

DON HUTSON'S FIRST NFL GAME

by John Hogrogian

On June 26, 1997, Don Hutson died in a nursing home in Rancho Mirage, California. He was 84 years old. The *New York Times* printed a large obituary on June 27, calling him "one of the Green Bay Packers' greatest players and perhaps the best wide receiver in college and professional football history."

The obituary repeated an often-told tale about Hutson. The story read as follows:

On the first play of his first pro game, the legend began.

The Packers were playing the Chicago Bears in Green Bay, Wis. On the first play, instead of the expected run, the Packers called a pass. The Bears' defense concentrated on Johnny Blood, the Packers' dangerous running back and receiver. On the other side of the field, Hutson loped lazily downfield, with only Beattie Feathers covering him.

Hutson stole a look at Blood. So did Feathers, a mistake because as soon as Feathers was distracted, Hutson took off. Arnie Herber's pass hit Hutson in stride, and he outran Feathers for an 83-yard touchdown.

This story has been repeated in various football histories and encyclopedias (but not all of them) over the years.

The legend is false in one regard, at least. That touchdown did not happen in Hutson's first NFL game. In 1935, the Packers played four pre-season games, all against lesser Wisconsin pro teams, none of which were members of the NFL. On August 31, the Packers beat the Merrill Foxes 34-0. Hutson did not play, as he had just reported after playing for the College All-Star squad that lost to the Chicago Bears by a score of 5-0 two days earlier. On September 2, the Packers beat the Chippewa Falls Marines 22-0, with Hutson making a scoreless debut for Green Bay. Hutson also played without scoring in a 40-0 Packers victory over Stevens Point on September 4 and in a 49-0 Packers victory over the La Crosse Lagers on September 8.

On Sunday, September 15, the Packers began their NFL season by hosting the Chicago Cardinals at City Stadium. The Cardinals won 7-6. The *Green Bay Press-Gazette* covered the game in detail in Monday's edition, including a play-by-play account. The starting ends for Green Bay were Milt Gantenbein and Al Rose. Hutson didn't play in the first quarter, in which the Cardinals took a 7-0 lead on a 22-yard touchdown pass play from Doug Russell to Bill Smith and an extra point drop kick by Paul Pardonner.

At the start of the second quarter Hutson replaced Rose at end. He stayed in the game for about half of that quarter (nine plays) before Rose returned to action. On his first play, Bob Monnett's pass to him was incomplete. The *Press-Gazette* stated that this was the only pass thrown to Hutson in the game. The play-by-play mentions Hutson on three other plays in that second quarter. He was stopped for no gain on an end-around play, he downed a punt on Chicago's five yard line, and he joined with Walt Kiesling as lead blockers on a five yard running gain by Johnny Blood. Shortly after Hutson left the game, the Packers scored on a short pass from Monnett to Swede Johnston. Monnett missed a place kick for the extra point. Chicago led 7-6 at the half.

Hutson did not play in the scoreless third quarter. He reentered the game with about ten minutes left and left the game five plays from the end. On his first play of the quarter, Hutson and Bob O'Connor tackled Chicago runner Hal Pangle after an eleven yard gain. On the next play, Hutson and George Svendsen tackled Cardinal fullback Mike Mikulak after a five yard running gain. The play-by-play doesn't mention Hutson again until late in the game, when the rookie lost twelve yards on an end-around play. After two more plays, Hutson retired to the bench for the afternoon. The Cards won the game 7-6.

THE COFFIN CORNER, Vol. 19, No. 6 (1997)

One week later, the Packers hosted the Bears. Hutson started at end. On the first play after the kickoff, Arnie Herber threw to Hutson for an 83-yard touchdown. This is the play around which the legend has grown. It took place in Hutson's second NFL game and first start.