

Cecil Isbell

By John Maxymuk

Adapted from *Packers By the Numbers*, Prairie Oak Press, 2003.

Single wing tailback Sammy Baugh came into the league in 1937 and left 16 years later as a Hall of Fame quarterback. Sid Luckman joined the Chicago Bears in 1939 to become the first modern T formation quarterback and retired in 1950 as a future Hall of Famer. Cecil Isbell was the Packers number one draft choice in 1938 and may have been the best of the three great contemporary passers, but quit after only five years. A comparison of the passing statistics for each passer over the years that Isbell was active is enlightening:

| | G | Att | Cmp | Pct | Yards | YPA | TD | Int | Int % |
|-------------------|----|-----|-----|------|-------|------|----|-----|-------|
| Baugh (1938-42) | 51 | 819 | 465 | 56.8 | 5,494 | 6.71 | 48 | 60 | 7.3 |
| Isbell (1938-42) | 54 | 818 | 411 | 50.2 | 5,945 | 7.27 | 61 | 52 | 2.9 |
| Luckman (1939-42) | 44 | 380 | 196 | 51.6 | 3,782 | 9.95 | 28 | 32 | 8.4 |

or if we make the comparison between the passers' first five years in the league:

| | G | Att | Cmp | Pct | Yards | YPA | TD | Int | Int % |
|-----------------|----|-----|-----|------|-------|-------|----|-----|-------|
| Baugh (37-41) | 51 | 765 | 414 | 54.1 | 5,097 | 6.66 | 40 | 57 | 7.5 |
| Isbell (38-42) | 54 | 818 | 411 | 50.2 | 5,945 | 7.27 | 61 | 52 | 2.9 |
| Luckman (39-43) | 54 | 583 | 306 | 52.5 | 5,976 | 10.25 | 56 | 44 | 7.5 |

This comparison reveals many things. Sammy Baugh threw a lot of short passes and was picked off a fair amount. Sid Luckman was running a passing offense that the rest of the league could not comprehend; his yards-per-attempt figure is eye-popping. The Bears did not throw a lot, but had a lot of long gainers through the air.

Overall, Isbell compares very well to both Hall of Famers. His yards per attempt figure is excellent, he threw the most touchdown passes and had the lowest interception percentage by far. Luckman's career yards per attempt number would drop to 8.42, still second all-time to Otto Graham; Baugh's number would rise to 7.31 by the end of his career.

Baugh was also a league leading punter and a notable defensive back who intercepted 9 passes through 1942. Luckman picked off 10 and was punting for a 40+ average in those years although that average would drop over time. Isbell also had 9 interceptions, but was not much of a punter. However, he rushed for 1,522 yards on 422 attempts in his brief career. Baugh rushed for 172 yards in that period, and Luckman's total was negative yardage.

So does Cecil Isbell belong in the Hall of Fame? No, his career was too short. The above numbers indicate, though, that Curly Lambeau was not off-base when he said that Isbell was the best passer he ever saw. Isbell was the master at any range. He could throw soft passes, bullet passes, or feathery lobs. He was the best with Sid Luckman of the Bears a close second and Sammy Baugh of the Redskins a long third. Luckman wasn't as versatile and Baugh couldn't compare on the long ones.

Unlike the other two, however, he never got to play quarterback in the T formation. As a tailback, he would get tackled on every play whether he was involved in it or not. Baugh himself has spoken on how the T extended his career.

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Furthermore, Isbell was as fine a passer as there was in the league despite being severely limited by a chronically bad shoulder. Cecil had dislocated his left shoulder several times in college so he started wearing a chain that went from his arm to his torso to keep him from raising his arm too high and damaging the shoulder. In later years he said of the shoulder harness,

“Sure it hampered me some. When I was punting, I couldn’t extend my left arm all the way out, so I had to learn to drop the ball one-handed. And I played defense all the time -- we didn’t have two platoons then -- and it wasn’t good for tackling. Not that it was so tender, but because it hindered the grasp. My reach didn’t have the range it would have had. The other thing was when I was carrying the ball. I couldn’t stiff arm with my left -- not effectively anyway.”

Isbell joined the Packers after leading the College All Stars to a 28-16 victory over Sammy Baugh’s Redskins in 1938. The Packers already had an All-League tailback in Arnie Herber, but Isbell was so talented that the two generally would alternate for Cecil’s first three years in the league. Sometimes both would play at the same time and occasionally even would throw passes to each other. Slow-footed Herber caught two touchdown passes from Cecil in 1938.

