

Ben Lee Boynton: The Purple Streak

by Jeffrey Miller

The 1924 season was one of transition for Buffalo's pro football team. The All-Americans, as the team had been known since its founding in 1920, had been very successful in its four year history, finishing within one game of the league championship in both the 1920 and 1921 seasons. But successive 5-4 campaigns and declining attendance had convinced owner Frank McNeil that it was time to get out of the football business. McNeil sold the franchise to a group led by local businessman Warren D. Patterson and Tommy Hughitt, the team's player/coach, for \$50,000. The new ownership changed the name of the team to Bisons, and committed themselves signing big name players in an effort to improve performance both on the field and at the box office. The biggest transaction of the off-season was the signing of "the Purple Streak," former Williams College star quarterback Benny Lee Boynton. Boynton, a multiple All America selection at Williams, began his pro career with the Rochester Jeffersons in 1921. His signing with the Bisons in 1924 gave the Buffalo team its first legitimate star since Elmer Oliphant donned an orange and black sweater three years earlier.

Born Benjamin Lee Boynton on December 6, 1898 in Waco, Texas, to Charles and Laura Boynton, Ben Lee learned his love of football at an early age. He entered Waco High School in 1912, and the next year began a string of three consecutive seasons and Waco's starting quarterback. Boynton earned a name for himself as a multi-threat player, a swift and shifty runner, an accurate and strong-armed passer, a strong-legged dropkicker, and a ferocious tackler on defense. Waco's greatest rival then was Forth Worth North Side High, home of another legendary grid figure Bo McMillen, who would go on to a spectacular college career of his own. When the two teams met at Waco in 1915, the game became known as one of the greatest ever played in the state of Texas. The game ended in a tie, with Boynton scoring Waco's marker, and McMillen scoring Fort Worth's.

After high school, Boynton took his act to the east coast town of Williamstown, Massachusetts, to play for tiny Williams College. During his freshman year, Boynton led the Ephs (pronounced "eefs") to a 7-0-1 season in which the Purple and White outscored its opponents 127 to 29. It was the first undefeated season in school history, and Ben Lee was honored with his first All-America selection, being picked to Frank Menke's elite squad. It wasn't long before the Williams faithful were referring to Boynton as "the Purple Streak."

Ben Lee sat out the 1918 campaign, serving his country as a gunnery sergeant in the Marines. When he returned in 1919, Boynton was named captain of the football team (he was also tapped to skipper the basketball and baseball teams). In his senior year, Boynton led the nation in scoring, compiling 141 points on 22 touchdowns and nine extra points. It was during his senior season that Boynton received his highest collegiate honor, being chosen to Walter Camp's All-America team. In the fall of 1921, Boynton was working at Bethlehem Steel in Steelton, Pennsylvania, when he was recruited by Leo Lyons of the Rochester Jeffersons. Lyons out-hustled representatives from the Akron Pros for Boynton's services by going directly to the mill and signing him right on the spot. Boynton played just three games for the Jeffs that season but was nevertheless sensational in racking up 23 points on two touchdowns, eight extra points and a field goal. He also threw for three more scores. He also managed to fit in a couple of games with the Washington Pros, scoring a touchdown and three more extra points, to give the Waco Wonder a total of 32 points and five touchdown passes in just five games!

Lyons later named Boynton the second greatest football player of the era, behind only the legend himself, Jim Thorpe. "There was a football player," Lyons recalled of Boynton. "He could do everything. Brainy? Say he could pick a flaw in the opposition's defense quicker than any other player who stepped into a pair of cleats. One day Boynton pulled something that that never had been seen on a local gridiron. An enemy tackler lunged at Benny as he sped over the chalk-marked lines. To his surprise he clutched only a bit of the atmosphere as Boynton dove over his prostrate body, landed on the back of his neck, turned a complete somersault, sidestepped another tackler as he came up on his feet and galloped 70 yards for a touchdown."

Ben Lee played just one game the following season. He dallied a bit with semi-pro baseball in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, before resurfacing in the pro football circuit in 1924. His return sparked a heated dispute between Leo Lyons and the new owners of the Buffalo franchise, both of whom claimed to have signed Boynton for the upcoming season. The NFL executive committee settled the issue—the Bisons were awarded Boynton's services.

