

WHEN THE NFL HAD CHARACTER

By Stanley Grosshandler

Two generations of football fans have grown up since the 1953 season, part of the decade called "The Golden Age of the NFL." Younger fans today may find it surprising to learn that the NFL was losing star players back then to the draft (remember the draft?) and to the Canadian Football League. The Korean Conflict had siphoned several top men into the service, including Cleveland tackle Bob Gain, the Cardinals great Ollie Matson, and San Francisco's versatile tackle Bob Toneff. Meanwhile, the Canadian Football League made some inroads by luring a handful north of the border. Among the emigrants were Cleveland's star end Mac Speedie, the Giants' center-tackle Tex Coulter and defensive end Ray Poole, San Francisco defensive back Jim Cason, and an Eagle receiver named Bud Grant who would return a dozen years later as a coach.

Although these and several other well-known players missed the 1953 season, the league still continued to grow in popularity -- due in part to the individual aura that made each team special. Teams then had a their own particular character and each had an identifiable leader. They were not the plastic, look-alike teams who strive today for parity (another name for mediocracy) and play for the field goal.

Reviewing those rosters of forty years ago can still produce chills among some "veteran" fans.

The Cleveland Browns had the confidence and composure of their coach Paul Brown. They did not have to be told they were winners. They knew it! Their on the field leader, Otto Graham, was as cool and methodical as his coach P.B.

The Eastern Conference Champs (in '53 the name changed from the American Conference), the Browns listed on their roster ten men who would become Hall of Famers: Coach Paul Brown, Otto Graham, Lou Groza, Frank Gatski, Bill Willis, Doug Atkins, Len Ford, Marion Motley, and Dante Lavelli. Offensive guard Chuck Noll was to make the Hall as a coach.

A two-platoon team, the Browns still had a few who played both ways. Punter Horace Gillom subbed at offensive and defensive end; while the great Motley had pretty much been replaced by Chick Jagade and played both fullback and goal line defense linebacker. Tom Catlin was a linebacker and center and Sherman Howard played at halfback and defensive back.

Graham was backed up by George Ratterman, with the ball carrying falling mostly to Ray Renfro, Billy Reynolds, Ken Carpenter, and Jagade. Dante Lavelli, Darrell Brewster and Dub Jones were the top receivers. Groza and John Sandusky played offensive tackle; Don Colo, Jerry Helluin, and Darrell Palmer defensive tackles; Frank Gatski was at center flanked by guards Abe Gibrion, Chuck Noll, Gene Donaldson, and Lin Houston. Linebackers were Walt Michaels, Tommy Thompson, and Tom Catlin, with defensive backs Ken Gorgal, Tommy James, Kenny Konz, and Warren Lahr.

Philadelphia had dominated the NFL until the Browns entered the league in 1950. A few veterans of the 1948-49 championship teams remained to give the Birds a touch of remembered class. Jim Trimble's Eagles posted a surprising 7-4-1 record to finish second in the East. Future Hall of Fame center Chuck Bednarik also backed up the line. Up front there were such old Eagle standbys as Frank Wydo, John Magee, Bucko Kilroy, Tom Scott, Norm Willey, Jess Richardson, and Vic Sears. Defensive standouts were linebacker Wayne Robinson, and defensive backs Russ Craft, Tom Brookshier, and Bob Hudson. Although the defense was erratic, it held opponents to seven or less points four times during the season.

On offense, the top runners were Don Johnson, Jerry Williams, and Frank Ziegler; while quarterbacks Bobby Thomason and Adrian Burk threw to the very talented ends Bob Schnelker, Bobby Waltson -- a great place kicker -- and Pete Pihos, a Hall of Fame end who still played offense and defense.

The only other teams who had .500 seasons were the Washington Redskins and Pittsburgh Steelers.

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At Washington the great coach Curly Lambeau, who had spent thirty seasons with the Packers, was in the last year of his Hall of Fame career. The Redskins still had their band and a heritage of Sammy Baugh's passes, but they were in the doldrums, in part because of owner George Preston Marshall's refusal to hire anyone whose skin was not lily white. Eddie LeBaron had taken over at quarterback for Baugh and completed a very modest 42% of his passes for a mere three TD's. His backup, Jack Scarbath, had nine six pointers but only completed 35% of his throws.

The top receiver was Hugh Taylor while Choo-Choo Justice, Leon Heath and Jules Rykovich led the rushers. Bill Dudley, like Lambeau destined for the Hall of Fame, was mainly used as a place kicker. Many of the Skins linemen played several positions on both sides of the ball. Gene Brito, destined to be a star defensive end was still going both ways.

