

Bonus Picks

By Donald Kosakowski

Can you imagine a group of NFL owners anxiously standing around, awaiting their turn to select a specially marked paper from a hat which would entitle one of them to take home the top prize of the collegiate ranks? Well, this rather unique manner of selection was actually used due to Commissioner Bert Bell's plan devised back in 1947. The idea was to provide for each of the then ten NFL teams, regardless of record, the opportunity to make what was referred to as the bonus pick. There was only one a year and once a team became the lucky selector, it was not eligible to enter the drawing the following year. In this way, each team was afforded this privilege.

This bonus pick system started in 1947 with the Chicago Bears selecting back Bob Fenimore of Oklahoma A & M and ended in 1958 with quarterback King Hill of Rice being tapped by the Chicago Cardinals. Thus, a Chicago franchise started and ended it.

Many teams profited from this system, but none as much as the New York Giants. For it was in 1951 that Jack Mara allowed his head coach, "Stout" Steve Owen, to do the selecting for the first time. As luck would have it, the big left-hander came out with the specially marked paper and the (10-2-0) Giants were the proud owners of the best halfback in the nation, Kyle Rote of S.M.U. One can easily see why January 18, 1951, is a rather important date in Giants' history.

The Giants also benefitted from this system indirectly in 1948 when the Washington Redskins selected All-American quarterback Harry Gilmer. As a result, owner George P. Marshall was quite willing to sell the draft rights to the Giants for Mississippi's "Chuckin'" Charley Conerly. A decision soon regretted by the Skins' owner.

With regard to the 12 prized players taken, it is interesting to note that 6 were quarterbacks while in college, 3 were running backs, 2 played end, and there was only one interior lineman selected and he's presently in the Hall of Fame.

Not all of the selectees became NFL stars or set any longevity records. For example, Bob Fenimore, selected by the Bears, played only the 1947 season. End Harry Babcock of Georgia was taken by the San Francisco 49ers in 1953, played sparingly from 1953 to 1955, and quarterback Robert Garrett of Stanord, picked by Cleveland in 1954, played only that season with Green Bay.

On the other side of the coin, however, there were some great selections. For example, Hall of Famer Chuck Bednarik of Pennsylvania in 1949 by the Philadelphia Eagles, Notre Dame's Leon Hart in 1950 by the Detroit Lions, Kyle Rote in 1951 by the Giants, and Paul Hornung by the Green Bay Packers in 1957 proved to be top choices.

With the Cardinal's selection of King Hill in 1958, a very unusual, yet interesting manner of selecting college football's best came to an end. All the teams had been given the opportunity once and, as a result, Bert Bell's bonus pick gimmick became an integral part of NFL history.