

CONSIDERED THE BEST

By Bob Carroll

Who were the best players in the NFL fifty years ago?

That's a question I hear a lot. Well, not really, but I did ask myself that the other day. And I asked it out loud six times just so I could honestly use this lead.

But seriously, folks, the question is sort of timely with all the celebrations of 50-years-ago stuff that have been clogging up the TV and newspapers. Last year it was D-Day; this year we have V-E Day, V-J Day, the first A-Bomb, and several other World War II events to celebrate. (Yay, A-Bomb!) 1945 was the NFL's first post-war season and the league was stronger than it had been in several years, though not yet at pre-war level. Nevertheless, the '45 season was filled with firsts and lasts.

For example, it was the first and last time a championship was decided on the dumb rule that a pass from the end zone hitting the goal post counted as a safety against the passer's team. With the help of that rule, the Rams' won their first and last title in Cleveland. By 1946, the Rams would take up temporary residence in Los Angeles. Rams quarterback Bob Waterfield played his first pro season in 1945 and it was good enough to get him named MVP. A number of pre-service-time stars like George McAfee and Bill Dudley were mustered out of the service in time to play part of the season. Some other longtime stars such as Don Hutson and Mel Hein played their last games.

So, who were the best players?

When you say "best," you're probably thinking about an absolute scale to measure talent, heart, speed, size, intelligence, intangibles, and whatever. Forget it. No such scale exists! No one knows who the very best were in 1945 or in 1995 for that matter.

I mean, Jerry Rice looks to me like a pretty fair player. Lots of people say he's the best at his position. They think that; they don't know that. Even an NFL cornerback who tries to cover Rice and decides the 49er is the "best he's faced" can't be certain he didn't go against Irving Fryar on an off day. If you did one of those electronic polls (the ones that tell the rest of us what to think), you'd probably get a boatload of opinions that Jerry Rice is the greatest. You could throw in a trunkfull of statistical evidence indicating Rice's greatness, but it will always come back to an opinion.

Okay, enough of that. Let me rephrase the question. Who were considered the best players in 1945?

Hey, I was nine-years-old. Don't ask me!

Fortunately, you don't have to rely on my uneducated guesses. There exists a mass of tabulated opinions re the best of '45. They are called "All-Pro Teams." I've argued before that All-Pro (or All-League) selections are the only "statistics" that some players like offensive linemen can present. I'm coming around to the belief that even such traditional stats as yards rushing, pass completions, and touchdowns mean very little when comparing players from one era with those of another. Too many rules have changed over the years.

But when we can see how a player was viewed in his time -- and that's what All-Pro Teams tell us -- we can begin to see how he ranks in the continuum. For example, compare the aforementioned Mr. Rice with Don Hutson. On the surface, it looks like no contest. Rice has all the stats. Moreover, he's bigger, faster, and certainly more hyped than the old Green Bay star.

However, when we examine how far Hutson was considered to be ahead of his contemporaries when he played, the argument for Rice is not so clear cut. Year after year, Hutson was rated the very best; the second man in the pecking order changed yearly. Rice, as great as he is, is still only one of a number of superior receivers playing today. On the fictitious "absolute scale," Rice may be the greatest receiver ever. But on the very real "relative scale" Hutson outranks him. There's always a new leader on the

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absolute scale -- Hirsch, Berry, Alworth, Rice. A dozen years from now some kid in seventh grade today will be the new "greatest." But Hutson may still be -- relatively -- the best of all time.

Some people sniff at All-Pro Teams as "just someone's opinion," as though that makes them meaningless. Such scoffers conveniently ignore the fact that players get drafted, make the squad, start at their position, and get paid by the team all as the result of "someone's opinion." That "someone" may be a scout, a coach, or a general manager. If his opinions are usually wrong, he'll usually get fired. On the other hand, All-Pro selectors seldom are canned, but we can still assume that most of them give their honest opinions when naming their All-Pros.

If we look at all the significant All-Pro Teams from 1945, we'll be able to see what players were considered tops at their position in that year. It's called the consensus.

For 1945, the Consensus All-Pros:

E Don Hutson, GB; Jim Benton, Cle
T Al Wistert, Phi; Frank Cope, NYG
G Riley Matheson, Cle; Bill Radovich, Det
C Charley Brock, GB
QB Bob Waterfield, Cle
HB Steve Van Buren, Phi; Bob Margarita, ChiB
FB Ted Fritsch, GB

Five significant All-Pro Teams were picked in 1945. The three wire services -- Associated Press, United Press, and International Mews Service -- published sort of unofficial official teams. That is, they were the ones most widely distributed (and read and quoted) even though the NFL didn't put its imprimatur on any of them. Generally speaking, when someone was called an "All-Pro," he probably appeared as a first team selection for one of the wire services.

Two other significant teams were named. The New York News published its annual poll, the collected opinions of 26 sportswriters around NFL land. I am of the opinion that the News teams back then were the equal of and sometimes superior to the wire service polls, but they didn't get the same play nationwide. The magazine Pro Football Illustrated also published a 1945 All-Pro Team but fans didn't get to read it until August 1946. Because they weren't as widely-known, reprinted, or cited the News and PFI teams didn't have the clout -- the unofficial officialness -- of the AP, UP, and INS.

