

ALONG CAME JONES

By Greg Kukish

Did you ever sit back and think about people who get lost in the shuffle of time and events? Like who was F.D.R.'s Vice President in his first term, or who was the second leading rusher in O.J. Simpson's record setting 2003 yard season? Well, other than the people who sit up nights thinking up questions for the next Trivial Pursuit series, not many people really know or care. It's not the man who holds the ladder, but the man who paints the flag pole who gets the recognition. It's not the man who blocks, but the man who scores who get the endorsements.

Ralph Jones -- could any name be less memorable? -- is all but forgotten today. Yet, his contributions to football deserve recognition. For one thing, he was the first coach to win a championship for the Chicago Bears.

Before you race to your record book, remember that George Halas' 1921 champs were the Chicago STALEYS, playing under a franchise managed by Halas but officially owned by A.E. Staley of Decatur. Halas and partner Dutch Sternaman acquired the Bear franchise the next year and made headlines throughout the 1920's -- but won no titles. Meanwhile, Halas and Sternaman drifted apart and the team suffered. By 1929, Chicago finished ninth in a 12-team league.

"We had two offenses," recalled one player. "The Halas offense and the Sternaman offense."

What to do? Halas later explained: "We thought it best to get a competent coach."

Halas considered his Bears as a daughter that no man was good enough to marry, but because of his feud with Sternaman and mounting outside duties a coaching change was necessary. The partners settled on an "outsider" -- Ralph Jones, a small, bald genius they'd known as an assistant to Bob Zupke at Illinois and who'd recently been successful at Lake Forest Academy near Chicago.

When Ralph Jones became head coach of the Chicago Bears, in 1930. He promised a Bear championship within three years! Then he set about installing some of his revolutionary ideas for the utilization of the ancient T-formation.

The prevailing offensive philosophy of the time was sheer power football, running and occasionally throwing out of either the single or double wing formation. The "T" had been around since 1880 and was considered hopelessly outdated. Offenses were designed to put more muscle at the point of attack than the defense. And that basically was it. Deception was unsporting. A pass for most pro teams was only a change of pace or an act of desperation.

But under Jones' fine tuning, the Bears re-introduced the "T" as a streamlined, multi-faceted, offense. It could attack a defense that had been forced to spread out in anticipation of what exactly the offense was going to do and with whom and how it was going to do it.

To accomplish this, Jones increased the splits between offensive lineman and was very precise about how each back lined up. The whole idea, obviously, was the spread the defense. Deception was added by snugging the quarterback up to the center to hide his ball handling.

Jones key innovation was the man in motion concept. A then-little known rule said only one man could be in motion at the snap of the ball. In the single and double wings, backs could shift, but had to be set for at least a second before the snap of the ball. But using the single man in motion, Jones created quite a stir among defenses, obviously the air game was opened up significantly. Consider the size of the lumps in the throats of defenders as they could see a Red Grange going in motion, not knowing exactly if it was a run, a pass, or a throw off of a run.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 10, No. 1 (1988)

In Claasen's *The History of Professional Football*, Carl Brumbaugh, the Bears quarterback, described one series: "Their fullback followed Red out the first time. That left no backer-up, and Bronko Nagurski went through the line for a good gain. The next time the halfback covered Red, so I threw a pass to [Luke] Johnsos in the territory the halfback should have been defending. The third time, nobody followed Red out, and I threw him a pass for a touchdown."

With Jones' new wrinkles, and the addition of some great players, the Bears finished third in 1930 (9-4-1) and again in 1931 (8-5-0). In 1932, they completed the regular season tied for first (6-1-6) and then won the title by defeating Portsmouth in the famous "indoor" game, played on an 80-yard field at Chicago Stadium.

With that, having made good on his promise of a title in three years, Ralph Jones retired from pro coaching to return to Lake Forest as athletic director.