

# 1952: The Dawning of Motown's Gridiron Empire

By Doug Warren

## Part One: Trader Buddy

In 1951, his first season as Detroit Lions' skipper, Buddy Parker had done a marvelous job in acquiring and blending old pros, like Vince Banonis and Pat Harder, with promising youngsters, such as Jack Christiansen, LaVern Torgeson and Dorne Dibble. The result was that Buddy's troops nearly pulled off a Western Division crown and a trip to the NFL Championship. The '51 season had been a turning point for the Lion franchise as the club compiled a 7-4-1 record. It was Detroit's first winning season since 1945. Entering the 1952 National League campaign, the nucleus of a championship contender in Detroit was now established, led by the tough Texas' twosome of Parker and his swaggering quarterback Bobby Layne.

Nevertheless just as in his first year in Detroit, when he traded his first two 1952 draft picks to acquire end Jim Martin from the Cleveland Browns and the aforementioned Harder from the Chicago Cardinals, Parker refused to stand pat with his roster. Needing a reliable backup signal-caller behind Layne, he acquired Jim Hardy from the Cardinals for two expendable reserves. Then, when it was learned that Detroit's star halfback Doak Walker would be out indefinitely due to a severe cut on his right arm caused by a jagged car window, Buddy moved another obscure performer to fill the void. The filler came in the form of disgruntled Green Bay Packer defensive back Earl "Jug" Girard. Despite five interceptions in 1951, Jug wanted to play offense. Packer boss Gene Ronzani on the other hand wanted Girard to stay in the Packer secondary. When Buddy offered the trade, Ronzani gladly accepted. The rejuvenated Jug would gain 569 total yards and score four TD's while spelling Walker during the '52 season.

While Buddy wheeled-and-dealed for on-the-field help, the unsung hero of Detroit's rise to power, Lion General Manager Nick Kerbawy, would manufacture one of the most devious talent exchanges in NFL history. While Kerbawy was in Chicago to make arrangements with Cardinals' owner Walter Wolfner involving a future pre-season game in Amarillo, Texas, he proposed a unique trade scenario to new Cardinal coach Joe Kuharich as their group was preparing for a trip to the race track.

Years later, Nick told *Detroit News* sportswriter Jerry Green of the exchange and Green included the story in his 1973 book entitled "Detroit Lions: Great Teams' Great Years." The following exchange comes from the book:

"Joe let's shake the league up," said Kerbawy. "I'll trade you halfback Jerry Krall for Buster Ramsey."

"OK," said Kuharich, and the deal was made.

"What we really did was trade then a free agent for Buster Ramsey," Kerbawy confessed.

Buster Ramsey was a player-coach with the Cardinals in 1951. Buster had done more coaching than playing that season, seeing action in only two games. As Buster's former Cardinal teammate and coach, Buddy knew Ramsey's mind for defense and wanted him to shore up the Lion defense.

"So while we were waiting to go to the track we made the trade and signed the papers right in the Cardinals' offices," Kerbawy recalled, "Since the trade was made, I figured I had to hustle back to Detroit and stayed only a couple of races and left.

"I called Buddy as soon as I got back to Detroit. 'You now have Buster Ramsey,' I told him. 'We gave the Cardinals Jerry Krall for him.'

"What do you mean?' Parker said to me. 'You can't trade them Krall. He's a free agent, we don't own him.'

"He won't be a free agent in an hour,' I said"

Kerbawy then proceeded to drive to Toledo, Ohio, where Krall was working after the Lions released him, to re-sign the already traded player. Kerbawy then sent Krall's contract to NFL Commissioner Bert Bell's

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Philadelphia office predated, cementing the deal for Ramsey to begin his career as Detroit's defensive coordinator. With Ramsey running the defense, George Wilson assisting Parker with the offense, and Aldo Forte molding the offensive line, Buddy's staff was now complete. These four men, together with Kerbawy, would orchestrate the rise of the Detroit franchise from laughingstock, into NFL powerhouse.

