

Riot at Yankee Stadium

By Tom Farley

It's a rare occasion when a sporting event makes the front page of the *New York Times*, even today. It was even rarer 40 years ago. But on December 7, 1959, a football game played the day before between the New York Giants and the Cleveland Browns – a 48-7 Giants victory that clinched the Eastern Conference title for New York -- made Page 1 of “the paper of record” for all the wrong reasons.

“Rioting Fans Halt Giants-Browns Game 20 Minutes” read the headline near the bottom of the page, above a photo of dozens of fans on the field around the goal posts in the north end zone, which sat in front of the bleachers and on-field seating in left field. At the right of the photo, a handful of Browns players are making their way to the visiting team dugout.

Nowadays, fans streaming onto the field is a common occurrence. Frequently, the exodus of the players, coaches and staff is matched by an influx of TV cameramen and still photographers. But, less than a year after the Giants and Colts stamped the NFL on the nation's consciousness with their overtime thriller, the “field invasion” was a much less frequent occurrence. Especially an invasion with the game still in progress, and one that frightened even the old pros.

What prompted the “riot,” as the *Times* characterized it? *Times* reporter Gordon S. White Jr., apparently from the City Desk instead of Sports, put it this way: “The riot was attributed to exuberance at the Giants' victory and to high feelings against the Browns.”

“High feelings,” indeed. The Giants had ended the Browns' six-year domination of the Eastern Conference (which was called the American Conference from 1950-52) by winning the Eastern and the league title in 1956. The Browns returned the favor in '57, beating the Giants twice and taking the Eastern title back. Then, in '58, the Giants beat the Browns three times -- the last two on consecutive Sundays in Yankee Stadium, and the last one in a playoff for the Eastern Conference title.

Entering that December day in 1959, the Giants were 8-2, having won seven of their last eight. Charlie Conerly was in the midst of his MVP season – he won the AP and NEA Player of the Year honors that season, while Johnny Unitas won the honors from the UPI, *The Sporting News* and the Maxwell Club. The Giants' defense, in its final season executing Tom Landry's innovative 4-3 defensive front under the man himself, was en route to leading the league in fewest points allowed for the second straight year.

On the last day of the 1958 regular season, the Browns were just seconds from a return trip to the NFL Championship Game. That is, until Pat Summerall's 49-yard field goal from snow-covered turf as time ran out – of which Vince Lombardi, then still a Giants assistant coach, told Summerall immediately afterward: “You know, don't you, that you can't really kick it that far?” -- gave the Giants a 13-10 victory and forced the playoff. While it wasn't evident at the time, that loss began the Browns' descent from the top of the mountain, and set in motion a chain of events that led to Art Modell firing Paul Brown after the 1962 season.

But late in the 1959 season, the Browns were still banging on the door to the Eastern Conference penthouse. While a rather ordinary 6-4, that still left them tied for second with Norm Van Brocklin and the Philadelphia Eagles, two games behind the Giants with two to play. Two Browns wins and two Giants losses would force a playoff. And with Jim Brown on his way to rushing for 1,329 yards -- 110.8 yards per game in a 12-game season -- Cleveland certainly felt it had a fighting chance.

It didn't. Brown, described by the *Times* as “physically subpar,” gained only 50 yards in 15 carries. The Browns as a whole gained only 146 yards; the Giants' defense shut down the pass as well, holding Milt Plum and Jim Ninowski to just 36 yards passing.

The Giants' offense, meanwhile, was fully recovered from a three-game midseason slump in which the team scored a total of 38 points. On this day, Conerly and Don Heinrich combined to pass for 401 yards, but it was Conerly's day: the Marlboro Man from Mississippi was 14 of 21 for 271 yards and three

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 21, No. 4 (1999)

touchdowns, one each to Frank Gifford, Kyle Rote and Bob Schnelker. Heinrich connected with Alex Webster for a score, Gifford ran one in from two yards out, Lindon Crow returned an interception for 30 yards and another score, and Summerall kicked two field goals to go with four points after touchdown. When Summerall pulled a groin muscle, punter Don Chandler stepped in to kick the final two PATs.

