

THE MUGGING OF BOBBY LAYNE

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Based in part on material supplied by Dr. Lawrence E. Ziewacz

On days when things are a little slow around the newsroom, any sportswriter worth his cliches can always pound out a couple of thousand words decrying the violence in football. Of course, the game has given out plenty of ammunition.

Item: In a football game between two black teams at Mt. Vernon, N.Y., in 1902, a defensive back threatened an oncoming running back with a knife. When the ball carried crossed the goal line, he was stabbed.

Item: In 1905, football was nearly outlawed as "too violent." Newspapers across the country printed a weekly tool of dead and maimed. Only rule changes stemming from a Presidential conference saved the game.

Item: The *Rock Island Argus* of November 8, 1920, headlined "Staleys Win World's Dirt Title" after four Rock Islanders were kayoed during a tie with Decatur. In one incident, Rock Island's Hal Gunderson was nearly killed when the Staley's George Trafton "slid across his face."

In 1956, as pro football was first finding national headlines consistently, a flap took place at Wrigley Field in Chicago that seemed to make the game look quite bloodthirsty. Yet, following the dictum that the only bad publicity is none at all, the incident may well have actually fueled the pro football fever that has gripped the country for the past 25 years.

As a flap, it had all you could ask for. It involved one of the great players of all time, and - - according to one side -- it decided the Western Division championship.

The Detroit Lions had broken away from the starting blocks like a shot in 1956, winning their first six games. They were driven by the inspirational leadership of their firebrand quarterback Bobby Layne, one of the first great come-from-behind QBs. According to his former teammate Doak Walker, "Bobby never lost a game in his life. Time just ran out on him." To a man, the Lions believed in Layne -- "When Bobby said block, you blocked. When Bobby said drink, you drank." They knew that as long as they could get him the ball, Detroit was still in any game.

The Chicago Bears followed fast on the Lions' heels. Paddy Driscoll had replaced George Halas as on-field coach in one of the Papa Bear's several retirements, and, after an opening game loss at Baltimore, the Bears moved into high gear to reel off seven straight victories. When "time ran out" on Bobby Layne at Washington in the Lions' seventh outing, Chicago and Detroit were tied for the Western Division lead.

The Bears moved into first place alone the Sunday after Thanksgiving when they came from behind to tie the New York Giants, 17-17. On the Thursday before, Detroit had been upset by Green Bay, 24-20.

Neither team had yet played the other.

However, that small conceit by the schedule-maker was rectified when Chicago went to Detroit on December 2. The Lions proved less-than-gracious hosts, bombing their rivals, 42-10, and moving back into first place. If the score represented a true reflection of the two squads abilities, the race seemed over.

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The next week, the Lions continued on their merry way by drubbing Pittsburgh, 45-7. Meanwhile, the Bears struggled in edging the lowly cross-town Cardinals, 10-3. Although the Bears had a mathematical chance to move past the Lions in their regular-season ender at Wrigley Field, unless they could find a way to stop Bobby Layne, they did not really need to show up.

Of course, the Bears did show up at Wrigley, and, as every sports fan across the nation learned on Monday morning, they found a way to stop Bobby Layne.

Detroit had the ball to the second quarter, trailing 3-0 but seemingly ready to move. Layne took the snap from center, stepped back and pitched the ball to a sweeping running back. Then he turned to watch the play unfold.

Suddenly, the lights went out.

What had happened was that 220 pounds of Bears defensive end, all of it named Ed Meadows, had blindsided Bobby with enough force to level any reasonably well-constructed brick building. Bobby was down and out of the count. They carried him off the field, through for the day with a concussion.

His substitute, Harry Gilmer, put up a good fight, throwing two touchdown passes, but, without Layne, the Lions were not the same team. The final score reflected an easy Bear victory, 38- 21.

The Lions roared foul, both after the play and after the game. Meadows, they insisted, had cut down their star with an illegal, unsporting, and infamous attack.

Meadows reputation didn't help his case. More than once he'd been accused of trying to hurt his own teammates in scrimmages. "This isn't the first time he's tried rough stuff," said Detroit club president Edwin J. Anderson. In truth, Meadows possessed a larger reputation for for hatchet jobs around the NFL than had George Washington around cherry trees. Ironically, the Bears' end had in fact been ejected from the Lions game, but later -- for fighting -- while Bobby Layne was on his back at the hospital.

So much for circumstantial evidence. Meadows stuck to his story that he hadn't seen Layne get rid of the ball. If he hadn't, said Layne, he was "the only guy in the whole stadium who didn't know."

Lion coach Buddy Parker was more blunt. "Why didn't Meadows bring a blackjack?" he asked.

Bert Bell, president of the NFL, after a brief investigation, cleared Meadows and the Bears of any intentional wrongdoing. This led to charges that the league office was really being run by Halas with Bell as his puppet.

Both Halas and Meadows threatened to sue, but somehow never found the time as they readied themselves for their upcoming championship game with New York. Lion fans insisted that their team would have been in that game except for the "mugging." No doubt, as they watched the game on TV, they cheered the Giants who obligingly won, 47-7, in one of the most one-sided of championships.

Amid all the charges and counter charges, one interesting piece of historical trivia surfaced when a former Los Angeles player revealed that the 51-53 Rams had a get-the-quarterback pool in which a cash award went to the player who knocked the rival QB out of the game.

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Old pro Greasy Neale, who had coached in the NFL for ten years, summed up the prevailing feeling among most of the pros: "All you've got to remember is that once you step out on the field, it's every man for himself."

Meadows played three more years. Layne played six. Parker went on. Halas went on and on and on. The incident receded in memory before the thrill of new touchdowns, only to be trotted out as "evidence" every time a new controversy came along.

Item: In 1960, Chuck Bednarik of the Eagles put Frank Gifford out for a year with a prodigious shot that many Giants termed a "cheap shot."

Item: In 1976, George Atkinson of Oakland belted Pittsburgh's Lynn Swann into the hospital with a crack while Swann was not the pass receiver. The whole thing ended up in a libel suit.

Item: In 1979, New England receiver Darryl Stingley was put into a wheelchair for life, the result of a hit by Oakland's Jack Tatum.

Item: In 1980, Mike Hartenstine of the Chicago Bears was fined by the league after blindsiding Ron Jaworski of Philadelphia.

No one ever seems to have much good to say about violence, yet the TV camera instant-replays examples again and again in slo-mo and glorious living color. Fans wince or cheer or both. Sometimes they cheer most lustily when one of the players doesn't get up. It's a rough game, we say.

Each time a new rule is passed to try to save a knee or a rib, we mutter about how "they're ruining the game." We laughed when Jack Lambert suggested they put skirts on quarterbacks.

Item: To be continued each season.