

Giants on the Gridiron

1927

By Bob Carroll

"We were playing in a game against, of all teams, the Chicago Bears at Wrigley Field," "Red" Grange told author Richard Whittingham in 1984. "I had my cleats dug into the ground and it was a kind of wet day and somebody fell over my knee. It was nothing deliberate, just one of those things. I was hit from the side by somebody and boom, out went the knee." The "somebody from the side" was Bears center George Trafton, two years removed from the Grange Tours but one of the roughest players in the NFL and certainly not a man to go easy on any ball carrier, former teammate or not. The knee, the right of the two most important knees in pro football, was never the same again. After the injury, Grange always said, he was "just another halfback." That's a modest exaggeration, of course. Grange would go on to win All-NFL honors a few years later. He was a good halfback once the knee came part way back, but he was never again the impossible-to-stop "Gallop Ghost." And, for the short term -- for the rest of the 1927 season -- he was finished. He missed only three games, then limped through the remainder of the schedule, usually playing a few minutes or a quarter, but having no impact.

The Yankees, C.C. Pyle's team, collapsed like Grange's knee. Three-and-oh before the injury, they struggled to 4-8-1 the rest of the way. This, despite good work by halfback Eddie Tryon, guard Mike Michalske, and a pair of redheaded, future Hall-of-Fame ends, Ray Flaherty and Morris Badgro. Without Grange, or with him injured, the team lost its edge, as well as its reason to exist.

On December 4, the Yankees met the Giants at the Polo Grounds in what would have been a big draw had the Yankees' record or the weather been better. Only 8,000 braved a snowstorm to watch the Yankees lose, 14-0. Grange played the whole game on a leg that sometimes failed him on his running attempts. Toward the end, he was booed by fans who felt cheated for having spent good money to watch the "old" Grange. Rud Rennie, of the *New York Herald-Tribune* wrote, "Red Grange, the hero of many a hard-fought football game, realized yesterday as he lined up behind the retreating Yankees on the snowy, wind-swept field at the Polo Grounds that fame is futile and the wages thereof is the razzberry." A week later, when the two New York teams met again on a muddy Yankee Stadium gridiron, about 5,000 came out to watch the Giants win, 13-0. According to Rennie, "There really was not much to it outside the of the punting and the fun of watching twenty-two men slipping and sliding in all directions and in ridiculous postures, mostly upside down." Grange again stayed in for most of the game, but, Rennie said, "What with mud under him and Giants on top of him, he did not get far. The longest run he made was from the field to the clubhouse. And he made that without the ball."

After the season, Grange received plenty of medical advice concerning his knee, most of it conflicting. An operation was risky; nothing was guaranteed. He could end with a stiff leg or even be unable to walk. One doctor had him put his knee in a barrel of ice. Another had him in a cast. He was hobbling on crutches, trying to follow the general order to stay off his leg, when a West Coast doctor ordered him to begin playing golf before the muscles atrophied. After a few months he could walk, and after taking the 1928 season off, he was able to return to football.

Star #1 and #1A

Ernie Nevers was every bit as great in 1927 as he'd been in 1926, but his team wasn't nearly as successful. With the NFL reduced from 22 to 12 teams, there were more good players to go around. Almost every team in the league was stronger, even if its record didn't reflect that because of the competition had improved too. But the Nevers Eskimos were not improved. They went into the new season with essentially the same iron man squad of the year before. And, what was good for six wins and three ties in 1926 could bring only one NFL win in 1927.

On October 23, the Eskimos visited the Pottsville Maroons, another of the few teams that had tried to stand pat and found itself slipping instead. Nevers passed for 305 yards and accounted for all four touchdowns in a 27-0 Eskimos' victory. Sportswriters kept careful track of Nevers' statistics in '27. As a result, we know his entire season's passing record for his nine NFL games: 89 completions in 197 attempts for 1,362 yards. By the standards of the day, that was sensational. He threw only five touchdown passes, compared to 17 interceptions. Because the rules of the day turned the ball over to the other team on an incomplete pass in the endzone, teams seldom threw the short scoring passes that modern passers use to inflate their touchdown totals. Nevers was rated the second best passer in the NFL.

Easily the best passer -- best in the history of pro football until then -- was Cleveland's Benny Friedman. The rookie from Michigan tossed twelve touchdown passes in 13 games. While we have complete stats for only eleven of his games, Friedman's marks were impressive: 87 completions on 196 attempts for 1,565 yards. In those eleven games, he had only eleven interceptions, a remarkably low number then.