Most of the touchdown passes, though, went to Don Hutson. Isbell proved a worthy successor to Herber in getting the ball to Hutson, and the two would enjoy remarkable success together and become good friends.

Oddly, *New York Times* columnist Arthur Daley wrote a piece on Hutson for *Collier’s* in 1944 that stated that Hutson and Isbell were not on speaking terms for their last year together. Since the two roomed together for all five of Isbell’s years in the league (as Daley himself would write about years later in the *Times*), one is left with the implication that this questionable tidbit was put in to create some controversy. Ironically in one later column, Daley quotes Isbell telling him, “If you ever see that fellow who wrote that we weren’t on speaking terms, you can tell him for me that he had it all wrong.”

Isbell’s longest touchdown pass was for 92 yards to Hutson in the league All Star game for 1939. His shortest touchdown went to Hutson for four inches in 1942, a season in which Don caught 17 touchdowns and Cecil threw 24. The 24 would stand as a team record until 1983 when Lynn Dickey bested it. From 1940 through 1942, Cecil threw a touchdown pass in 23 straight games, a record that Johnny Unitas would break in 1958 en route to an ultimate total of 47 straight.

The Packers played post-season football in three of Isbell’s five years. They lost the title game to the Giants in his rookie year and lost a divisional playoff to the Bears in 1941, but in 1939 they won it all.

The 1939 title game was a rematch with the Giants who had won the previous year largely because Hutson missed almost the entire game due to injury. The game was played in Milwaukee to try to cash in on the larger attendance possible at the State Fair Grounds. 32,379 fans braved gale force winds to cheer on the Packers.

Although the Giants trailed only 7-0 at the half on a Herber TD pass, they only crossed the Packers 30 yard line one more time in the contest. The second half was all Green Bay. Tiny Engebretsen kicked a 37-yard field goal and Cecil Isbell threw a 31-yard touchdown pass to Joe Laws in the third quarter to make the score 17-0.

In the fourth quarter, Ernie Smith kicked a 42-yard field goal, and then Bud Svendsen intercepted a pass and ran it back to the Giant 15. Fullback Ed Jankowski ultimately punched it in from the Giant one to make the final score 27-0. It was the worst beating any team had doled out in a title game up to that point, but that record would only last one season until Luckman’s Bears buried Baugh’s Redskins 73-0 the next year.

In his five years in the NFL, Cecil Isbell twice was All-League and three times was second team All-League. He played in four of the five All Star games of the time -- once as a

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member of the 1939 champion Packers and three times as a member of the league All Stars.

Isbell said that he had seen Lambeau go up to loyal veterans like Arnie Herber and Hank Bruder and tell them they were through, and he was determined that would never happen to him. He would quit on his own time.

When his alma mater, Purdue, offered him a coaching job at a pay cut in 1943, he took it so we will never know what he would have accomplished had he stayed a pro longer. He was head coach for three years at Purdue before moving on to coach the Baltimore Colts of the All America Football Conference for a few years. Isbell held a few assistant coaching jobs (including working under Lambeau again on the Chicago Cardinal staff) before leaving football for business in the mid 1950s.

He was elected to the College Football Hall of Fame in 1967 and the Packer Hall of Fame in 1972. Cecil Isbell died in 1985 and is little remembered, but deserves better.

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| CECIL ISBELL | TB-DB-HB |
| Isbell, Cecil Frank | 6-1, 190 |
| Purdue | HS: Sam Houston [Houston, TX] |
| B: 7/11/1915, Houston, TX | D: 6/23/ 1985, Hammond, IN (69) |
| Drafted: 1938 Round 1 GB | |

| Year Tm | G | Att | Com | Pct | Yds | Y/A | TD | Int | Rate |
|---------|----|------------|------------|------|-------------|------|-----------|-----|------|
| 1938 GB | 11 | 91 | 37 | 40.7 | 659 | 7.24 | 6 | 10 | 55.9 |
| 1939 GB | 11 | 103 | 43 | 41.7 | 749 | 7.27 | 6 | 5 | 66.4 |
| 1940 GB | 10 | 150 | 68 | 45.3 | 1037 | 6.91 | 8 | 12 | 53.1 |
| 1941 GB | 11 | 206 | 117 | 56.8 | 1479 | 7.18 | 15 | 11 | 81.4 |
| 1942 GB | 11 | 268 | 146 | 54.5 | 2021 | 7.54 | 24 | 14 | 87.0 |
| 5 Yrs | 54 | 818 | 411 | 50.2 | 5945 | 7.27 | 59 | 52 | 72.6 |
