

## **Jock Sutherland: Forgotten Coaching Great**

*by Jack Ziegler*

Arthur Daley, famed "Sports of the Times" columnist, called him "one of the greatest coaches who ever lived." Art Rooney, the Steelers' owner, credited him with putting "Pittsburgh on the professional football map." Pop Warner, legendary coach from the early part of this century, said simply: "He was one of the best I ever coached."

Largely forgotten today, John Bain "Jock" Sutherland was, from 1919 to 1948, a coaching colossus who bestrode the college and professional football worlds. Born in desperate poverty in 1889 in Cooper-Angus, Scotland, Sutherland emigrated to America in his early teens. In a young manhood reminiscent of an Horatio Alger story, Sutherland worked his way through Oberlin Academy waiting tables and shoveling snow. In 1914 he entered the University of Pittsburgh's Dentistry School. Unfamiliar with American football (he'd played soccer in Scotland) until he saw it played at Pitt, Sutherland quickly took to the game. At 6'1", 200 pounds, Sutherland became an All-American guard at Pitt under the tutelage of Pop Warner. He also found time to excel as a collegiate heavyweight boxer and hammer thrower.

World War I found Sutherland an officer in the Army, coaching his first football team at Camp Greenleaf. With the end of the war, Sutherland briefly opened a dental practice in Duquesne, Pennsylvania, but then accepted a head coaching post at Lafayette College. From 1919 to 1923 Sutherland directed Lafayette to a 33-8-2 record, including an undefeated season in 1921. When Warner left Pitt in 1923, Sutherland seemed the obvious replacement (perhaps many on the Pitt campus remembered that Sutherland's Lafayette squads had twice blanked strong Panther teams).

At Pitt, Sutherland earned a reputation as one of the country's great college coaches. Against tough opposition from 1924 to 1938 Sutherland compiled an astounding 111-20-12 record. Sutherland produced four unbeaten teams, two national championships, and four trips to the Rose Bowl (the Panthers won only once, beating Washington 21-0 in 1937). Recruiting mainly from the mines and mill towns of western Pennsylvania, eastern Ohio and northern West Virginia, Sutherland acquired tough physical players well suited to his driving single-wing offense. Twenty-four of his players became All-Americans. But in the late thirties, Pitt de-emphasized football and Sutherland felt pressured into leaving the University he loved and saw as symbolic of his success in America. Years later Sutherland revealed his frustration to Pittsburgh Post-Gazette columnist Al Abrams: "Why, why [didn't] they want me? Everything was done to make things unpleasant for me. I could do little else but resign."

Sutherland spent 1939 out of football. Despite offers from Navy, Ohio State, and Yale, Sutherland went to the pros in 1940, signing with the lackluster Brooklyn Dodgers. The Dodgers, who had finished 4-6-1 under Patsy Clark in 1939, became new men under Sutherland's leadership. As a result of Sutherland's authoritarian direction, rigorous conditioning routines, and blackboard drills, the Dodgers challenged Washington for the 1940 Eastern title. The Brooks finished 8-3-0, just one game behind Hall of Fame coach Ray Flaherty's Redskins. Especially effective for Sutherland was league MVP Ace Parker at tailback, who rushed for 306 yards and passed for 817 more (Parker's 10 touchdown passes were second only to Sammy Baugh's 12). Other Dodger stars included Pug Manders and Banks McFadden in the backfield, Bruiser Kinard on the line, and All-Pro Perry Schwartz at end.

Football fans in Flatbush hoped that 1941 would finally be their year. But alas, as so often in Brooklyn sports, it was not to be. The Dodgers almost beat the championship Bears in pre-season, but stumbled when the bell rang, losing three of their first five games. Though the Brooks played well over the last half of the season, winning five of their last six, including both games with Steve Owen's Giants, they still wound up one game behind the Polo Grounders in second place. One bright spot for the Dodgers was Pug

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Manders winning the league's rushing title with 486 yards. Sutherland spent World War II in the Navy, not returning to pro football until 1946 when he signed with the Pittsburgh Steelers. Sutherland performed miracles in transforming a 1945 2-8-0 club into the respectable 5-5-1 1946 squad. Aside from a better on-field performance, owner Art Rooney was further cheered by increased attendance as fans flocked to Forbes Field in homage to the popular Sutherland. The one sour note in Steeler fortunes was Sutherland's deteriorating relationship with star tailback Bill Dudley who rushed for a league leading 604 yards. Dudley proved too headstrong and independent for Sutherland and the coach responded with whip-like sarcasm. Dudley was especially angered by Sutherland's insistence that he play the last four games of the season despite his injured ribs.

