

## **A Boom, Boom, Boom For The South Side**

by Bill Schubert

Of all the great rivalries in sports, one of the most intense was the Chicago Bears and their cross town nemesis, the Chicago Cardinals. From the Bears formation in 1922, until the Cardinals left for St. Louis before the 1960 season, George Halas and his crew had represented the North Side of Chicago and the Cards the South Side.

The Cards are long gone from Chicago but they left a legacy of sporting lore that exists today in the memories of their graying and bitter fans. Old South Side Cardinal fans will neither forgive or forget that Halas, in their view, kicked their team out of town.

The Cardinals have a rich history, being the only surviving charter member of the NFL. (Sorry Bear fans, I know Halas was there at the beginning, but Decatur is not Chicago and Staleys are not Bears.) The Cards have been around so long that they had an old timers dance three years before the NFL began, to honor Nick Bruk, Dan Ward and Frank Ragen, members of the 1900, 1902 and 1903 squads.

It's understandable why some of the Cardinals' stories survive as they are important tales of football history: the Dream Backfield in the late 40's, who led the championship team of 1947 and division winner in 1948, the big bru-ha-ha in 1925 with the Pottsville Maroons, or Ernie Nevers' spectacular play in the early 30's. But, there is one favorite tale of old South Siders that may appear insignificant to the uninitiated, the "Boom, Boom, Boom" play in 1951.

To understand why one play would live on in history you have to understand something about Chicago. In Chicago there is a North Side and a South Side, divided by a line of demarcation called Madison Avenue.

To illustrate the seriousness with which Chicago respects this division, George Halas signed an agreement on August 27th, 1931, with the Cardinal's owner at the time, Dr. David Jones, that stated that the Cardinals agreed to play south and the Bears north of Madison Avenue. The document must not have meant much at the time because the Cardinals played in Wrigley Field as south side orphans from 1931 to 1940. However the document does illustrate the bitterness of the Cardinal-Bears rivalry.

Cardinals General Manager in the 50's, Walter Wolfner, blamed the neighborhood around Comisky Park for the Cardinals poor attendance and wanted to move to Northwestern University's Dyche Stadium in 1958. Northwestern is in Evanston, an autonomous town bordering Chicago on it's northern boundary.

George Halas wanted no part of the Cardinals so close on the North Side and pulled out the document to block the Cardinals move. The Cardinals gathered up old South Side Irish lawyer Tommy Nash, (famous for defending Al Capone in the 20's) and sued the Bears for restraint of trade, claiming the document could not be held binding against the new owners of the Cards. Bitter grid iron combatants had become belligerent court room opponents. The whole stink he became moot because Northwestern didn't want any trouble and when they heard of the suit, they withdrew their offer.) So Halas retained his claim to the North Side turf and outmuscled the Cardinals politically for not the first or the last time.

Madison Avenue represents a Mason-Dixon line of sorts that divides two different social life styles. The North Side is glitz and glamour. The South Side is tough and working class. Even today, the North Side is BMW's, White Zinfandel, Hugh Hefner and Opra. The South Side is T-shirts, Al Capone, beer and hot dogs. The promotional literature for Chicago always shows the sparkle of the North Side and never the brick bungalows and truck depots of the South Side.

It is a misunderstanding of the stereotype, however to think that the South Sider feels inferior. Different yes, yet tantamount in all ways.

This division carries over to Chicago's sports teams. When the Cardinals played the Bears, it represented far more than a football game, it was a clash of two social strata.

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Through football history, it was almost always the Bears who were more successful in the NFL standings. However, twice a year the Cardinals would get a chance to prove the illogic that the Bears may be one of the best teams in the league, but not necessarily the best team in Chicago.

1951 was typical. The Bears were in the hunt for the Western Division Conference title. Heading into the last game of the regular season the Bears needed a win against the Cardinals and a loss by the Lions and the Rams to face the Browns in the NFL Championship game in Wrigley Field.

The Cards knew their season was over, a season of intra-squad squabbles and a 2-9 record. Curley Lambeau had been let go (officially resigned) as the Cards' coach on December 7th and was forced to watch the game from the press box annex. All three of his former subordinates Cecil Isbel, Phil Handler and Garrard Ramsey ran the team. All were talented in their own right, but the team lacked a firm hand at the helm and the Cardinals had floundered.

The Bears were looking forward to a great day in Wrigley Field. It was Bulldog Turner's last season and perhaps his last game. A gala on field celebration was planned. Turner would be awarded a new car and the accolades of the many friends he had made in eleven years in the NFL.

The Cardinals however reveled in the role of the spoiler. They had ruined the Bears championship hopes three of the last four years by beating them in the last game of the season. The Cards had whipped the Bears earlier in the year 28 to 14 and were determined to do it again.

Wrigley Field was frozen as the ambient temperature hovered around zero. The Bears struck first after a score less first quarter on a 25 yard pass from Johnny Lujack to Gene Schroeder and they took a 7 to 0 lead into the locker room to end the half.

The Cardinals came out for the second half with a new look. Perennial Cardinal, Charlie Trippi replaced Jim Hardy at Quarterback. The Cardinals junked the conventional T-formation that they had used in the first half and went into their Double Wing-T. The coaches three, had tried to get Lambeau to use the Double Wing since spring training in August to no avail and it had been one of the points of friction amongst the Cardinals coaching staff. The Double Wing-T is really a spread formation in modern terms, using no less than five wide outs. Dangerous for an immobile quarterback, it was perfect for the speed, agility and experience of Trippi.

