

A STRANGE SWITCH

By Stan Grosshandler

The most unusual event I have ever seen in football involved a player destined to become one of the great legends of pro football.

I was a freshman member of the 1945 U. of Cincinnati team. The Bearcats had resumed football that season with Ray Nolting, an outstanding alumnus, as head coach. Their eight game schedule presented the unusual feature of home and home games with the University of Kentucky.

Nolting, a great Chicago Bear halfback (1936-43), had chosen to play for the Bears so he would not have to play against Bronko Nagurski. So who do you think he had to tackle in his first pro practice scrimmage? As a coach, he felt there was no need for a player to know all the assignments for every play, only his own. This made it somewhat confusing. To me, the confusion was compounded by the fact that odd numbered plays went to the right rather than the to left as in most systems.

Ray was an extremely vain man. Ruggedly handsome, he would frequently remove his dentures, hand them to a manager, and scrimmage with the squad. His ability to be at full speed with only one or two steps was amazing.

The assistant coaches were John Wiethe and Carl Brumbaugh. Wiethe, a Xavier of Cincinnati man, played guard for the Lions (1939-42) making All-NFL. He'd also been a playing coach in the National Basketball League. A Phi Beta Kappa and graduate lawyer, Wiethe gave the impression too many NFL linemen had beat on his head. This was hardly the case. He later coached the U. of Cincinnati basketball team and then became the Democratic chairman of Cincinnati, a position that enabled him to wield considerable political power for many years.

Carl Brumbaugh had a distinguished career as a Bear QB (1930-34,36-38). I've read that he was the first T-formation quarterback to crouch down behind the center, the style used today.

Kentucky won the first game of the series, with the second to take place in Nippert Stadium, Oct. 27, 1945. All week we prepared for the devastating passing attack the Wildcats had featured in their first game, sparked by a brilliant freshman T- quarterback.

In the repeat game, the first time Kentucky got the ball we were astonished to see them line up in the Notre Dame box with the freshman passing sensation at tailback. It was immediately apparent that the young star was bewildered at this new position. The whole Cincy squad sensed the frustrations of the Kentucky squad as they struggled with an unfamiliar formation. Their rifle-armed QB was stymied. Final score: Cincinnati 16, Kentucky 7!

The freshman star was next heard from in 1949 as the backup QB to Sid Luckman and Johnny Lujack. With these two ahead of him, he had little opportunity to demonstrate his passing skill and was confined to a linebacker and defensive back role with some place kicking on the side. In fact, he was a very good linebacker, according to Don Kindt, a teammate and close friend, who told me that he was really a very good defensive player.

Don told a humorous story of his most frustrating game. In one 1952 game against the Dallas Texans in which the Bears became the only team Dallas could beat all year, Don was knocked out of bounds and stuck head-first into a snowdrift. Suddenly, he saw a Dallas player soar over his head. The Texan -- the same one who'd stuck Don in the

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snowdrift -- was the victim of the kicking prowess of the quarterback-turned-linebacker. The "field goal" had been made with the seat of his Texas pants.

Ray Nolting had reasonable success in four years as coach at Cincy, taking one team to the Sun Bowl. He drifted from coaching, returned a few years ago to coach a minor league team, and now owns a tavern in Cincinnati. One member of his 1945 team, starting end Gene Ruehlman, became mayor of Cincinnati.

The old game program of the Cincinnati-Kentucky contest had an article by Sid Luckman, describing that new and complex formation -- "The T." The Wildcat roster included George Washington Serini, a Bear interior lineman from 1948 to '51 and a Packer in '52, Dick Hensley, an end with the Giants, Pittsburgh, and Bears (1949, 51, 52), and two of Kentucky's greatest basketball players: Ralph Beard and Wallace "Wah-Wah" Jones. Somehow Nolting managed to get Jones declared ineligible for the second game. The Wildcat coach, Bernie Shively, was also athletic director. This was his only season as coach.

Why a coach would scrap a successful formation in the middle of a season with a T-formation quarterback like George Blanda is something that has eluded my research for 35 years.