The Cleveland Bulldogs were made up mostly of players from the Kansas City Cowboys of 1926, but Friedman was the feature act. >From the first game, when the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* called them "Benny's Bulldogs" in its headline, his name usually topped his team's game stories -- an honor previously reserved for Grange and Nevers. Headline writers understood that fans recognized the

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stars' names before the names of the teams. It was Grange, Nevers and Friedman who brought the fans to the ballpark, not the Yankees, Eskimos, or Bulldogs.

Friedman, a native Clevelander and former Michigan All-America, was a good runner and fair kicker, but as a passer he was unsurpassed in accuracy, distance, and audacity. Supremely confident -- actually cocky -- Benny was perfectly willing to throw the ball on first down, a strategy unheard of in pro football before he arrived. He would sling a pass from his own endzone, if he thought the time was right for it.

On October 30, Friedman and the Bulldogs played host to Nevers and the Eskimos in one of the season's best games. Cleveland's Rex Thomas returned the opening kickoff 80 yards to the Eskimos' 15. Friedman completed a short pass, and after Thomas drove to the four, Friedman plunged over center for the touchdown to put Cleveland in front 6-0 before many of the 12,000 who turned out at Luna Park had settled in their seats.

Nevers led the Eskimos downfield with a series of short line smashes. Then, when the defenders pulled in to stop his running, he fired a 40-yard pass to Joe Rooney. With the ball at the one-yard-line, he bulled over. His placekick gave the Eskimos a 7-6 lead.

It took Friedman exactly three passes to move his team to a second touchdown and back in front. The scoring toss was a 65-yarder to Thomas. In the second quarter, the Bulldogs' widened their lead to 19-7, when Friedman's 24-yard-run set up another TD. But Nevers was far from finished. His running and passing gave the Bulldogs two fourth quarter touchdowns and 20 points. Ironically, in a game filled with offensive fireworks, the winning points came on a defensive play. Cleveland's Ossie Wiberg usually played blocking back, but in the third quarter, he went in as a guard. His extra speed let him get through to block a Nevers punt in the endzone, and the two points from the safety provided the victory margin, 21-20, despite Nevers' fourth-quarter rally.

For the day, Nevers scored all 20 of his team's points, averaged nearly 60 yards on his punts, intercepted three passes (only one by Friedman), completed eight-of-19 passes, and gained consistently on his line smashes all day. Friedman completed seven of 14 passes (and had three dropped), including one for a touchdown. He had the game's longest run from scrimmage, scored seven points, and returned Nevers' punts for gains between ten and 25 yards. The Bulldogs won the game, but the duel of the stars was a standoff.

Yet, for all of Friedman's talent and charisma, Cleveland still wasn't ready to support pro football wholeheartedly. Jim Thorpe hadn't been able to fill the stands in 1921. Neither had a championship team in 1924. Friedman put the Bulldogs in the race, but Cleveland fans still yawned. The Friedman-Nevers duel drew 12,000, but the Giants brought out only 3,000, Grange and the Yankees a mere 2,500. The only other five-digit home crowd came on Saturday, December 3, when 11,000 watched a double-header -- a Bulldogs-Eskimos rematch won easily by Cleveland, 20-0, and the state high school championship game. It didn't take a genius to figure that most of the crowd was there to watch the high-schoolers.

A Great Year to be a New Yorker

For baseball fans, especially New York baseball fans, 1927 will always be a halcyon year. The mighty Yankees of Ruth, Gehrig, Lazzeri, and Meusel hammered the American League into submission and then swept the Pittsburgh Pirates four straight in the World Series. Many still consider the '27 Yankees the greatest baseball machine ever assembled. And, to keep fans coming to what were often one-sided games, there was the spectacle of "Babe" Ruth in pursuit of his own home run record, a race he made successful when he tied his old record of 59 on September 29 with two homers against Washington. The next day, he smashed number 60 off Senators' lefthander Tom Zachary.

New York's pro football fans can't hold 1927 in quite such high esteem as their baseball colleagues, but it is nevertheless a special year for them too. In 1927, the New York Giants won their first NFL championship. And, as a team, they posted a record that, while not so spectacular as Ruth's, will last far longer.

