

## **THE HIDDEN CAREER OF KEN STRONG**

by Bob Gill

The more we find out about minor league football in the 1930s and '40s, the more top-level players we discover who put in time with pro teams outside the NFL. Among others, the list includes stars like Frankie Albert, Ed Danowski, Jack Ferrante, Augie Lio, Harry Newman, Hank Soar, Tommy Thompson and Kenny Washington, plus Hall of Famers Red Badgro, Johnny Blood, Sid Gillman, Vince Lombardi and Ace Parker.

But without a doubt, among the famous names of football, the one with the most extensive non-NFL career was Ken Strong.

The initial phase of Strong's pro career lasted from 1929-35. In four years ('29-32) with the Staten Island Stapletons and three ('33-35) with the New York Giants, he was a consensus all-pro selection in 1930-31 and '33-34, finishing among the NFL's top four scorers in each of those seasons. Then, after an injury-plagued 1935 season and a contract dispute with the Giants, he jumped in 1936 to the New York Yankees of the newly formed AFL.

Though it didn't last, the AFL was definitely a major league in '36. The Yankees contended for the title before ultimately finishing third. With no passer, the team relied almost exclusively on its ground game, led by Strong's powerful running and crunching blocks. In addition, Strong finished third in the league in scoring – in fact, he would have led the league easily if not for the fact that he made only 5 of 20 field-goal attempts.

The Yankees declined in 1937, as did the AFL, which barely made it through the season. After an opening-game loss at home, the team took to the road and never returned. Strong played in the opener and the first road game, then left the club for good.

As punishment for jumping to the outlaw league, Strong was suspended from the NFL for five years. But Giants owner Tim Mara had a lot of clout, and before the 1938 season he came to Strong with a proposition: If Ken would play with Mara's new farm team at Jersey City, Mara would arrange for his big fullback to return to the Giants in 1939.

As pro football's first full-fledged farm club, the Jersey City Giants proved an unqualified success, rolling to the American Association championship with a 7-1 record. Strong booted 13 field goals and led the league with 51 points, earning a spot on the all-league team – and also his return to New York the following season.

Back with the Giants, Strong became a role player, a kicker and blocking back. But he finished the season with a back injury, and then underwent a stomach operation in the summer. (In Pro Football's Rag Days, Strong said the problem was an ulcer.) Apparently, his pro football career was over.

By October, though, Strong had recovered sufficiently to accept an offer to return to Jersey City, where the Little Giants had gotten off to a rocky start. Strong's kicking and the passing of Danowski, his former New York teammate, helped drive Jersey City to another American Association title. And at season's end, Strong announced that he was hanging up his jersey for good.

As it turned out, "for good" meant one year.

In 1942 the American Association shut down for the duration of World War II. In its absence, a number of teams in the Northeast formed a pretty regular circuit of their own, something like the Ohio League in the Canton-Massillon era. One team, the Long Island Clippers, featured as their star back none other than Ken Strong.

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The Clippers played four games against other clubs on the circuit, plus another against the NFL Brooklyn Dodgers, but won only one. I have no record yet for one of them, a 26-7 loss to the New London (Conn.) Diesels, featuring Strong's fellow Hall of Famer Clarke Hinkle. But the record of Strong's non-NFL career listed below includes all other games:

	G	TD	XP-A	FG-A	Pts
1936 NY AFL	10	1	6-9	5-20	27
1937 NY AFL	2	1	0-0	2- 3	12
1938 JC AA	8	1	6-7	13-20	51
1940 JC AA	6	0	5-5	4-10	17
1942 LI (ind.)	4*	1	0-1	2- 3	12
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	30	4	17-22	26-56	119

It's not a bad record, all by itself. And when you add it to Strong's 12 years and 479 points in the NFL (he rejoined the Giants from 1944-47 as a kicking specialist, it's easy to see that he was one of the most durable players the game has ever seen.

Which probably wouldn't surprise anybody who saw him play.