

MIDDLE MAN

By Bob Carroll

Mel Hein was quite possibly the best two-way center ever to play pro football. On offense, he snapped the ball unerringly and blocked like a demon. On defense, he was known for his bone-crushing tackles and his ability to cover pass receivers. On top of all that, he was a team leader.

One of his most important contributions to the New York Giants' success came when he used his influence as a veteran star to reduce the often brutal hazing that took place in training camp. That made for a happier -- and more successful -- team.

Mel was born August 22, 1909, in Redding, Cal. At Washington State University, he teamed with another all-timer, tackle Turk Edwards, to give the Cougars the most successful team they had ever had. At 6-2 and 225 pounds, Mel was a real force as W.S.U. stormed through an undefeated regular season in 1930.

Yet, unbelievably, he had to scrape to find a job when he turned pro. At Washington State, he was so versatile that he moved up and down the line, wherever he was needed most. That got his team to the Rose Bowl but cut heavily into his All-American revues. No one knew whether he was a tackle, guard, or center. Not a single NFL team contacted him.

Finally Mel wrote to three teams, asking for a tryout. The Giants "took a chance" and offered him \$150 per game.

They never regretted it.

During his fifteen years with the Giants (1931-1945), the team won seven Eastern Division championships and two league titles. For eight straight years, from 1933 to 1940, Mel was named the center on the NFL's Official All-League team.

In 1938, Mel was selected the NFL's Most Valuable Player, an incredible honor for a lineman. In a key late-season win over the Green Bay Packers, he intercepted a Packer pass and raced 50 yards to score the only touchdown of his pro career.

His durability was fantastic. In over 200 games - usually going the full 60 minutes he never missed a game. Supposedly, he only once needed a time out - for a broken nose!

When the Pro Football Hall of Fame opened its doors in 1963, Mel was the first center to be enshrined.