

TRIGGER-MAN OF THE EAGLES

By Bob Carroll

Tommy Thompson, one of the National Football League's earliest and most successful T-formation quarterbacks, led the Philadelphia Eagles to championships in 1948-49. In those years, the Eagles were known for their crushing rushing attack featuring Steve Van Buren, but Thompson's leadership, intelligent play calling and deep passing were critical to the offense.

Teammate Al Wistert, in *GREAT ONES: NFL QUARTERBACKS FROM BAUGH TO MONTANA*, explained: "I think the real key to those titles was Tommy Thompson. He wasn't just a leader or a passer, although he was outstanding as both. He was much more. He had those indefinable qualities that make a player a winner. And he could transfer those to the rest of the team. Without Tommy, we still would have been a team of stars. But I don't know if we would have been a great team -- a championship team."

Surprisingly for a passer, Thompson had full sight in only one eye, the result of a boyhood stone-throwing accident. Yet, despite any loss of depth perception, he became one of the most accurate passers of his time.

His strong arm enabled him to excel with a discus, shotput and javelin in high school. At the University of Tulsa he played singlewing tailback for undistinguished teams. No NFL team drafted him, but he signed as a free agent with the Pittsburgh Pirates (Steelers) in 1940.

When Pittsburgh and Philadelphia traded franchises before the 1941 season, Thompson went to the Eagles. Although seldom used in the Pittsburgh singlewing, he was tabbed as Philadelphia's regular quarterback when new coach Greasy Neale installed the T-formation. Freed from the rushing duties of singlewing tailback, Thompson said he might "play 20 years" in the T and joked that he should take a rocking chair on the field. But, during his first two years at the helm of the slowly-improving Eagles, he had only occasional success.

He entered the Army at the end of the 1942 season (the U.S. Army, in its infinite wisdom, requires its men to have only one good eye) and received the Purple Heart when he was wounded while landing with the second wave at Normandy. He returned to Philadelphia in time to play briefly in 1945.

Thompson had a love-hate relationship with Coach Neale, somewhat like baseball's Jim Palmer-Earl Weaver association. One time Tommy tried to ignore a play sent in by Neale. The coach insisted. In the huddle, Thompson grumbled: "If the old goat wants it, let him have it." Then he warned, "And if anybody goes offside or misses a block, I'll shoot him." Naturally, the play brought a touchdown. When Tommy got to the sideline, he shook hands with Neale and cracked: "Congratulations. You were lucky that time."

In 1946, Tommy led the NFL in pass completion percentage. Meanwhile, Coach Neale had put together a star-studded squad that finished second to the Giants in the NFL's Eastern Division. In addition to Thompson and Van Buren, the team had rugged performers in tackles Al Wistert, Vic Sears, and Bucko Kilroy, centers Vic Lindscog and Alex Wojciechowicz, end Jack Ferrante, and backs Bosh Pritchard, Joe Muha, and Russ Craft.

The next year, the Eagles added pass catcher and crushing blocker Pete Pihos to their arsenal. The Birds tied the revitalized Steelers for the division title with an 8-4 regular season mark, then took a playoff at Pittsburgh, 21-0.

In its account of the game, the Associated Press said "a brilliant performance by Quarterback Tommy Thompson made [the Eagles'] victory appear ridiculously simple ... Thompson unveiled what was probably his greatest game in six years as a professional by completing 11 of 17 passes for 131 yards, including the first two Philadelphia touchdowns ... Thompson's field generalship was well-nigh flawless. He used Van Buren, Joe Muha and Pritchard to flay the Steelers between the tackles and, when Pittsburgh attempted to close up, Tommy turned on his aerial offensive, which made Pittsburgh almost helpless."

In the championship game, Thompson set playoff records by completing 27 of 44 pass attempts, but Philadelphia lost to the Chicago Cardinals, 28-21, on an icy Comiskey Park field.

Thompson led the NFL in passing in 1948, completing 141 of 246 passes for 1,965 yards and a league-high 25 touchdowns. Only eleven of his tosses were intercepted. Tommy made a fetish of avoiding interceptions, saying, "More games are lost by passes which go into the hands of the opposition than by long runs." He always insisted, "An intercepted pass is the opposing team's greatest defensive weapon."

The '48 Eagles lost their opener, 14-21, in a rematch with the Cardinals, then tied the Rams 28-28. After that, it was Katie-bar-the-door, as the Birds went 9-1 the rest of the way. When a blizzard struck Philadelphia for the championship game, Tommy, true to his credo, avoided mistakes and the Eagles beat the Cardinals, 7-0, on a fourth-quarter touchdown scored after a fumble.

