

KEN STRONG

By Bob Carroll

The year was 1928. Coach Walter Steffen's Carnegie Tech team -- a team that had run roughshod over Rockne's Notre Dame eleven the week before -- had just been destroyed by New York University. Steffen, a respected coach who had seen the best in football for a quarter of a century, talked about N.Y.U.'s premier back, Ken Strong:

"A great ball carrier -- 205 pounds of speed and power.

"One of the best blockers I've ever seen.

"A high-class forward passer -- up with the best.

"Certainly one of the best all-around kickers in football history.

"A player with exceptional spirit -- a team player in every way.

"I'll tell you he is easily the greatest football player I ever saw!"

In 1939, after Strong had shown what he could do as a professional player, Grantland Rice was only slightly more conservative: "Considering the test of both college and pro football, I'd say the battle of the swift and strong was among Ken Strong, Jim Thorpe, and Ernie Nevers, with Bronko Nagurski close up. Strong and Thorpe had greater variety; this gives them the edge. I mean everything that belongs to football -- running, blocking, tackling, passing, and every type of kicking."

To be ranked with Thorpe and ahead of Nevers is certainly heady stuff. In retrospect, the records show that Strong was never more than an ordinary forward passer, and after a wrist injury in 1931, he was actually sub-par. His other statistics -- running, receiving, and kicking -- were excellent for his day, but pale in the era of the specialist. Still, rating him on any single phase of his game is silly. It was his ability to win in every conceivable way that made him so valuable. He was the kind of athlete to whom coaches are forever pointing and saying, "If I could pick one player to have for one big game"

Ken was born in New Haven, Connecticut, August 6, 1906. Following a brilliant four years at West Haven High School, he entered New York University in 1925. Handsome, with a shock of dark, wavy hair, he would have made a great cover for a media guide had there been such at the time. But, considering his football exploits, he would have made any N.Y.U. guide-cover had he looked like the elephant man.

He began there as a blocking back, but by his senior year he was doing everything for the nationally-ranked Violets. He led the nation in scoring with 162 points on 22 touchdowns and 30 extra points. He finished his college career with 2,080 yards by rushing alone. Naturally, he was on everyone's All-American team for 1928.

Although his football fame was coast-to-coast, his future appeared to be in baseball. He was a power-hitting outfielder, regarded as the best prospect to come out of a New York school since Lou Gehrig. Upon his graduation in June of '29, he signed a contract with the New York Yankees.

His progress was steady and spectacular. He whacked 21 home runs in the remainder of the '29 season for New Haven of the Eastern League and followed with 41 for Hazleton of the New York-Penn League in 1930. In a game on June 8 against Wilkes-Barre, he slugged four homers in four successive at-bats. He was being hailed as the "next Lou Gehrig."

Then in 1931, with 13 home runs already in the till for Toronto of the Triple-A International League, he ran full-speed into an outfield wall and broke a bone in his wrist. The injury left him unable to throw a baseball correctly and ended his diamond career.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 1, No. 9 (1979)

Meanwhile, he'd reached stardom in pro football. The New York Giants made him an offer in 1929, but he turned them down to join the Staten Island Stapletons for \$5,000 a season plus a rent-free apartment.

Although the Stapes' offer was higher than the one made by the Giants, some observers thought he'd made a mistake. With the Giants, he could have made bigger headlines and certainly played in more victories than were possible with the Stapes. Sometimes, with Staten Island, he was pretty much a one-man show. Significantly, he scored 45% of all the points the Stapes could muster during the team's four years in the NFL.

If his acclaim at Staten Island wasn't always national, it certainly was loyal. One day the Stapes played the Giants at cozy Thompson's Stadium, the Stapletons' home field. New York end Ray Flaherty tackled Strong near the sideline and they both slid into the crowd standing there.

Ken tried to get up, but Flaherty held him fast. "Leggo!" yelled Ken, his face pressed into the dirt.

"I'll let go when you stop belting me!" hollered Flaherty.

To the surprise of both, Flaherty was actually being smacked by a little old lady with an umbrella, outraged at what that mean New York end had done to HER Ken.

In the Stapes' four years in the NFL, only once did they get to a .500 season, but they were usually "respectable" losers. As their only All-Pro, Strong was the one who preserved the respectability. In any given game, he was usually the Stapes top rusher, often the only scorer, sometimes the top receiver, and even their best-of-a-bad-lot passer.

In 1933, the Stapes dropped out of the league and Ken signed -- at a salary cut to \$250 a game -- with the Giants.

The NFL had just decided to move the goal posts up to the goal lines. Giant coach Steve Owen immediately recognized two facts. First, field goals would become a more deadly offensive weapon. And, second, the Giants had in Ken Strong quite possibly the best kicker in the league.

