

THE FACTS ABOUT FRIEDMAN

By Jim Whalen & C.C. Staph

According to some reports, Benny Friedman thought the greatest football player who ever lived was Benny Friedman. As he grew older, he made more and more statements along that line, while sometimes sneering at the abilities of modern players. Apparently, he never tired of talking about his own accomplishments but seldom had much energy for other subjects.

That turned many people off. And they may have reacted by exaggerating the size of his considerable ego. They also may have taken the "if-you're-so-smart-why-ain't-you-rich" approach to Friedman's career: "If he was so good, why doesn't everyone know it?"

Whether they knew it or not, some of Benny's contemporaries were loath to admit it. Some questioned his willingness to put his team's success ahead of his own. Some, like later critics, were less than enchanted by the Friedman persona. A memory laced with prejudice can be destructively selective.

Although there were those who remembered him fondly, any evaluation of a player as controversial as Friedman had best depend on the record and not the reminiscences.

His place as an all-time great of college football has never been in dispute. A member of the Michigan Sports and Helms Halls of Fame, he was elected in 1951 as a charter member of the College Football Hall of Fame. He was named to Bill Edwards' All-Time All-American Team in the 1930 ILLUSTRATED FOOTBALL ANNUAL, George Trevor's All-Time Midwest Team in 1949, and the Mid-Century University of Michigan Team in 1950.

But until quite recently, there was little real record of Friedman's professional greatness. All-pro selections were thought to have started in 1931, Friedman's fifth pro year. Pre-1935 statistical records were nearly non-existent.

Now, through the efforts of John Hogrogian, we have a complete listing of all-pro teams of the 1920s. At last we can see what various expert observers thought about Benny at the time he played.

And now, through the efforts of David Neft, we have a far better picture of his (and other stars') statistical record.

So what does all this new information show? Was Benny everything he said he was? Or was he just one of many good-but-not-great stars of the past.

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First, a few basics:

Benjamin "Benny" Friedman was born March 18, 1905, in Cleveland, Ohio, where his father, Louis Friedman, worked as a furrier and tailor. In 1923, Benny graduated from Glenville High School, where he'd starred in football, baseball, and basketball. With Friedman leading the attack, Glenville won the 1922 Cleveland city football championship and beat Chicago's Oak Park High School in a post-season game of national championship significance.

The 5'8", 172-pound Friedman entered the University of Michigan in the fall of 1923 and starred for the freshman team. However, as a sophomore, he became discouraged when he failed to start the first three varsity games under interim coach George E. Little. He almost transferred to Dartmouth, but Athletic Director Fielding H. Yost persuaded Little to start Friedman and to put more passing into the offense.

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The move paid handsome dividends as Michigan won the next four games convincingly, outscoring the opposition 77-6. Friedman completed touchdown passes of 62 and 35 yards in wins over Wisconsin and Minnesota, but the Wolverines were upset 9-2 by nationally sixth-ranked Iowa in the season's finale.

Yost returned to the sideline the next year. He was to tell H.G. Salsinger, "The best team I ever coached was the Michigan team of 1925." He rated the squad, which outscored its opponents 227-3, ahead of his famed "point-a-minute" teams of 1901-05.

Friedman was the team's offensive star, scoring 52 points on four touchdowns, two field goals, and 22 extra points. He passed for 760 yards and 14 touchdowns, with sophomore end Bennie Oosterbaan his favorite receiver. Before they were done, the Friedman-to-Oosterbaan combo was heralded as one of the best in college football history.

Other stars of the team included center and captain Bob Brown, tackle Tom Edwards, guard Ray Baer, halfback Lou Gilbert, and fullback John "Bo" Molenda. The Wolverines lost only once, a 3-2 upset to star-studded Northwestern in a driving rain-sleet storm and 55-mile-per-hour gale at Chicago's Soldier Field. The weather was such that the game became strictly a punting duel with both teams playing for a break, attempting only one pass, and making only one first down between them.

Michigan was undefeated in Big Ten Conference play during 1926 but dropped a 10-0 decision to undefeated co-national champion Navy before 80,000 spectators in Baltimore. Friedman completed several key passes to Oosterbaan during the season, which was highlighted by his performance in a 17-16 come-from-behind thriller against eighth-ranked Ohio State before 90,411 at Columbus.

