

# 1950 - A Landmark Year

by Stan Grosshandler

The 1950 season was truly a landmark year and could even be considered the true beginning of the modern era of the National Football League as it encompassed many factors that had tremendous influence on the league. The decade that followed has been termed "The Golden Age of Pro Football." 1950 got it off and winging.

On January 20, the Rules Committee allowed unlimited substitution which was destined to totally change the character of the game. The dissolution of the All-American Football Conference brought three new franchises into the league: Cleveland, San Francisco, and Baltimore. The first two were destined to be among the most successful sports franchises in history. With the Browns came Coach Paul Brown, perhaps the most innovative coach the game has ever seen. His philosophy, theory, and teaching techniques influence football coaching at all levels to this very day.

Now all the best players would be concentrated in the NFL. These included a number of players from defunct AAFC teams and a whole cadre of well-trained recent college grads whose careers had been disrupted by war. Ex-GI's who'd entered college in 1946 were now eligible for pro football. And of course, there was the usual fine crop of ex-collegians whose careers had passed uninterrupted from high school to college and now to pro ball. Undoubtedly, more talent was present in the league in 1950 than ever before.

Television for the first time began to wind its tentacles around the game, as the Rams contracted to show all games on television including home contests. Their attendance fell as a result -- a lesson that would govern the NFL's dealings with the new medium throughout the decade.

On January 9, President Truman's budget request was almost one third military expenditures and foreign aid.

Buffalo, Houston, and Oakland were all turned down on requests for franchises by the NFL owners in a meeting January 20, the same day the unlimited substitution rule passed and the annual draft was held.

The 1950 draft was probably the most unusual in the history of the league.

First members of the 1949 New York Bulldogs active and reserve list were eligible to be drafted along with the college seniors. After that part of draft was completed the players of the New York Yankees of the AAFC were divided between the New York Giants and New York Bulldogs who then changed the team name to New York Yanks. Although the Yanks got the bulk of the roster, the Giants solidified their defense with Arnie Weinmeister, Tom Landry, Otto Schnellbacher, and Harmon Rowe.

The rest of the AAFC players not with Cleveland, San Francisco or Baltimore then went into an allocation pool and were selected by other teams of the NFL including the three newcomers. Cleveland was strengthened by the acquisition of star guard Abe Gibron, defensive tackle John Kissell, and halfback Rex Bumgardner, all from the Buffalo Bills.

On February 1, the first big bomb broke on the league when Earl "Curly" Lambeau resigned after 31 years as head of the Green Bay Packers. Lambeau had formed the Packers in 1919, two years before they joined the NFL. He'd coached them to six NFL championships between 1929 and 1944. But Curly had been on a downward spiral the past several years. He could no longer control the Packers' Executive Committee which had been increased from five to thirteen. The AAFC had made it more difficult for him to obtain good players; he had been forced to abandon the Notre Dame box formation

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which he had virtually learned from Rockne personally and switch to the T. With the new formation he was no longer the innovative offensive genius he had once been.

Besides these factors, he was plagued by his inability to control players who were war veterans. After Saipan, a Lambeau tongue lashing held no terror. Additionally, the good burghers of Green Bay did not take kindly to his multiple marriages and that he no longer froze with them in the winter but lived in California. The time was ripe for him to go.

On March 3, the NFL de facto-admitted they had not "merged" with the AAFC but had gobbled it up. They officially admitted what they considered the three most viable franchises -- San Francisco 49ers, Cleveland Browns, and Baltimore Colts -- to the league. They were right on two out of three!

The NFL was divided into the American and National Conferences, each with a president under Commissioner Bell. The American included Cleveland, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Washington, the New York Giants, and the Chicago Cardinals. The National consisted of Baltimore, Detroit, Green Bay, Los Angeles, San Francisco, the Chicago Bears, and the New York Yanks, known as the Bulldogs the previous season.

Each club was to play ten home and home games within the conference, one with a traditional rival from the other conference, and one with Baltimore, a swing team playing each member of the league.

On March 17, scientists at the University of California at Berkley synthesized a new element to be called Californium.