Early in October, a Strong boot provided the margin in a 10-7 victory over the Packers, but it was a mid-November meeting with the Bears that was something special. New York Times columnist Arthur Daley explained: "He kicked a field goal. The Giants were offside. He kicked a field goal. The Giants were offside. So he did it again, and this time it stuck for a 3-0 victory.

"During that series of plays Coach Steve Owen grew irate because his brother Bill, the New York tackle, had made no attempt to flatten Joe Kopcha, the Bear guard, who was a sitting duck as he knelt on the line of scrimmage. Steve yanked Bill to the sideline.

"'Why didn't you belt Kopcha?' roared Steve.

"'I just couldn't,' said Bill. 'Every time Ken kicked, Kopcha raised his eyes to heaven and said, 'Please, God, don't let him make it.' Gosh, Steve, I couldn't belt a guy when he was praying, could I?'"

1933 was also the year the NFL divided itself into two divisions. The Giants won in the east and the Bears in the west, setting up a rematch for the first championship game.

Although the Giants lost 23-21, the game was one of the best ever, with the lead changing hands six times. The last New York touchdown was most unusual. "Harry Newman handed off to me on a reverse to the left," Ken later explained, "but the line was jammed up. I turned and saw Newman standing there, so I threw him the ball. He was quite surprised. He took off to his right, but then HE got bottled up. By now I had crossed into the end zone and the Bears had forgotten me. Newman saw me wildly waving my hands and threw me the ball. I caught it."

Later, the Giants put the Newman-to-Strong-to-Newman-to-Strong play into their offense, but it never worked again. However, it showed the kind of resourcefulness Strong brought to the game.

1934 was probably Strong's best year. He rushed for over 400 yards and totalled 56 points in touchdowns and kicks. The championship game saw the Giants and Bears facing each other again. The field at the Polo Grounds

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 1, No. 9 (1979)

was a sheet of ice, as the Bears built up a 13-3 lead through three quarters. The only New York points came on a 38-yard field goal by Strong. But the Giants had put on sneakers borrowed from the Manhattan College basketball team at the beginning of the second half. By the fourth quarter the New Yorkers were used to their new footgear and the Bears were still sliding on the ice. The Giants rattled off 27 points. Strong scored touchdowns on runs of 11 and 42 yards.

The Giants won in the east again in 1935. For the third straight year, Strong scored a touchdown in the championship game, this time on a 42-yard pass from Ed Danowski. However, that was the only touchdown New York could get as Detroit won easily 26-7.

The next year, after a salary dispute with the Giants, Ken jumped to the New York Yankees of the American Football League, one of the short-lived rivals of the NFL. In 1939, he was back with the Giants. "I broke my back against Washington," he recalled, "and was a kicker exclusively after that."

In 1944, after being retired for four years, Ken came back to the Giants as a kicking specialist. A number of old pros came out of retirement during the war years for one last fling. Green Bay's great passer of the 1930s, Arnie Herber, also shook off the mothballs and joined the Giants. Strong led the NFL in field goals in '44 and Herber gave them one of the league's more respectable passing attacks, as the Giants won another eastern title.

Most of the overage warriors re-retired by the war's end, but Ken was still good enough to contribute after peace arrived. He was New York's kicker through 1947, missing only two extra points in four seasons.

Strong's last session with the Giants was in 1962 when he served as a special kicking coach. His star pupil -- Don Chandler. Counting that one year as a coach, Ken was with the Giants during nine seasons. In seven of those years, New York won its division championship.

Strong, who died in New York in 1979 at the age of 73, enjoyed a successful business career away from football. In 1967 he was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Several years earlier he was named to the College Hall.

When West Haven High School proudly dedicated its new football stadium to the greatest all-around athlete in the history of the school, the program listed many -- not all -- of Ken's football accomplishments but closed with this: "And with all the publicity, back-slapping and praise, he has never lost any of his admirable characteristics as a good sport, a splendid competitor, a pleasant companion and a true gentleman always."

In many ways, that's an even more impressive list of Ken Strong's talents than even the one given in 1928 by Coach Walter Steffen.

ELMER KENNETH STRONG, Jr.

Halfback

Born: August 6, 1906, in New Haven, CT

Died: October 5, 1979, in New York, NY

Height: 6-0 Weight: 206 College: New York U.

College All-America Teams (1928): AP, Collier's, INS, UP (first team selections).

All-NFL Teams:

1929: Green Bay Press-Gazette.

1930: Green Bay Press-Gazette, Players' Poll (1st).

1931: United Press (1st); Official Team (2nd).

1933: U.P., Chicago Daily News (1st); Official Team (2nd).

1934: Official Team, Chicago Daily News (1st); U.P. (2nd).

National Collegiate Football Hall of Fame

Pro Football Hall of Fame - 1967

1929-32 Staten Island Stapletons; 1933-35, 1939, 1944-47 New York Giants;

1936-37 New York Yankees (AFL)