In addition to his second year as a consensus All-America, Friedman was named team captain and Big Ten Most Valuable Player. In the national rankings published by Frank G. Dickinson, Michigan was third, after being second in the year before.

An intelligent quarterback, Benny exploited opponent's defensive weaknesses with his soft passes. He was confident and, of course, outspoken but his outstanding play was given credit for generating such interest in Michigan football that the mammoth Michigan Stadium came to be built.

He majored in Literature, Science and Arts, lettered in baseball as a junior, and graduated from Michigan in 1927. His professional career lasted from 1927 through 1934. In the last three seasons, his play was restricted by his duties as backfield coach at Yale. From 1934 through 1941 he was head football coach at City College of New York, where his charges compiled a composite 27-31-4 record. In 1949 he became Athletic Director at Brandeis University, serving until 1963. There he initiated the intercollegiate sports program and also acted as the Judges' football coach from 1951 through 1959 when they discontinued the sport. His record was 34-32-4.

In 1964 he opened a summer camp for boys, including the Kamp Kohut Football School for aspiring quarterbacks, in Oxford, ME. He kept in top physical shape by demonstrating football techniques, exercising, and water skiing.

However, in 1980, his leg had to be amputated after a blood clot formed in it. He developed a heart condition and became despondent over ill health. On November 24, 1982, he was found in his East Side New York apartment dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

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David Neft has painstakingly reconstructed Friedman's professional record. Most categories are divided into two parts. The first is complete games (CG) which include games wherein the stats have been put together from existing play-by-plays and games in which some stat totals were given in the game accounts. While these are not "official" records and may be off a yard or two here and there, depending on the care taken by the original reporter, we can safely assume that these are an accurate statistical picture of what was accomplished. A second part is incomplete games (IG). These represent those stats that David has gleaned from news stories of games (at least two for each game, often more). Although these are useful in gaining an overall picture, David does not add them on to the complete

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game totals because they would create misleading averages. A news story will often mention a long run or pass but ignore all the short yardage plays and incomplete passes.

Even so, it's worth noting that when Benny retired he was, as nearly as we can tell, among the first five career rushers in total yardage and unchallenged in passing yardage. Indeed, it was not until Hall of Famer Sammy Baugh's seventh season (1943) that any player passed the total passing yardage that we can verify for Friedman. In 1928, he led the NFL in scoring, led in passing (by any conceivable rating system), and may have led in rushing (there are too many incomplete games for all the possible leaders, but Friedman's per game average makes him a likely candidate).

He was best known as a passer, of course. And the best way to understand how far he outdistanced other tossers is a simple comparison for the years 1927-30 (before injuries and coaching duties sharply curtailed his output).

Friedman - Next Highest			Friedman - Next Highest		
TD Passes			YARDS		
1927	12	7 McBride	1721+	1362	Nevers
1928	10	5 Wilson, Mercer	1120+	906+	Wilson
1929	20	6 Nevers	1566+	677+	Kelly
1930	13	9 Dunn	1246+	825	Dunn
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55	27		5653+	3770+	

Naturally, Bennie was All-Pro, but saying that didn't mean much until recently. Then John Hogrogian began digging out all-league teams from the 1920s – teams that no one knew (or remembered) until John discovered them. What is most interesting is how thoroughly he dominated the teams. From 1927 through 1930 – four years – Benny was named to every all-pro team that appeared. That's not almost every, that's EVERY. And on those that were chosen by panels he was usually the top or one of the top vote-getters.

In 1927, he was picked on teams by the Green Bay Press-Gazette (chosen by sportswriters, game officials, and team managers), Wilfrid Smith of the Chicago Tribune, game official Jack Reardon, and coaches Ralph Scott and Leroy Andrews.

1928 saw him selected by the Press-Gazette, Wilfrid Smith, and on a special poll of team managers. In 1929, he was tabbed by the Press-Gazette and Smith, again by Leroy Andrews, by Collyer's Eye Magazine, and by Rud Rennie of the New York Herald Tribune.

