

# THE CASE FOR BENNY FRIEDMAN

By Joel Bussert

<u>Year</u>	<u>Club</u>	<u>G-GS</u>	<u>TD</u>	<u>XP</u>	<u>FG</u>	<u>PTS</u>	<u>TDP</u>	<u>RU</u>	<u>RE</u>	<u>RB</u>
1927	Cleveland	13-13	2	11	0	23	11	2	0	0
1928	Detroit	10-10	4	19	0	43	9	4	0	0
1929	New York	15-14	2	20	0	32	20	2	0	0
1920	New York	15-13	6	10	1	49	13	6	0	0
1931	New York	8- 5	2	0	0	12	3	2	0	0
1932	Brooklyn	11-10	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0
1933	Brooklyn	7- 5	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0
1934	Brooklyn	1- 0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals		80-71	16	60	1	159	66	16	0	0

These are the certified figures for Benny Friedman, based on a personal review of hundreds of newspaper accounts, including as many as six or seven for some games. I will concede that there are some discrepancies that arise from reviewing the various accounts. There are different versions, for instance, of two Detroit touchdowns in 1928, and depending on the source you use, Friedman scored either four or six touchdowns that season. I use four, but if he had six would it affect our perception of him in any significant way? Some researchers credit Friedman with 68 touchdown passes, and after a very exhaustive search of old newspapers, I'm confident that 66 ought to be the figure.

Occasionally, newspaper stories included some game statistics, and those that exist for Friedman are interesting. For instance, in a game against the Chicago Cardinals in 1927 he completed eight of 10 passes for 223 yards and touchdowns of 65, 50, and 52 yardg. Against the New York Yankees on October 14, 1928, he completed 12 of 22 passes for 217 yards and carried 16 times for 124 yarda. Against the Bears later that season he rushed for 164 yards in 30 attempts. In a 1930 qame against Frankford he completed 18 of 23 passes, five for touchdowns.

In any event, it's an impressive record, The 66 touchdown passes were the NFL record for a long time. Arnold Herber tied the mark ia 1940, then surpassed it when he came back to play two wartime seasons for the Giants, finishing with 81 in 1945. Meanwhile, Samy Baugh had gone by Friedman in 1943, reaching 80 in his seventh season. As late as 1951, Friedman's total of 66 touchdown passes was the ninth highest in the history of pro football.

Any evaluation at Friedman needs to be based on his first four seasons. Beginning in 1931, he was generally a part time player, becoming an assistant coach at Yale that year. It's a remarkable four years. Prom 1927 through 1930 Benny tossed 11, nine, 20 and 13 touchdown passes, leading the league each season. The record of 20 touchdown passes was not surpassed until Cecil Isbell tossed 24 for the 1942 Packers, and Benny's seasonal totals of 20, 13, and 11 were the three highest on record until 1940, though four other players (Red Dunn, Harry Newman, Arnold Herber, and Frank Filchock) shared the third spot with him at 11. His four-season total is 53 touchdown passes in 53 games. The NFL did not achieve that ratio (a touchdown pass per team per game) until the season of 1943. Moreover, in his own time no one was coming close to Benny. Red Dunn of Green Bay, another hero whose name has vanished, had 11 touchdown passes in 1929, the only other man to reach double figures between 1920 and 1932.

Friedman, since he called the signals, was always listed as the quarterback in the lineups that appeared in programs and newspapers, but he actually lined up in the single wing as the tailback. The tailback was the most important offensive player in the single wing, even more important than the quarterback is today since he had responsibilities as both runner aad passer. Since he played the most important position, the three questions that need to be answered about Benny are (1) Was the team successful? (2) How good was the offense? (3) How did his contemporaries judge him?

Were his teams successful?

