

# The Power and the Glory: Single-Wing Football

by Jim Campbell

**"There is no way to improve on football beyond the unbalanced line single-wing"**

**-- Coach Carl G. Snavely, Bucknell University, 1933.**

Certainly, there are those who would take exception to Coach Snavely's statement of years ago, but one of those would not be Keith Piper, head coach at Denison University in Granville, Ohio, where he still runs the single-wing -- much to the chagrin of the Big Red's opponents.

Piper, who was a fine single wing center at Baldwin-Wallace, during and after World War II, contends that no one really ever caught up with, or passed, the single wing offense -- it's like the double-breasted suit. It just went out of style. Don't look now, but the old "dee-bee" is back. Is the single wing far behind?

Once college football shook itself out in the 1880s and '90s, the basic offensive formation -- as practiced by Amos Alonzo Stagg, Walter Camp, Fielding "Hurry Up" Yost, George Woodruff, John W. Heisman and other pioneers -- was similar to a "full-house" T-formation.

The legalization of the forward pass in 1906 -- football had become so brutal by '05 that President Teddy Roosevelt called leaders of the sport to the White House and told them, essentially, "Clean up your act. Get rid of the massed formations, interlocked interference, kicking (other than the football, we assume), slugging or I'll ban the game" -- gave birth to new tactics. Glenn Scobey "Pop" Warner, then riding the crest of a wave of popularity as coach of the storied Carlisle Indian School, invented the single-wing.

As is the case today, imitation was then the sincerest form of flattery, and before long most football teams in the country -- high school, prep, college, and professional -- were running Warner's single wing.

While not as violent as the flying-wedge, guards-back, and other plays and formations that featured massed interference, the single wing was a powerful offense. It's basic play, the off-tackle slant, is still the "bread 'n' butter" play of any modern running offense.

What the single wing had, and what modern offenses that borrow from it still feature, was a double-team block at the point of attack coupled with a trap block at the same hole. Anytime two men block one defender, there is a good chance for positive yardage.

To achieve this double-team and trap block, the single wing used an unbalanced line. Naturally, the center, who had to make a head-down, long snap to one of the deep backs, was over the ball. If the line were unbalanced right, or "strong right," the center would be flanked by the left tackle on his left and the left guard - sometimes called the "inside" guard to avoid confusion -- on his right. Those two men would be flanked by the left end and right or "outside" guard. The outside guard would have the right tackle to his right. The right tackle would have the right end to his right. This whole process could be reversed simply by putting both guards to the left of center, where they would be joined by the left tackle and left end to make the formation unbalanced left, or "strong-side left." As the strength of today's formations is determined by where the tight end is stationed, the single wing was "strong" to which ever side had the two guards. This alignment allowed the guards to "pull" and lead interference in making the signature double-team blocks.

The backfield consisted of a tailback (the key man in most single wing systems), a fullback, a quarterback or blocking back, and a wingback. The tailback, the left halfback, was vital because he usually handled the ball most of the time. He was usually a "triple threat," which meant he could run, pass, and kick. In the days when teams sometimes punted before fourth down, this was very important. He was called the tailback, because he was the deepest man in the backfield. He lined up directly behind the center or perhaps slightly to the left or right, depending on the particular coach's whim. The fullback was stationed a yard or so closer to the line than the tailback and usually behind the inside guard. He ran smashes into

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the middle, mostly, and blocked. The quarterback primarily blocked. In most systems, he called plays. He was set behind the outside guard -- or maybe as wide as the right tackle. The wingback, or right halfback, was usually posted outside the right end, although some systems had him behind or inside the end. Wingbacks also blocked, went out for passes, or occasionally ran an inside reverse. Sometimes the wingback would be on the left side. This was known as "wing left."

