

THE NFL'S SIX MOST SIGNIFICANT GAMES

by Stan Grosshandler

The National Football League has achieved a position of prominence through progressive steps as rule changes, both on the field and administrative, and landmark games. While these historic games may not have been the most exciting ever played they left an indelible mark on league history.

Sports historians, asked to name the landmark games of the NFL, cited a variety of contests; however the following six games received unanimous mention.

Red Grange draws 70,000 to the Polo Grounds

Bears 19 - Giants 7: December 7, 1925

Few athletes have ever known the fame and adulation received by Red Grange, a product of the 1920's "Golden Age of Sport." To this day he remains one of the most famous football players of all time.

Within a week after his final game for Illinois, Grange signed with the Chicago Bears for a percentage of gate receipts. To take advantage of Grange's popularity the Bears immediately took off on a whirlwind tour playing 10 games in 15 days.

70,000 fans jammed into New York's Polo Grounds (capacity 57,000), the largest crowd to witness a football game in the City's history, to watch Grange and the Bears play the Giants.

With Grange hampered by injuries the fans had little to cheer about until late in the game when Red intercepted a pass running it back 35 yards for the TD as the Bears won 19 to 7.

His share of the gate was between \$25 and \$30,000.

Prior to this game pro football was the much maligned step-child of the college game. The players were considered undesirables, coaches warned their players about turning pro, and many college mentors declared the best collegiate teams could beat any pro aggregation. Even Red Grange's father did not want him to turn pro before he graduated. Indeed, the league later passed a rule forbidding the signing of college players before they graduate because of Grange.

Historian and Publisher David Neft points out the real significance of this game was that it proved the professional game could draw not only in cities such as Chicago and ST. Louis; but in the biggest market of all New York City.

Prior to this game New York Giants owner Tim Mara was just about ready to throw in the sponge as his team could not compete against the many local college powers in New York at the time. Encouraged by the draw of this one particular game Mara determined to stick it out and developed one of the most successful sports franchises of all time.

Indoors in 1932

Bears 9 - Spartans 0: December 19, 1932

The NFL of 1932 was an unwieldy conglomeration of eight teams. The Chicago bears finished with a 6-1-6 record, the Green Bay Packers 10-3-1 and the Portsmouth Spartans 6-1-4. It was determined the Bears and Spartans had tied for the lead and a play-off game was arranged to crown a champion.

The game was scheduled to be played in Chicago December 7; however, a week long blizzard made it impossible to play outside so the game was taken indoors to the Chicago Stadium. Dirt left over from a circus provided the turf and the size of building limited the field to 80 yards.

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The game was decided in the final moments when on fourth down fullback Bronko Nagurski faked a plunge into the line, stopped, straightened up and passed one yard to Red Grange in the end zone for the touchdown. The Spartans protested that Bronko was not the required five yards behind the line when he passed; but the officials held firm and the Bears were the champs.

According to illustrator and historian Bob Carroll, this game left its imprint several ways.

There had been ten ties during the 1932 season with four of them scoreless. The owners realized there is nothing like a tie to turn off the fans; therefore they decided to encourage scoring. Prior to the next season passing was allowed from anywhere behind the line of scrimmage, the goal posts were placed on the goal line, and a ball downed on or near the side lines was brought in ten yards. Provisions for a league champion were made when the league was divided into two divisions of five teams each, the winners of each to play a championship game.

All this the result of a game played indoors on a 80 yard field.

The 73-0 Game

Bears 73 - Redskins 0: December 8, 1940

At the beginning of the 1940 season the Chicago Bears were acclaimed to be the greatest football team ever assembled. Six members, Coach and owner George Halas, Sid Luckman, George McAfee, Bulldog Turner, Danny Fortmann, and Joe Stydahar would eventually be elected to the Hall of Fame.

The Bears finished with a less than perfect 8-3 record including a lose to the Redskins. The Bears claimed they should have won the Skin game; for the officials had failed to call a penalty when Bill Osmanski was held in the end zone and could not catch what would have been the winning pass.

The Redskins called them a bunch a cry babies and the papers were full of condemnation of the Bears. George Halas said nothing other than to post all the newspapers in the locker room. The effect was far beyond the "Papa Bears" wildest imagination.

On the second play of the game fullback Bill Osmanski ran 68 yards for a touchdown. The Bears never let up with the final score 73 to 0.

Jim Campbell, former historian of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, cites the fact this one game demonstrated the great explosive potential of the T formation.

The T formation dates back to the beginnings of the game but had gradually been replaced by newer formations. In 1940 the Bears were the only NFL team employing this formation. Coach Halas had asked Clark Shaughnessy one of the great creative offensive coaches, to help him. Innovations as the man in motion, draw plays, counter plays and multiple passing routes were added.