Thompson was still at the top of his game in 1949. He finished second in passing, as the Eagles' 11-1 season record was the best in their history. Van Buren set a new league rushing record with 1,146 yards. The offense scored a league-high 364 points, and the defense held opponents to league-low 134. The Birds took their second league title by defeating the Rams, 14-0, in a steady downpour at Los Angeles.

1949 was the highpoint for Thompson and the Eagles. 1950 was the low. The Cleveland Browns, fresh from dominating the All-America Football Conference, dazzled the Birds with a sophisticated passing attack in the opening game to upset the '49 NFL champs 35-10. The Eagles bounced back to win six of the next seven games but then collapsed to lose the final four. They finished third in the East at 6-6.

It wasn't hard to spot the reasons for their fall. Van Buren was injured much of the season, missed two games completely, and was never more than a shadow of the old "Wham-Bam." Pritchard missed the entire season. Back-up Clyde Scott was also hurt, as was ace blocker Al Wistert. With the running game a shambles, defenders concentrated on stopping Thompson. The offense scored 110 fewer points than in '49, offsetting a herculean effort by the defense, which again allowed the fewest NFL points.

At season's end, Coach Neale was fired.

Thompson also retired after the 1950 season. At the time, he ranked second in NFL career completion percentage (51.4), third in career pass receptions (732), yards (10,400), and touchdowns (90).

Tommy later coached in the Canadian Football League and was an assistant with the Cardinals and at the University of Arkansas. Arthritis confined him to a wheelchair after 1970. In 1988, though suffering from cancer, he traveled to Philadelphia for a reunion of the Eagles champions of 40 years before.

Bibliography: Eugene Murdock, "The Year Greasy Neale Was Fired," PRO FOOTBALL DIGEST (April-May 1968); David S. Neft and Richard M. Cohen, PRO FOOTBALL: THE EARLY YEARS (Connecticut, 1987); Howard Roberts, THE STORY OF PRO FOOTBALL (New York, 1953); Robert Smith, GREAT TEAMS OF PRO FOOTBALL (New York, 1964); THE SPORTING NEWS, (May 8, 1989).

TOMMY THOMPSON: Lurtis Pryor Thompson

Quarterback

Born: 15 August 1916, Hutchinson, KS

Died: 21 April 1989, Calico Rock, AR

Height: 6'1" Weight: 195

College: Tulsa

		PASSING										
		G	ATT	COM	PCT	YARD	AvgG	TD	TD%	IN	IN%	RATE
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1940	Pit N	11	28	9	32.1	145	5.18	1	3.5	3	10.7	17.7
1941	Phi N	11	162	86	53.1	974	6.01	8	4.9	14	8.6	51.8
1942	Phi N	11	203	95	46.8	1410	6.95	8	3.9	16	7.9	50.3
1943	MS											
1944	MS											
1945	Phi N	8	28	15	53.6	146	5.21	0	0.0	2	7.1	38.7
1946	Phi N	10	103	57	*55.3	745	7.23	6	5.8	9	8.7	61.3
1947	Phi N	12	201	106	52.7	1680	8.36	16	8.0	15	7.5	76.3
1948	Phi N	12	246	141	57.3	1965	7.99	*25	10.2	11	4.5	98.4
1949	Phi N	12	214	116	54.2	1727	8.07	16	7.5	11	5.1	84.4
1950	Phi N	12	239	107	44.8	1608	6.73	11	4.6	22	9.2	44.4
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9 years		99	1424	732	51.4	10400	7.30	91	6.4	103	7.2	66.5

		RUSHING					Additional Statistics:
		G	ATT	YARD	AVG	TD	Caught
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1940	Pit N	11	40	39	1.0	0	1940 and two for 10 yards and a
1941	Phi N	11	54	28	0.5	0	touchdown in 1941; intercepted
1942	Phi N	11	92	9	0.1	1	three passes for 24 yards in
1943	MS						1941, four for 28 yards in 1942
1944	MS						and two for 33 yards in 1945;
1945	Phi N	8	8	-13	-1.6	0	returned five punts for 27
1946	Phi N	10	34	-116	-3.4	0	yards in 1941 and seven for 60
1947	Phi N	12	23	52	2.4	2	yards in 1942; returned five
1948	Phi N	12	12	46	3.8	1	kickoffs for 76 yards in 1942;
1949	Phi N	12	15	17	1.1	2	punted once for 43.0 average in
1950	Phi N	12	15	34	2.3	0	1941.
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9 years		99	293	96	0.3	6	