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<u>Year</u>	<u>Team</u>	<u>Record</u>	<u>Pct.</u>	<u>Finish</u>
1927	Cleveland	8-4-1	.667	Fourth
1928	Detroit	7-2-2	.778	Third
1929	New York Giants	13-1-1	.929	Second
1930	New York Giants	13-4-0	.765	Second
Totals		41-11-3	.788	---

In 1927 Cleveland handed the champion Giants their only defeat 6-0 as Friedman completed 11 of 17 passes. Detroit only losses in 1928 were to Providence and Frankford, the two teams ahead of the Wolverities in the standiag. The 1929 Giants lost only to undefeated Greem Bay 20-6 in a late-season game that decided the championship. A year later, the Giants won a late-season rematch to temporarily knock the Packers out of first place, but upset looses to Stapleton and Brooklyn relegated the Giants to another runner-up finish.

It's worth noting that Friedman was the only reason for the existence of the 1927 Cleveland Bulldogs and 1928 Detroit Wolverines. In both cities, the franchises represented an attempt to build a professional following based on Friedman's popularity, as a native son and high school star in Cleveland and in Detroit as a former hero at tha University of Michigan. Twelve members of the 1927 Cleveland team played for Detroit in 1928, and when Tim Mara, attempting to rebuild the Giants who had collapsed in 1928 after their championship season, attempted to acquire Friedman, he had to buy the Detroit franchise. Six members of the 1927-28 Cleveland-Detroit teams also played for the 1929 Giants.

How good was the offense that Friedman engineered? The best of its time. His teams led the NFL in scoring all four seasons.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Team</u>	<u>Avg</u>	<u>Rank</u>	<u>Runner-up</u>	<u>Avg</u>
1927	Cleveland	16.1	First	New York Giants	15.2
1928	Detroit	18.9	First	Chicago Bears	14.0
1929	New York	20.8	First	Green Bay	15.2
1930	New York	18.1	First	Green Bay	16.7

That leaves the matter of the comtemporary judgments of Friedman. In those days the Green Bay Press-Gazette chose an all-league team that was generally recognized as "official;" it was based on a poll of writers, players, coaches, etc. The most convincing assessment of Friedman's performance is the fact that he was named quarterback on the Press-Gazette team each season from 1927 through 1930. But to capture some of the feeling of the impact that Friedman had on the public and the media, of his actual accomplishments in games, and of his style of play, there's no better source than the newspaper accounts of the games he played in.

### VOICES FROM TEE PAST

Lynn Wittenburg, *Portsmouth Times*, Nov. 6, 1930: "...that redoubtable descendant of Palestine, Benny Friedman, not so much a giant in physique as in football ability, mentality and agility. The boy from the Ghetto passed with unerring and uncanny ability. Friedman was in the contest a little over half the evening's performance but his playing was easily the sensation of a zippy night. In brief, it was a case of 'too much Priedman,' for the small town boys ... Friedman was easily the most spectacular player that has appeared at the stadium this season. As a passer Beany appears to have no equal. Griff's gang [the Spartans] could hava used a squadron of airplanes, a couple of dirigibles, and some blimps as they tried to stop the air raid. Friedman's aerial darts shot straight over the line, parallel to the horizon, and uncannily true to the arms of a waiting player. He shoots just a short distance from behind the line of scrimmage, gets his shot away lightning-fast, and with the ease and grace of a ballroom dancer. Even to get distance Friedman does not increase the altitude of his throws. Friedman passes the moleskin as easily as a major league pitcher twirls a baseball. The incomparable Benny is not only an artist in the aerial game but he is a mighty atom in line plunging."

George Strickler, *Chicago Herald-Examimmer*, October 24, 1927: "Friedman, whose specialty is passing, gave one of the greatest exhibitions of aerial offensive on recard during the first 11 plays of the game. It took the Bulldogs exactly this long to score their first touchdown. In this series of 11 plays which carried

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the ball 80 yards, Benny passed four times, completing throws of 15, 18 and 21 yard. the latter terminating over the goal line." [Friedman completed eight of 20 for 122 yards, four interceptions, in the game.]

