

1964: A Giant Collapse

by Jack Ziegler

Through late summer 1964 New York Giant football fans were experiencing a lot of gastric upset. Not only had New York lost four of five exhibition games, but fans found themselves dwelling on absent friends from the 1963 Eastern Conference Championship squad. On August 25 Hugh McElheny was cut, along with 1963's leading ground gainer, Phil King. During the off season Dick Modzelewski had been traded to the Cleveland Browns. But what rankled most was the departure of number 70, Sam Huff, the man who defined the middle linebacker position. In return for the epicenter of the their "Dee-fense," the Giants received two journeymen, scatback Dick James and defensive tackle Andy Stynchula.

Ostensibly such moves were part of chain-smoking Head Coach Allie Sherman's efforts at revitalizing an aging squad. Critical fans saw Sherman as cutting the heart out of a proven club. And Stynchula would make no one forget "Little Mo," nor would untried middle backer Lou Slaby come close to filling Huff's athletic and motivational cleats.

Despite the pre-season losses, coaching boy-wonder Allie Sherman remained optimistic. Sherman put great store in the Giants' number one draft pick, troubled running back Joe Don Looney (who would never play a down for New York). Likewise, Sherman saw Stanford rookie running back Steve Thurlow as a "new" Alex Webster (the "old" Webster was in his final season for the Giants). One dark strand in the otherwise bright Sherman tapestry was the "unretiring" of 37-year-old defensive coach Andy Robustelli, who returned to defensive end.

In a moment of uncharacteristic hubris, the normally modest Frank Gifford echoed the starry-eyed Sherman, telling New York fans: "Listen, we'll win this thing -- because we always win."

The season opener against the Philadelphia Eagles at Franklin Field on September 13 revealed the shape of things to come. The Eagles, 1963's Eastern Conference's cellar dweller, thrashed the Giants 38-7. A befuddled offensive line could not pick up Eagle safety Don "The Blade" Burrough's blitzes. Quarterback Y.A. Tittle went down six times (five courtesy of Burroughs), fumbled three times, and threw two interceptions.

The Eagles looked like the Browns or Colts. Earl Gros, Timmy Brown, and Tom Woodshick all galloped for touchdowns while Norm Snead threw two touchdowns. A shocked New York *Times* Giant beat reporter, William Wallace, noted that "...the Giants have never looked quite so impotent in defeat, bowing to a team that was a rag tag outfit at Princeton in an exhibition loss two weeks ago." Conversely, Coach Sherman declared himself pleased with Lou Slaby's great range at middle linebacker.

In retrospect, the Giants' 1964 season probably ended at Pitt Stadium the following Sunday, September 20, when Steeler defensive end John Baker streaked by Giant tackle Lane Howell to level Y.A. Tittle. The play was a screen pass, which Steeler linebacker Chuck Hinton picked off for a TD. Far more costly was the injury to Tittle. The Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* photo of Tittle, helmetless, dazed, on his knees, blood trickling down his bald pate, became a wire-foto classic. Though official reports emphasized bruised ribs, Tittle had been concussed and would never again regain his 1963 form.

Tittle's 21-year-old replacement was Gary Wood, a Cornell graduate and small for the NFL at 5'11" and 188 pounds. Wood did well, moving the Giants to within three points of the Steelers late in the fourth quarter. But as so emblematic of this 1964 club, the Giants couldn't make the big play. Don Chandler missed a tying field goal of 37 yards. The Giants lost 27-24 and fell to 0-2.

Giant followers took heart from a New York victory over Washington on Friday night, September 25, at Yankee Stadium (the Giants had to share the Stadium with the baseball Yankees). The Giants spotted the Skins a 10-0 lead in the first half as starter Gary Wood proved ineffective. In relief, Y.A. Tittle guided the Maramen to two Don Chandler field goals in the third period. When a woozy Tittle left the game in the

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fourth quarter, Gary Wood won it the way New York might have won a game in 1958 -- a dive fake to Alex Webster, then a TD scamper around left end for a 13-10 victory, the first against two losses.

An ebullient Allie Sherman announced, "We go from here...this is the beginning."

But it wasn't. Two Sundays later, October 4, the Giants went down to defeat at the paws of the Lions in Tiger Stadium, 26-3. New York could only muster a puny 167 offensive yards against Detroit's robust 413. New York penetrated Detroit's territory twice, registering a lone Chandler field goal. Tittle endured a woeful day, going 11-24-122-3. Detroit's offense was distinguished by its infinite variety -- New York fell for a fake field goal TD in the first period and later in the game was victimized for two TDs by halfback Tommy Watkins, one a punt return, the other an option pass. A final twist of the knife was Giant return back Clarence Childs' dully downing a fumbled punt in the end zone for a safety.

On October 11, the Giants struggled to hang on to a tie 13-13, against the Cowboys in Dallas. The football gods smiled on the inept New Yorkers as Cowboys placekicker Dick Van Raphorst's field goal attempt sailed wide in the closing moments. The Cowboys moved almost at will against a once mighty Giant D, amassing 473 offensive yards to the Giants' pathetic 128, including a minuscule 33 yards passing. Tittle's passing statistics approached the abysmal -- 6-18-66-2. He did complete his second touchdown pass of the year to Joe Morrison. (In 1963 Tittle threw 36.)

October 18 marked the return of the rag tag Eagles to Yankee Stadium. A rejuvenated Ollie Matson, belying his 34 years, ran for two touchdowns and 100 yards. Y.A. Tittle, who had turned 38 on Columbus Day, had a less pleasant afternoon. Blitzes, this time by cornerbacks Irv Cross and Nate Ramsey, mystified Giant blockers while sleepwalking New York receivers dropped seven passes.

