

SPEC SANDERS: A MEMORABLE RUNNER IN A FORGOTTEN LEAGUE

by Stan Grosshandler
(Originally published in *Pro Football Digest*)

"During my career I saw about five or six men I would place in a special category," said Buddy Young, director of Player Relations in Commissioner Pete Rozelle's office. "I won't tell you who they are, but Spec Sanders is one of them. He was in a class by himself!"

"He was one of the finest, most complete players I have ever seen. Spec was a late blossomer for he played in the shadow of Pete Layden at Texas and then spent three years in military service. He was a case of a late maturation factor".

On Friday night, October 27, 1948, Spec Sanders put on one of the most spectacular and unforgettable shows ever seen on a professional gridiron. A tailback for the New York Yankees of the old All-America Football Conference, Spec carried the ball 24 times for an unsurpassed 225 yards against the Chicago Rockets.

The Yankees took the opening kickoff and in 12 plays were on the scoreboard. Sanders went the last 20 yards after flattening a Rocket with a vicious straight arm. Spec accounted for the third TD with a perfect pass, and moments later as he faded for another pass, he was trapped. He squirmed loose and ran 70 yards through the entire Chicago team.

"I really do not remember a great deal about the game," recalled Spec. "I do recall Buddy Young taking the opening kickoff of the second half back 95 yards for a touchdown. Later Buddy was replaced by Dewey Proctor who I threw a short pass. Instead of the conventional stiff arm, Proctor used a closed fist which proved very effective as he made a nice gain. Most of the regulars and myself sat out the final quarter."

"My first season I played both ways, alternating at tailback with Ace Parker, now in the Hall of Fame. We had a big fullback in Pug Manders. (Manders led the NFL in rushing in 1941 with 486 yards, the lowest figure ever to top a league in rushing). Lloyd Cheatham was our blocking back and Bob Sweiger the wingback."

"The next season (1947) I confined myself to offense and Buddy Young took over at fullback. Buddy was 5'4 and weighed 175. We did not need a big fullback in our system for we did a lot of faking. Buddy's great speed helped me tremendously. There is no doubt in my mind that he was one of the greatest backs ever. Buddy was as good a friend as I ever had."

"I sat out the '49 season due to a knee operation," continued Spec, "and by 1950 the AAFC had merged with the NFL. My old coach Red Strader was now with the New Yorks of the NFL. Red joked about me making a comeback and before I knew it, we were sitting down to sign a contract. I played strictly on defense that year and made 13 interceptions for a new record. (The present record is Dick Lane's 14). That was my final season."

"Spec Sanders was one of those big backs who ran extremely hard," recalled Elroy Hirsch. "We all felt that he would soon burn himself out." Before his knees gave up Spec had led the AAFC in rushing both in '46 and '47 setting a record of 1,432 yards the latter year. He also topped the league in scoring with 114 points his second year. When the final records of the AAFC were written, Spec Sanders had scored the most touchdowns by rushing, was the second all-time ground gainer, fourth in total points, and eighth in passing.

The All America Football Conference was the brainchild of Chicago journalist Arch Ward, founder of the College All-Star game. It was organized in 1944 and finally was able to get underway in 1946 with a

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 18, No. 5 (1996)

Western Division composed of Cleveland, Los Angeles, Chicago, and San Francisco, and an Eastern Division of Buffalo, New York, Miami, and Brooklyn.

Conditions were ripe for a new league. There was a galaxy of former college greats plus ex-pros coming out of war-time service and the AAFC started to sign up as many as possible. A new football war was on.

"The first big-name college star to sign in the AAFC was my old teammate Crazylegs Hirsch," said Pat Harder. "This was a big event for the new league. At the College All-Star camp that year it was like two different camps, one for the guys who signed in the AAFC and one for fellows like myself who signed in the NFL. Because of Arch Ward those who went with the AAFC got all the publicity. I frankly didn't think that I was going to get to play in the game."

The first established pro to jump to the new league was a near-sighted Bear tackle, Lee Artoe. Lee's eyesight was good enough to spot a 15 grand contract and he was quick to jump. In all, the AAFC induced over 100 players to jump the older league, with the Bears being hurt the most.

To promote the AAFC, the papers announced that an assortment of formations would be used. Cleveland would run the T formation; New York, the single wing; Buffalo, the winged T, and Chicago, a split, spread double wing. The Los Angeles Dons advertised themselves as the most colorful team in the game sporting red, white, and blue pants.

There were many great players and some really fine teams in the All-America Football Conference, but unfortunately the Cleveland Browns won the title every year and interest and box office receipts began to ebb. The Browns of Graham, Motley, Lavelli, Speedie, Groza, and Willis lost but 4 and tied 3 games over the four year period of the league's existence.

