

Bob Waterfield vs. Bill Willis

A Single Still Frame from the 1950 NFL Championship Testifies to their Hall of Fame Credentials.

by Bill Pepperell

As pro football fans we can probably never hope to understand the game in its entirety. To do so would require that we have a deep knowledge of its games and players, and also of its technical aspects, that is, its “x’s” and “o’s”. We can gain a fairly deep understanding of what the games and the players may be like, through a reading of the wealth of material that is available to us. But to acquire a deep understanding of football in the other dimension – its technical aspects – is a difficult, tiresome, and ultimately unfruitful avenue of study, bringing us very little closer to a better grasp of the game.

A football play is extremely complex: 11 men on the offensive side are moving in rapid and baffling concert, and the 11 men on the other side are reacting to this movement in equally rapid and baffling moves. Most “experts” simply imply that we have no business even commenting on a game. As we have been told by Jim Mora, in his most grating and demeaning manner, “You don’t know when it’s good or bad. You really don’t know. You...don’t look at the film, you don’t know what happened. You really don’t know. *You think you know*, but you don’t know. And—you—never—will.”

I can certainly ignore Jim Mora and his abrasive manner, and continue to comment on what I think is good and bad, and pretend that I will one day have a better understanding of the game in all its technical complexity, but I cannot ignore a man like Bill Glass, a standout ex-defensive end for the Cleveland Browns. A Christian minister, he has written several excellent books on life in pro football, and he is a gracious, kind, and generous man in the way he “talks” to the fan reading his books. So when he says in his book, *My Greatest Challenge*, that “the average fan...doesn’t know enough about the game to judge accurately a player’s performance,” then I will acknowledge that perhaps obtaining a deep understanding of the technical aspects of the game is simply beyond the means of people like myself.

But occasionally something that I’ve read about a player’s particular skills will coincide with a picture I see of that player performing his skills in action, and something will “click” inside my head as a technical aspect is grasped, and then follows the thought, “Oh *that’s* what they mean when they say So-and-So was very good at Such-and-Such.” In this almost accidental moment of discovery, my understanding of the game is suddenly deepened and enriched.

I recently saw such a picture, from the 1950 Championship game, which, when studied closely, demonstrated certain technical proficiencies of Bob Waterfield and Bill Willis. This study led me closer to answering an extremely difficult question which I am continually posing to myself: On what criteria is selection to the Hall of Fame based?

I feel the one overwhelming consideration for selection to the Hall of Fame should be determined by asking a question – in this form: Were the player’s abilities so outstanding that he rated special consideration when designing a game plan against the team he played for?

When this question is asked of Bob Waterfield, quarterback of the Cleveland/Los Angeles Rams from 1945 to 1952, and of Bill Willis, defensive middle guard of the Cleveland

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Browns from 1946 to 1953, the answer is an emphatic "Yes!" It then becomes necessary to define what those outstanding abilities were, and then to offer proofs of those abilities.

To define the outstanding abilities of some of the great players, I have found George Allen's book, *Pro Football's 100 Greatest Players*, to contain some of the most useful, concise, and meaningful material. This is where I turned to get some good capsule descriptions of Bob Waterfield and Bill Willis.

Allen says of Waterfield that he was:

one of the finest all-around athletes professional football has had...one of the best punters and place-kickers of all time...an outstanding defensive back with superb timing and ability to intercept passes...threw every kind of pass effectively...[a] quiet man who led by example...wasn't the talkative type of inspirational leader...inspired confidence in his leadership by being cool in the hottest of circumstances...was a good runner and used his running game superbly...one of the most intelligent quarterbacks I ever saw...a real student of the game...responded effectively to pressure...could pick a defense apart...a pure professional, a quiet killer who was outstanding from the first to last day he stepped foot on a professional field.

This is all very, very impressive, but what is barely even hinted at in Allen's evaluation is Waterfield's absolute mastery at ball handling as a T-formation quarterback.

George Ratterman, the ex-Cleveland Browns quarterback (who himself was said by his teammate Ken Konz to be "the best ball handler I ever saw in my life") says in his book, *Confessions of a Gypsy Quarterback*, that certainly being an effective passer is the first requisite for being a professional quarterback, but next in importance is "the ability to handle the football." And Ratterman mentions only two players of his era as being "full-blown virtuosos" of ball handling: Frankie Albert of the 49ers, and Bob Waterfield of the Rams. Ratterman had a brilliant mind and was, as noted, a great ball handler himself, so this is indeed supreme praise.

The T-formation set itself apart and became the standard in football because in the center snapping the ball to the quarterback directly behind him, the quarterback then wheeling and turning his back to the line either to backpedal for a pass or to give the ball to a running back, the ball was out of sight of the defensive players for unprecedented fractions of seconds longer than to which they were accustomed. This was enough to tip the scales to the offense's advantage. The more effective the quarterback was in concealing the whereabouts of the ball ("ball handling") the more effective the offense became. As will be evident further down, Waterfield's abilities in concealing the ball and creating confusion in the defense reached a point of brilliance.