After three quarters, it was 48-0. Early in the fourth quarter, Bobby Mitchell took a Chandler punt back 78 yards for the Browns' only score. So a comparatively uneventful fourth quarter, combined with the obviousness of a Giant victory, gave "the howling crowd of 68,436," as *Times* sportswriter Louis Effrat put it, time to get restless.

Just in case there was any doubt, Page 1 reporter White said: "It was also noted that many in the crowd had been drinking."

Giants coach Jim Lee Howell said: "There were a lot of drunks."

The 1960 book *The Pros*, which features the writing of Tex Maule and the legendary photography of Robert Riger, contains a photo of two young boys running down the field with the football as one of New York's finest gives chase. As Maule put it: "The big crowd ... roared encouragement to these two boys, who finally escaped with the football. The crowd then poured out of the stands with incredible enthusiasm, invaded the field before the game ended and tore down the goal posts while Cleveland Coach Paul Brown led his charges to the safety of the dressing room."

It's likely that Maule, *Sports Illustrated's* pro football writer for many years, took such a cavalier, boys-will-be-boys posture toward the field invasion because he was viewing it from the safety of the press box.

Down on the Yankee Stadium grass, where there was still one minute, 53 seconds to play, Gifford had a radically different perspective. "First they tore down the goalposts, then they surrounded both benches," Gifford wrote in his autobiography *The Whole Ten Yards*. "I took one look at their eyes and was stunned at what I saw. I had never seen so many crazed expressions. So even though the game wasn't over, I grabbed Charlie and said, 'Let's get the hell out of here.'"

"If you do not clear the field, there may be a forfeit," called out the golden voice of Yankee Stadium public-address announcer Bob Sheppard. But this crowd was not having it. Finally, the players evacuated the field.

"As both teams dashed for their locker rooms, I saw a little boy being buffeted in the crush," Gifford said. "He was crying and all scuffed up -- in real danger. I scooped him as I ran and deposited him on top of the first-base dugout. 'Don't go back on that field,' I screamed at him."

"I left the field to keep from getting beat up," Paul Brown told a UPI reporter. "They were also shoving and punching my players and they followed me off the field."

In the Giants locker room, owner Tim Mara said: "We gotta go back out. Paul Brown is going to demand a forfeit unless we finish the game."

"Bull----," Conerly said. "No way am I going back out there."

The *Times* reported the next day that Paul Brown "had no intention of asking that a forfeit be declared," and that the officials had not mentioned a forfeit at the time of the incident.

Conerly didn't go back out there, Gifford said, "but the rest of us returned to the field and ran a couple of plays while they kept the clock going." The Giants and Browns did this while encircled by fans "so close we could hear them breathing," he said. Paul Brown wasn't nearly as close; the *Times* reported he watched "from a vantage point near the visiting dugout."

"On one play Mel Triplett took a handoff and kind of jogged through the Browns, who were standing around with very white faces," Gifford said. "He must have kept running, because only the ball came back to us."

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Paul Brown, concluding his 14th year in professional football, told UPI: "... you can have the New York fans. That was the worst thing I've ever seen. In all my years of football, I've never seen anything like that roughhouse." The game officials agreed that the riot was one of the worst in their memory of NFL games.

The *Times* reported that while there were at least a dozen fights on the field, it could confirm only that two men, ages 27 and 28, were hospitalized for facial cuts. No arrests were made, the *Times* said.

While it could have been much worse, it was bad enough, Gifford said.

"I think we were all wondering how many of us were going to get out alive," he said. "It was the closest I've ever been -- or want to be -- to mob hysteria."

The epilogue, Gifford said, came 17 years later: In 1976, when Giants Stadium opened across the Hudson River from Manhattan in East Rutherford, N.J., the field and the front row were separated by a wall at least 10 feet tall.

This has become standard in the stadiums built since Giants Stadium opened; while most of the architects will tell you it's for the improved sightlines, certainly Wellington Mara and other members of his family would likely tell you it's got more than a little to do with a day late in 1959 that mixed joy and sadness for true Giants fans.