When the regular season began, nearly one-third of the team consisted of newcomers; including rookies such as, ends Pat Summerall and Blaine Earon, tackles Bob Miller and Gil Mains, guard Stan Campbell, quarterback Tom Dublinski, and starting defensive backs Yale Lary and Jim David. Each of these players, with the exception of Summerall, who would be traded to the Cardinals after just two games, would be solid contributors for the Lions during the decade.

Once the season began, the Lions would get no-quarter from the schedule-makers, opening up on the west coast with back-to-back match-ups against the San Francisco Forty-Niners and Los Angeles Rams. Then in weeks three and four, Detroit would return to Briggs Stadium to face those same two teams again. On opening day the 'Niners thumped the mistake-prone Lions 17-3 at Kezar Stadium. Detroit rebounded the following week however, squeaking past the defending champion Rams 17-14. Parker's squad was no doubt helped by the fact that, after losing their opener to the Cleveland Browns in week one, the Rams hierarchy had fired their head coach Joe Stydahar. It was a development that would make the sleaziest Hollywood writer blush, and would typify the type of front-office chaos that would plague the Rams for years.

Detroit returned home hoping to find a way to beat the 49ers, whom they had lost to four-straight times. They failed, as San Francisco rolled in another rout, this time by a 28-0 tally. The Detroit fans booed, Buddy Parker fumed, and Bobby Layne was benched for the second time in less than three weeks. Adding to Parker's troubles was the fact that Jim Hardy and Tom Dublinski fared no better versus the San Francisco defense in relief of Layne.

The young coach, his quarterback and his team were at a crossroads. Parker skipped the club's traditional postgame buffet, instead heading home to find a way to kick-start a turnaround.

Later that evening, he was paid a visit by Layne. "I'm going to be your quarterback," Bobby told his coach, "and this team will straighten out in a hurry."

Bobby's impromptu visit to Parker's home turned out to be the most important meeting of their collective careers. From that point on, they would sink or swim with each other. The inseparable coach and quarterback, save for 1957, would wage gridiron war together for the next eleven years.

When the team arrived at Briggs Stadium on Tuesday morning to begin preparations for the Rams' rematch, a player-only meeting was called and, for 45 minutes, the Lions aired their thoughts and grievances. They emerged from the summit committed to one another for the long haul. As they returned to the practice field, the scoreboard eagerly greeted them just as it had said goodbye two days earlier, SF 28, DET 0. "I thought that might help to wake them up," said Parker. "It did."

When the Lions took the field the following Sunday against the Rams they did so without Doak Walker and Pat Harder. Walker had his leg banged-up during the 49er game; and in a twist of cruel fate during the pre-remote control era, aggravated the injury at home a couple of days later while getting up to turn the TV channel. Doak would spend the game in street clothes. Harder on the other hand would suit up, but was unlikely to play because his battle-scarred knees had begun to act up once again.

If it were true that all of the drama during the week had served to strengthen the Lions resolve, they sure didn't display it once the pigskin was put into play. The Lions were lethargic, spotting the visitors a 13-0 advantage by the end of the first period, while 40,152 Lion rooters in the stands cursed their favorite team once again.

### Part Two: Penalty from Heaven

When the Rams hit on a long bomb on the first play of the second period, the Lions were potentially staring a 20-0 deficit square in the face.

It looked like the Lions' goose was cooked . . . but . . . a penalty flag had miraculously found its way to the turf. The Rams had committed a holding penalty, nullifying the score. It was then that Pat Harder saddled up

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alongside his head coach. "I can't stand it on the bench any longer. Knee or no knee, put me in." Without hesitation, Buddy obliged the ole' warhorse. . . . The coach could sense his team coming to life.

Just before halftime, Bobby Layne hit Cloyce Box deep for a 67-yard strike, cutting the Rams' lead to 13-7. Next a 31-yard interception return by linebacker LaVern Torgeson pushed the Lions into the lead at 14-13. The Rams would answer back with a field goal for a 16-14 advantage. It was at this time when Bobby Layne, Detroit's much-maligned QB, dipped into his bag of tricks. Layne handed off to halfback Bob Hoernschemeyer, who rolled out and threw to a streaking, diving Box for the touchdown. Pat Harder would add a 26-yard insurance field goal in the final period.