Allen says of Willis that he was:

the quickest lineman I ever saw...small for a lineman, even in the 1940s...but was so quick and so aggressive he hit like a 250-pounder...speed adds to impact...played middle guard in the five-man line in the 5-2 defense they played in those days...usually lined up over center...the greatest middle guard ever, the finest lineman of the 1940s...he was quick...they used to think that he cheated because he got across the line so fast...but what he did was watch the center's hands and move as soon as they tightened on the ball, even as the center first started to snap the ball...don't think anyone else picked this up and it gave Bill a split second on everyone else...extremely smart and mobile...seemed to make a different kind of pass rush each time...one of the first great pass rushers and was equally effective against the run...moved laterally real well and was one of those players who made plays all over the field...was like a cat, pouncing on people.

As in Waterfield's case, this is all very, very impressive. But in contrast to my comments on Waterfield's ball handling abilities, which I feel Allen did not address, I have nothing to add to Allen's comments: Willis's brilliance is fully set forth by Allen.

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The 1950 NFL Championship game, won by the Browns over the Rams 30-28, on a field goal by Lou Groza at 14:40 of the 4th quarter, was held in Cleveland on December 24, 1950. The game pitted Waterfield against Willis, and is almost universally ranked as one of the greatest games ever played, bringing two outstanding teams together. The Browns had just completed their first season in the NFL, winning the Eastern Conference title with a 10-2 record, after winning the All-America Football Conference Championship in all of the four years of the AAFC's existence: 1946 through 1949. The Rams came to the Championship after winning the Western Conference title with a 9-3 record, in the course of so doing setting 22 records for season offense, including 64 touchdowns, 466 points, and 5,240 yards gained.

Before only 29,751 customers, enduring snow flurries, 25-degree cold, and 30-mile-an-hour winds biting in off Lake Erie, the Rams scored on the first play from scrimmage: an 82-yard pass from Bob Waterfield to halfback Glenn Davis: 7-0, Rams.

The Browns tied the game quickly, moving the ball 70 yards in six plays, the touchdown coming on a 31-yard pass from quarterback Otto Graham to halfback Dub Jones: 7-7.

The Rams went up again on their next series, driving 80 yards in 8 plays, the touchdown coming on a three-yard run up the middle by big 6'4", 220 pound fullback Dick Hoerner: 14-7, Rams.

At 2:20 elapsed in the second period, Graham connected on a 35-yard pass to end Dante Lavelli. The snap from center for the extra point was caught by a gust of wind, did not get cleanly to the holder – Tommy James – and the point-after failed: 14-13, Rams.

In two significant drives in the second quarter, the Rams failed to come away with any points. In the first drive, the Rams brought the ball down to the Browns 7. But a holding penalty pushed them back to the 26. Waterfield sent end Tom Fears over the middle and underthrew him: defensive back Ken Gorgal stepped in front of him, intercepted, and returned the ball 33 yards, stopping the Rams cold. The Browns, however, could then do nothing with the ball.

The Rams got the ball back and then went on another impressive drive. They got to the Browns 8, but were stopped on 4th and 6. The very reliable Waterfield tried a field goal from the 16, but it drifted wide, and the Rams once again come away scoreless.

The second half began with the Browns still trailing, 14-13, but they scored next, and took the lead for the first time, at 4:00 elapsed in the third quarter, when Graham connected on a 39-yard pass, again to Lavelli: 20-14, Browns.

The Rams then began a very crucial drive, ending in a touchdown that is the focus of this article. Starting at their own 29, the Rams quickly completed several passes and moved to the Browns' 17. Remembering that they were on the Browns' 7 and 8 in the second period and came away scoreless, the Rams decided to play basic football. The ball went to Hoerner for 8, then 1, then 3: 1st down at the 5. Hoerner carried the ball three more times, getting to the Browns' 1: it was now 4th and 1. Hoerner had carried the ball six consecutive times from the 17.

It would be easy to take for granted that any given team could score much more often than not from the 1. But apparently it's not as easy as it looks. As Dante Lavelli of the Browns once said about scoring in these goal-line situations, "You can't always do it with all the big guys in there."

Realizing getting into the end zone was certainly not a given, Waterfield called for a play that was masterful in its execution. The Rams' main worry was Bill Willis. As described earlier, he was a one-man defensive wrecking team. He was extremely quick, smart, mobile, moved laterally very well, and could make tackles from almost anywhere.

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Waterfield called a play that allowed Willis to go unblocked. Waterfield turns his back completely to Willis, holds the ball low, and sets his hips in a position *completely parallel to Willis's hips* -- certainly not an easy thing to do. Charging in from his down stance at the line, Willis cannot see the ball, nor can he tell by Waterfield's body position to which side the ball may be headed. With his quickness, he needs only one step to reach Waterfield, and since he cannot tell what is going to unfold, he must commit to trying to get Waterfield in his grasp before the play can get any further along. As a right-hander pushing off his left foot, his momentum is carrying him to his left. We can surmise that Waterfield sent Hoerner the opposite way and hands him the ball just as Willis grabs Waterfield. Willis can't recover in time to make the lateral move right to catch Hoerner, and Hoerner is able to get past Willis and score.

Waterfield bested Willis in this particular play, but it was very, very close.

But both meet my Hall of Fame criteria: Willis's rushing abilities were so outstanding that special attention had to be given him when the Rams designed this and other plays to be used against the Browns. Waterfield's ball handling abilities were so outstanding that in this situation the Browns *should have* given him special attention by having Willis drop back off the line a little -- becoming, in effect, a middle linebacker (in which position he played at times) -- thus delaying his rush until he could read where Waterfield was going with the ball.
