

GEORGE TRAFTON: THE TOUGHEST, MEANEST, AND MOST ORNERY

By Don Smith
For the Pro Football Hall of Fame

There was very little of the commodity known as consistency in the early years of the National Football League. Teams organized, joined the league and disbanded with monotonous regularity. Players came quickly and left the same way in relatively short careers. Those who did stick around for any length of time invariably played for several teams, many times more than one the same year.

But there was one notable exception to this general pattern of confusion. That exception was a player named George Trafton and, over thirteen years from 1920 through 1932, he was the durable, hard-hitting center of the Chicago Bears. At that stage of pro football history, he is the only player of note to have even played that long, let alone with one team.

Only two teams, in fact, survived those first thirteen campaigns. One was the Chicago Cardinals and the other was Trafton's Bears eleven, which was known as the Decatur Staleys at the time it joined the NFL as a charter member in 1920.

Trafton, a 6-2, 235 pound blockbuster, earned all-NFL honors four times in thirteen years. There can be little doubt that the Chicago native was an excellent player with a deserved reputation as a superior competitor. In 1964, he was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. He also had the reputation of being able to roughhouse with the most storied gridiron ruffians.

Red Grange, the fabled halfback who played both with and against Trafton during his NFL days, once opined that Big George was "the toughest, meanest, most ornery critter alive."

After Trafton joined Green Bay as a line coach in 1944, the Packers press book reported: "Green Bay fans never liked Trafton when he was with the Bears because they saw him as a truculent, blustery competitor who tried to arouse their contempt. Now that he is with the Packers, they can see the result of his hard-driving will to win. He uses every opportunity to show his charges what his experience has told him is the proper way to win."

During his active career, many felt that Trafton's "proper way to win" was, among other noble tactics, to be more than a little "dirty" at times. One writer reported that Trafton was strongly disliked in every city of the NFL except Green Bay and Rock Island. In those places, "he was hated."

One afternoon in 1920 in Rock Island, the Staleys and Independents were locked in a particularly violent struggle. Every play ended in a tangle of bodies, with Trafton always in the center. Four Rock Island players were put out of action in a space of twelve plays and the blame for this was directed at Trafton. Rock Island fans loudly voiced threats of bodily harm for Big George after the game.

In advance of the game, Trafton had learned that Rock Island had assigned a lesser player to stick with him and remove him from the game by any means necessary. But Trafton disposed of the hatchet man early in the game. When the villain was carried from the game, legend has it that the imprint of cleats was clearly discernible from his forehead to his chin.

There was another incident that day that inflamed the fans. "I tackled a Rock Island halfback and, after I hit him," Trafton once recalled, "he spun against a fence that was very close to the field and broke a leg. After that, the fans really did get on me."

When the final gun sounded, Trafton sprinted for the nearest exit. Passing the Staley bench, he grabbed a sweat shirt from Staley's trainer Andy Lotshaw who hastily counselled Trafton to "put it on and hide your uniform number." Trafton leaped into a waiting cab but, when rocks came crashing through the cab's

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windows, George leaped out and raced down the highway with a pack of angry Rock Island rooters not far behind. Finally, he hitched a ride from a non-participant and escaped from town.

Bears coach George Halas, taking note of Trafton's "experience" in handling the dangers inherent with pro football in Rock Island, decided to entrust the Bears' game share of \$7,000 to the big center the next time the Bears played in Rock Island. "I knew that if trouble came," Halas explained, "Trafton would be running for his life. I would only be running for \$7,000."

Another year in Rock Island, Trafton hooked up in a rowdy feud with the Independents' center, Lou Kolls, a man whose size and temperament were similar to Trafton's. In spite of repeated actions that normally would draw penalties, the officials ignored the private feud. "If we tried to discipline them, we'd be calling penalties all day long," referee Bobie Cahn explained. "We figured we might as well let them kill each other."

Trafton, however, was far more than just a roughneck on the gridiron. He was a skilled defensive player and he had the moves and reactions of a halfback to go with his size and strength. He was one of the first centers to rove on defense and the very first on offense to center the football with one hand. There may, however, have been a practical reason – he was missing the index finger on his left hand.

Still, Trafton, who defiantly wore the supposedly unlucky No. 13 for all of his NFL campaigns, developed the reputation of never making a bad snap, as the Bears press book once said, "in 201 games or 158 hours of actual competition."

George's football skills first attracted attention when he played for Oak Park High School in the Chicago suburbs. He enlisted in the Army in 1918 and was captain of the Camp Grant team. Scores of colleges sought Trafton's services, but he chose Notre Dame. His career in South Bend was brief. Knute Rockne, the famous Notre Dame coach, caught him playing semi-pro football one Sunday and personally had him expelled.

But with the Bears, anything went and George soon was a team captain and a leader who could make the big plays and sometimes out-smart the opposition as well. In one game against the Packers, Verne Lewellen, Green Bay's splendid punter, dropped back to kick from his goal line. Trafton ripped through the Packers' defense to block the punt for a Bears touchdown.

"Who blocked that kick?" a disgusted Lewellen asked after the play.

"Bill Hewitt did," Trafton replied, pointing to the Bears' rookie end.

Later in the game the same situation developed and the Packers over-shifted to stop the innocent Hewitt. The ball was snapped and again Trafton blocked the kick and scored a touchdown. The Bears won 14-10 strictly on the strength of Trafton's heroics.

Trafton wound up his career as an active player in 1932 and played an important role in the Bears' drive to the NFL title for the first time since 1921. In his final league game, the Bears defeated Portsmouth 9-0 for the league championship in a game played indoors at Chicago Stadium.

Trafton followed his playing career with coaching stints with the Bears, the Packers and the Los Angeles Rams. He proved to be an excellent coach who could wield so-so forward units into championship-caliber lines. But his lasting reputation came from his playing exploits. For the first 13 years of the National Football League, there just wasn't any other player quite like him.