

WHO WAS THE BEST BLOCKING BACK?

by Greg Kukish

We are all aware that carrying the football is the primary function of a running back, and I'm sure, that if you would ask any back he'd confirm that notion. But, a back does have other duties such as receiving and blocking.

Ah! blocking! What about blocking? Everyone will tell you that blocking is indeed part of the job, well every back but Jim Brown, but it has to be the least favorite, right? Not necessarily. Some of the best blocking backs were also great ball carriers as well. For instance, in a brief phone interview with Red Grange, he pointed to Bronko Nagurski as the textbook blocking back of the early era of pro ball. "Nagurski could do it all," Red remembered. It's difficult to separate fact from legend when discussing men like Nagurski, but meeting Bronko running out of the backfield with or without the ball was similar to standing in front of a speeding train.

Ernie Nevers, a great back with the Duluth Eskimos and later the Chicago Cardinals, probably explained the philosophy of the time best when he said, "We blocked below the hips. There was no just standing there brush blocking. Show me a good blocker, a man who doesn't flinch, who loves the game for itself and not the money in it, and I'll show you a real football player who won't get hurt."

Pat Harder in the late forties with the Chicago Cardinals and later with Detroit was considered one of the best blocking backs in any era. At that time, in the games' history, passing the football became dominant and backs took on another responsibility: pass blocking. "I thoroughly enjoyed the blocking aspect of the game," Pat once said, "You have to gear yourself mentally as well as physically."

The fifties and sixties was the playing era of a man who many have called "the best blocking back of all." Although, he was selected into the Hall of Fame for his ability to carry the football, a source of no greater experience than Ray Nitsche answered without hesitation, "John Henry Johnson," when asked to name the best blocking back was that he played against. Myron Cope, a veteran sports journalist who has been doing radio color commentary for Steeler games for many years, and who was very close to the Steeler scene during John Henry's Steeler days (60- 65) also echoed Nitsche's answer of John Henry Johnson.

When I asked John Henry if he enjoyed blocking he said, "Oh, I loved to block. It's because it gave me an opportunity to hit the guys who were always hitting me when I carried the ball." When questioned about what made a good blocking back John Henry answered, "Blocking is nothing but 100% desire." End of lesson.

The names of Paul Horning and Jim Taylor were also remembered for their blocking ability, as well as for carrying the football. Their blocking for each other helped each right into the Hall of Fame, As a matter of fact, Horning sometimes received more attention for his blocking than his other exploits on the field. "It tees me off," said Horning one day, "you score 176 points in a season and all you hear is that blocking stuff."

As far as pass blocking is concerned, let's hear what Bobby Layne had to say. "Get me guys like Jim Taylor, John David Crow and John Henry Johnson. They play even without the ball. Half of those good runners will get a quarterback killed if you keep them around long enough."

A running back in the American Football League, who was more regarded for his blocking and pass protection than his ball carrying is Bill Mathis (New York 1960-1969). Another member of "The Other League" who was quite a blocker as well as a good running back was the colorful Cookie Gilchrist. As a long time Denver Bronco fan recalls, "Gilchrist blocked so hard you could hear rods cracking in the stands."

Into the seventies, before the rules changes helped open up the passing game, Jim Kick opened holes in the defense for Larry Csonka, when Larry wasn't opening holes for himself, and Rocky Blier did the same

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 11, No. 3 (1989)

for Franco Harris. And lets not forget Jim Braxton, who added quite a few volts to the Buffalo Bills "Electric Company," while blocking for O.J. Simpson.

Today's blocking backs fit the same basic standards as their predecessors. However, in a one running back attack the blocking back takes the form of a tight-end (H-Back), who approaches the line of scrimmage from an "in motion" position horizontally, instead of straight out of the backfield into the line. The horizontal direction gives the H. Back a better angle against an onrushing defense to create a hole.

A good blocking or complimentary back to a team's feature back, is a good run blocker, able to pick-up a blitzing line backer, has the ability to catch, and, of course, can do the power running inside to gain those tough 2-3 yards. Tom Rathman of the 49'ers and John L. Williams of the Seahawks are two great blockers who also excel at the other duties of a blocking back.