

# **CLIFF BATTLES**

By Michael Richman

When Cliff Battles' name surfaces among those familiar with stars from the NFL's early years, the issue often becomes why. Why did Redskins owner George Preston Marshall refuse to grant the running back's request for a salary increase after the 1937 season?

Battles, then 28, was at the height of his Hall of Fame career. He'd just earned his second of two NFL rushing titles and third All-Pro honor, and established himself as a cog on a 1937 Redskins team that won the NFL title in its first season in Washington. He'd rushed for 3,542 yards in only six seasons – huge numbers in that era.

Stories vary as to how much money Battles made, and how much more he requested. He said in Myron Cope's book, "The Game That Was: The Early Days of Pro Football," that he earned \$4,000. It's also been reported that he was paid \$3,000 a year and requested a modest raise, or that he wanted his \$2,500 salary increased to \$4,000. Sammy Baugh, Battles' teammate in 1937 and one of the greatest passers in NFL history, told *Redskins Weekly* that Battles made \$2,750 and wanted a \$250 raise.

But Marshall, a tightwad with most player salaries, refused to give the raise, and Battles quit the team. Known for making exaggerations, Marshall told the *Washington Times-Herald* in a Feb. 15, 1940, that Battles made more than \$3,800 and was offered a \$5,000 contract.

"You must bear in mind that Battles played with a team that lost \$85,000 and, naturally, he must have been over-paid, or we would have done better," Marshall said.

Marshall's stubbornness angered Baugh, who made a reported \$10,000.

"He let the best damn back in the league at the time get away over 250 damn dollars," Baugh said. "When I found out about that, I couldn't believe it. Hell, if I had known at the time, I would have given him the money. I never liked the way Mr. Marshall handled our ball club. Very few players liked Mr. Marshall."

Battles proceeded to become an assistant football coach at Columbia University in New York City, where he earned \$4,000. He was the great one that the Redskins let get away. Without him in the backfield with Baugh, where they were known as the "twin threats," the Redskins won only one more championship, in 1942, before Baugh retired in 1952.

Battles was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1968. He was also the first small college player to be enshrined into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1955. The Kenmore, Ohio, native played for tiny West Virginia Wesleyan from 1928 to 1931. A triple-threat with amazing breakaway speed, he was named to several All-America teams. He acquired the nickname "Gip" (sometimes spelled "Gipp") that apparently stemmed from his admiration for Notre Dame All-American back George Gipp, the subject of Knute Rockne's "win one for the Gipper" speech.

"In 1931, the East produced not only one of the best players of the year but of all time in Cliff Battles of West Virginia Weleyan," Allison Danzig wrote in "The History of American Football."

Someone who scouted Battles in college was George Preston Marshall, a Washington, D.C., laundry entrepreneur who bought the rights to an NFL franchise and located it in Boston in 1932. The team was called the "Braves."

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A West Virginia native, Marshall had decided to track athletic pursuits of players from his home state. His fascination with Battles grew when seeing him play against Washington-area schools like Navy and Georgetown. After Battles finished at West Virginia Wesleyan, Marshall dispatched a talent scout, Jerry Corcoran, to sign him.

The New York Giants and Portsmouth (OH) Spartans, among other NFL teams, also contacted Battles. But he signed with the Braves, who offered him \$175 per game, compared with a high of \$150 from the other teams.

"I chose the Braves because they were the only team to send a personal representative to see me," Battles said in Bob Curran's book, "Pro Football's Rag Days." "Mr. Marshall was from West Virginia, and he told [Corcoran], 'Sign Battles or keep right on going south and don't come back.'"

Battles was an immediate star. He rushed for a league-high 576 yards in 1932 and was an All-Pro. The next season, Battles and fullback Jim Musick provided a one-two punch for the Redskins, the team's new nickname. Musick led the league in rushing with 809 yards, and Battles was right behind with 737. He was again All-Pro. Battles gained 215 yards alone in a game against the Giants, becoming the first NFL player to top the 200-yard barrier. Since then, only three Redskins have rushed for more than 200 yards in one game: Gerald Riggs (221), George Rogers (206) and Timmy Smith (204).

After a few off seasons, Battles hit his stride again in 1936. He tallied 614 yards and five touchdowns, as the Redskins won the Eastern Division title with a 14-0 win over the Giants. Battles slogged 80 yards through the mud and rain at New York's Polo Grounds for an insurance touchdown. An early injury forced him out of the championship game, when the Redskins fell to Green Bay, 21-6.

That was the Redskins last season in Boston. Marshall, who'd lost about \$100,000 in "Beantown" due to poor attendance, moved the Redskins to Washington in 1937.

The Redskins were 2-2 after four games. But they won six of their last seven to capture the Eastern Division and earn another trip to the championship game.

Washington was propelled by an offense based on versatility, quickness and speed. The team's key weapons were a rifle-armed rookie passer named "Slingin" Sammy Baugh, the league's passing champ, and Battles, who rushed for league-highs of 874 yards and five touchdowns. He had runs of 71, 65 and 60 yards in one game, and ran 73 yards for one score and returned an interception 76 yards for another in the 49-14 division-clinching win over the Giants.

Battles was instrumental in the title game, too, when the Redskins defeated the Chicago Bears, 28-21. He scored Washington's first touchdown on a 7-yard reverse and, after catching a screen pass from Baugh, he ran 55 yards on the frozen tundra of Soldier Field.

But just like that, Battles was gone. After he accepted the Columbia job, the temperamental Marshall became very angry and vindictive, Battles said in "The Game That Was." "He blasted me in the newspapers and refused to speak to me for 10 years," Battles said. "He threatened to sue the university. He sent a strong wire to the president of Columbia, accusing the school of stealing someone in whom he had invested a lot of time and money. As far as I know, the president never acknowledged the wire."

In 1942, Battles quit Columbia and joined the U.S. Marines during World War II. He coached the El Toro Marines in 1944. He also coached the Brooklyn Dodgers in the new All-America Football Conference in 1946 and 1947. He later became an associate with General Electric in Washington before retiring in 1979.

Battles died on April 28, 1981. Art Bachtel, a teammate of Battles at West Virginia Wesleyan, remembered him this way:

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“He was the greatest open-field runner I ever saw,” Bachtel said in the *Akron-Beacon Journal* on Dec. 13, 1999. “He didn’t run but seemed to lope along. It was his natural way of running. Whenever we broke him through the line, it was almost certain to be a touchdown.”

CAREER			RUSHING				RECEIVING				TOT
Year	Team	Gm	Att	Yds	Avg	Td	Rec	Yds	Avg	Td	Td
1932	Bos(N)	8	<b>148</b>	<b>576</b>	3.9	3	4	60	15.0	1	4
1933	Bos(N)	12	136	737	<b>5.4</b>	3	11	185	16.8	0	4
1934	Bos(N)	12	96	480	5.0	6	5	95	19.0	1	7
1935	Bos(N)	7	67	230	3.4	1	3	22	7.3	0	2
1936	Bos(N)	11	176	614	3.5	5	6	103	17.2	1	7
1937	Was(N)	<u>10</u>	<b>216</b>	<b>874</b>	<u>4.1</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>81</u>	<u>9.0</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>7</u>
6 Years		60	839	3511	4.2	23	38	546	14.4	4	31

Led league in **bold**