The New York Yankees won the Eastern Division the first two years with such stars as ends Bruce Alford and Jack Russell, future Hall of Fame tackle Bruiser Kinard, All-League tackle Nate Johnson, and a great guard in Dick Barwegan.

The third year, Buffalo and Baltimore, which had replaced Miami, tied with mediocre records of 7-7. The Buffalo Bills, behind the passing of George Ratterman to Al Baldwin and the running of the league's leading scorer, Chet Mutryn, beat the Colts of Y.A. Tittle and Lamar Davis. The Bills then dutifully bowed to the Browns, 49-7.

The final year saw the league consolidated into one division of seven clubs. San Francisco, runnerup to the Browns every year, were again the bridesmaid with the honor of getting clobbered in the title game. The 49ers had the great lefty quarterback, Frank Albert, throwing to Alyn Beals, all-time AAFC scoring champ. They also had a terrific collection of runners in Len Eshmont, Norm Standlee, John Strzykalski, and Joe Perry.

After the All-America Conference took a beating financially, losing an estimated \$5 million, a merger was accomplished with the NFL, with the Browns, 49ers and Colts joining the older league. The rest of the players were distributed to the different NFL clubs. Actually in three of the four years, the AAFC outdrew its opponent league and the total average attendance during this period was 28,300 per game for the AAFC against 27,600 per game for the NFL.

"I believe the Browns killed the league," stated Crazylegs Hirsch. "When we played them it was not a question of whether we'd win or lose, but how bad they would beat us. Yes, TV was a factor for there was no fat TV contract such as the AFL had when they started out. Another factor was we played very few exhibition games which bring in extra income to a team."

"Among many things that contributed to the demise was poor management," added Buddy Young. "Also all the good coaches were in the other league."

The National Football League will not recognize records established in the AAFC so feats such as Spec Sanders' 225 yards are lost in the dusty records of a long forgotten league.

Orban Eugene (Spec) Sanders
Tailback-Defensive Back
6-1 196

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 18, No. 5 (1996)

Cameron JC (OK); U. of Texas
 Service: Georgia Pre-Flight; No. Carolina Pre-Flight
 Temple HS (OK); Cameron JC (OK)
 Born: January 26, 1919, Temple, OK

RUSHING

YEAR	Team	LG	GM	ATT	YDS	AVG	TD
1946	Yankees	AAC	13	*140	*709	5.1	*6
1947	Yankees	AAC	14	*231	*1432	6.2	*18
1948	Yankees	AAC	13	*169	759	4.5	9
1949	DNP						
1950	NY Yanks	N	12	-	-	-	-
4 years			52	540	2900	5.4	33

PASS RECEIVING

YEAR	Team	LG	NO	YDS	AVG	TD	
1946	Yankees	AAC	17	259	15.2	3	
1947	Yankees	AAC	1	13	13.0	0	
1948	Yankees	AAC	-	-	-	-	
1949	DNP						
1950	NY Yanks	N	-	-	-	-	
4 years			18	272	15.1	3	

PASSING

YEAR	Team	LG	ATT	COM	YDS	TD	IN
1946	Yankees	AAC	79	33	411	4	9
1947	Yankees	AAC	171	93	1442	14	17
1948	Yankees	AAC	168	78	918	5	11
1949	DNP						
1950	NY Yanks	N	3	2	58	0	0
4 years			421	206	2829	23	37

PUNT RETURNS

YEAR	Team	LG	NO	YDS	AVG	TD	
1946	Yankees	AAC	17	257	15.1	1	
1947	Yankees	AAC	6	164	25.7	0	
1948	Yankees	AAC	13	128	9.8	0	
1949	DNP						
1950	NY Yanks	N	6	93	15.5	0	
4 years			42	642	15.3	1	

KICKOFF RETURNS

YEAR	Team	LG	NO	YDS	AVG	TD	
1946	Yankees	AAC	13	395	30.4	1	
1947	Yankees	AAC	*22	593	27.0	*1	
1948	Yankees	AAC	9	217	24.1	0	
1949	DNP						
1950	NY Yanks	N	-	-	-	-	
4 years			44	1205	27.4	2	

YEAR	Team	LG	PUNTING		SCORE	PASS	
			NO	AVG	PTS	INT	
1946	Yankees	AAC	33	36.6	72	2	
1947	Yankees	AAC	46	42.1	*114	3	
1948	Yankees	AAC	42	40.6	54	1	
1949	DNP						
1950	NY Yanks	N	71	42.3	-	*13	