

The 1963 Championship Game: Irresistible Force vs. Immovable Object

by Jack Ziegler

Sid Luckman, former great quarterback for the Bears and now an assistant coach for the same organization, understood the 1963 matchup between the Bears and Giants real early: "The championship game figures to be one of the best in history...because you've got the Bears' great defense against the Giants' great offense."

How good was the Bears defense? In 1963 it held opposing clubs to 144 points, an average of 10 points a game. George Allen, the forty-one year old defensive genius, had installed a zone defense at Chicago. The four defensive backs – Richie Petitbon, Bennie McRae, Roosevelt Taylor, Dick Whitsell – were excellent indeed. Buddy Parker, then the Steelers' coach, rated the Bears' secondary the best he'd ever seen and Parker had coached the "Chris' Crew" in Detroit.

The three linebackers – defensive signal caller Joe Fortunato, Bill George, and Larry Morris – were rated the best in the league by everybody. New York sportswriters freely admitted that Tittle and company had not faced such a trio in regular season competition and expressed some concern on how the Bear linebackers would be contained in the championship game. Perhaps the New York scribes were recalling how Vince Lombardi's Packers managed only one touchdown in two games against the Bears and how Johnny Unitas could not throw a touchdown pass in two meetings. The Bears defense was tough, perhaps as intimidating as the Giants had been in the late fifties.

The Bears offense was another matter. Billy Wade, a quiet, competent quarterback, operated behind the best offensive line in the West. Wade was the eighth rated QB in the NFL in 1963 while Tittle was number one. An average passer (192-356-2301 yards (54%) -15 TD-12I) and runner (45-132-2.9 avg-6 TD), the 33 year old Wade operated a 3 yards-and-a-cloud-of-dust rushing attack "livened up" occasionally with short passes to behemoth TE Mike Ditka (59-794-8-TD) and Willie Galimore (85-321-3.8 avg-5 TD) would make no one forget Rick Casares in his prime. But the defense made things happen and the offense put enough points on the board to earn the Bears an 11-12 record in the West, edging out the 11-2-1 Packers for the conference title.

How good was the Giant offense? Their 11-3-0 record was based on the glittering 448 points they racked up in 1963, a nifty 32 points per game average. Though the Giants still boasted a solid defense, winged victory rode on the golden arm of Y. A. Tittle who tossed 36 touchdown passes in 1963. Obtained in 1961 from the 49ers for guard Lou Cordileone, Tittle was at first booed when he started in place of Giant institution Charlie Conerly. But boos turned to cheers as Tittle produced Eastern Conference championships in 1961, 1962, and 1963. Tittle kept two major weapons in his aerial arsenal – the long bomb for the instant six points or the screen or flare pass that ate up defenses five to ten yards at a time.

Tittle's favorite target for both kinds of passes was Del Shofner, a fellow Texan and former track star and two-way halfback at Baylor. Secondary receivers included durable flanker Frank Gifford (42-657-7 TD), backs Phil King (32-377-5 TD) and Joe Morrison (31-284-7 TD), and TE Joe Walton (26-371-6 TD), who was questionable for the championship game. The running game was more serviceable than exciting and featured Phil King (161-613-3.8 avg-3 TD) and Joe Morrison (119-568-4.8 avg-3 TD) as the mainstays, with aging Alex Webster (32) and High McElhenny (34) as backups.

In the week preceding the December 29 championship game, newspaper stories focused on field and weather conditions. Commissioner Pete Rozelle had tried to talk Bear Head Coach George Halas into switching the playing site to larger (capacity 75,000), lighted Soldier Field. Halas, who had the option for choice of site, insisted on playing at smaller (capacity 46,000), archless Wrigley Field. All Rozelle could do was move up kickoff time to 12:05 CST, allowing about four and one-half hours of daylight before

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sunset. In case of continuing play at 4:30 p.m., Rozelle ruled that the game would be stopped and continued the next day.