On the 24th of June, a Northwest Airlines DC-4 exploded over Lake Michigan killing 58, the worst civil disaster in U.S. history. The next day North Korean troops launched an attack across the 38th parallel. President Harry Truman, without consulting Congress, authorized U.S. land, air, and sea forces to strike the aggressors.

On July 18, Commissioner Bell ended Frank Filchocks' "lifetime" suspension for failing to report a bribe attempt before the 1946 Championship Game. He took no action on Merle Hapes who had also been banned.

The annual College All-Star game was played August 11th. The collegians, on TD's by Ralph Pasquariello of Villanova and Charley "Choo-Choo" Justice of North Carolina, led the 1949 NFL champion Philadelphia Eagles, 14-0, until the final quarter when Steve Van Buren scored a touchdown. But the college boys added a field goal. Final: 17-7.

The Official National League Football Pro Record and Rule Book had a half orange and half green cover for the Browns and Eagles. It contained rosters for the previous year. The schedule showed several night games and two games slated for Thanksgiving. In the Officials section, six crews were listed under the names of referees and a list of thirteen officials called Coast Officials.

The 1950 edition of Sports Review by Elbak had articles on Van Buren, Red Grange, NFL coaches, discussions of each teams' prospects, and many action photos. But no rosters.

The fifth and final edition of *The Sporting News Official National League Football Pro Record & Rule Book* featured a very long story on Greasy Neale, NFL rules and records, and nothing else.

An AAFC record guide was published with 1949 records but had little distribution.

September 15, one day before the start of the NFL season United Nations forces under Douglas MacArthur ended two months of retreat by launching a giant counteract via Inchon and recaptured the capital city Seoul.

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The next night, September 16, 1950, before a record crowd of 71,237 in Philadelphia's Municipal Stadium, the game everyone had been awaiting for the last four years took place. Commissioner Bert Bell just couldn't wait to see his league's 1949 champs the Philadelphia Eagles take apart the Cleveland Browns who had won the AAFC every year of its existence. He not only made this the first game of the season but placed it on Saturday night, a day before the rest of the league started.

In the first moments of the game, Cleveland rookie Don Phelps returned a punt for a 69-yard touchdown only to have a clipping penalty take the points off the scoreboard. The Browns also lost their great offensive tackle and placekicker Lou Groza on this play.

Midway in the quarter, Cliff Patton kicked a field goal. This was the last time the Eagles were ahead.

The Browns then scored once in each of the first three quarters on passes to Dub Jones, Dante Lavelli, and Mac Speedie by Otto Graham.

In the fourth quarter Pete Pihos scored on a pass from Bill Mackrides who had replaced Tommy Thompson; however the Browns answered on runs by Graham and Baumgardner. Tackle Forrest "Chubby" Grigg, subbing for Groza, converted all the extra points. Final: Browns 35 - Eagles 10.

There have been many excuses made for the Eagles -- Greasy Neale did not take the Browns seriously, called them a basketball team, and never scouted them or watched them on films. Philadelphia's two best runners, Steve Van Buren and Abisha "Bosh" Pritchard were injured and did not play. Pritchard was out for the season; Van Buren never regained his pre-injury best. Clyde Scott, brilliant back-up halfback, separated his shoulder in the second quarter. All-NFL tackle Al Wistert was out with a bad knee.

In his excellent book *The History of Professional Football*, author Spike Claassen takes particular glee in writing how the Browns swarmed all over Steve Van Buren all night. If they did, they were tackling a cripple on the side lines!

The truth was the Browns had a team full of tremendous talent that was at the zenith of its potential, while the Eagles were a team who had peaked the previous year and were on the way down. No further proof is needed other than the fact the Browns played for the championship seven times during the 1950's while the Eagles were not in another title game until 1960.

Another factor in the Browns win was the strategy that spread the Eagle defense. On every play, the Cleveland linemen lined up further apart, causing the Eagles to spread their line, isolating the middle guard and making him easier to block for plays up the middle.

In a return game on December 3, the Browns won again, 13- 7. Graham didn't throw a single pass in the game, proving Cleveland was not a "basketball team." Coach Brown was later to admit this was a foolish thing to do.

In later years both Otto Graham and Dante Lavelli agreed that the 1950 club was the best of their era.