Final Score: Detroit 24, Los Angeles 16

After the final gun, the victorious Buddy Parker greeted Rams' coach Hamp Pool at midfield with a less than subtle message. "Don't feel bad Hamp. You only lost a game. I could've lost my job." The holding penalty was the turning point of the game, and Buddy knew it. What he didn't realize at the time however, was how much that penalty would serve as the pendulum for the entire season.

The following week, with the help of two Jug Girard touchdowns, Detroit blasted the Packers on the road 52-17. Then on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, the stout Lion defense gave 56,029 Detroiters something to cheer about as they held Cleveland to two Lou Groza field goals in a 17-6 triumph over the Browns.

In Week 7, Cloyce Box snared a 46-yard TD and Bob Hoernschemeyer trudged for 107 rushing yards in a 31-6 road-grading of the hapless Pittsburgh Steelers. Finally, the woeful Dallas Texans ventured north to the Motor City on November 16 where the ageless Pat Harder ran and kicked his way to 17 points (1 TD, 2 FG's, 5 PAT's) in a 43-13 demolition.

When the high-flying Lions and their 5-game winning streak rolled into Chicago's Wrigley Field on November 23, they stood tied with San Francisco atop the National Conference at 6-2. They were followed by the Rams and Packers, who shared second place with 5-3 marks. The Bears meanwhile were well behind the pack in third place at 3-5. However, as fans of both teams know, records mean nothing when Detroit and Chicago square off. George Blanda's 17-yard strike to end Ed Sprinkle with 17 seconds to play proved the point once again as Chicago pulled off the 24-23 upset. The Lions loss, combined with San Francisco's loss to the Rams and the Packers win over the putrid Texans created a four-way tie atop the standings with each team now holding 6-3 marks.

The knot in the standings gave Detroit's traditional Turkey Day matchup special significance as the Packers rolled into the Motor City four days later; but Detroit made easy work of the Pack as Bobby Layne lit up the stat sheet with five TD passes in a 48-24 victory. Conversely, the smoking-hot Rams kept pace with the Lions by scorching the fading 49ers 34-21. With just two games left on the schedule, Detroit and Los Angeles stood at 7-3.

The following Sunday, December 7, Detroit enacted revenge against the visiting Bears 45-21 with Layne hitting paydirt on throws of 29, 28 and 25 yards to his favorite target, Cloyce Box. The same day out on the coast, the Rams bested Green Bay 45-27. The final regular-season game for both squads provided little excitement as Detroit trounced the soon-to-be extinct Dallas Texans 41-6 and L.A. defeated the Pittsburgh Steelers 28-14. With 12 games in the books, the Lions and Rams remained deadlocked at 9-3, forcing the co-leaders to square off for a third time in a playoff to decide the National Conference championship.

On December 21, 47,645 Lion-loyalists filed into fog-filled Briggs Stadium to witness Detroit's most important professional football game in 17 seasons, the 1952 National Conference Playoff. The Lions had lost only once since their Week 3 embarrassment versus the 49ers, whereas the Rams were NFL's hottest team, winners of eight-straight since their October 19<sup>th</sup> loss to the Lions. To add to the theater, for the first time in ten games the Lions starting lineup would include a healthy Doak Walker, while the Rams would have to contend without their sensational rookie defensive back Dick "Night Train" Lane. The already feared Night Train was injured in the Steeler finale after setting an NFL single-season record of 14 interceptions.

