regular daily practices and a much more detailed plan of attack. Some of the coaches skirted the rule of no coaching from the sidelines by devising some very subtle and very simple hand signals. Maybe it was just the way he would stand, or how he had his hands in his pockets, or something else, but we knew what play he wanted. It wasn't done often, but it was done."

Alexander is justly proud of his contribution to the game. He was featured on a national television show in 1985 for laying the ground work for the outside linebacker, which, thanks to the likes of Lawrence Taylor, Mike Merriweather, Rickey Jackson, and Otis Wilson, has become a glamor position in the NFL.

"I like watching the games on television. Living in Metuchen (New Jersey), we get a lot of the Giants' games. It gives me a good feeling to think that I might have had a little bit to do with the way Lawrence Taylor plays today. He's about as big as I was, but, oh, so much faster. They all are, really. I'm glad to see the game become what it has, but I just hope today's player realizes what we went through in the so-called rag days to give the game a strong foothold. I think they do."

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John Alexander died on August 5, 1986. He was a month and a day past his 90th birthday. His remains were cremated and scattered over a very appropriate venue for an old New York Football Giant. Giant, upper case, and giant, lower case, fit very well in describing John Alexander.