Blue collar iron men who reflected the work ethic of their immigrant parents and their city identified the Pittsburgh Steelers led by tough Ernie Stautner.

The Steelers with Joe Bach at the helm were in only their second year as a "modern" T-formation team. They had two future NFL luminaries at quarterback in Jim Finks and Ted Marchibroda. Despite the change, the character of the team was still single-wing tough. Some all-time Steeler greats and favorites whose names are synonymous with the Steelers' rugged tradition were Elbie Nickel, Fran Rogel, Lynn Chandnois, Dale Dodrill, Bill Walsh (the center, not the later 49er coach), George Tarasovic and Bill McPeak.

Jack Butler intercepted nine passes for two TDs and also played some offensive end catching one TD pass. He was one of the finest players of his time and is often called the best defensive back of his era NOT in the Hall of Fame. Defensive tackle Stautner, who wore Pittsburgh's black and gold for fourteen years, is the only Steeler of this period in the Hall.

Another legendary Hall of Fame coach, Steve Owen, was in his last season heading up a poor Giant team. Why this team could win only three games is difficult to understand when one looks at the roster. Besides Owen there were five others who made the Hall of Fame; Frank Gifford who played offensive and defensive back, threw option passes, and place kicked; Tom Landry, an excellent defensive back and later a great coach, Em Tunnell the first pure defensive player in the Hall of fame; and tackles Rosey Brown and Arnie Weinmeister.

Charley Conerly and Arnie Galiffa were at QB with the runners Sonny Grandelius, Kyle Rote, and Eddie Price; while top linemen were Dick Yelvington, Bill Austin, Jack Stroud, John Rapacz, Ray Wietecha, John Cannady, and Jim Duncan. However, an injury to Price took away the base of the offense, and youngsters such as Brown, Wietecha, and Gifford had not yet developed into stars.

Joe Stydahar had been a Hall of Fame tackle for the Bears and a championship coach for the Rams, but his Chicago Cardinals team could win only one game, the last of the year from the Bears. Although some other teams had more players drafted into the military, no team was hurt more than the Cards were when Ollie Matson put on olive drab. Charlie Trippi, of the old Dream Backfield, still remained; he was the top rusher and an eventual Hall of Fame selection. John Olzewski was also a class fullback, while players like Pat Summerall, Bill Svoboda, Don Joyce, and Leo Sanford were to taste glory with the great Giant and Colt teams that were still several years away.

In the Western Conference (the previous season it was called the National Conference), the Detroit Lions, who won their second consecutive championship in '53, reflected the flamboyance of their athletic and spiritual leader Bobby Layne. Bobby played hard both on and off the field and expected his teammates to follow suit. The Lions were winners because Bobby Layne told them they were winners and they darn well better play like winners or answer to Bobby.

Coach Buddy Parker had a cadre of great backs behind Layne at QB. They were Gene Gedman, Jug Girard, Bob Hoernschemeyer, Doak Walker, Ollie Cline, Lew Carpenter, Pat Harder and Bob Smith. Cloyce Box, Leon Hart and Dorne Dible were the receivers. Up front were guards Dick Stanfel and Harley Sewell; tackles Charlie Ane, Ollie Spencer, and Lou Creekmur with veteran center Vince Banonis.

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On defense were ends Blaine Earon, Sonny Gandee, Bob Cain, Bob Dove, and Jim Doran. Tackles were Thum McGraw and Bob Prchlik, with linebackers Joe Schmidt, Jim Martin, Lavern Torgeson and defensive backs Jim David, Yale Lary, Carl Karilivacz, and Jack Christiansen.

With 33 man rosters, several players appeared on both sides of the line. Jim Doran, who caught the pass that won the championship game played both offensive and defensive end. Lew Carpenter and Jim Smith played halfback and defensive back; while Bob Miller appeared both ways at tackle.

It has been said many times that the Lions were the first club to put the best athletes on defense, and their record attests to the wisdom of this philosophy. Lions from this team who ended up in the Pro Football Hall of Fame are Layne, Walker, Lary, Schmidt, and Christiansen.

The 49er's had dream runners in Hugh McElhenny and Joe Perry with Y.A. Tittle their on the field leader. If the Lions were free-wheeling terrors, the 49ers epitomized slick offense. Seldom mentioned in the same breath as their scoring ability was a defense that sorely missed Toneff, Cason, and Ed Henke. Nevertheless, Buck Shaw's 49ers posted the third best record in the NFL. Their future Hall of Famers included Bob St. Clair, Leo Nomellini, Tittle, McElhenny, and Perry.

