

# CONVERSATIONS ABOUT DEFENSE

by Stan Grosshandler

It is difficult to realize that until relatively recent times the defense received small recognition. In truth, they probably did not deserve any for they were stereotyped, showing little imagination.

As the two platoon system began to establish itself and coaches showed more innovation defensively, we began to hear of the "Umbrella Defense," the "Eagle Defense," and in the next decade such names of aggrandizement as "The Doomsday Defense," "The Purple People Eaters," and "The Violent World of Sam Huff."

Stars of the 1930's and 1940's will tell you there was little stress put on defense. It was something you had to do until you got the ball back. Joe Kopcha, all-pro Bear guard in the '30s, described how he and his teammates would often lean on the men opposite them when the play went the other way. The object of the game was to go the entire 60 minutes and you wanted to conserve your strength for the offense. The word "pursuit" was rarely used.

The great Packer guard, Buckets Goldenberg, brought out three interesting points:

"Lambeau paid little attention to the defense," he said. "He felt we could always outscore the other team. I always felt that if we played the Little Sisters of the Poor they would probably have scored a couple of times."

He also pointed out that when Larry Craig, the blocking back from South Carolina, joined the Packers, he was placed at defensive end and Hutson was moved to defensive halfback where he became quite good. This not only strengthened the defense, but prolonged Don's career.

Goldenberg also claimed to have been the victim of the first draw play. "I had noticed that whenever Sid Luckman planned to pass he would drop his left foot back. When I saw him do this, I would yell to a teammate to cover for me and I would barrel right in. I got to be pretty successful in getting Sid until one day Bulldog Turner realized what I was doing. He persuaded Luckman to fake a pass and hand off to Osmanski. It went for a nice gain and the draw play was born.

When Crazylegs Hirsch spoke of his great Ram club of the '50s, he pointed out that although they gave up a lot of points, they really were a fine defensive club.

"I think the defense got lax because we were such a high scoring team. Stan West was a terrific middle guard; while Larry Brink, Jack Zily and Bill Smyth were all top defensive ends. Brink was one of the first defensive men to gain some publicity. At tackle Dick Huffman went both ways while Bob Reinhard stuck to defense. Gil Bouley and Ed Champagne could play either way, mostly sticking to offense."

Hall-of-Famer Alex Wojciechowicz told of Greasy Neale's plans to stop the tricky T-formation: "We put a big, heavy guard, either Bucko Kilroy or Piggie Barnes, right over the center. Vic Sears and Mike Jarmoluk played opposite the tackles; while the ends, Pete Pihos or John Green on the left and Jay MacDowell on the right, played wide to prevent the sweep and flat pass. Joe Muha backed up the left and myself the right. We plugged the gap between our tackles and ends. We were to shut off the middle and contain the ends at the line."

This defense worked very well against the T for several years until, as all students of the game know, Paul Brown devised his countermeasures.

Steve Owen's Giants always seemed to be just a little ahead of the rest on defense. Hank Soar told how the great Giant clubs of the '30s had red dogs and safety blitzes but, because of limited personnel and practice time, did not often use them.

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The Umbrella Defense of the 1950's was considered a great innovation and brought recognition to many of its members.

"In 1950 we developed a defense for use against the Browns that became known as the Umbrella," recalled Em Tunnell, the late Hall of Fame defensive back. "Our ends Jim Duncan and Ray Poole drifted back to cover the flats. Tackles Arnie Weinmeister and Al DeRogatis and guards Jon Baker and John Mastrangelo would rush the passer and contain the run. The lone linebacker, John Mastrangelo would rush the passer and contain the run. The lone linebacker, John Canady, was told to follow the fullback wherever he went. Tom Landry was on the left corner and Harmon Rowe the right; Otto Schnellbacher was the weak safety and I played the strong side. If you would look down on the alignment from high in the stands, it looked like an umbrella. In truth, it was the beginning of the 4-3-2-2."

Y.A. Tittle made an extremely interesting point when quizzed about the success of his 49er backfield.

"It is possible that we were ahead of the defense at that time; but you must remember they were not very sophisticated then. One reason was that defensive units did not play together as long as they do today. They might play as a unit five years compared to the long periods the people play on the defense today."

One defensive group that emerged during the 1950's was the Detroit Lions' "Chris Crew," named for Hall of Fame defensive man Jack Christiansen. I had the opportunity to talk to Jack, Yale Lary, and Jim David regarding the success of this group. During their tenure the Lions won three NFL titles, four division titles, and had two second place finishes.

All three cited the fact that they all got along very well and had excellent communications. Yale Lary cited they played together for a long period and were free of injuries, a relatively rare phenomenon in those days. He also made the point that when college players came into the pros in those days they were not very skilled on pass defense. Jim David remarked that it was his feeling that quarterbacks then did not read defenses as well as they do today.

"We were not ahead of our time in the mechanics of playing defense," insisted Christiansen. "It was a matter of personnel. The Lions were the first team to realize you have to put your best players on defense. Up until then players who failed to make the offensive unit or the fringe player were put on defense. The Lions drafted the best players for defense, many of whom would have been great offensive players."

Today, as the defensive men share the MVP awards, have their own trophies, and obtain glamorous labels, it is hard to believe that they once labored in near total anonymity.