

ALL-AMERICAN FLOPS!

By Bob Braunwart & Bob Carroll

PART 1: 1920-32

The All-America college star who flops as a pro has been a cliché since Willie Heston fell flat on his face with Canton against arch-rival Massillon back in 1905. From the time the NFL was formed (as the American Professional Football Association) in 1920, there have been quite a few All-Americans who failed to live up to their reputations when they turned pro. Indeed, one sometimes has the feeling that the bigger the college reputation, the smaller the professional achievement. But, is that impression accurate?

As in-depth scouting has become the norm, the All-American flop has become a rarity. There still is the occasional Terry Baker but, more often than not, an All-America who really doesn't have the tools will be a low draft choice with little expected of him. The heyday for flops was supposedly before World War II.

The first NFL era in most histories is the period from 1920 to 1932, before the league split into divisions. Therefore, we'll begin by checking the careers of those players named to reputable All-America teams from 1919 to 1931 inclusive.

For a list of All-Americans, we used the *Ronald Encyclopedia of Football* which lists first team AA picks during the years in question for the following: Walter Camp (1919-24), Frank Menke (1919-20), All-American Board (1924-31), International News Service (1924-31), Associated Press (1925-31), *Collier's* (1925-31), and United Press (1925-31). There were other All-American teams during the period, but they were not so widely circulated as these. From 1919 to 1931 inclusive, a total of 223 different names appeared on the All-American roll. Many players were named for more than a single year, i.e., Red Grange in 1923-24-25.

The simplest test of success for a pro is that he play in a game; the next test is that he keep playing. Using *Pro Football: The Early Years* (Neft, Cohen, et. al.), the 223 All-Americans were checked to see (1) if they played in the NFL, and (2) if so, for how many seasons. Admittedly, there were some independent teams on a par with NFL teams at that time, but we chose to limit our survey to NFL teams because the competition faced by independents was often poor.

The chart below shows the results of the survey. Note that the number of All-Americans in a given year indicates only those named for the first time. For example, only eight All-Americans are listed for 1922 when only Walter Camp picked a team because three other Camp selections, Brick Muller of California, Frank Schwab of Lafayette, and Eddie Kaw of Cornell had been named the year before.

The most obvious item on the chart is that almost two-thirds of the college All-Americans of the period did not play in the NFL at all! Given the shaky financial structure of many teams during the era, it seems most likely that any player with a big college rep could have found a spot on some team's roster on publicity value alone, IF he wanted to.

Therefore, we can safely make the statement that most college All-Americans did not flop with the pros; instead, they chose not to play.

Reasons varied. Some AA's chose to begin lifetime careers. For some the money, often less than \$100 per game, was insufficient. The most widely accepted reason is that pro football playing was not considered "respectable."

There is a widely held belief that when Red Grange signed to play pro ball late in 1925, he made professionalism in football respectable. But a glance at the chart shows that the percent of AA's turning pro actually went down after 1925. From 1919 to 1925, 41 of 94 AA's (43.6%) turned pro. From 1926 to 1931, 42 of 129 AA's (32.6%) turned pro.

YEAR	NO. AA	NO. OF NFL SEAS.	% TURNING PRO
		0 1 2-3 4+	

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 1, No. 10 (1979)

1919	14	3	4	4	3	78.6
1920	17	9	2	3	3	47.1
1921	10	4	3	1	2	60.0
1922	8	7	1	0	0	12.5
1923	10	7	0	2	1	30.0
1924	18	11	4	3	0	38.9
1925	17	12	2	1	2	29.4
1926	22	16	3	2	1	27.3
1927	18	11	1	4	2	38.9
1928	25	17	2	2	4	32.0
1929	22	16	2	2	2	27.3
1930	21	15	2	0	4	28.6
1931	<u>21</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>42.8</u>
Totals	223	140	29	28	26	37.2

Included among the many AA's who never appeared in a the NFL were Charles McGuire, Chicago (1920-21); Frank Schwab, Lafayette (1921-22); Harry Kipke, Michigan (1922); Homer Hazle, Rutgers (1923-24); George Pfann, Cornell (1923); Bennie Oosterbaan, Michigan (1925-26-27); Tom Hamilton, Navy (1926); Wes Fesler, Ohio State (1928-29-30); Ben Ticknor, Harvard (1929-30); Frank Carideo, Notre Dame (1929-30); Bobby Dodd, Tennessee (1930); and Marchy Schwartz, Notre Dame (1930-31).

The second largest group of AA's (29) are those who played only one year in the NFL. The immediate reaction is to brand these as flops. Some were, of course. Ed McGinley, for example, was a fine 180-pound tackle with Penn, but the New York Giants had to replace him with a heavier lineman before they could win any games in 1925. However, old news clippings indicate that many played well for a single pro year and then retired to pursue other careers. Belford West, Colgate (1919); Brick Muller, California (1921-22); Jim Crowley, Notre Dame (1924); Babe Connaughton, Georgetown (1926); and Jack Riley, Northwestern (1931) are only a few who would have been welcomed back for a second NFL season.

Many AA's who played only two or three seasons -- Bob Higgins, Penn State (1919); Ben Boynton, Williams (1919-20); Charley Berry, Lafayette (1924); Ed Weir, Nebraska (1924-25); Gibby Welch, Pitt (1927); and Herman Hickman, Tennessee (1931) -- were pro successes.