Once the single wing caught on, various refinements were added by coaches, but there were really only a couple of basic systems. They became known as the Tennessee single-wing and the Michigan single wing, perhaps because those two schools and their coaches were so successful over the long haul. The man responsible for the Tennessee juggernauts of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s was General Bob Neyland, a classmate of Dwight D. Eisenhower at West Point. Neyland, always "the General" and never "Coach," used a balanced line -- a guard, tackle, and end to each side of the center. Michigan was tutored by Herbert "Fritz" Crisler, who actually brought his system from Princeton, where he learned it under Bill Roper. Later Bennie Oosterbaan coached the Maize and Blue.

Other coaches famous for the single wing during its heyday include: Bill Alexander, Georgia Tech; Bernie Bierman, Minnesota; "Gloomy Gil" Dobie, Washington and Cornell; Dick Harlow, Western Maryland and Harvard; Howard Jones, Iowa and Southern California; Lawrence "Biff" Jones, Army, LSU, Oklahoma and Nebraska; Tad Jones, Yale; Andy Kerr, Colgate; Lou Little, Columbia; George "Red" Munger, Pennsylvania; Bennie Owen, Oklahoma; Red Sanders, Vanderbilt and UCLA; Andy Smith, California; Carl Snavely, Bucknell, Cornell, and North Carolina; Dr. John Bain "Jock" Sutherland, Lafayette and Pittsburgh; Wallace Wade, Alabama and Duke; Lynn "Pappy" Waldorf, Northwestern and California; Henry Williams, Minnesota; and Bob Zupke, Illinois.

Each of the above coaches -- and unnamed others -- added his own touch, but the basics remained.

The one coach who didn't use the single wing was Knute Rockne. Rock had his own system -- the Notre Dame box. It was similar to the wing. The only real difference was the tailback and fullback were at the same depth in the backfield in the box.

While nearly everyone was jumping on the single wing bandwagon, its inventor, Warner, was jumping off. He moved his fullback up and out to a position opposite the wingback and had the double wing.

Some of the most fabled names in college football were products of the single wing. From Jim Thorpe to Red Grange, Ernie Nevers, Morley Drury, Cotton Warburton, Bronko Nagurski, Sammy Baugh, Marshall Goldberg, George Cafego, Sid Luckman, Nile Kinnick, Tom Harmon, Paul Christman, Charley "Choo-Choo" Justice, and Paul Giel, nearly all were single sing tailbacks.

As World War II drew near, two games -- both the responsibility of the same man -- did more to render the single wing unfashionable than any other. Clark Shaughnessy, who moved to Stanford after the University of Chicago dropped football before the 1940 season, installed a man-in-motion wrinkle in the Chicago Bears' T-formation and all the Bears did was maul the Washington Redskins in the '40 NFL Championship Game, 73-0. Shughnessy took the new T with him to Palo Alto, and all Stanford did was shock the college football world by running and passing Nebraska dizzy in an upset 1941 Rose Bowl victory to cap a perfect season. The T-formation then became "the latest rage."

Still, purists hung on. But by the 1950s, nearly everyone had jilted the single wing to heed the siren call of the T.

In the early 1960s, the only major colleges still banging away with the single wing were Princeton, Tennessee, and UCLA. By '64, only Princeton would remain. The Tigers ran the wing through "the Age of Aquarius" -- 1969. During the wing's final years, tailbacks Hank Lauricella and Johnny Majors were All-American at Tennessee. Fullbacks Homer Smith and Cosmo Iacavazzi were All-American at Princeton. Tailbacks Paul Cameron and Bill Kilmer were All-America at UCLA.

Pete Elliott, a former college head coach -- Nebraska, California, Illinois, and Miami -- and presently executive director of the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, was a single wing quarterback (blocking back) at Michigan, 1945-48. In the Michigan system, the quarterback was more than a blocker only. Says Elliott, "First, we called all our own plays -- unlike today's quarterbacks -- and that was a real perk. Then we could run with the ball on some plays, pass it on others, and go out for passes. It wasn't all just knocking people over. Remember, Early Britton and Forest Evashevski were quite famous as blocking backs for Red Grange and Tom Harmon."