Tim Mara came out of the war with the AFL ahead on points. He'd lost \$40,000 defending his franchise rights, but he entered the 1927 season with his Giants facing no real head-on competition. The other New York franchise, Pyle's Yankees, were hogtied under his lease. Mara made no effort to influence Yankees player signings or game strategy. All he cared about was that his Giants' scheduled home dates not put him in competition with another game at Yankee Stadium, and that's essentially what he got in his agreement with Pyle.

The team Mara put on the Polo Grounds gridiron was a veteran outfit and unusually deep. Teams were still restricted to 18-man rosters for games, but that didn't mean they couldn't keep a few others under contract to replace injured regulars or spell them in the occasional back-to-back, Saturday-Sunday scheduling. It was a little trick that Frankford had used in 1926 to help it to the title. Oldtimers still boast of 60-minute "iron men," but few successful teams really followed that practice by 1927. On most winning teams, the regulars played about three-quarters of a game unless injuries to other team members forced them to stay in the lineup.

The Giants had no single back with the ability of Nevers or Friedman, but they had a deeper, more versatile crew than any other team. Tailback Jack McBride, who'd been with the team since 1925, was a very good triple-threat. A heavy-duty runner and fair passer, McBride led the league in scoring with 57 points, 21 accomplished by extra points and field goals. Other holdovers were Jack Hagerty and Henry "Hinkey" Haines. Faye "Mule" Wilson, a fine blocker, was picked up from Buffalo, and veterans Doug Wycoff and "Tut" Imlay came aboard from the AFL. Joe Guyon, Thorpe's old teammate, came out of retirement to play about half the schedule, as did Phil White, who'd booted a 50-yard field goal for Kansas City two years earlier.

Haines was the most dangerous of the bunch. A tremendous breakaway runner at Penn State in 1920, he'd used his great speed to run for a pair of 90-yard touchdowns against Pennsylvania that year. After leaving school, Haines had concentrated on a baseball career, reaching the Yankees in 1923 as an outfielder. However, a .160 batting average convinced both the Yankees and Haines that he wasn't likely to force "Babe" Ruth to the bench. In the meantime, "Hinkey" had been playing football

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each fall with the coal-region teams of eastern Pennsylvania. In 1925, he joined the Giants and combined with McBride for a strong "inside-outside" running attack.

Although the Giants were well-stocked in the backfield, their real strength was up front. Century Milstead returned from the AFL to pair at tackle with "Stout Steve" Owen, the future Giants coach. Dick Stahlman, a rugged 220-pounder who played for nearly everyone during his long career, was the number one tackle sub, though he could play anywhere on the line. The New York guards were big "Hec" Garvey, the ex-Notre Damer who'd been in the league since 1922, and Al Nesser, the last of the famous clan. Nesser had started playing professionally in 1910, but at age 34 he was still a reliable pro. On the bench were "Doc" Alexander, the coach in '26 and muscular Riley Biggs, another graduate of the AFL. Regular center "Mickey" Murtagh was the smallest interior lineman at 190 pounds but very quick.

"Chuck" Corgan, another baseball-football athlete, was at one end. Corgan was an excellent pass receiver on the gridiron and had shown promise as a Brooklyn Dodger infielder earlier in '27. Then, after the football season, he was stricken with cancer and died in June of 1928.

Of all the Giants' players, the one who made the most impact on the season and ultimately on the sports world was huge Robert "Cal" Hubbard. Hubbard was one of those players who could have starred at any position. He is in both the College and Pro Football Halls of Fame as a tackle, but the Giants lined him up at end on offense in 1927. In an enemy secondary the 6'4", 240-pound Hubbard could outmuscle any defensive back in pursuit of a pass, but his prime concern was downfield blocking. Hubbard's ability to clear out a safetyman helped spring Haines and the other backs loose for long gains all season. When the opponents had the ball, Hubbard dropped back to linebacker, where his size and speed made him the league's most effective defender. After his pro football career ended, Hubbard became an outstanding American League umpire. In 1971, he was named to his third Hall of Fame, the baseball shrine at Cooperstown.

Backing Hubbard and Corgan at end were Jim Kendrick, another veteran wing and Paul Jappe, a former All-America from Syracuse, who could also play guard.

"Doc" Alexander was only available some of the time so Earl Potteiger, a running back who'd traveled all over the league was installed as the Giants' coach.

The team started slowly, shutting out Providence and Pottsville on the road but in between, Benny Friedman and the Bulldogs held them to a scoreless tie at Cleveland.