With Lane out of action, the Rams were left with no choice but to double-cover the explosive Cloyce Box. Strangely however, they also decided to double the rusty Doak Walker. The Lions capitalized by splitting both Box and Walker out wide, then attacking the interior of the Rams' defense with the running of Pat Harder and the hands of Leon Hart. The Lions first touchdown drive started on the Ram 48 thanks to a shanked punt by Norm Van Brocklin. Bobby Layne connected with Hart on throws of 22 and 13 yards to set up Harder's 12-

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yard touchdown run. Moments later, the Rams failed to capitalize on a Bobby Layne interception by Don Paul, as Bob Waterfield's 34-yard field goal attempt sailed wide. Taking over at their 20, the Lions marched 80 yards (51 of those coming on a pass from Layne to Doak Walker) in just six plays for their second touchdown; the TD coming when Harder blasted over right tackle to paydirt from 3-yards out, giving the Lions a 14-0 edge.

The Rams finally got on the board just before halftime when Van Brocklin connected with Tom Fears for a 15-yard TD, Bob Waterfield's ensuing point-after cut the Lions' halftime advantage to 14-7. Los Angeles took the second half kickoff hoping to turn the tide. However, a Ram fumble recovered by Yale Lary on the Lion 47 led to Detroit's third touchdown. The score came on a halfback option play designed for Doak Walker. Doak took the handoff from Bobby Layne and rolled to his right, before tossing to Leon Hart, who made a spectacular overhead grab good for 24-yards. Five minutes later, Pat Harder scored his 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> points of the day on a 3-point boot from 43 yards. The field goal gave Detroit their biggest lead of the day at 24-7. The highlight of the third stanza however belonged to the Detroit defense, as late in the period they stopped the league's leading ground gainer, Deacon Dan Towler, on four-straight tries from inside the six-yard line. Adding to the excitement was the fact that Towler's final blast ended on the one-foot line.

There was still over a quarter of football left and the NFL's defending champions refused to go down without a fight. With Harder and Bob Hoernschemeyer both out of the game with injuries the Lion offense bogged down, just as the Rams' potent attack began to heat up. An interception by the L.A.'s Stan West, Bobby Layne's fourth of the afternoon, led to a Dan Towler 5-yard touchdown run at 7:24 of the fourth period, slicing the Detroit lead to 24-14. Two-and-a-half minutes later, the Lions were forced to punt. Vitamin T. Smith took the punt and returned it 57-yards for another touchdown. . . . Lions 24, Rams 21.

Suddenly, heart rates all around greater Detroit began to race as a game once seemingly over had ignited into a barnburner.

The next six minutes were tense as both teams went conservative, hoping for a mistake by their opponent. That mistake finally came with under a minute to play as Ram quarterback Bob Waterfield, playing the last game of his Hall of Fame career, dropped to pass from his 11-yard line. As Bob began to set up in the pocket, Lion defensive end Jim Doran closed in forcing Waterfield into a hurried throw. The pass was tipped by safety Jack Christiansen into the hands of teammate LaVern Torgeson at the Ram 29.

Although there were only 36 ticks left on the clock, the Lions went for the kill. Layne handed off to Doak Walker on first down and, aided by a terrific block by end Bill Swiacki, danced his way to the 11 for a first down. Then after Harder blasted his way to the nine, halfback Bob Hoernschemeyer tore through left tackle for the game-icing touchdown. Harder's fourth PAT, and 19<sup>th</sup> point, of the day made the final score . . . Detroit 31, Los Angeles 24.

Harder's playoff-record breaking 19-point performance was the biggest day of his storied career. While Pat's total would be equaled by Green Bay's Paul Hornung in the 1961 NFL Championship Game, it would remain unbroken until San Francisco's Ricky Watters scored five TD's in a 30-point effort in 1993.

The veteran with bad knees, who was once considered washed up, had found the fountain of youth at the most important time. Ironically, in leading up to the game a few days earlier, Pat had commented to *Detroit Times* Sports Editor Bob Murphy about the upcoming playoff by saying, "This game between the Lions and the Rams is one where the old players get younger and the young players get older."

The Detroit Lions had done plenty of growing during the 1952 season; now all that was left separating them from their first title in nearly two decades was a team that had played for a championship in every year since their inception in 1946. The Cleveland Browns were a battle-tested, veteran outfit, eager to reclaim the crown that they had vacated to the Rams a year earlier. If the opponent wasn't tough enough, Detroit would also have to deal with the fact that the game would be played on the other side of Lake Erie, before a hostile crowd in Cleveland Municipal Stadium.