The weather in Chicago had been bitterly cold all week. Pete Marcantino's ground crew labored manfully to keep the playing surface in decent shape. The field was covered with hay and tarpulins. In addition, eight gas-powered heating units pumped hot air under the tarps to keep the field soft. At one point, the gas driven units threatened to run dry early one morning. A nearby service-station owner was summoned from his bed to make a 200 gallon delivery and the heat machines kept pumping. In the end, the selfless service-station owner's effort proved futile as kickoff came with 11 degree temperatures. With the tarps rolled back and the heating machines silent, the field quickly froze over, adding treacherous footing to the chilled players' woes.

Gameday dawned bright and sunny but cold--temperature on the field fluctuated between 8 and 11 degrees. The first scoring took place midway through the first period. On a quarterback draw, Billy Wade picked up twelve yards but fumbled when hit by Dick Lynch, Erich Barnes recovering for the Giants at the Bears 41. With an assortment of screen passes and running plays, the Giants moved steadily downfield. Tittle capped the drive with a 14 yard touchdown pass to Frank Gifford at 7:22 of the first quarter. Gifford beat covering man Benny McRae handily, catching the pass on the run in the corner of the Bear end zone.

It was an expensive first score for the Giants. Bear linebacker Larry Morris hit Tittle just as he completed his throwing motion and damaged Tittle's left knee. Though he needed no immediate medical attention, Tittle was hobbled by the hit, losing mobility and agility. But for the moment, New York led 7-0.

The Giants seemed to get another break near the end of the first quarter as Bears' halfback Willie Galimore fumbled at the Chicago 31 when hit by Dick Pesonen. On the next play Tittle went for six, lofting a picture-perfect pass to split end Del Shofner. Shofner had caught passes like this all year long but this one he dropped, maybe because of the cold. Undaunted, Tittle tried a screen play to back Phil King. But Larry Morris stepped in front of King, grabbed the ball, and lumbered 61 yards downfield to the Giant 6, finally being pulled down by pursuing Giants Darrell Dess and Greg Larson. The Bears quickly drove into the Giant end zone, the scoring play a 2 yard quarterback sneak by Billy Wade behind the power blocking of center Mike Pyle and guard Ted Karras. At 14:44 of the first quarter, the score was tied 7-7.

On the following Bob Jencks kickoff, Giant kick returner Charlie Killett fumbled at the NY 13 and a Bear recovered at the NY 6. But a Bear was offside and Chicago had to re-kick, sparing the Giants further damage.

At the beginning of the second quarter, Tittle again moved the Giants smartly downfield, the highlight being a 36 yard pass to TE Aaron Thomas, subbing for the injured Joe Walton. Thomas caught the ball on a crossing pattern, then tiptoed along the sidelines to the Bear 14. A Phil King run got the Giants to the 3 but there the New Yorkers stalled on three Tittle incompletions. Don Chandler trotted in and kicked a 13 yard field goal at 5:11 of the second quarter.

Shortly thereafter, disaster struck for the New Yorkers. On a sideline pass to Gifford (ruled incomplete because caught out of bounds), Larry Morris again hit Tittle in the left knee. As Morris recalled it: "I hit him just as he tossed that pass. His left leg was rigidly set on the ground and I slammed him just at the knee." Tittle later compared the two hits: "The first time it didn't hurt too much, but the second time it really hurt. I felt it pop."

As the Chicago crowd cheered lustily, Tittle was helped off the field by Hugh McElhenny. At half-time, Tittle would require novocain and cortisone shots plus heavy taping and bandaging to play in the second half. Meanwhile, Giant fortunes were in the not very capable hands of rookie backup quarterback Glynn Griffing from Mississippi. Under Griffing's direction, the Giants managed only two yards on seven plays. Coach Sherman's lack of confidence in Griffing was demonstrated late in the second quarter when the Giants punted on third down rather than have Griffing take another snap.

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Tittle came out to play in the third period but this was not Tittle the All-Pro quarterback (221-367-3,145-(60%)-36 TD-14). He could put virtually no weight on his lead left foot. With Tittle throwing off his rear right foot, the results were predictable. William Wallace of the *New York Times* observed that "Several of the Giant Star's passes seemed to hang in flight, lacking their usual directness."