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Elliott continues, "We lined up in the T when we came to the line, then shifted to the single wing. Sometimes we even ran from the T, but not often. Although, what's the use of having it if you don't run from it once in a while. We also had the buck-lateral series and the fullback-spinner. They were very versatile and very Michigan."

The personable Elliott explains, "The buck-lateral was fullback oriented. The direct snap went to him rather than the tailback. He could fake the line buck, lateral to the tailback, or lateral to the quarterback, or lateral to the wingback coming cross the formation -- all with his back to the line. Or he could then turn around and run up the middle."

Says Elliott, "The spinner featured the fullback, too. He would get the ball and spin in a full, 360 degree circle. As he was doing this, the tailback would cross in front of him and either take the ball or leave it for the wingback, who could cross from the other side and either take it or leave it. Sometimes the quarterback would take the ball or just fake -- and, of course, the fullback could hand-off to no one, spin completely and head for the hole himself. We also had many tailback plays, and great tailbacks when I was there -- Bob Chappuis, Wally Teninga, and Chuck Ortman."

Because the Pittsburgh Steelers, the last pro team to do so, were running the single wing in 1952, they drafted the versatile Ortman on the second round when most other pro teams showed little interest in him.

Homer Smith, now a valued assistant at UCLA, tells how Princeton remained fullback oriented even long after Crisler left for Ann Arbor. Under coaches Charlie Caldwell and Dick Colman, the Tigers retained much of what Michigan later ran. With a tailback like Dick Kazmaier -- the last single wing player to win the Heisman, 1951 -- the Tigers utilized his triple threat talents. But when Princeton didn't have a solid sterling tailback, the fullback was key. Says Smith, "The fullback was a trap runner. We ran inside and outside traps. Inside was over guard; outside was over tackle. It must have been effective -- I was ninth in the nation in rushing in 1952."

Frank Lovecchio, a successful physician and ex-blocking back at Princeton, substantiates Smith's assessment, "I usually handed off, in the buck-lateral series, led on power-plays, or slipped out into the flat as a safety-valve on pass plays."

In 1964, when Princeton was the only major college still using the wing, Iacavazzi finished with 909 yards -- eighth in the nation -- in nine games for a 5.28 yards-per-carry. Good enough for All-America honors and a \$100,000 signing bonus from the New York Jets.

Jack Stroud, a great tackle at Tennessee and later a 12-year veteran with the New York Giants, gives a lineman's perspective, "It was all power. We used shoulder blocks -- not those dance steps you see now. No hands, no grabbing -- just line your helmet up with his numbers and mow 'em down. Our guards pulled, our tackles pulled, the blocking back would lead, and the wingback would get into the flow. They talk about 'student body right' and 'student body left,' that's what we had at U.T."

While Piper is still the only college coach to exclusively run the single wing, elements of it are alive today. Evashevski, in the fifties, took it to Iowa and devised the wing-T. Dave Nelson, a tailback/wingback at Michigan in the forties, made the wing-T famous and successful at Delaware. After Nelson's retirement, Harold "Tubby" Raymond, an ex-Wolverine guard, carried on the tradition, making it even more famous -- if possible.

Susquehanna University, in Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania, a team that was in the 1991 NCAA Division III quarterfinals has had great success with the wing-T over the last decade under head coaches Bill Moll, Rocky Rees, and Steve Briggs. All are proponents of the Delaware wing-T.

Moll says, "The system incorporates the best of the single wing - - two men blocking one man at the point-of-attack and another blocker applying a trap block. I always liked those numbers. Our 132 power couldn't be a lot different from what Harmon and Evashevski ran at Michigan. Other teams don't like to see you coming at them with it."

If "What goes around, comes around" applies to football, when the single wing comes around, look for Keith Piper, riding in a 1939 Ford Phaeton convertible, to lead the parade.