The Browns used the new rule allowing platooning to their advantage. The defense had Bill Willis at middle guard with Darrell Palmer and John Kissell at left tackle and Chubby Gregg and John Sandusky at right tackles. Len Ford, obtained in the allocation pool, was the left defensive end with George Young at the right end. The linebackers were Hal Herring and Tommy Thompson on the left, Alex Agase in the middle and Tony Adamle and Emerson Cole on the right.

Ken Gorgal backed by number two quarterback Cliff Lewis played safety and Tommy Mames and Warren Lahr the defensive halfbacks.

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The offense was built around Otto Graham's passing, Marion Motley's draw plays, and the ability of halfbacks Rex Bumgardner, Ken Carpenter, Dub Jones, and Don Phelps to skirt the ends or turn into downfield receivers along with ends Mac Speedie and Dantel Lavelli. A third end, Horace Gillom, was also the punter.

Frank Gatski centered, with Lou Groza at left tackle and placekicking and Lou Rymkus at the other tackle. Lin Houston was at right guard with left guards Weldon Humble and Abe Gibron acting as the "messengers" bringing in each play from Coach Brown.

Only a few players -- Herring, Lewis, Phelps, Cole, Gillom, and rookie Jim Martin went both ways.

Besides Coach Brown, offensive stars Graham, Motley, Lavelli, Gatski and Groza and defensive men Ford and Willis are all in the Hall of Fame.

The Eagles still used many players on both offense and defense. Their two future Hall of Fame centers Alex Wojciechowicz and Chuck Bednarik played both ways while a third center who had made all pro, Vic Linskog, only played offense.

Guards Walter Barnes, Bucko Kilroy, Mario Gianelli played both middle guard and offensive guard. Vic Sears and Mike Jarmoluk were usually the defensive tackles with John Green and Jay MacDowell at ends. Joe Muha and Wojciechowicz backed up the line and their jobs were critical as they were expected to hold up receivers from going down field. They were unable to contain the speedy Brown halfbacks.

Russ Craft and Neill Armstrong played defensive half back and Pat McHugh and Frank Reagen the safeties.

Captain Al Wistert played strictly offensive tackle and Cliff Patton offensive guard. Most backs, save quarterback's Tommy Thompson and Bill Mackrides and star runners Clyde Scott, Steve Van Buren, and Frank Ziegler went both ways. Even the talented receiver Pete Pihos played offense and defense.

Along with Coach Neale, Eagles to be found in the Hall of Fame are Pihos, Van Buren, Bednarik, and Wojciechowicz.

The day after the Browns' startling opening victory, the 1950 season got underway as the Giants beat the Steelers, the Redskins defeated the Colts, the Bears edged the Rams, the Yanks surprised the 49ers, and the Lions routed the Packers under new coach Gene Ronzani.

As in the American Conference, the two power houses of the National Conference, the Rams and Bears, opened against each other with the aging Monsters of the Midway winning, 24-20.

Under coach Joe Stydahar the Rams partially employed two platoon football with some players strictly offense, others defense and several both ways.

Many years later Elroy "Crazy Legs" Hirsch discussed this team. "I would have to think our '50 team had the best array of talent," he said, "We had an excellent defense yet no one seemed to realize it. They were never really extended for we scored so often."

Rookie middle guard Stan West anchored the line with Bob Reinhard at one defensive tackle with tackles Dick Huffman, Gil Bouley, and Ed Champagne going both ways. Larry Brink, Jack Zilly, and Bill Smyth were at the defensive ends with Don Paul, Fred Naumetz, and Tank Younger at linebackers. Jerry Williams was at safety with Tommy Keane and George Sims the defensive halfbacks.

On offense, Art Statuo centered with Harry Thompson, Jack Finlay at guards in front of either the cool, calm Bob Waterfield or volatile Norm Van Brocklin at quarterback. Like the Browns, the Rams' halfbacks -- Paul Barry, Glenn Davis, Tommy Kalmanir, and V.T.

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Smith were trained to skirt the ends or go deep for the pass, augmenting the great ends Bob Boyd, Tom Fears, and Hirsch.