San Francisco may have been one of the most versatile teams in the league. When quarterbacks Tittle and Hal Ledyard went down with injuries, defensive back Jimmy Powers, who was also the punter, took over. Five other backs including Joe Arenas, Billy Nixon, and Pete Schabarum, three of their top rushers, played both ways. Their top receivers were Billy Wilson and Gordon Soltau, also the place kicker.

Up front Leo Nomellini appeared on both sides of the line as did six others. Center Bill Johnson, guard Bruno Banducci, and linebacker Hardy Brown were among the more prominent linemen.

The Los Angeles Rams were the most thrilling team in sports, led by Norm Van Brocklin, Elroy Hirsch, and Tom Fears. Their high-flying offense was more entertaining than anything Hollywood could produce even in 3-D or Cinemascope. Van Brocklin led by fear: no one wanted to deal with Stormin' Norman after having missed a blocking assignment.

The Rams under the guidance of Hamp Pool had the great Van Brocklin at quarterback backed by Rudy Bukich. He threw to future Hall of Fame ends Tom Fears and Elroy Hirsch plus Bobby Boyd, who also played defensive back occasionally and Tank Younger, a linebacker, halfback, and fullback. Deacon Dan Towler, Skeets Quinlan, and Younger did the bulk of the ball carrying.

On the defense, L.A. had future Hall of Fame defensive stars Andy Robustelli and Night Train Lane, along with such defensive greats as Herb Rich, Woodley Lewis, Norb Hecker, Stan West, Larry Brink, Don Paul, and Gene Lipscombs, the biggest man on the team. The Rams were the only team in the league who had a man to do nothing but kick -- Ben Agajanian.

George Halas fielded one of his worst teams. George Blanda was not an inspiring quarterback that year. Curley Morrison led a mediocre group of runners and Jim Dooley was the leading receiver.

George Connor and Bill George, like Halas and Blanda, future Hall of Famers both played offense and defense. Aside from such a couple of good linemen in Ed Sprinkle, Bill Wightkin, and Fred Williams this was a very tame Monster of the Midway.

The Baltimore Colts replaced the Dallas Texans in 1953, and the NFL was granted by the courts the right to black out TV games at home. TV fans could grumble that they were being deprived of seeing more interesting folks on Sunday than Ed Sullivan could produce. Even the new and lowly Colts already had such dominant personalities as Artie Donovan, Gino Marchetti, and Buddy Young. The Colts, in their initial season under Keith Molesworth, actually won three games better than either the Packers or Cards.

Eleven players came from the dismal Dallas team of '52 -- offensive tackle Ken Jackson, guard Sisto Averno, center Brad Eckland, defensive ends Marchetti and Barney Poole, defensive tackles Joe Campanella and Art Donovan, defensive back Tom Keane, halfbacks Young and George Taliaferro, and offensive end Dan Edwards. The Colts seemed a slapdash outfit in their first year, but six members of

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this team were to share in the glory years of the team at the end of the decade -- Art Spinney, Bill Pellington, Bert Rechichar, Carl Tasseff, and future Hall of Famers Donovan and Marchetti.

The once great Packers were in the midst of a rapid descent to the bottom. The team that had once epitomized daring offense was wallowing in the Wisconsin snow. No team in the NFL had so completely changed its personality -- for the worse! Beset by all kinds of problems including using three coaches, Gene Rozani, Hugh Devore, and Ray McLean, the Packers actually had three players who like the six Colts would eventually be members of a great team. Center Jim Ringo, now in the Hall of Fame, defensive tackle Dave Hanner, and linebacker Bill Forester were to see much better years.

Quarterbacks Babe Parilli and Tobin Rote, one of the top rushing QB's in league history, led a few fine players like fullbacks Fred Cone and Howie Ferguson, end Billy Howton, tackle Dick Wildung, and linebacker Clayton Tonnemaker, but the Pack had more holes than Wisconsin cheese.

While all teams had attacks balanced between passing and rushing, only three were able to complete 50% of their throws. No team today completes less than the 50% mark. The number of field goal attempts has almost doubled and all teams are over 50% today. In 1953 only four of the twelve teams Cleveland, San Francisco, Detroit, and Washington were successful on 50% or more. These were the team who had outstanding kickers as Lou Groza, Gordon Soltau, Doak Walker, and Bill Dudley.

In comparison with 40 years later we find the teams of this era were more identifiable as players were bound to the team and could not change at will, passing and kicking were less accurate than today, the 33 men rosters still mandated versatility with some playing both offense and defense, and the press was still of the generation who felt their duty was to aggrandize the players with all positive stories reflecting great admiration rather than negative tales of sordid off the field adventures. It was a different game.