Certainly, we may regard any AA with a pro career of four or more seasons during this era as having been successful. Eight of this group -- nearly a third -- achieved the ultimate mark of success by being named to the Pro Football Hall of Fame: Wilbur Henry, W. & J. (1919); Red Grange, Illinois (1923-24-25); Ernie Nevers, Stanford (1925); Ken Strong, N.Y.U. (1928); Dutch Clark, Colorado College (1928); Bronko Nagurski, Minnesota (1929); and both Turk Edwards and Mel Hein, Washington State (1931).

In summary then, the All-American flop was a rarity rather than the rule in the NFL's earliest era. Most of the big college names chose to skip play-for-pay, but those who joined the pros usually did well.

PART 2: 1933-45

The period from 1933 to 1945 was one of struggle for America. First, the country had to climb out of its worst depression, and then it had to wage and win the largest and most horrible war the planet had ever seen. Surprisingly, it was a period of growth for pro football. Attendance at games grew steadily. If pro ball still could not rival the college game for the spectators' dollars, at least it was getting there.

One result of the surge in pro interest was that the game's outstanding players began to be known for their feats on professional gridirons rather than by their college reputations. Former AA's like Bronko Nagurski and Don Hutson actually increased their fame once they left college. Others, such as Steve Van Buren, Joe Stydahar, Arnie Herber, and Tuffy Leemans only gained national reputations after they donned professional togs.

Perhaps the presence of so many pro stars who had NOT achieved AA recognition helped popularize the stereotype of the All-American flop in the public's mind. The reasoning -- such as it was -- went something like this: Arnie Herber from little Regis is All-NFL; Warren Heller from Pitt is not. Therefore, the best pros are players from

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 1, No. 10 (1979)

obscure schools. Not only did this "logic" ignore the fact that Herber at Green Bay had a far better supporting cast than Heller at Pittsburgh, but it also overlooked players like Wayne Millner, Ernie Smith, Ace Parker, and Beattie Feathers who continued to make headlines at the same rate in pro ball as they had in college.

However, logical or not, fans began to take a more jaundiced view of All-America credentials, and when an occasional player failed his "pro test," the failure took on much more significance than it really warranted.

To examine the 1933-45 period, we checked the pro careers of 266 players listed on seven annual mythical AA teams from 1932 to 1944. The teams represented were the All-American Board, Associated Press, *Collier's*, International News Service, and United Press, all of which named teams during the entire period, and *Look Magazine* (1942-44) and the Football Writers' Association which began in 1944.

The percentage of AA players turning pro increased by nearly 20 percent over the 1920-32 period. This was caused, we believe, by three and possibly four factors.

First, of course, was the growing acceptance that pro football found with the public. If a pro player was not yet everyone's hero, he was no longer the ogre he had once been with some college fans. This change in climate undoubtedly influenced some players to take a fling at pro ball.

Second, there was the Depression. No doubt many college grads decided a job playing football was preferable to joining former classmates in the unemployment line. Additionally, pro salaries -- low by modern standards -- compared favorably with those available in the working world.

A third factor was related to the nature of the All-American teams themselves. Fewer and fewer names were coming from the elite Ivy League schools which traditionally opposed professionalism. More AA's were coming out of those midwest and southern schools that had supplied pro football manpower for years. In other words, the All-American teams began adding more potential pros. It is worth noting that the two most celebrated Yale players of the period -- Clint Frank and Larry Kelley -- ignored the appeals of the NFL.

A fourth factor cut both ways. World War II delayed many a player's entry into pro football and reduced other careers to one or two seasons. For example, Banks McFadden had an excellent rookie season with Brooklyn and then spent the next five seasons in the military. But, at the same time, experience on service teams with pro teammates well may have convinced many college stars to turn pro after the war.

When Jay Berwanger, the first Heisman winner and the first pick in the initial pro draft, decided not to turn pro in 1936, his decision was -- at most -- surprising. Today, such a decision would be inconceivable. But how did those who took the pro plunge during the period fare? As more AA's turned pro, the chances for flops increased. Yet, nearly half of the AA's who joined the pro ranks during this period (70 of 149) played for four or more years -- surely a mark of pro success. Many of them were named to all-pro teams and a few reached Hall of Fame status.

For the record, these were Wayne Millner, Sammy Baugh, Bruiser Kinard, Alex Wojciechowicz, Ace Parker, Bill Dudley, Pete Pihos, Otto Graham, Bill Willis, and Don Hutson.

YEAR	NO AA	NO. OF NFLSEAS. 0	1	2-3	4+	% TURNING PRO
1932	21	11	3	5	2	47.6
1933	18	10	2	2	4	44.4
1934	23	13	2	4	4	43.5
1935	17	10	1	3	3	41.5
1936	18	8	1	4	5	55.5
1937	20	10	4	3	3	50.0
1938	22	11	4	5	2	50.0
1939	20	9	2	4	5	55.0
1940	15	4	1	4	6	73.3
1941	19	6	1	3	9	68.4
1942	26	6	1	7	12	76.9
1943	22	11	1	2	8	50.0
1944	<u>25</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>68.0</u>

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 1, No. 10 (1979)

Total 266 117 29 50 70 56.0

Of those who played fewer than four years, we must factor out those who had their careers curtailed by military service and those who left the NFL as soon as a better "civilian" career turned up. Then, there were a few, like Michigan's Harry Newman, who jumped the NFL to try the doomed American Football Leagues of the period.

When all of this is considered, the indication is that All- America credentials, though no guarantee of pro success, were certainly no ticket to failure.