The Rams had the luxury of four great fullbacks, Dick Hoerner, Dan Towler, Tank Younger, and Ralph Pasquariello, all between 220 and 240 pounds. The following season the first three were utilized as the famed "Bull Elephant Backfield." Hoerner, who in 1950 still did some line backing and was also a talented receiver, agreed with Hirsch that the '50 team was probably the best of the great Ram teams of that era.

There is a pretty good Hall of Fame contingent from this team in coach Stydahar, Hirsch, Fears, Waterfield, and Van Brocklin.

Coach George Halas, like the Rams, continued to use many of his players both ways. Two of his old greats from the championship teams of the early 1940's, Bulldog Turner and George McAfee, saw duty on both sides of the line. He also had an unusual situation at quarterback. Sid Luckman was still playing; however, Johnny Lujack had taken over, with George Blanda and rookie Steve Romanik in reserve.

"Johnny Lujack was one of the greatest athletes I have ever seen," recalled defensive back Don Kindt, "He did the passing, was our second best ground gainer, did the place kicking, and in my opinion was the best defensive back on the team."

"Another great athlete on that club was George Blanda," Kindt continued, "He didn't get to play much quarterback, but he did some punting and place kicking plus he played defensive back and, believe it or not, was a good line backer."

The Cardinals under Lambeau opened the season against the Eagles on the 24th. The Eagles blew them out 45-7 converting three interceptions and two fumbles by Jim Hardy into TD's. "This was probably the worst day of my life," Jim Hardy, Cards quarterback recalled, "On the way to the park I was in an auto accident and didn't get to the field until kickoff time. By the end of the first half I had thrown three interceptions and fumbled twice. I can remember sitting in the locker room at half time wondering what had happened."

"In the second half I had another fumble and five more interceptions," Jim added, "They tried to get me out and use Frank Tripucka, but he was carried out after three plays so back I go. My eight interceptions are still a record."

The once great Cards, NFL champs in 1947, were now the over-the-hill-gang. Lambeau had sent fading quarterback Paul Christman to Green Bay; but Pat Harder, Charlie Trippi, and Elmer Angsman remained from the great "Dream Backfield." Mal Kutner and Bob Shaw were two of the best in the business ends. The Cards had quite a collection of Ramsey's. Star guard Buster was joined by end-defensive back Ray and guard Knox, acquisitions from the AAFC.

Ten years later the Cardinals moved to St. Louis and in 1988 to Phoenix. They have as yet to return to their post-World War II glory.

On September 27th, former heavyweight champion Joe Louis attempted a comeback against Ezzard Charles only to be defeated.

A major surprise of the NFL season was the first Brown-Giant game, won 6-0 by the Giants, the first time the Browns were ever shut out. The Giants had been the greatest beneficiary of the collapse of the AAFC when they obtained center John Rapacz from the old Chicago Hornets, plus six former Yankees, including five defensive players who were to help form one of the best known and most innovative defenses the NFL has ever seen.

Defensive tackle Arnie Weinmeister was the keystone of the line while Tom Landry, Harmon Rowe, and Otto Schellbacher combined with Emlen Tunnell to form the famous Umbrella Defense backfield. This was the first time a pure defensive unit ever obtained a special name and notoriety.

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Veteran coach Steve Owen used a six man line -- left end Jim Duncan, left tackle Weinmeister, left guard Jon Baker, right guard Mastrangelo (from the Yanks), right tackle Al DeRogatis, and right end Ray Poole. John Cannady was the single line backer. Tom Landry and Harmon Rowe were the left and right defensive halfbacks; while Tunnell played left safety and Schellenbacher the right.

During the first half against Cleveland, Duncan and Poole dropped back, slid, and floated acting basically as outside linebackers. Graham did not complete a pass. In the second half they charged with Landry and Rowe moving to the linebacker slots. All the Giants needed was a single touchdown by rookie fullback Eddie Price.

On offense the key was Chuck Conerly throwing from either the A-formation or the T. There are accounts of games where the Giants played one formation the first half and, if it did not work, slipped into the other the second half.

On October 1, Dick Sisler's two run homer in the tenth gave the Phillies their first pennant in 35 years; however by the 7th the Yanks had knocked them off four straight in the series; the same day the troops of Communist China came to the rescue of North Korea.

