

THREE CENTERS

By Mike Gershman, Football Datebook 1988

MEL HEIN

It would have been unthinkable 50 years ago to have separate teams play offense and defense; however, Giant coach Steve Owen created what was, in effect, a two-platoon system in 1937. He would replace ten men at the end of the first and third periods; the only player left was Mel Hein, because, Owen said, "He was too good to take out." An all-pro eight straight years, Hein is one of the few centers enshrined in the Hall of Fame and the only one included in the 1963 group of charter enshrinees. He rarely made bad snaps, was sure-handed enough to intercept seventeen passes during his fifteen-year career, and Bronko Nagurski called him "the surest, cleanest and most effective tackler" he had ever encountered.

Hein played center and linebacker for the Giants from 1931 to 1945 and qualifies as the Lou Gehrig of football, never missing a regular-season game. Harold Rosenthal notes that he played fifteen years in the pros, four years in college, and four years of high school and comments, "Since he went both ways in every game he played ... he was a record which can never be broken."

Born in Redding, California, Hein put aside an early interest in rowing to play center, guard, and tackle at Washington State. He was named All-America in 1930, but interest was so slight that he was forced to write the Portsmouth Spartans, Providence Steam Roller, and New York Giants offering his services; he accepted Providence's offer of \$125 a game. When he ran into Giant end Ray Flaherty at a basketball game in Pullman, Hein learned to his dismay that New York had also sent a contract, offering him \$150 a game. The next day Hein telegraphed the postmaster in Providence, asking that he return the Providence contract unopened; a few days later, it arrived, and Hein became a Giant.

Listed third on the depth chart when he reported, Hein got his chance when both veteran centers were injured early in the season; he took over and played every minute of every game, setting the pace for his Iron Man career. With his arrival, the Giants became a perennial contender. They lost the championship game to the Bears in 1933, the year Hein was named all-pro center for the first time, but came back to win the famous "Sneakers Game" in 1934. New York bested Green Bay in 1938 to win another championship, and Hein was selected as the NFL's first official most valuable player, the only interior lineman to be so honored.

Named team captain in 1935, Old Indestructible played on five divisional champions in addition to the 1934 and 1938 title teams, retiring after the 1945 season. He later coached the Los Angeles Dons, New York Yankees, and Los Angeles Rams and also served as head of officials for the AFL.

BULLDOG TURNER

Clyde (Bulldog) Turner was the center of the 1940s, as was Mel Hein in the 1930s and Chuck Bednarik in the 1950s. Turner's snapping and blocking were key elements when the Bears won NFL championships in 1940, 1941, and 1943. (Chicago punters used to brag to fellow kickers that they got the ball with the laces up every time.)

But Turner also had the speed of a halfback and used it to catch rushers from behind and pick off passes. In 1942 he led the league in interceptions (8), and, recently, scouts with 20 plus years experience picked him as one of the NFL's three best linebackers ever, along with Tommy Nobis and Dick Butkus. A seven-time all-pro, Turner was born in Sweetwater, Texas, and had little interest in football until he started hearing about a Sweetwater athlete named Sammy Baugh and saw students wearing sweaters with a big "S" on them. Turner said, "I didn't know what it meant, but I knew they were getting all the attention, so I made it my business to find out."

He went to Hardin-Simmons, a small college in Texas, played a big part in the Bulldogs' 23-3-2 record from 1937 to 1939, was named All-America in his senior year. Detroit Lions owner George Richards romanced Turner, gave him walking-around money in violation of NFL rules, and spent \$150 on Turner's teeth to "lock him up."

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Richards did such a good job that Detroit coach Gloomy Gus Henderson decided not to “waste” a pick on Turner in the 1940 draft and, instead, chose USC quarterback Doyle Nave. The Bears, the next team to draft, picked Turner, Henderson was fired, and the Lions were fined \$5,000 for tampering. Turner immediately became the Bears starting center. Chicago rolled to a Western Division title, and Turner returned an interception for a touchdown in the 73-0 rout of the Redskins in the 1940 NFL Championship Game.

In 1942, he returned two interceptions for touchdowns, one of them a 97-yarder thrown by Baugh. Turner said, “I had to carry him on my back the last seven yards.” When several Bears were ejected in a 1944 game, Turner took over at halfback and ran 48 yards for a touchdown the only time he carried the ball.

Bulldog played in the Pro Bowl after the 1940 and 1941 seasons, and, when the game was reinstated, was chosen for the games following the 1950 and 1951 seasons. Turner retired after the 1952 season, coached at Baylor, and worked as an assistant to George Halas. He replaced Baugh as head coach of the AFL Titans (Jets) and was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1966.

CHUCK BEDNARIK

“I felt pretty silly standing out in the middle of the field all alone when the offense and defense would change.” Chuck Bednarik was pro football’s final sixty-minute player – the last iron man – playing center on offense and linebacker on defense.

A member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, Bednarik was named to the all-time NFL team as a center in 1969 and won the Hickok Award as the greatest pro lineman of the 1950s. Missing only three games in a 14-year career, he was named all-pro seven straight years and eight times in all, the first as a center and the last seven as a linebacker.

Born in steel country, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Bednarik flew thirty combat missions as waist gunner in a B-24 and won five battle stars and an air medal. When the war was over, he entered the University of Pennsylvania on the G.I. Bill, made half the solo tackles, and led the team in interceptions three straight years. A two-time All-America selection, he placed third in the 1948 Heisman voting behind Doak Walker and Charlie Justice and won the Maxwell Trophy. The Eagles surprised no one by using their bonus pick to select Bednarik, who was part of the Eagles’ NFL championship team in his rookie season.

A year later, he was named All-NFL center and became one of the league’s dominant linebackers in the 1950s, playing in eight Pro Bowls. In the 1954 game, he punted five times for a 43-yard average, recovered three fumbles, intercepted a Bobby Layne pass and ran it back 24 yards for a touchdown, and was named the game’s outstanding player.

In 1960 he was given a color TV set and a \$1,000 bonus upon his apparent retirement. But, when the weather turned cooler, Bednarik was back in harness, playing a big part in a nine-game winning streak that followed an opening day loss. One of those victories came against the Giants at Yankee Stadium on November 20, 1960. With New York trailing 17-10, George Shaw hit Frank Gifford with a sideline pass; Bednarik hit Gifford hard enough to knock him out of the game and keep him out of football for a full year. Giant fans booed loudly, but Sam Huff, Gifford’s teammate, called it “the finest tackle I’ve ever seen. It was the kind of tackle you dream about getting.”

For his part, Bednarik dreamed of another championship ring and got his Christmas wish one day late when the Eagles faced the Packers in the title game at Franklin Field. He played 58 minutes at age 35 and made two key plays, putting Paul Hornung out of the game and protecting the Eagles’ 17-13 lead by wrapping up Jim Taylor on the Eagles’ 9-yard line; it was the only NFL Championship Game Vince Lombardi ever lost.