On October 16, they opened at the Polo Grounds against Friedman. A good crowd of 25,000, according to the *Times*, saw another defensive struggle. Neither team could score in the first half, with a wide field goal try by McBride the only real threat. After an exchange of punts in the second half, Friedman hit "Tiny" Feather on a 35-yard pass, and followed with a 15-yarder to wingback Jim Simmons. From the New York 14, Benny and Simmons took turns pounding into the line until Simmons finally put the ball over for the first touchdown against the Giants in 1927. It

was enough. The Giants were held scoreless for the rest of the game for a 6-0 loss.

No one scored on the Giants again for the next five games. In the meantime, the offense kicked in, averaging better than 20 points a game. On November 20, the Cardinals finally crossed the Giants' goal line. The Cards had hired Guy Chamberlin as coach after Frankford fired him in an internal dispute, but the man who'd won four of the last five NFL championships didn't have the horses for a winner in Chicago and retired after the season. When his Cardinals broke the Giants' scoreless string in the third quarter, they were already down by three touchdowns.

One week later at the Polo Grounds, the Giants lined up against the Bears in the most important game of the season. New York stood 8-1-1; the Bears were 7-1-1 until Chamberlin's Cardinals upset them 3-0 on Thanksgiving Day, but they could still eventually end up tied for the title if they could hang a second loss on the Giants.

Like the Giants, the Bears were a veteran team. "Tillie" Voss and "Duke" Hanny were the ends; the tackles were a pair of future Hall of Famers, Ed Healey and "Link" Lyman. Jim McMillen and Bill Buckler lined up as guards, with George Trafton at center. Joey Sternaman was at quarterback, with the great "Paddy" Driscoll, Laurie Walquist and speedy Bill Senn sharing the halfback slots and rugged "Buck" White at fullback. Among the Bears' subs were co-coaches George Halas and "Dutch" Sternaman.

The Bears started off like they were going to roll right over the Giants, marching straight down the field through the best defense in the league. They made a first down at the New York eight. Walquist smashed for four yards, Driscoll picked up another, and White slammed to the one. On fourth down, White tried to leap the line but the New York front wall speared him high in the air and shoved him back.

The Giants took over at the one. Haines called signals (huddles were still not in general use) sending "Mule" Wilson back in punt formation, cautioning him to be careful to avoid stepping on the endline. Haines looked around, noted there were several puddles on the field and called to the referee to bring out a towel to wipe the ball. The Bears jammed nine men on the line in hope of blocking the kick. What they didn't see was Haines setting up a few steps deeper than normal for punt formation. When the ball was snapped, it went to Haines instead of Wilson. With only two Bears deep, Chuck Corgan was wide open. "Hinkey" shot him a pass that he carried out to the 30. Although the Bears eventually stopped New York's drive, the momentum had been changed by Haines trick. "He stage-managed it perfectly," Steve Owen said later.

In the third quarter, in Rud Rennie's colorful phrase, "McBride began to pierce the Bears' line like a knife driven into a tub of butter." He did nearly all the carrying on a 53-yard drive that put the Giants in front 7-0. After the kickoff the teams exchanged punts, but Chicago let Jack Hagerty's kick roll to the two-yard-line where a Giant covered it. The Bears punted from behind their goal line and New York had the ball at the 30. Wilson ran for a first down, and McBride completed a short pass to Hagerty to move New York to the ten. McBride gained another first down at the five. Then, after Wilson lost a yard, McBride drove through center to within half a

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yard of a touchdown. It took him two tries for the last 18 inches, but he got them.

Trailing 13-0, the Bears fought back. "Paddy" Driscoll led a drive down to the ten early in the fourth quarter. The Bears went into a spread formation, and Walquist zipped a short pass to Joey Sternaman, who tucked it in behind the goal line. When Joey added the extra point, the Bears had a chance to tie or win, but the Giants defense held them off. Steve Owen called it the toughest game he ever played. Both teams were spent. When it was over, Owen and Bears guard Jim McMillen slumped to the ground and sat there. At last, McMillen leaned toward Steve and shook hands

limply, but it was five minutes before either could rise and head for the clubhouse.

The Giants still had to win their last two games, the long awaited meetings with the Yankees. When they took both on shutouts, it gave them ten white washings in 13 games. The Canton Bulldogs had posted nine shutouts in 12 games in 1922, while allowing 15 points, five fewer than the '27 Giants defense, but the NFL was a much stronger league in 1927. Most observers would give the Giants' first champs the nod as the best defensive unit of the decade.