After 50 years as manager of the Philadelphia athletics, Connie Mack retired on October 18th, succeeded by his long time player and coach Jimmie Dykes.

The Baltimore Colts were taking their lumps under coach Clem Crowe. In their third game Jim Hardy of the Cards threw six touchdown passes, five to Bob Shaw. Shaw still holds the record for most touchdown receptions in a game, tied with Kelen Winslow and Jerry Rice.

As inept as the team was it had two future Hall of Famers, Art Donovan and Y.A. Tittle, plus some fine rookies ins Adrian Burk, Art Spinney, and Don Colo. Late in the season Frankie Filchock, who finished with the Canadian season, joined the club as third quarterback behind Tittle and Burk. He threw three passes in his final NFL season.

The New York Yanks, guided by Red Strader who'd coached the AAFC Yankees in 1949, broke fast by winning five of their first six games, losing only to the Rams. There were only five former Bulldogs on the roster along with 15 former Yankees, six former AAFC players and four rookies.

Quarterback George Ratterman, an ex-Buffalo Bill, threw 22 scoring passes. Rookie fullback Zollie Toth was the top rusher, and three former AAFC stars -- George Taliaferro, Sherman Howard, and Buddy Young -- handled the halfback slots. Orban "Spec" Sanders, who'd twice led the AAFC in rushing, played defense only and set a league record with 13 interceptions.

"I had sat out the 1949 season with a bad knee," Spec said, "and did not intend to play again. When Red became coach, we got to talking and before I knew it he had talked me into signing a contract. We felt defense would be easier on my knees." Spec is the only player to lead one football league in an offensive category and another in a defensive one.

Perhaps the most disappointing team in the league was the Detroit Lions. Coach Bo McMillin obtained Bobby Layne, the penultimate field general, the two best college grads in the nation in Leon Hart and Doak Walker, obtained AAFC stars Bob Hoernschemeyer and Ollie Cline, and drafted four great tackles -- Thurman McGraw, Lou Creekmur, Gus Cifelli and Floyd Jaszewski. In Cloyce Box he had the premier receiver in the game. Yet the Lions were a 6-6 team.

At the end of the season the players went to management and requested McMillin, whose football career dated back to the Praying Colonels of Centre College in 1920, be replaced by his assistant Buddy Parker. Using the '50 team as his nucleus, Parker had within two years a championship club.

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A second great disappointment were the San Francisco 49ers with a 3-9 mark. Runners Joe Perry and Johnny Strzykalski were the offense and first round draftee Leo Nomellini was destined to be a great defensive tackle, but quarterback Frankie Albert's short passing attack was ineffective, hindered by the sudden fading of Alyn Beals, his top receiver.

The Steelers continued to slough along as John Michelosen remained faithful to his mentor Jock Sutherland's single wing. Tailback Joe Geri did the running, passing, punting, and place kicking. Geri completed but 36% of his mere 113 passes yet ranked third amongst passers as they were rated by average yards per completion. In an era where it was not unusual to see 40, 50, and 60 point games, the singlewing Steelers only twice scored as many as 28, both times against the hapless Cards.

The draft was a good one bringing in tackle Ernie Stautner along with runners Lynn Chandnois and Fran Rogel. All were destined to become longtime Steeler stars.

The Packers and Redskins were real nonentities, both having 3-9 records. Two Packer rookies of note were quarterback Tobin Rote and linebacker Clayton Tonnemaker; while the Redskins' Sammy Baugh, Harry Gilmer, Choo-Choo Justice, and Bill Dudley attempted to function behind a nondescript line.

At season's end the Browns had only lost twice, both to the Giants, but the Giants blew it by losing to the weak Steelers and Cards, thus creating a playoff game. The third time proved the charm for Cleveland as they finally edged New York, 8-3.

Over in the other division the same thing happened. The Rams lost twice to the Bears, but the Halasmen lost to the likes of the Pack and Cards. This was the first time there had ever been playoffs in both divisions. Oddly the Rams, who like the Browns had lost twice to their playoff opponents, won the rubber match at Los Angeles, 24-14.