George Strickler, *Chicago Herald-Examiner*, November 28, 1927: "They had a million ideas about winning the game, but not a darn man to stop Friedman's passes. In this, however, they are just like the other teams of their league and a lot of college teams Friedman has played against. All the genius that is Friedman's was at its best yesterday. In the Bulldog scoring, Friedman's passes were a prominent part in every touchdown but one. And if he had deigned to pass on this drive, he probably would have been successful also."

*New York Herald-Tribune*, October 14, 1929: "...the passing of Friedman had the crowd tingling with excitement every moment of the time he was on the field. It was his uncanny ability to dodge would-be tacklers and toss long-delayed passes which gave [Jack] Hagerty a chance to get free for many long gains..."

*New York American*, October 21, 1929: "The former Michigan star and All-American quarterback was passing with deadly accuracy. Straight as an arrow his passes flew into the hands of the receivers, who were usually wide open."

William Hennigan, *New York World*, October 15, 1928: "He's a master, this Benny Friedman. He can throw a football with almost as much skill as Waite Hoyt can throw a baseball. He can smash and rip through an opposing line with as much power and drive as any other player in the country today. He can skirt around the ends with almost the speed of a Hinky Haines. And when it comes to tackling, he is second to none ... There were a lot of other former college heroes on the gridiron, but Friedman far overshadowed them."

*New York World*, November 12, 1928: "... for Benny Friedman again showed himself to be the smartest of field generals, the cleverest of them all at either end or a forward pass, and a twisting, driving, striving broken field runner. He battered through the New York line, ponderous with beef, and he circled the Giant ends, good as they were."

Bill Slocum, *New York American*, November 12, 1928: "He (Friedman) verified all the testimonials which have been written concerning his elusiveness. Just a sparrow in an open lot--that's Benneh."

Edgar Munzel, *Chicago Herald-Examiner*, Nov. 26, 1928: "With the biting cold practically rendering forward passing as too hazardous, Friedman revealed to the customers that his claim to greatness was not solely confined to his unequalled passing ability. He started a running exhibition that had the Bears backed into their territory in no time and more than that, it wound up in the desired touchdown."

A.J. Hendry, *Chicago Herald-Examiner*, October 29, 1928: "Benny Friedman was the magnet that drew more than 20,000 pro football followers to Wrigley Field yesterday, and Benny more than rewarded them for their willingness to sit through the chilly afternoon with an exhibition of diversified ability that dispelled any doubt, if there was any, why his name ranks high among the greats in Western Conference lore."

Wilfred Smith, *Chicago Tribune*, October 29, 1928: "Benny as a forward passer and perfect field general is well known. But yesterday it was Benny the line plunger and open field runner who won the plaudits of the crowd. In sixty minutes Friedman carried the ball 164 yards from the line of scrimmage. Thirty times he sent himself into the line or around end and he averaged five and a half yards on each trip. At times his line and hard blocking backs gave him all the aid any runner could desire, but frequently it was a one-man affair."

"Twisting, shifting out of tacklers arms, dodging, he carried on. Buried under a mass of tacklers at the end of each sprint, yet he was unstoppable."

"The Bears were prepared to meet a driving air attack and for this had well laid plans. But they could not cope with this new Friedman, who outran them and drove over them."

Wilfred Smith, *Chicago Tribune*, October 28, 1928: "... Friedman has shown the graduate players that his mastery of gridiron strategy is complete. His judgment of play is extraordinary, his reputation as a place kicker of the highest, and his ability as a passer unequalled ..."

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*New York Herald-Tribune*, November 12, 1928, describing tying touchdown in fourth quarter: "He was well back of the line, preparing to throw a forward pass, when four Giants bore down upon him. Calmly, he stood there and dodged them, one after the other. It did not seem possible for him to do anything but be thrown for a loss ... But Friedman not only got away, he ran to the right, spotted Bacchus, standing all by himself in the end zone, and threw the ball right into his arms."

Now I ask you, was there ever a guy like Benny?