And in 1930, he was picked as quarterback by the Press-Gazette, Chicago Daily Times, Milwaukee Sentinel, in a special poll of players and coaches, by Ernie Nevers, and on two different teams chosen by Red Grange, one for Collyer's Eye and the other for the Chicago Herald Examiner.

In 1931, his season was truncated by injury but the Press-Gazette still put him on its third team, Curly Lambeau named him to his second team, and game official Jack Reardon made him first team QB. Even in 1933, he made the second squad on the Official Team. All told, the only backs with comparable credits during the NFL's first two decades were Ernie Nevers and Dutch Clark.

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Despite his brilliant play, Benny's teams never won a championship. Some say that toward the end he stopped playing much defense – a sensible decision for a team's offensive mealticket. He was controversial and to some abrasive.

But when it came to estimating his abilities, he was a pretty good judge.

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PASSING

YEAR	TM	LG	CG	ATT	COM	YDS	PCT.	TD	IN	IG	AT	CO	YDS	T	IN
1927	Cle	N	11	196	87	1565	44.4	10	11	2	9	9	156	2	
1928	Det	N	5	84	36	569	42.9	4	8	5	25	20	551	6	4
1929	NYG	N	9	117	53	985	45.3	13	7	6	36	28	581	7	3
1930	NYG	N	9	105	56	922	53.3	10	7	6	19	15	324	3	2
1931	NYG	N	5	52	29	422	55.8	0	3	3	15	12	277	3	1
1932	Bkn	N	7	68	21	266	30.9	4	8	4	9	4	77	1	1
1933	Bkn	N	9	80	42	597	52.5	5	7						
1934	Bkn	N													

8 years 55 702 324 5326 46.2 46 51 113 88 1966 22 11

RUSHING

YEAR	TM	LG	GM	CG	ATT	YDS	AVG	TD	IG	AT	YDS	T	NO	INT
1927	Cle	N	13	2	9	43	4.8	1	11	12	108	1	2	
1928	Det	N	10	3	38	335	8.8	1	7	31	229	5	2	
1929	NYG	N	15	4	44	161	3.7	1	11	28	246	1	4	
1930	NYG	N	15	5	68	177	2.6	2	10	22	209	4	3	
1931	NYG	N	8	3	48	188	3.9	1	5	18	135	1	0	
1932	Bkn	N	11	5	40	130	3.3	0	6	3	48	0		
1933	Bkn	N	9											
1934	Bkn	N	1											

8 years 83 22 247 1034 4.2 6 50[114 975 12 11]

PASS RECEIVING

YEAR	TM	LG	GM	CG	PC	YDS	AVG	TD	IG	TD	XP	XA	FG	FA	PTS	
1927	Cle	N	13	5	1	20	20.0	0	8	2	11	17	0	1	23	
1928	Det	N	10								6*19	*26	0	0	*55	
1929	NYG	N	15								2*20	*31	0	1	32	
1930	NYG	N	15								6	10	23	1	2	49
1931	NYG	N	8								2	0	2	0	0	12
1932	Bkn	N	11	5	4	51	12.8	0	6	0	5	5	1	2	8	
1933	Bkn	N	9								0	6	6	0	0	6
1934	Bkn	N	1								0	0	0	0	0	0

8 years 83 10 5 71 14.2 0 18 65 104 2 6 185

PUNT RETURNS

YEAR	TM	LG	CG	NO	YDS	AVG	T	IG	NO	YDS	T	CG	NO	AVG	IG
1927	Cle	N	1					12	4	100	0	2	9	37.1	11
1928	Det	N	2	4	44	11.0	0	8	2	65	0	1	1	44.0	9
1929	NYG	N	4	8	88	11.0	0	11				4	1	35.0	11
1930	NYG	N	5	8	107	13.4	0	10							
1931	NYG	N	3	4	54	13.5	0	5				3	2	28.0	5
1932	Bkn	N	5	7	108	15.4	0	6				5	10	31.5	6
1933	Bkn	N													
1934	Bkn	N													

8 years 20 31 401 12.9 0 23 34.1

Courtesy of David Neft)