On December 24, in the first championship game to be televised nationally, the Rams and Browns, met in cold, damp Cleveland Stadium. Within 27 seconds the Rams were on the board with a 82-yard Waterfield to Davis pass. Cleveland tied with a 31-yard Graham to Dub Jones pass. At the half it was the Rams, 14-13. Trading points the Rams led 28-27 with 20 seconds remaining. A 16-yard field goal by Lou Groza gave the Browns the title and each Cleveland player a winners share of \$1,113.

Marion Motley led the league in rushing with 810 yards followed by Frank Ziegler, Joe Geri, Eddie Price, and Joe Perry. The five top passers were Van Brocklin, Graham, Geri, Ratterman, and Conerly. Tom Fears led the receivers while Bob Shaw scored 12 touchdowns on receptions. Doak Walker had five touchdowns running and six on pass receptions plus 38 extra points and eight field goals for a total of 128 points. Johnny Lujack scored 11 touchdowns, 34 PAT's, and three field goals for 120 points.

The 1950 season was still the era of all offense, damn the defense, full speed ahead. In twenty two games one team scored 40 or more points. The Rams set a record for points (466) and yards (5420). In all they set fifteen offensive records.

But a strong message was coming across to the coaches as they observed the teams who emphasized defense and allowed the least amount of points were the most successful i.e. the Browns, Giants, and Eagles. Within a season or two teams like the Lions were putting their best athletes on defense as they concentrated on building strong "D's."

The first Pro Bowl using the present day format was played the following January between the stars of each conference, with Otto Graham leading the American Conference to a narrow 28-27 win.

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The significant trends seen during the 1950 season, -- the reluctant switch to two platoon football, the concentration on defense, the innovative coaching, and the influence of television -- make it truly a landmark season.

### 1950 NFL Trivia

Hardy Brown, a legendary line backer who was reputed to frequently break his shoulder pads upon tackling, played two seasons in the AAFC before joining the NFL where he played with Washington, Baltimore, San Francisco, and the Cards. By spending the 1960 season with Denver of the AFL, he has the unique record of playing in three major football leagues.

Frankie Filchock was also associated with three leagues. A long time NFL player who started in 1938 he played in the CFL and was a coach of Denver in the AFL.

In the 1950 NFL there were nine two sport athletes. Len Ford and Otto Graham of the Browns played in the National Basketball League -- Ford with the '49 Dayton team and Graham with Rochester. Bob Shaw and Ray Ramsey of the Cards, Hal Crisler, and Ted Fritsch all were in the NBL while Otto Schnellberger played in the Basketball Association of America. Greasy Neale spent several years as an outfielder with the Reds while Pete Layden of the Yanks was an outfielder with the 1948 St. Louis Browns.

While at Texas, Layden was backed up by Spec Sanders. With the '48 Yankees of the AAFC their roles changed, with Pete the backup man. They were also with the '50 Yanks but Sanders was now on defense. Spec is the only man to have rushed for 1000 yards in the AAFC as he led the league twice in rushing.

### Hall of Famers Active in NFL in 1950

#### Cleveland

Paul Brown	Otto Graham	Bill Willis
Marion Motley	Frank Gatski	Len Ford
Dante Lavelli	Lou Groza	

#### Chicago Bears

George Halas	Sid Luckman	George Connor
George McAfee	Bulldog Turner	George Blanda

#### Philadelphia

Greasy Neale	Pete Pihos	Steve Van Buren
Chuck Bednarik	Alex Wojciechowicz	

#### L.A. Rams

Joe Stydahar	Bob Waterfield	Elroy Hirsch
Tom Fears	Norm Van Brocklin	

#### N.Y. Giants

Steve Owen	Arnie Weinmeister
Tom Landry	Em Tunnell

#### Chicago Cards

Curly Lambeau	Charlie Trippi
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#### Washington

Sammy Baugh	Bill Dudley
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#### San Francisco

Joe Perry	Leo Nomellini
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#### Baltimore

Y.A. Tittle	Art Donovan
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#### Detroit

Bobby Layne	Doak Walker
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#### Green Bay

Tony Canadeo
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#### Pittsburgh

Ernie Stautner
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