### Part Three: The Doaker and the Defense Lead the Way

When the Lions left Michigan Central Station at 5:30 pm Friday, December 26, for their showdown two days later on the Cleveland shores of Lake Erie, only three of the 33 Detroit players had ever played this deep into an NFL season. Guard/End Jim Martin, whom Parker had acquired from the Cleveland Browns in early 1951, had been a rookie on the Browns' 1950 Championship squad. The other two were the team's elder

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statesman, 31-year-old Center Vince Banonis and 30-year-old Fullback Pat Harder, whom had both been Chicago Cardinals when they made back-to-back trips to the championship game in 1947 and '48.

On the other hand, the members of the Lions' coaching staff were no strangers to the NFL's biggest stage, as all four men had been a part of previous games as either players, coaches, or both. Buddy Parker had been a member of the Lions' 1935 Championship roster, as well as an assistant coach under Jimmy Conzelman on those aforementioned Cardinal squads of 1947 and '48. Detroit's defensive guru, Buster Ramsey, was a teammate of Harder and Banonis, playing linebacker and guard for Chicago, while George Wilson and Aldo Forte spent their playing days on Chicago's North Side, as members of the Monsters of the Midway during the Bears' salad days of the early-to-mid 1940's.

What the Lions lacked in experience, they more than made up for in guts and sheer talent. They were also healthy, with one major exception. Dick Stanfel, one of the league's best linemen, would miss the start at guard because of a badly bruised side, courtesy of the Rams. In his place, Coach Parker chose to slide Lou Creekmur over from tackle, while rookie Bob Miller would fill in at Creekmur's spot. However, on the other side of the field, Cleveland's sick-bay was occupied by two of their biggest offensive weapons, End Mac Speedie and Halfback Dub Jones. Neither man would play a down the entire day, and their absence would have a major impact on the Browns' ability to move the football through the air. Adding to the Browns' woes, Lou Groza, Cleveland's All-Pro tackle/kicker would require a Novocain injection before kickoff to ease the pain of the broken ribs he suffered two-weeks before in Cleveland's last regular-season game, a 37-34 loss to the New York Giants.

With the injuries and each team's contrasting experience as the backdrop, the eyes of the pro football world descended on Cleveland, Ohio on December 28, 1952. As the 2 p.m. kickoff approached, 50,934 spectators, roughly 5,000 of which were Detroiters, huddled in their seats in cavernous Cleveland Stadium. Although the Lions were installed as 3-point favorites due to the Speedie and Jones injuries Browns' backers on hand remained confident, fully aware that their team had never lost a championship game on their home field.

The game remained scoreless through the first period. However, it wasn't due to a lack of opportunities for the host team. Groza missed three field goals in the first fifteen minutes. "The Toe" went awry from 28-yard line, and twice from the 17, his accuracy no doubt affected by his banged up ribcage. Then early in the second period, the other half of Cleveland's usually stellar kicking duo, punter Horace Gillom, shanked a punt a dismal 22-yards, giving Detroit terrific field position at midfield.

Eight plays later, the Lions capitalized when Bobby Layne blasted over center on a quarterback-sneak from two-yards out. Pat Harder's point-after gave the visitors a 7-0 edge. The drive was highlighted by a 13-yard Layne scramble, and passes of 10 and 13 yards to Cloyce Box, and Bill Swiacki, respectively.

With the game remaining a tense 7-0 midway through the third quarter, the man whom the Lions had waited for patiently all-year to heal made the wait worthwhile with one touch of the football. When Detroit took over at their 33-yard line, Layne called on Doak Walker. The Browns, expecting a halfback pass, were waiting for him. However Layne, as he often was, remained one step ahead of the defense calling on Doak to run instead.