The Double Wing-T spread the Bears out, giving Trippi room to roam. If the Bears defense tried to close on Trippi to shut down his tailback skills, he would instantly transform into a quarterback and exhibit his considerable passing talents.

After the second half kickoff, Trippi took the Cards from their own 29 in six plays, plus a penalty, for the tying touchdown. Trippi scored himself, untouched on a sixteen yard run. The Bears went three and out. The Cards had the ball again on their 49 after a poor punt. Trippi marched the Cardinals again on runs of twelve and sixteen yards. The Cards had to settle for a field goal, but took the lead 10 to 7.

The Bears answered with a drive of their own as Gene Schroeder grabbed his second TD pass, a 46-yard bomb from Steve Romanik who had replaced Lujack at quarterback. George Blanda added the P.A.T. with his toe and the Bears took the lead back 14 to 10. The game was fast becoming a classic.

South Side fans didn't have long to wait to rise to their feet, however as Don Paul returned the ensuing kickoff 57 yards, caught from behind on the Bears 33 by none other than Gene Schroeder. Trippi ran the ball down to the Bear 6 on another broken field run and consummated the drive with a touchdown pass to little Billy Cross, who stepped in the end zone.

The Bears had plenty of time left in the fourth quarter. An interception cut their next drive short, but a holding penalty stopped the Cards. After another failed Bear possession, Trippi drove the Cards from the their 46 on a 12-yard run and a 16-yard pass to Paul, down to the Bears 26. In his finest day, Trippi took the ball back as if to pass, but darted left and wove a path through the defenders for another rushing touchdown.

The point after was added with 7:40 left to play. The Cardinals had a commanding 24 to 14 lead and it looked like they were going to turn the Bears' championship dreams into a nightmare for the fourth time in

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five years, satisfaction enough for any South Side fan who loyally followed the 2 and 9 Cardinals. What the fans didn't know of course, is that the game was about to take it's permanent place in South Side sporting lore.

Enter Bear End Ed Sprinkle. Sprinkle was the type of player that you loved to have on your team, but loved to hate on the other team. He wasn't big at only 210 pounds, but he was tough. Sprinkle loved to hit and was relentless on a pass rush, scratching and clawing his way to the quarterback.

Sprinkle was from Tuscola, Texas, and had come up to the pros during World War II as a protege of Bulldog Turner. Sprinkle and Turner had both played at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene. Turner invited Sprinkle to the Bears tryout camp in 1944. Ed only weighed 190 pounds at the time and probably wouldn't have made the team if a lot of the established stars hadn't been in military service. However, using his style of pure aggression, (breaking Turner's nose in the process), he not only made the team but became a starter. Sprinkle would develop into an All-Pro Defensive End and could catch a pass or two on offense.

To make up for his lack of size, Sprinkle would rush with his arms up high, slapping at the ball, or tackling high around the shoulders. Many an opposing player would get an elbow in the face or a forearm across the nose. Halas would always feign a "boys will be boys" shrug when confronted with Sprinkle's tactics. Sprinkle was proud of his reputation, titling an autobiographical story in Stuart Leuthner's book Iron Men "The Meanest Man In Football".

With Trippi running rampant, gaining 145 yards, averaging 15 yards per carry and throwing for 106 yards in the second half including a touchdown, it was Sprinkle's job to stop him. All the Cardinals, but especially Trippi, had been whacked and gouged by Sprinkle all day. Near the end of the game Charlie had finally had enough. With the game well in hand Trippi intentionally ignored his blocking assignment, and met the onrushing Sprinkle with a right cross square on the jaw - Boom! Trippi managed a few more pops before Sprinkle landed out cold, flat on his back - Boom! Then the starter's pistol fired to end the game - Boom!

Trippi was ejected from the game and fined the mandatory \$50.00 for striking an opposing player. Trippi trotted off the field, claiming the fine was worth every penny, and into the annals of South Side lore as a hero. The Cardinals were delirious in their riotous locker room after the game and started a very exclusive club, called the five dollar club. Each member had to pay five dollars in dues to cover Trippi's \$50.00 fine.

The Boom, Boom, Boom play wouldn't have survived to become a football legend had Charlie Trippi not carried the whole South Side of Chicago in his right arm that day. It was the perfect capper to a perfect day. The despised Bears were beaten, their Championship hopes dashed, and Sprinkle wound up flat on his back. What more could a Chicago Cardinal fan ask for? Legend has shortened the third Boom to a comma when in reality it should be a few dots, Boom, Boom... Boom, as the game wasn't quite over when Trippi was thrown out, but it's so much more fun to tell the story in a South Side pub with a comma.

The play was and is a favorite of the media and fans and haunted Sprinkle. To Sprinkle's credit, he had a sense of humor about it. Sprinkle had given Elroy (Crazy Legs) Hirsch one of his patented forearms in a game against the Rams earlier in the year and knocked him woozy enough to draw an unnecessary roughness call from the officials. Meeting up with Hirsch at the Pro-Bowl at the end of the year, Sprinkle said, "I got this thing figured out. You owe me one, and I owe Trippi one, so during the game on Sunday, why don't you hit Trippi and we'll all be even."