The *coup de grace* occurred late in the third quarter. From the New York 38, Tittle attempted a screen to Joe Morrison. But DE Ed O'Bradovich intercepted Tittle's pass, returning it to the Giant 14. The Giants held the Bears to one yard on two plays. On third-and-nine, Billy Wade threw a four yard look-in pass to 230-pound Mike Ditka who dragged 190-pound DB Dick Pesonen down near the Giant 1. Once again Billy Wade called a sneak and went over from the one at 12:48 of the third quarter, making the score 14-10, Bears.

That's the way the game ended, though the Giants looked like they might pull it out in the last two minutes. With 1:38 left, the Giants had the ball on their own sixteen. Two completions moved the ball to the New York 34. A Joe Morrison 12 yard reception moved the ball to the Giant 46. After an incompletion, Gifford made an apparent catch at the Chicago 40, but was ruled out-of-bounds. Tittle went back to Gifford again, this time successfully to the Bears' 39. With 10 seconds on the clock, Tittle needed a miracle finish. So he went to his miracle weapon-the bomb-and his magician of a receiver, Del Shofner. But Tittle's pass soared way over Shofner's head and into the waiting arms of Bear safety Richie Petitbon in the end zone. Shofner had not caught a pass all day, going 0 for 5 against the tough Bear secondary.

Chicago fans surged onto the field and had to be cleared so the remaining two seconds could be played. Wade took the snap and dove into the dirt. The Bears were the NFL champions. Appropriately, Bear defensive coach George Allen was awarded the game ball, since the Bear defense had proved immovable by the irresistible Giant offense.

1963 NFL CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

December 29, 1963

CHICAGO	7	0	7	0	--	14
NEW YORK	7	3	0	0	--	10

First Quarter

N.Y. Gifford, 14 yard pass from Tittle (Chandler kick)	7:22
CHI. Wade, 2 yard rush (Jencks kick)	14:44

Second Quarter

N.Y. Chandler, 13 yard field goal	5:11
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Third Quarter

CHI. Wade, 1 yard rush (Jencks kick)	12:48
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TEAM STATISTICS

	CHICAGO	N. Y.
First downs--total	14	17
Punts--number	7	4
Punts--average distance	41.0	43.3
Punt return--yards	5	21
Interception returns--number	5	0
Interception return--yards	71	0
Fumbles--number	2	2
Fumbles--lost ball	2	1
Penalties	5	3
Yards penalized	35	25

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

RUSHING

	CHICAGO	ATT	YDS	AVG		NEW YORK	ATT	YDS	AVG
Bull		13	42	3.2	Morrison	18	61	3.4	
Wade		8	34	4.5	King	9	39	4.3	
Galimore		7	12	1.7	McElhenny	7	19	2.7	
Marconi		3	5	1.7	Webster	3	7	2.3	
					Tittle	1	2	2.0	
Totals		31	93	3.0			38	128	3.4

RECEIVING

	CHICAGO	NO	YDS	AVG		NEW YORK	NO	YDS	AVG
Marconi		3	64	21.3	Gifford	3	45	15.0	
Ditka		3	38	12.7	Morrison	3	18	6.0	
J.Morris		2	19	9.5	Thomas	2	46	23.0	
Coia		1	22	22.0	McElhenny	2	20	10.0	
Bull		1	-5	-5.0	Webster	1	18	18.0	
Totals		10	138	13.8			11	147	13.4

PASSING

	CHICAGO	Att	Comp	Pct.	Yds	Int	Att.	Comp	YdsLost	Tackled
Wade		28	10	35.7	138	0	4.9	13.4	9	
NEW YORK										
Tittle		29	11	37.9	147	5	5.1	13.4	7	
Griffing		1	0	0.0	0	0	---	---	0	
		30	11	36.7	147	5	4.9	13.4	7	

Source: David S. Neft and Richard M. Cohen,
The Sports Encyclopedia: Pro Football