Shaughnessy then moved to Stanford where he took over a team that had won one game the previous season, installed the T, and went undefeated. When a few weeks after the Bear game, Stanford beat favored Nebraska in the Rose Bowl, the rush to adopt the T began!

The Browns Were For Real

Browns 35 - Eagles 10: September 16, 1950

The first real rival to the NFL, The All American Football Conference (AAFC) appeared in 1946. The Cleveland Browns under coach Paul Brown totally dominated it for four years, attendance fell due to lack of competition; yet expenses rose as both leagues competed for players. A merger was made in early 1950 and the Browns joined the NFL.

Either by coincidence or design their very first game was against the Philadelphia Eagles, the most dominant NFL team in the post- war era. The Eagles had won three straight division and one league title in the past three years featuring future Hall of Famers Steve Van Buren, Pete Pihos, Chuch Bednarik, and Alex Wojciechowicz.

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Philadelphia planned to welcome the Browns to the NFL with the biggest thrashing they had ever seen; however the Eagles failed to consider coach Paul Brown, one of the most meticulous strategists the game has ever known.

So deftly did he design his offense with Otto Graham either passing, handing the ball on a draw to his devastating fullback, Marion Motley, or pitching out to a cadre of fleet halfbacks that the famed Eagle defense was unable to contain the Browns.

Coach Brown had carefully prepared for the game. He reasoned that if on each play he split his line a fraction of a step further he would eventually spread and isolate the Eagle line allowing big holes for Motley and the rest to barrel through.

The final score was 35 to 10 Cleveland.

Paul Brown developed the science of coaching to an art never before seen in the NFL. His exact attention to details, his brief but well planned practices, and his year round dedication to the game had been previously unknown. Using messenger guards he was the first coach to send in every play. He built his running game around Motley, designed his defense around guard Bill Willis and his punting around Horace Gillom. All three were black! Thus taking a giant step in league integration.

In many ways Brown changed coaching in the NFL.

This one game proved that the AAFC had indeed been a major league and that Cleveland was not only a major league club; but a team the other powers would have to reckon with for a long time.

Sudden Death

Colts 23 - Giants 17: December 28, 1958

Thirty two years later there are romanticists who claim the 1958 Championship Game between the Baltimore Colts and New York Giants was the greatest game ever played.

Using a versatile offense blending passing and running, the Colts won the Western Division title meeting the veteran New York Giants Eastern champs for the title.

The lead had changed three times during regulation play when with 1' 28 left and 86 yards from the Giant goal line Colt Quarterback John Unitas engineered a drive ending with a game tying field goal. The game was now in "Sudden Death Overtime."

Though Sudden Death was on the books since 1955, this was the first time it had ever been used.

Eight minutes and 15 seconds into overtime Colt Alan Ameche crashed across for the game winning score.

The timing of this game was perfect. Television had begun to take a firm grip on the sports loving public. Over 45 million homes were treated to this game, liked what they saw, and demanded more. This game truly catapulted pro football into the space age of television.

All football historians selected this game as the most significant in the history of the league.

The Baltimore Colts were not a flash in the pan club as they dominated NFL play for several seasons after this momentous game and presented Coach Webb Ewbank plus John Unitas, Lenny Moore, Raymond Berry, Jim Parker, Gino Marchetti, and Art Donovan to the Hall of Fame.

The Guaranteed Win

Jets 16 - Colts 7: January 12, 1969

Three days before Super Bowl III, Jet Quarterback Joe Namath astounded the media by making an unconditional guarantee of a Jet victory in Super bowl III. All nodded smugly knowing the Jets were as much as 23 point underdogs. So confident were the Baltimore Colt players of a win, many had already spent their winners share.

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On game day Joe Namath passed, Matt Snell ran, and Jim Turner kicked the Jets to a 16-7 win. The Colts never really knew what had hit them.

Joe Horrigan, historian of the Pro Football Hall of Fame points to several accomplishments of this game. He feels the use of Namath's guarantee to generate interest was one of pro football's greatest marketing success stories. Horrigan points to the fact the first two games were not even sell outs; however after game III every one has been a sell out, indicating the NFL came to realize how powerful a good marketing campaign can be.

A second major accomplishment was it proved parity of leagues so the AFL did not suffer the fate of the AAFC which was disassembled and only three teams integrated into the NFL. AFL joined the older league intact and with equal status in all facets of the game thanks to Joe Namath's guarantee.

The NFL is a rapidly expanding organization of gigantic proportion and will certainly have landmark games in the future but for the time being these are the most significant six.