

A NIGHTMARE

By Ron Reid

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What started it was a simple idea. What it has become is a long-running nightmare with the bureaucrats who inhabit the U.S. Patent Office. Where it may lead, only God and football know.

Consider then the evolution of the ordeal known by Jim Schneider, a 61-year-old Pittsburgh businessman who, nine years ago, came up with a different method for numbering football uniforms. On several occasions since, he has had cause to wish he had tried to build a better mousetrap.

What Schneider hoped to do was make fan identification of players quicker, easier and more informative. Toward that end, he devised a new system of uniform numbering -- one he still believes will give the fan instant recognition of every player on the field without need of a game program. (He is hoping the new United States Football League will reach the same conclusion before it dresses out its players for its maiden season next March.

Schneider's idea for pro football is simple: Instead of the traditional two-digit numbers, he proposes using a letter and a single number to identify the player as to his offensive or defensive position.

Under Schneider's system, every offensive player would be assigned an odd number, every defensive player an even number. The position of every player would be coded by a letter. (Q- quarterback, T- tackle, G-guard, L-linebacker, etc.)

Terry Bradshaw, then -- to pick a name purely at random -- would have Q-3 on his uniform and helmet. Lynn Swann would be W- 1, John Stallworth, W-3, Jack Lambert, L-4, and Mel Blount, B-2. As is now the practice, each player's name also would adorn the back of his jersey. Schneider agrees that college squads with their larger rosters, would make two digit numbers necessary.

"I thought this would be so much easier for fan identification," says Schneider. "Especially for the games on television and for women who don't watch football all the time and don't know the players all that well."

With a claim that his system would also be a boon to keener officiating, Schneider adds, "Every time I've shown this idea to my friends, they say, 'Hey, Jim, you've really got something there.' And I just know it will work."

But unfortunately for Schneider, no one in the National Football League, the Canadian Football League, the NCAA, or even the nether regions of the WPIAL (ed.: local school athletic association) has yet to agree.

Schneider has written or contacted various spokesmen in each of those organizations; once even offering to buy an entire consignment of grade school team uniforms if they bore his letters and numbers, only to receive a polite, "No thanks."

"Your system is interesting and we appreciate your interest in devising such a plan for consideration by the league," wrote Jim Boston, the Steelers' business manager, in a letter to Schneider in 1973. "Maybe at some future date there will be a new plan adopted and possibly it will be your own plan."

But if Schneider has not been able to get off the schneid with football people, the frustration has been small compared to that caused by his continuing warfare with the U.S. Patent Office, which began with his first application in 1974.

In repetitive attempts to prove that his football code satisfies the four tests necessary for a patent -- that it is useful, novel, of "non-obvious difference to one of ordinary skill in the art" and that it is a machine, manufacture, composition or method -- Schneider has accumulated a 1 3/4-pound sheaf of legal correspondence, government fees and a long siege of bewilderment.

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Each time the Patent Office has denied Schneider's application, the occasion has been marked by a bale of documents -- baffling, semi-legible, incomprehensible, Xeroxed, Catch-22 -- each apparently relating to Schneider's idea for football as apple pie does to a surfboard.

Offered by the patent examiner as proof that Schneider's football number code does not satisfy the four tests, the "evidence" includes a variety of previous patent applications, diagrams and product illustrations.

Among other documents, they include:

- * One entirely written in French.
- * Several dealing with board games that appear to be new versions of draughts, chess, checkers, Go, Bingo and skittles.
- * One for an all-purpose heated athletic bench called the Jenkins' Hot Seat.
- * One dated in 1897.
- * One of 1937 vintage which appears to be the precursor of the broadcaster's flip card, bearing roster names and numbers "for use by those ... listening to the game over radio."
- * A picture of the sideline kicking net used by Pat Studstill when he punted for the Los Angeles Rams.
- * A totally unreadable copy of a magazine article, which appears to be a story about different colored football pants for different football positions.

It should come as no great surprise then, to know it took Schneider until 1979 to get the Patent Office to recognize that his idea applied to human football rather than a simulated board game.

And he might have dropped the whole idea but for the announced birth of the USFL. Schneider, as you might expect, is hoping to turn a few bucks off his idea and, with the new league gearing up for cable television, his hope has been renewed.

Some dreams continue, you see, even through a nightmare.