

## G.P.M.: George Preston Marshall

Courtesy The Pro Football Hall of Fame

George Preston Marshall was operating a laundry in Washington, D.C. when he broke onto the National Football League scene in 1932 as a part-owner of the new Boston Braves franchise. His three partners dropped out of the picture after just one season but Marshall stayed for the next three decades to contribute to pro football in an unique and most valuable way.

Particularly during a 10-season period from 1936 through 1945, Marshall's teams were among the perennial contenders for NFL championships. Marshall renamed his team the Redskins in 1933 and moved the club to Washington in 1937. The 1936 Boston Redskins won the NFL Eastern Division crown. The next year in Washington, the Redskins won their first overall NFL championship, an honor they were to repeat five years later in 1942. During this period, the Washington team also won Eastern crowns in 1940, 1943 and 1945.

Some of the great players of history also performed for Marshall's teams during those early years. The whirling dervish halfback, Cliff Battles from West Virginia Wesleyan, and the mammoth tackle, Turk Edwards from Washington State, joined the 1932 Boston Braves and were powerful forces during the team's formative years. In 1936, Notre Dame's great end, Wayne Millner, came aboard and, in 1937, it was Sammy Baugh, the incomparable passing whiz from Texas Christian. Like Marshall himself, all are now members of the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

But as successful as Marshall's elevens were, the flamboyant owner was destined to leave his biggest mark in the administrative areas not directly associated with the makeup of the team on the field. The Grafton, W. Va., native was the first to introduce true color and showmanship on pro football gridirons by organizing the Redskins team band and developing the concept of gala halftime shows. Until Marshall came along, no one had ever thought of such a thing.

Marshall was also the first to genuinely promote his team through the use of professional publicity and public relations methods. Even as early as the 1933 season, when he gained full control of the club and renamed it the Redskins, he had his club line up for the team photo dressed in war paint, feathers and full headdress. When the fabled Baugh signed a Redskins

contract in 1937, Marshall's publicity campaign made him the most famous pro football player before he ever threw his first NFL pass.

The flamboyant owner quickly became a force in league affairs through his efforts to improve the playing rules to open up the game and make it a more crowd-pleasing sport. Marshall was also the moving force behind the NFL's decision in 1933 to split the league into two equal divisions with one season-ending showdown between the two champions to determine an overall title winner.

The original Boston Braves team played in Braves Field in 1932 and wound up with a break-even 4-4-2 record. But they did not break even financially. When the books showed a \$46,000 loss, his three partners jumped ship. Marshall merely viewed this development as the opportunity to "do his own thing" and he quickly went about doing just that. For the next several years, his startling moves kept the pro football world on edge. Before the 1933 season, he renamed the team Redskins and moved it to Fenway Park, home of the Red Sox of baseball's American League. For the next two years, the Redskins, under their full-blooded Indian coach, Will "Lone Star" Dietz, finished at the .500 mark.

So Marshall, with his ever-present public relations intuition, hired a local Boston athletic hero, Eddie Casey from Harvard, to coach the Redskins. The 1935 Redskins won only two of 11 games. So Marshall turned to New York Giants' end Ray Flaherty and the future Hall of Famer accepted the job on the condition that the Boston owner would stay off the field and in the stands. While this was contrary to Marshall's general nature, the two worked together in comparative harmony until Flaherty entered the service in 1943.

Flaherty came through as a rookie coach and the Redskins won the NFL East by defeating the New York Giants, 14-0, in the season's final game. But when Marshall decided the Boston fans weren't enthusiastic enough about his team's success, he moved the championship game to the Polo Grounds in New York, even though the Redskins had earned the home field advantage. The Green Bay Packers upended the Redskins, 21-6.

It was the last game a Marshall team would play under the Boston banner. The NFL approved a shift of the franchise to Washington before the 1937 season and there Marshall's flamboyant, attention-getting tactics seemed to blossom into full bloom. Washington fan enthusiasm was instant as the Redskins marched toward a second straight divisional title. When the team went to New York for a showdown battle with the Giants, more than 10,000 Washington fans followed on a special train.

Marshall's insistence on keeping in the middle of things, regardless of whatever controversy that might have been caused, may indirectly have led to the 73-0 slaughter his Washington team suffered in the 1940 championship game with the Chicago Bears. Three week earlier, the Redskins had beaten the Bears, 7-3, in a game that ended in a controversy near the Washington goal line. The Bears, feeling they had been robbed of a probable victory, complained bitterly about the officiating.

Marshall responded quickly in the public prints: "The Bears are front-runners. Quitters. They are not a second-half team, just a bunch of cry-babies." Copies of Marshall's remarks were placed in the Bears locker room as the Chicago team prepared for the return match. George Halas had his team at its angry peak just about kickoff time. The Bears scored on the second play from scrimmage and history's worst rout was underway. Many historians feel Marshall's badgering of his opponents played a major role in the historic outcome.

For all the excitement his teams produced on the playing field and image he brought to the sport of pro football, Marshall's star may well have shined the brightest on the legislative front. After just one season

in the NFL, Marshall's influence was a major factor in several rule changes that had lasting effect on the crowd appeal of the game. When the Chicago Bears and Portsmouth Spartans met indoors in cramped Chicago Stadium to decide the 1932 NFL championship, Marshall was one of the most interested viewers. While the Bears-Spartans showdown was a last-minute idea, Marshall immediately saw the advantage of splitting the league into two divisions with a final championship game between the winner of each division. Marshall's viewpoint prevailed and the NFL championship series, started in 1933, became an almost instant smash success.

Because of the small indoor field at the 1932 title game, certain ground rules were put into effect supposedly just for that game. But the Boston owner felt that some of the rules were good ones and he pushed for permanent adoption of (1) creating hashmarks 15 yards inbounds, (2) moving the goal posts from the back of the end zone to the goal line and (3) making a forward pass legal anywhere behind the line of scrimmage, instead of five yards behind the line. All three changes were adopted with eventual positive results.

At Marshall's funeral in 1969, NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle ably summed up the master showman's unusual gift to pro football: "Mr. Marshall was an outspoken foe of the status quo when most were content with it. His fertile imagination and vision brought vital improvements to the structure and presentation of the game. Pro football today does in many ways reflect his personality. It has his imagination, style, zest, dedication, openness, brashness, strength and courage. We all are beneficiaries of what his dynamic personality helped shape over more than three decades."