

KILROY WAS THERE

By Bob Barnett and Bob Carroll

[The following was excerpted from an article by the authors which will appear in the initial issue of SPORTS HERITAGE, discussing rough play in the 1950s. Additional material has been added for THE COFFIN CORNER readers.]

When the New England Patriots won their way into the Super Bowl last year, most fans across the country were caught by surprise. Nevertheless, many experts had been saying for years the Pats had the most talent in the NFL. If that was true, much of the credit belongs to present vice president and former director of player personnel Frank J. Kilroy.

Kilroy's ability to identify outstanding prospects borders on the legendary. For nearly three decades he's held front office positions with the Philadelphia Eagles, Washington Redskins, Dallas Cowboys, and Patriots. As one football insider says, "He is a genius at picking players. Wherever he goes, they are always talent rich."

This season, the Patriots have started strong again. Their rugged performance in the year's second game – when they knocked several New York Jets out of a 20-6 New England win – can only be credited indirectly to Kilroy, but the hospital roll reminded veteran observers of the way Kilroy himself played the game.

From 1943 through 1955, Frank "Bucko" Kilroy played in the line for the Philadelphia Eagles. He started as a two-way tackle and wound up as a middle guard on defense, the position which earned him the most notoriety.

Bucko was not known for his gentleness. He was once described by a Chicago newspaperman as "a knuckle-duster in knee pants who gives our fellows that boyish grin while knocking their teeth loose in a pileup."

The Chicago writer may have been swayed by the fact that the Eagles supplanted the Bears as the NFL's top team in the years right after World War II. Led by running back Steve Van Buren, the Birds won three straight division titles from 1947 through 1949. In 1948 and '49 they took the league championship.

"The Eagles then were like the Raiders today," says Kilroy now. "We were tough and intimidated teams. The nature of our offense added to our toughness. Our backs were taught to cut back against the grain. That put the blockers on the other side of the tacklers. We blindsided most of the defensive players. They didn't see us and we demolished them!"

Some complained the Eagles' style also demolished the rule book. "Our answer to [charges of] dirty football was that it was the reply of losers."

Most fans wouldn't have criticized Bucko's play quite so harshly as they did in Chicago, but he definitely had a reputation as one of the league's tough guys.

Bucko was proud of the label but he drew the line when the criticism became libelous. "In 1955 LIFE MAGAZINE wrote an article called 'Savagery On Sunday' in which they depicted me as the villain in pro football. They said I shouldn't be allowed in pro football and that the Giants finally caught up with me and hurt my knee.

"It was a bunch of garbage. I sued them and won in a jury trial. I only got \$25,000. But I guess \$25,000 was a lot of money then. It was more than I got for a season of pro football."

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More than one foe alliterated Bucko's nickname to "Killer" Kilroy – apparently with good reason. Nevertheless, Bucko was tossed out of only two games in his 13-year career, a tribute either to the subtle ways he handled his mayhem or to a high number of nearsighted officials employed by the NFL.

The second expulsion – the Bray Case – is still remembered fondly by Kilroy.

"It was a preseason game with the Bears. Ray Bray [the Bears big, veteran guard] had a mask on and I didn't. He came down and hit me on the nose with his mask. It split my nose open so I retaliated. I was on the ground so I just kicked up and kicked him in the groin."

Bucko was fined \$250 by NFL Commissioner Bert Bell, who may have arrived at that figure by reading Kilroy's listed weight in a program – the going rate was \$50 per banishment. Now \$250 might pay for a modern player's breakfast, but in Kilroy's day it represented a fair-size chunk of change. In his best season, the Eagles deigned to pay him \$8,000 and this was several years before that.

But if Bucko was chastened by the fine, his wife was livid. Bell kept the league office in Philadelphia, and a short time later he ran into the angry Mrs. Kilroy. "You didn't fine my husband," she snapped, "you just cost me a new spring coat."

Bell was a fair man. "I'll tell you what I'll do. You go home and tell Bucko that if he behaves himself and doesn't get tossed out of any more games this season, why, I'll rescind the fine."

According to Kilroy, he was a model of deportment for the rest of the schedule. After the final game, Bell gave him a check and made him endorse it over to Mrs. Kilroy.

"That was the deal," Bucko laughs, "but the joke of the thing was that he gave her back \$500. So she called Bert and said, 'Bert, you made a mistake,' and he said, 'Boy, am I lucky. If Bucko had gotten his hands on it I would have never seen the other \$250.'"

Bucko's reputation for rock-'em-sock-'em football may have been deserved, but so was his recognition as one of the top linemen of his day. In 1949, the NEW YORK DAILY NEWS named him a first team all-NFL guard. They repeated the honor in 1950, putting him on their offensive team (Bray was named to the first team on defense.) Bucko was also selected for the Pro Bowl after the 1952 and 1953 seasons.

The honors take on even more significance when it is remembered that the Eagles fell on hard times in the early 1950's. Van Buren's career was ended by an injury, quarterback Tommy Thompson retired, and head coach Earle "Greasy" Neale was sacked. Despite the efforts of a brilliant few – Pete Pihos, Chuck Bednarik, Kilroy, a couple of others – the Eagles spent most of the decade looking up at the rest of the league.

A knee injury finally caught up with Kilroy. He retired after the 1955 season to join the Eagles' coaching staff. From there he moved into the front office and began honing his ability as a talent judge.

With more than 40 years' service in the NFL, Kilroy is also in a unique position to judge the quality of play. His estimate of the time when he played: "It was a rougher game, but it wasn't as good a game as it is today. It's a better spectator game now."

Why was it rougher then? "It was the nature of the game," Kilroy believes. "For one thing, the forearm made it rougher. It isn't legal today. A guy with a forearm can break a 2 x 4, but you never see someone punch a 2 x 4. He'd break his hand. Those forearms were the reasons there were a lot of broken hands, broken jaws, and broken faces."

"I think the glory days of the NFL as far as personnel were the late '40s and early '50s because all the players were back from World War II. They'd been killing Germans and Japanese, and then later came the Korean War. These kids today were never in a war."

"When the All-America Football Conference folded, there were only 12 teams, with 35 players on a team. That meant that 60 percent of the players today would not have been playing."

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"It was a survival of the fittest – a different mentality. We were taught to love your God, respect your elders, and fear no son of a bitch that walks."

BUCKO KILROY

DG-OT-DT-OG

Francis Joseph Kilroy

6-02 243 Notre Dame; Temple

Northeast Catholic HS [Philadelphia, PA]

Born 05 / 30 / 21, Philadelphia, PA

1943 Phil-Pit; 1944-55 Philadelphia NFL