Also added to the Bisons roster were halfback Eddie Kaw, two-time Walter Camp honoree at Cornell, and Pete Calac, a powerful Mission Indian who played fullback on the Canton Bulldogs and Oorang Indians with Jim Thorpe and Joe Guyon. The combination of Tommy Hughitt, Boynton, Kaw, and Calac gave Buffalo the most potent offensive backfield in the league.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 25, No. 3 (2003)

The 1924 season opened in the new Bison Stadium on Sunday, October 5, 1924, with the newly renamed Bisons taking on the Columbus Panhandles before some 5,000 witnesses. The pre-game pageantry included a parade and marching band, followed by a flag-raising ceremony officiated by Buffalo Mayor Frank X. Schwab and Bisons President Warren D. Patterson.

It was an auspicious beginning for the season as well, with the Bisons riding the crest of the day's excitement en route to a 13 to 0 drubbing of Joe Carr's railroad men. Despite losing fullback Pete Calac to a broken nose, the outcome was never in doubt as the Herd took an early lead and never looked back. Employing a bit of razzle-dazzle, Benny Boynton scored his first touchdown in a Buffalo uniform as he scampered 20 yards after a fake field goal. Frank Morrissey added two field goals to round out the scoring. The Bisons were certainly off to a promising start.

The promise was not kept for long, however, as the Bisons dropped their next game 7 to 0 to the Dayton Triangles before an estimated crowd of 6,000. The local pros put up a valiant but ultimately futile effort against another Ohio-based opponent. Neither team was able to generate an offense until the Triangles pierced the goal line just two plays after blocking a Boynton punt in the fourth quarter, giving the visitors the decisive points.

Ben Lee made up for it the following week, however, scoring all but six of Buffalo's points in leading the Herd to a convincing 26 to 0 defeat of the Rochester Jeffersons in front of 5,000 faithful at Bisons Park. After a scoreless first quarter, Boynton broke the ice with a 14-yard dropkick, giving the local boys a three-point bulge. The lead was extended when Eddie Kaw connected with Boynton on a 10-yard forward pass. Before the second period was over, Boynton added a 30-yard dropkick to put the Bisons ahead, 13 to 0. The onslaught continued in the second half as Boynton pulled off the most spectacular play of the day, returning a Rochester punt 80 yards for a score. His muffed conversion attempt immediately following was the only blotch in Boynton's otherwise flawless display of football skill. In the fourth quarter, he threw for the Bisons' final score, connecting with Chick Guarnieri on a five-yard touchdown pass.

The Bisons improved to 3-1 with a hard-fought victory over the Akron Pros at Bisons Park. Led by Mike Trainor and Pete Calac, both of whom pierced the Akron goal line for markers, the Bisons defeated the once-mighty Pros 17 to 13 before 8,000 spectators--the largest crowd of the season. Boynton chipped in by converting both extra points and dropkicking a three-pointer as an insurance marker.

With some 6,000 enthusiasts as witnesses, the Frankford Yellow Jackets assailed the Buffalo Bisons with a 24 to 0 thrashing at Bisons Park on November 2. Two former Buffalo players now with Frankford, Butch Spagna and Herb Stein, undoubtedly took special delight in trouncing their former mates.

It took just one week for the Bisons long to rebound from the drubbing they had received at the hands of the Frankford Yellow Jackets, as the local boys whitewashed the Kenosha Maroons, 27 to 0. Some 3,500 fans turned out to see the Orange and Black improve its record to 4-2. Ben Boynton showed once again why he was called the "Purple Streak" at Williams College, scoring two touchdowns, one a spectacular 25-yard scamper. He also connected on touchdown passes to Chick Guarnieri and Eddie Kaw, booted a field goal, and three extra points.

Playing before a sparse home crowd of 2,700, due mainly to the season's first severe snow storm, the Bisons avenged their early season loss to the Dayton Triangles with a convincing 14 to 6 victory. The storm, described by the Buffalo *Courier* as "a miniature blizzard," reduced the field to a veritable quagmire. Buffalo's "vaunted aerial attack," however, was in no way deterred as the Herd used the passing game to jump out to an early lead, Benny Boynton tossing an 8-yard touchdown pass to end Len Watters. Boynton's conversion gave the Herd a seven-point lead. Dayton quickly responded with a touchdown of its own, but the conversion was unsuccessful, leaving the Triangles behind by a single point. The Bisons scored an insurance marker in the third quarter, as Pete Calac plunged over from the three-yard line. Boynton again converted the extra point, giving his team an eight-point cushion and the margin of victory.