Walker took the handoff to the right, cut upfield off the block of tackle Gus Cifelli, and then jukeed back to the inside. The race was on. With Cloyce Box providing downfield interference on Cleveland DB's Bert Rechichar and Tommy James, Doak rolled 67-yards for the score. Harder's ensuing PAT gave Detroit a 14-0 lead.

The Browns finally got on the scoreboard four minutes later when fullback Harry Jagade, culminating an 88-yard Cleveland drive, carried wide for 7-yards and the TD. Groza's 1-point boot followed, cutting the Lion lead to 14-7. Two minutes later, Cleveland was on the doorstep again when big Marion Motley broke loose for 42 yards and a first down before being pulled down at the Detroit 5.

What occurred next is commonly referred to as "the biggest play of the game."

On first down, Motley took the handoff from Otto Graham, and was immediately smashed by Detroit's Don Doll, who had rushed up from his safety spot. It was an all-world play, and the five-yard loss put the Browns back on the 10-yard line. On second down Graham, attempting to pass was swarmed under by the Lions' Thurman McGraw and Jim Doran for a 13-yard loss back to the 23. On the next play, Otto slipped in the backfield and was tackled after gaining a yard. With their kicking game essentially grounded due to Groza's

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injured ribs, Cleveland was forced into a desperation pass on fourth down. The ball was batted down by the Detroit linebacker Dick Flanagan. The Lions lead remained intact.

At 8:43 of the fourth quarter, Detroit added some insurance points when Pat Harder's kick from 35-yards split the goal posts, stretching their lead to 17-7. Cleveland would mount one final assault that would carry them from their own 18 to the Detroit 8.

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Cleveland, 10 points down and needing to conserve clock went to the air four-straight times. Three incompletions later, the Browns were down to their last gasp. Otto Graham's pass to Dante Lavelli in the end zone went through Lavelli's grasp and into the hands of teammate Darrel Brewster for an apparent Cleveland touchdown. However, the officials ruled it an incomplection due to the fact that no Lion had touched the ball on the play, making the Lavelli to Brewster carom an illegal forward pass. The Lions got the ball on the 20. Two clock-killing plays later, the Detroit Lions were World Champions.

The defense had been incredible, stopping Cleveland drives in Lion territory at the 21-, 21-, 24-, 5-, and 8-yard lines. The banged-up Browns, despite racking up 227 yards rushing and 22 first downs, could only manage one touchdown. Cleveland signal-caller Otto Graham was harassed all day, completing only 20-of-36 passes for 157 yards and an interception. In the meantime, Lion QB Bobby Layne, who completed just 7-of-9 passes for a mere 59 yards, directed a patient Detroit ground attack that compiled 199 yards and two scores.

In the locker room after the game, Buddy Parker reflected on his team's season, beginning with the loss in Week 3 to the 49ers. Recalling what he had told his players that day, Parker said, "Well, you didn't play very good football today, but you can be in first place on Thanksgiving Day if you play the kind of football you are able to from now on. . . . Our boys have come a long way since that afternoon in Briggs Stadium when we were beaten 28-0. We hit bottom that day." The "pivot point" of the entire season however, according to the coach, had come following week against Los Angeles, when a Ram holding penalty negated a L.A. touchdown and a 20-0 Lion deficit. Detroit rallied to a 24-16 victory that afternoon and would lose only one game (to the Bears) by a single point the rest of the season.

Buddy Parker, who as a rookie player had scored a touchdown and grabbed an interception for Detroit in their 1935 NFL Championship Game victory, had returned the Motor City to the NFL mountain top as a head coach. In just two seasons under Parker's guidance the Detroit franchise managed a complete turnaround, winning 29 of 37 games (including pre-season). In addition, at just 39 years of age Buddy became the third youngest coach in NFL history to lead a team to the championship (only the Bears' George Halas and the Giants' Steve Owen were younger at the time).

The following afternoon, Monday, December 29, a prophetic headline graced the sports page of the *Detroit Times*. The headline read, "Youth of Champs Foreshadows More Lion Crowns."

They were right . . . Buddy Parker and his young Lions were just getting started.

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