This is an important point because when you try to make sense out of all five teams and choose a consensus, you find yourself weighing a first-team selection on one team against a couple of second-team selections on other teams. It's no problem figuring Al Wistert, Charley Brock, and Steve Van Buren were consensus picks -- all five teams named them to their first squads.

But who is the consensus tackle to pair with Wistert? Is it Emil Uremovich, first team with the UP and News and second team for PFI? Or is it Frank Cope, first on AP, second with with UP, the News, and a second team guard with PFI?

Obviously, the only way to resolve such a close call is to assign points for different teams and different levels. I won't bore you with the different formulas I tried except to say that at one point I was dealing with fractions of points and my little hand calculator kept shorting out.

I finally settled on a "simplest is best" solution. For a first team selection on one of the unofficial-official teams (AP, UP, INS) -- 5 points, second team -- 4 points. The New York News and Pro Football Illustrated were a step lower in influence (though not in the quality of their selections), so their first- teamers got 4 points and their second teamers 3. None of the five published third teams or honorable mentions; the Associated Press didn't have a second team, or at least I've never seen one.

The point totals made it easy to name the consensus team for 1945, but what about comparing how, say, Joe Aguirre did that year with his rank in a different year when there were more or fewer All-Pro Teams? No problem, I told myself. Just figure the percentage of possible points. There were 23 possible points in 1945, Aguirre got 8. His percentage was 34.8. That could be compared with his mark in some other year.

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But when I thought about it a little more, I realized that a spread of 100 possible percentage points would cause low years to artificially pull down a player's career picture. Better to award a player 60 points for being in the NFL (a passing grade) and apply the All-Pro points percentage to a scale of 40 points, then add the two totals together. Aguirre's $34.8 \times .40 = 13.9 + 60 = 73.9$. I liked that a lot better, in part because it looks like a real grade, but mostly because it won't throw his grade for his whole career out of wack.

Using that formula, I rated every player who received first or second team All-Pro honors in 1945:

| | | Possible points | | | | | - 5 5 5 4 4 = 23 | |
|-----|-----------------------|-----------------|----|----|----|----|------------------|-------|
| POS | | AP | UP | IN | NY | PF | PTS | RATE |
| E | DON HUTSON, GB | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 22 | 98.3 |
| | JIM BENTON, Cle | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 21 | 96.5 |
| | Steve Pritko, Cle ... | - | 1 | 1 | - | 2 | 13 | 82.6 |
| | Joe Aguirre, Was | - | - | 1 | 2 | - | 8 | 73.9 |
| | Jack Ferrante, Phi .. | - | 2 | - | 2 | - | 7 | 72.2 |
| | Frank Liebel, NYG ... | - | - | - | - | 2 | 3 | 65.2 |
| T | AL WISTERT, Phi | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 23 | 100.0 |
| | FRANK COPE, NYG | 1 | 2 | - | 2 | 2G | 15 | 86.1 |
| | Emil Uremovich, Det . | - | 1 | - | 1 | 2 | 12 | 80.9 |
| | John Adams, Was | - | - | 2G | - | 1 | 8 | 73.9 |
| | Vic Sears, Phi | - | 2 | 2 | - | - | 8 | 73.9 |
| | Eberle Schultz, Cle . | - | - | 1 | - | - | 5 | 68.7 |
| | George Sergienko, Bos | - | - | 2 | - | - | 4 | 67.0 |
| | Lee Artoe, ChiB | - | - | - | 2 | - | 3 | 65.2 |
| | Chet Bulger, ChiC ... | - | - | - | - | 2 | 3 | 65.2 |
| G | RILEY MATHESON, Cle . | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 22 | 98.3 |
| | BILL RADOVICH, Det .. | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | - | 19 | 93.0 |
| | Augie Lio, Bos | - | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 16 | 87.8 |
| | Stan Batinski, Det .. | - | 2 | - | - | 1 | 8 | 73.9 |
| | Bruno Banducci, Phi . | - | - | - | 2 | - | 3 | 65.2 |
| C | CHARLEY BROCK, GB ... | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 23 | 100.0 |
| | Mike Scarry, Cle | - | 2 | - | - | 2 | 7 | 72.2 |
| | Mel Hein, NYG | - | - | 2 | - | - | 4 | 67.0 |
| | Ki Aldrich, Was | - | - | - | 2 | - | 3 | 65.2 |
| Q | BOB WATERFIELD, Cle . | 1 | 1H | 2 | 1 | 1 | 22 | 98.3 |
| | Sammy Baugh, Was | - | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2H | 17 | 89.6 |
| | Sid Luckman, ChiB ... | - | 2 | - | 2 | 2 | 13 | 82.6 |
| H | STEVE VAN BUREN, Phi. | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 23 | 100.0 |
| | BOB MARGARITA, ChiB . | - | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 15 | 86.1 |
| | Fred Gehrke, Cle | - | 2 | 2 | - | 1 | 12 | 80.8 |
| | Steve Bagarus, Was .. | 1 | - | - | 2 | - | 8 | 73.9 |
| | Jim Gillette, Cle ... | - | - | 1 | - | - | 5 | 68.7 |
| F | TED FRITSCH, GB | - | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 16 | 87.8 |
| | Frank Akins, Was | - | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 16 | 87.8 |
| | Bob Westfall, Det ... | 1 | - | - | - | 2 | 8 | 73.9 |