

Ray Flaherty

By Don Smith

Before Ray Flaherty coached even one National Football League game, he put himself squarely behind the eight ball with a rare vow that he would offer his resignation if his Boston Redskins did not win the NFL title!

Prompting Flaherty's drastic departure from the accepted coach's posture was the signing of an all-American end from Notre Dame, Wayne Millner. In a gush of exuberance, Ray wired the Redskins' owner, George Preston Marshall: "With that big Yankee playing end, please accept my resignation if the Redskins do not win the championship this year!"

"This year" was 1936 and history records that the Redskins did not win the championship, although they came close. History also shows that Flaherty did not resign, nor was he asked to do so. Instead he stayed on six more years until World War II service interrupted his tenure and he brought the Redskins four Eastern division and two NFL championships. No other Redskins coach stayed as long nor provided as many titles, a record not soon forgotten either in Washington or the entire NFL..

Proof of this is his election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1976, a full 40 seasons after that rookie coaching campaign in Boston in 1936. Flaherty's seven-year record with the Redskins was a sizzling 54-21-3. After his war service, he returned to the New York Yankees of the new All-America Football Conference and led that team to divisional championships in both 1946 and 1947. When he finished his career with the 1949 Chicago Hornets, he owned a sterling 80-37-5 career coaching mark and a .676 winning percentage.

Even more important than the mere won-lost figures is the fact that Ray guided the Redskins during the era when they perennially challenged the New York Giants, Green Bay Packers and Chicago Bears for NFL dominance.

The most feared team, however, was the Chicago Bears and, in three head-to-head clashes with the fabled "Monsters of the Midway," Flaherty's Redskins came out on top two of the three games. Ironically, more people will remember the one losing effort than the two big wins, for that losing effort turned out to be the biggest disaster in pro football history, a 73-0 annihilation by the 1940 Bears. But sandwiched around the 1940 massacre were the Redskins' 28-21 win over the Bears in the 1937 championship and a 14-6 upset of the undefeated and heavily favored Chicago eleven in the 1942 finale, Flaherty's last game as the Washington head coach.

In the 1937 title win, Flaherty made his first mark on history by introducing the behind-the-line screen pass, a standard offensive weapon today but a puzzling new maneuver the Bears couldn't handle on that particular day. Washington's rookie tailback, Sammy Baugh, was the reason for Flaherty's innovative strategy. In his very first year, Baugh had established himself as the best passer pro football had yet seen, and Flaherty knew that the Bears would be rushing him unmercifully throughout the game.

"They were breaking their necks trying to rack up Baugh," Flaherty recalls. "That's what made the screen pass go. It had been nullified downfield but we put it in behind the line of scrimmage and the Bears didn't know how to stop it."

In a game that Flaherty says he remembers best among his many football experiences, Baugh tossed scoring passes of 55 and 77 yards to Millner and a winning 35-yarder to Ed Justice to stymie the favored Bears.

Another Flaherty innovation became the scourge of the NFL and undoubtedly played a big role in the 1942 title triumph, which developed into one of the biggest reversals of form in NFL championship-game history. To fit the rules of the day, the Redskins' coach developed a two-platoon system that created havoc for every defense. Both platoons played offense and defense, but one unit featured a backfield led

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 6, Nos. 5 & 6 (1984)

by Baugh that was a powerful passing combination while a second backfield, with Frank Filchock at tailback, favored the running game.

"We made the defenses change," Flaherty explains. "They'd get all set for Baugh's passing and then would have to change when we put the running unit in. We tried to keep them constantly off balance and usually succeeded."

In the 1942 showdown, Baugh's unit scored on a 25-yard pass and a one-yard rushing plunge at the end of a long drive, but the defense, honed to razor-sharp efficiency by Flaherty, played the biggest role, giving up no scores at all. Chicago's only touchdown came on a 50-yard fumble return.

Flaherty not only was the longest-tenured Redskins coach, but he was also the only field boss not bothered by the flamboyant Marshall, who was noted for his tendencies to want to "help" with the gridiron master-minding. "I never had any trouble with Mr. Marshall," Flaherty insists. "He came down to the bench one day and I sent him back into the stands. He never came down again."