Tommy Hughitt suffered a broken nose in the first quarter and took himself out of the game. However, when Boynton sustained a hip injury early in the fourth quarter, Hughitt returned to play the balance of the game in heroic fashion. The victory left Buffalo with an impressive 5-2-0 record, with the weak Rochester Jeffersons next on the schedule.

On November 22, the Herd traveled to Rochester for its first away game of the campaign, and once again the Purple Streak haunted his old mates by scoring nine points in the first four minutes of the contest. Boynton started things off by dropkicking a 30-yard field goal, and then just moments later caught a 20-yard touchdown pass from Eddie Kaw, giving the Bisons a 9 to 0 lead from which they never looked back. The Jeffs held tough for a couple of quarters, but Buffalo's high-powered offense would not be denied for long, as Kaw and Boynton hooked up on another aerial strike, this time with Kaw on the receiving end. Final score: Bisons 16, Jeffs 0.

The victory raised the Bisons' record to 6-2-0 for the season, with a clear shot at the league title. The Bisons returned to the friendly confines of the Queen City to take on the 4-6 Milwaukee Badgers, but even the advantage of the home crowd could not

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 25, No. 3 (2003)

kick-start the stalled Buffalo offense. The Badgers dominated from first whistle to last in drubbing the hometowners 23-0, dropping the Bisons to 6-3.

An amusing anecdote involving Boynton from this particular game was shared some years later Len Watters, Bisons' end, while discussing coach Tommy Hughitt's obsession with fundamentals. According to Watters, who later attained coaching fame in his own right at Williams College, "Tom stressed form in tackling--in fact he was insane about it. [Milwaukee] had possession back on their own thirty. Red Dunn, former Marquette quarterback, broke through the line and headed downfield with Boynton in hot pursuit. Boynton overhauled him on the 10-yard line. Dunn put his hand out, stiff-arm fashion, to ward off his pursuer. Boynton grabbed Dunn's arm, swung him around and wrestled him to the ground.

"The Buffalo players gathered around Boynton in the locker room, slapping him on the back and congratulating him on his saving tackle. Just then Hughitt rushed in with fire in his eye.

"Boynton,' he screamed, 'that was the blankety blank lousiest tackle I ever saw! Do you realize that if Dunn's arm had pulled out of its socket, [he'd have scored]?"

Unfortunately for Boynton and the Bisons, the Milwaukee game proved to be Benny's last as a pro player. The Boynton-less Bisons were crushed in their two remaining games (22 to 0 by Akron on November 27 and 45 to 7 by Frankford on November 29). The Bisons limped to a respectable but nevertheless disappointing 6-5-0.

For Boynton, however, it was a stellar season in which he managed to score 59 points on six touchdowns, four field goals and eleven extra points. It was the greatest single season performance ever produced by a member of any of Buffalo's pro teams from the 1920s (not counting Ockie Anderson's year in 1920, which is not recognized by the NFL). For his efforts, Ben Lee was selected to two first-team All-Pro squads.

Ben Lee Boynton gave up the gridiron after the 1924 season, but he didn't stay away from the game for long. He returned to his native Texas, and in 1926 helped form the Southwest Officials Association and served as the organization first president. He officiated major college games for the next 14 years, including the first Cotton Bowl (then called "the Dixie Classic") and the second Sugar Bowl. After retiring from officiating, Boynton found his way into the broadcast booth, where he provided radio commentary for several years.

Boynton entered the insurance business in 1925. During the second World War, Boynton served his country as a lieutenant commander in the Naval Reserves. He was named the Physical Training and Welfare Officer at the Jacksonville Naval Air Station, and was credited with establishing smooth operating programs on several naval bases throughout the south.

After the war, Boynton returned to the insurance game. He was elected to the National College Football Hall of Fame in December of 1962, just one month before his death from cancer on January 23, 1963 at the age of 64. He was survived by Katherine, his wife of 42 years.