1947 proved the finest year in Steeler history. Dudley had been traded to Detroit and Sutherland molded the remaining players into a 8-4-0 club. The "starless Steelers" were led by tailback Johnny "Zero" Clement (670 yards rushing, 1004 yards passing), end Val Jansante (35 catches, 599 yards, 5 touchdowns) and linemen like Ralph Calacagri, Bill Moore, and Paul Stenn.

The Steelers appeared to have the Eastern division locked up but late season losses to the Eagles and Bears forced a playoff with Philadelphia. In an uncharacteristic act of rebellion for a Sutherland-coached team, the Steelers "struck," demanding extra pay for the additional week of practice before the playoff game. Sutherland exploded, differences were not smoothed over, and a demoralized Pittsburgh team lost to Greasy Neale's Eagles 21-0.

Hopes ran high in the Steel City in the spring of 1948. At last the Steelers seemed poised on the edge of greatness. Things began smoothly enough when Sutherland left in March for his annual vacation/scouting trip through the South. After visiting coach Wallace Wade of Duke over Easter, Sutherland dropped out of sight for 11 days. He finally surfaced near the small western Kentucky town of Bandanna, mumbling that he had come south to attend his son's wedding (Sutherland never married). At first, doctors in Cairo, Illinois diagnosed Sutherland as suffering from nervous exhaustion. Flown back to Pittsburgh by private plane, the Steelers' coach was examined by doctors at West Penn hospital. Exploratory surgery revealed two brain tumors. Sutherland died at 4:15 a.m. on April 11, 1948.

The city's shock at the apparently healthy Sutherland's sudden illness and death was best summed up by a Pittsburgh Press headline: "CITY'S FOOTBALL HEART, SOUL DIE WITH JACK SUTHERLAND." Over 3,200 mourners filed by Sutherland's casket at Sampson's funeral home while several hundred crowded the services at Calvary Episcopal Church in East Liberty. On a windy, rainy April 13, a day much like autumnal days when Sutherland-coached teams ran roughshod over opponents: Dr. John Bain Sutherland was buried in Homewood Cemetery as a Highland piper skirled a last farewell. His pallbearers, fittingly enough, were eight members of the 1947 Steelers: Chuck Cherundolo, Bill Moore, Jack Wiley, Val Jansante, Ralph Calacagri, Charlie Mehelich, Steve Lach and John Mastrangelo.

In tributes to Sutherland, Arthur Daley and Al Abrams penetrated to the essence of the man. Both writers noted that it took them over fifteen years to break down Sutherland's glacial aloofness. Once past what Abrams called Sutherland's "iron mask of reserve," both writers found Sutherland extremely sensitive, a man cut to the quick by his forced resignation at Pitt and the "player vs. coach" controversy with Bill Dudley. Sutherland found the more independent players emerging after World War II difficult to understand and manage. By 1947 Abrams noted that Sutherland felt "bewildered and unhappy." In an off-the-record conversation with Abrams, Sutherland confided that "I've felt like quitting. I'm too old to take this any more. All I demand from my players is respect to their coaches and to play their best on the field." Doubtlessly, Sutherland's relationship with Dudley and the "striking" Steelers of 1947 proved much different than his own relationship as a player with Pop Warner back in 1916.

An extremely self-contained man, Sutherland's idea of warmth was to shake each

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player's hand in the locker room after a hard-fought victory. Once, after Johnny Clement had played exceptionally well in a close game, Sutherland actually spoke to him: "There was a lot of football played out there today. Eh, Johnny?" From Sutherland, this qualifies as an emotional outpouring.

In some ways, Sutherland was a dinosaur and his legacy proved reactionary (Johnny Michelosen, a Sutherland protege and his successor, kept the single-wing in Pittsburgh until 1951). Sutherland believed in fundamentals – hard-blocking, hard tackling, precise execution – and almost won a division championship in 1947 with single-wing basics while most other pro teams were converting to the pro T. Perhaps Arthur Daley best summed up Sutherland's thinking: "His football was almost exclusively power football. He'd rather knock a man down than throw a pass over him."

Seemingly gruff, conservative, demanding, still the "Silent Scot" commanded respect and admiration. When Sutherland died, flags all over Pittsburgh flew at half-mast. Even Hall of Fame tailback Bill Dudley, who had feuded so bitterly with him just two years before, had high words of praise for Jock Sutherland: "He was the best coach I ever played for."