Some say that Marshall resented Flaherty's insistence on running the on-the-field show himself and that Ray's service call may have prevented an open break between the two. Whether this is true or not, Marshall did offer Flaherty his job back at the end of the war, but Ray opted instead for a fling with Dan Topping's New York Yankees team in the rival AAFC. Flaherty's signing proved to be of major prestige value for the new league. Fans in New York knew of his play with the Giants and they knew too of his fine record with the Redskins. Since Paul Brown in Cleveland still was a comparative unknown in 1946, Flaherty in reality was the first "name coach" from the pro ranks to sign with the AAFC.

In spite of Ray's excellent coaching record, many old-time fans remember him best as an outstanding end and field leader of the Giants in the early 1930s. It was as a Giants player, in fact, that Flaherty was involved in one of pro football's most famous incidents.

The Giants and the Bears faced off for the 1934 NFL championship in New York's Polo Grounds, turned into a literal skating rink by an ice storm and freezing temperatures. When a pre-game survey of the field ascertained that conditions would be impossible, Flaherty suggested the use of basketball shoes to obtain better traction. A frantic search for the rubber-soled shoes continued throughout the first half, during which the Bears built up a 10-3 lead. By intermission, nine pairs of basketball shoes had been located, and the key Giants put them on to start the second half. With this new advantage, the Giants staged a fantastic 27-point fourth-quarter rally to upset the Bears 30-13.

Flaherty had first learned of this tactic when he was a Gonzaga University star in 1923, 1924 and 1925. Ray started his pro career with the Los Angeles Wildcats of the first American Football League in 1926 and he quickly established himself as one of pro football's premier ends. When the AFL folded after one year, Ray switched to the New York Yankees of the NFL in 1927 and then was traded to the Giants in 1929. Except for 1930, when Ray took a year off to coach at his alma mater, Flaherty finished out his career with the Giants. An all-NFL end in 1928 and 1932 and the league pass receiving champion in 1931, Flaherty spent his last three years with the Giants as a player, captain and assistant coach.

Right after the 1935 NFL championship game between the Giants and the Detroit Lions, Marshall tapped Flaherty to lead the Redskins. Ray became the fourth Boston head coach in five years and he inherited a team that had had a 2-8-1 record in 1935. All of this made Flaherty's rash pre-season promise all the more preposterous. But Flaherty quickly proved himself as a top-notch leader, and the 1936 Redskins scored three straight season-ending victories to win the Eastern crown. Marshall, angry at Boston fans for their lack of attendance, moved the championship game to the neutral Polo Grounds where Green Bay beat the Redskins 21-6.

Not surprisingly, the Redskins were in a new home – Washington, D.C. – in 1937 and, in the years immediately ahead, the Flaherty success story grew. The techniques he used to develop perennial contenders most likely would be just as successful today.

"If I were still coaching," Flaherty said, "I'd still be stressing fundamentals. You've got to block and tackle and play defense. It's a specialist's game now, but it's still a game of fundamentals. That's how you win."

Flaherty, more than almost anyone else, should know!

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 6, Nos. 5 & 6 (1984)

AS A COACH

Year	Team	Season Record	Division Finish
1936	Boston Redskins	7-5-0	1st
1937	Washington Redskins	8-3-0	1st
1938	Washington Redskins	6-3-2	2nd
1939	Washington Redskins	8-2-1	2nd
1940	Washington Redskins	9-2-0	1st
1941	Washington Redskins	6-5-0	3rd
1942	Washington Redskins	10-1-0	1st
1946	New York Yankees (AAFC)	10-3-1	1st
1947	New York Yankees (AAFC)	11-2-1	1st
1948	New York Yankees (AAFC)	1-3-0	
1949	Chicago Hornets (AAFC)	4-8-0	Tie 5th *

Coaching tenure -- 10+ seasons -- 80 wins, 37 losses, 5 ties

* AAFC had only one division in 1949.

DIVISIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS -- 1936, 1937, 1940, 1942, 1946 (AAFC), 1947 (AAFC)

LEAGUE CHAMPIONSHIPS -- 1937, 1942