For the first time in 1964 Giant fans booed their team as Y.A. was lifted in the second quarter. The Giants bowed 23-17 for a 1-4-1 record. Locker room post mortems proved instructive. A frustrated Alex Webster exclaimed: "We try just as hard...We're working as much and putting out as much. I don't know what's wrong."

Eagle defensive tackle Floyd Peters saw the problem immediately: "Tittle doesn't execute the plays like he used to. Webster can't hit the hole anymore."

New York *Times* reporter William Wallace agreed with Peters, noting that Tittle now required six or seven seconds to get off a pass. The league standard was closer to four.

Further humiliations were in store. On October 25 the Giants lost to the Browns in Municipal Stadium, 42-20. Their 1-5-1 record was now the worst in the league. Despite the score New York had played well until the fourth quarter when Cleveland scored 21 points in four and a half minutes. Fourteen of the points came thanks to fumbles by Dick James and Clarence Childs. Giant quarterbacks performed competently. Tittle rolled out for a TD and passed for 177 yards. Gary Wood, coming in late, went 3-3-44, including a 20-yard touchdown strike to Ernie Wheelwright.

As an ironic footnote, traded defensive tackle Dick Modzelewski was awarded the game ball for his outstanding defensive play, an honor he never received in his eight-year stay with the Giants.

All Saints Day, November 1, seemed especially blessed for Y.A. Tittle. The Bald Eagle magically regained his 1963 form (for this day only) throwing for 285 yards and four touchdowns against St. Louis. The Giants, fueled by Tittle's resurgence, rose to a 2-5-1 mark, prompting Coach Sherman to discourse on the possibility of winning the Eastern Conference Championship. Especially noteworthy was the crisp Giant blocking that gave up only one sack as the Giants rolled over a good Cardinal squad, 34-17.

The performance by New York on November 8 darkened Coach Sherman's sunny vision of championships. The Giants bowed to the Cowboys in the Stadium 31-21, reducing their record to 2-6-1, the first time a Giant team had lost six games since Steve Owen's last year as coach in 1953. Giant miscues abounded as Don Chandler's fumbled punt attempt and Dick James' mishandling of a Cowboy punt netted Dallas fourteen points. Not only did Tittle's 16th season interception result in a Dallas TD, but the usually controlled Tittle came unglued in the third period. After overthrowing a wide open Aaron Thomas, Tittle slammed his helmet in the turf, then threw three more incompletions. Though Tittle rifled two touchdowns to Frank Gifford (his first scores of 1964), it was not a productive day.

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Shortly thereafter Coach Sherman abandoned his aggressive 1963 "Bomb" offense for a more conservative inside passing game. The Giants were adapting a short pass, run-oriented game more suited to Gary Wood rather than Y.A. Tittle. An era was passing.

November 15 saw the Giants struggle to a 10-10 tie in the mud of pre-astroturfed Busch Stadium. Both sides were reduced to minimal offense and minimal scoring. Aside from touchdown passes by Tittle and Charlie Johnson and field goals by Don Chandler and Jim Baaken, both sides struggled to avoid fumbling a slippery football.

Late in the fourth quarter Tittle tried to recreate his glory days with the 49ers with an "Alley Oop" pass to a much slower R.C. Owens. But the always aggressive Pat Fischer was there to grab the INT and mathematically eliminate the Giants from the Eastern crown.

November 22, the first anniversary of the Kennedy assassination, saw New York take a drubbing from Pittsburgh 44-17 at the Stadium. The Giants played listlessly, spotting the Steelers a 17-0 lead, which mushroomed to 37-3 in the third quarter. Though New York added two so-what TDs in the fourth quarter, it hardly atoned for their six fumbles, three by fleet-footed but ham-handed Clarence Childs.

Former Giant running back Phil King was stunned, remarking "I've never seen the Giants as flat as that." The Giants 2-7-2 record marked the worst New York result since 1947 when Steve Owen was coach and Paul Governali the quarterback. New York *Times* columnist Arthur Daley pronounced the unthinkable: "They lost more than a ball game; they lost the fire and the fierce will-to-win that had long been a Giant trademark."

Giant fortunes did not improve on November 29 when New York lost to the Redskins at D.C., 36-21. Gary Wood started and even had the Giants ahead 21-17 in the third quarter until he fumbled at his own 15. In relief Tittle proved worse, setting up two Sonny Jurgensen to Bobby Mitchell TD's with a fumble and an interception. New York's banged-up secondary proved suspect as subs Andy Nelson's and Allen Webb's ineptitude allowed Jurgensen to rack up 316 passing yards and drop New York to 2-8-2.

On December 6, there was a sense that the torch had been passed to Gary Wood. Wood took every snap but one against the visiting Vikings. New York hung in till the fourth quarter with Wood passing for 188 yards and two touchdowns. But Fran Tarkenton was better -- his two touchdown passes and one-yard run sunk the Giants 30-21 and reduced them to 2-9-2.

The New Yorkers staggered into their last game with Cleveland, who needed to win to clinch the Eastern title. The Giants were in poor health, dressing only 35 players (the league limit was forty but New York had depleted its taxi squad). Tittle, a sentimental favorite, got the nod and played competently, going 10-15-93 with a touchdown pass to Dick James.

The Browns played ferociously, overcoming a brief 7-0 New York lead to prevail 52-20. Frank Ryan, possessed by the ghost of Otto Graham, victimized the Giants for five passing touchdowns.

A bizarre note occurred after Gary Wood's second touchdown pass with seconds left on the scoreboard clock. Unrestrained by ushers, whose off-field indifference mirrored the Giants on-field malaise, the remaining crowd surged on to the field to tear down the goal posts. A league official, tempering justice with mercy, fired the game ending pistol shot, thankfully bringing to a close New York's devastating 1964 campaign.