

FRIEDMAN

by Bob Carroll

The news that Benny Friedman was dead came as a shock. I never met Benny --never even talked to him on the telephone. Yet, somehow I felt almost like I'd lost a friend.

I enjoyed a lot of time with Benny in a way. In the hours I spent reading and re-reading xeroxed game accounts from years 1927 through 1934, I saw so many "Friedman's" I could spell it in my sleep. Today, when a player is the cornerstone of a team, writers sometimes call him "The Franchise." In Benny's case, headline writers took that one step farther by often omitting the name of Benny's team, as in "Friedman defeats Bears." For no other player of the period -- not even Grange -- was this done so consistently. And, when the team was admitted to the headline, it was usually in the possessed form of "Friedman's Giants" or "Friedman's Wolverines."

The headlines were accurate. Benny Friedman was quite simply the best offensive player of his day. He was a good kicker, an outstanding runner, and the best forward passer ever seen to that time.

In 1929, to get him for the New York Giants, owner Tim Mara bought the whole Detroit Wolverine team! It was a bargain.

Particularly in his first four seasons, Benny devastated the opposition. From 1927 through 1930, he scored more than 150 points and averaged better than a touchdown pass per game. Remember, this was in an age when some teams went whole seasons without once throwing for a touchdown.

In his last four seasons, he was slowed by a leg injury, coaching duties, and some less-than-outstanding support. Still, the threat was there, and, on occasion, it was delivered. Ironically, it was only near the end of his career that the league began keeping stats.

That's one of the reasons, I've heard, that Benny isn't in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Without complete stats, it's said, his career cannot be completely evaluated.

I question that. The game has changed so much since the '20s and '30s that statistics just can't be compared. Bronko Nagurski's yearly rushing marks don't look very impressive laid alongside Walter Payton's. Do we drum the Bronk out of the Hall?

I'm slowly becoming convinced that the existing stats of the '30s actually hurt the reputations of stars such as Gutowsky, Caddel, Presnell, Danowski, and Newman when they are misinterpreted by modern critics who have little knowledge of the two-way, ground-oriented conditions under which they were made. I'm sure if we had a record of every pass Friedman ever threw, his career would pale before the totals rung up by Dan Fouts.

But, it's the game that has changed! Fouts is one of the best passers today; Benny was THE passer of his time and everybody else was third or fourth.

I've heard it argued by some of Benny's contemporaries that he didn't play much defense. Perhaps not. At Michigan, he was regarded as the best defender on the team, but toward the end of his career -- when most of the critics saw him -- he may well have realized that his job was to stay healthy and lead the offense. All I know is that in his first few years he seemed to intercept an awful lot of opponents' passes.

Some people are bothered by his relatively short career. He's listed at eight years, but he only played in one game in 1934. And, from 1931, he missed some games. Without a doubt, the important part of his career was from 1927 to 1930. We have to remember that only a few stars played a full four years in those days. There just wasn't enough money to keep most players coming back once they found a "real" career.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 4, No. 12 (1982)

What counts is what a player did while he was on the scene. Look at the records of Benny's teams in those first four years:

1927 - Cleveland Bulldogs	8 - 4 - 1
1928 - Detroit Wolverines	7 - 2 - 1
1929 - New York Giants	13 - 1 - 1
1930 - New York Giants	13 - 4 - 0

Of course, he didn't do it alone, but he was the key man.

P.F.R.A. member David Neft, in *Pro Football: The Early Years*, lists Friedman's TD pass totals by season. It's interesting to look at the next highest totals:

Friedman TDP	2nd place TDP
1927 - 13	McBride, NYG - 6
1928 - 11	Kelly, NYG - 8
1929 - 19	Dunn, GB; Nevers, Cards - 6
1930 - 14	Dunn, GB - 10

During the next three years, he threw 3, 5 and 5 touchdowns, finishing 6th, 3rd, and 2nd.

Another knock on Benny that I've heard is that he was less than humble in putting himself forward as a candidate for Hall of Fame membership. I doubt if the selectors are influenced by such things. They're pros too. Perhaps Benny was immodest. Perhaps he had a right to be.

Anyway, those are some of the knocks I've heard. Perhaps they explain why he's not in the Hall of Fame. I'm not pushing for his election. It can't mean anything to him now, and -- for those of us who've taken the time to study his career -- it can't inflate his reputation.

But let me make one last comparison. When Jim Brown ran, every other runner was compared to him. When Don Hutson caught, all other receivers were ranked against him. When Benny Friedman was passing, no one was compared to him. He was unique.