

PASS THAT DRUMSTICK! GO, LIONS!

By Bob Carroll

When the Lions' Barry Sanders ran for 167 yards on Thanksgiving Day to move past Eric Dickerson and into second place in the NFL's all-time rushing list, he and his mates set a Chicago Bears' record -- the most points ever given up in a game by the Bruins. The come-from-behind, 55-20, Detroit victory could be looked upon as payback for the heartbreak of 1934. Or maybe the shock of 1980.

Detroit's annual Thanksgiving Day bash goes way back -- all the way to 1934, the first year the transplanted Portsmouth Spartans played as the Lions in the Motor City. After a five-year run, the club took Turkey Day off until World War II was over. It's been going strong ever since.

Getting Started

Pro football teams had flopped in Detroit in 1920, 1921, 1925-26, and 1928. As far as Detroiters were concerned, professional sports meant the Detroit Tigers baseball team. Even though the Tigers were not a very good team in the '20s, they were still a bigger hit (to use a baseball reference) than any of the pro football wannabees. Even the great Benny Friedman, a University of Michigan alumnus and arguably the most exciting pro player of his day, couldn't make a go of it in Detroit.

The Lions, coming to town in 1934, needed something big to supplant the American League champion Tigers on the sports page. A Thanksgiving Day game, with the baseball season long gone, just might make the Lions top dog over the Tigers (to use a menagerie reference) for a week.

George A. "Dick" Richards, the man who bought the Spartans and brought them to Detroit, was a radio executive. Football on the radio was still in its infancy in 1934, but he saw an opportunity to boost interest in his team and fill some air time for all those turkey-stuffed football fans out in Radioland. With NBC Radio, he put together a 94-station network to carry the Lions' hosting of the Chicago Bears in what shaped up to be the biggest game of the NFL season. As befitted such a game, the announcers were Graham McNamee and Don Wilson, the Madden and Summerall of their day.

Richards had a ratings winner. Pro football lagged well behind the college game back then, but this game was something special.

The undefeated Bears boasted breakaway halfback Beattie Feathers, enjoying the NFL's first thousand-yard rushing season, and break-'em-into-pieces fullback Bronko Nagurski. In the line, they had such stalwarts as Link Lyman, George Musso, Joe Kopcha, and Zuck Carlson.

Against almost any other team, this might have looked like a blowout. But the once-beaten Lions were not just any other team. The backfield, led by all-pro tailback Dutch Clark, was deep and talented, with Ace Gutowsky, Glenn Presnell, Father Lumpkin, Ernie Caddel, and Frank Christensen vying for time on the field. The line, with Ox Emerson, George Christensen, Jack Johnson, and Harry Ebding was a match for the Bears. In fact, the Lions had started off their season pitching shutouts against their first seven opponents. Only a tight 3-0 loss to the Packers the previous Sunday kept Detroit from matching Chicago's undefeated record. That would put the Cats in position to move past the Bears in the standings with a win in their second meeting, scheduled for Chicago the following Sunday.

All 26,000 tickets to Detroit University Stadium were gobbled up (to use a turkey reference) two weeks before kickoff. The game was for first place in the Western Division, and with most of the league's power camped in that division, many observers figured the NFL championship would eventually fall to the winner.

Then fortune smiled on the Lions. The Bears came into the fray crippled. It turned out, Beattie Feathers and Joe Kopcha were both sidelined for the rest of the season with injuries.

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Brimming with confidence, the Lions dominated the first half. Gutowsky plunged for a pair of touchdowns, Clark added an extra point, and Presnell kicked a field goal. At the intermission, Detroit led 16-7. A tie for first place was only 30 minutes away.

In the third quarter, Chicago began a comeback. The Lions' potent offense was snuffed, and Automatic Jack Manders connected on a pair of field goals to bring the score to 16-13. More than halfway through the final quarter, the Lions made a crucial mistake. An errant Detroit pass was intercepted by guard Joe Zeller and returned to the Lions' four-yard-line. Nagurski, the Irresistible Force, was effectively resisted on two dives into the line. On third down, he faked a plunge, stopped short and flipped a pass to end Bill Hewitt for the touchdown. It was the same play that had brought the Bears victory over the then-Spartans two years earlier in the famous indoor playoff game for the 1932 championship. In that affair, the receiver had been Red Grange.

The Bears led 19-16, but there were still six minutes on the clock. At last the Lions roused themselves from their second half stupor and launched a drive. With the fans screaming on every play, they moved inexorably down the field. As they approached the goal line, Chicago pulled itself together for one last stand. There was less than a minute left when a last-ditch Detroit pass fell harmlessly, leaving the Lions frustrated at the Chicago 16.

Two days later, the Bears topped the despondent Lions again in Chicago to complete an undefeated regular season.

The next year, the Lions took a measure of revenge with a Thanksgiving Day whipping of the Bears, but Chicago had slipped badly by then and Detroit was on its way to a title. The game just didn't have the same impact as the year before.

A Long History

Holding a game on Thanksgiving Day is hardly unique to pro football. A Turkey Day Game is still a staple with high schools and a few colleges. At one time, it often marked the climax of the season for teams at all levels. Arguably, the most significant NFL Thanksgiving Day game was played in Chicago in 1925 when Red Grange turned pro and brought on the first football sellout at Wrigley Field. Four years later, Ernie Nevers had his famous six-touchdown game on Thanksgiving.

The importance of Detroit's annual affair is that it's been around for so long. With this season, it has been played every year for the past 53. And, with bigtime college games becoming more rare on the day, Detroit's game has become a post- or pre-meal television feast for football fans. The Dallas Cowboys also have joined the annual festivities. Although the Texas games have produced some exciting and memorable affairs, they lack Detroit's historical pedigree.

The 1980 Lions-Bears game set something of a record for shock. The game finished its normal span, tied 17-17 when the Bears scored on the "final" play. Chicago received the OT kickoff. Twenty-one seconds later, the game was over. The Bears' Dave Williams brought the kick back 95 yards to a touchdown.

After the 1938 game, Detroit's Thanksgiving Day series was abandoned until after the war. When it was re-started in 1945, it opened with a significant game -- but not for the Lions. The Cleveland Rams clinched the Western Division title with a 28-21 win. Jim Benton caught passes from Bob Waterfield for 303 yards, a record that stood for decades.

In the years immediately after the war, the Lions fell on hard times. They lost five straight Thanksgiving Day games and a majority of their other tilts.

But a 49-14 crushing of the New York Yanks in 1950 marked the beginning of the Lions' most glorious era. They won seven of the first eight games played in the '50s, a period when they took the NFL championship three times.

Some of the longest plays in Lions history took place in those games. In 1950, Bob Hoernschemeyer broke loose for 96 yards; the next year, he went 85. In 1953, Bobby Layne hit Cloce Box on a 97-yard pass play.

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Starting in 1951, Green Bay settled in for a long run as the Lions' annual Thanksgiving Day opponent. Just when Detroit was hitting the heights, the Packers were struggling through the worst period in their history. Still, several of the games were close.

After the 1963 game, Packer coach Vince Lombardi decided the short week of practice necessitated by playing a Thursday game was putting his team at a disadvantage in its quest for the championship. Since then, the Lions have played a different opponent each Thanksgiving.

The Big Game

If there's one game that stands out above the rest for longtime Detroit fans, it's the Lions' 1962 upset of the Green Bay Packers. The Pack came into the game undefeated amid talk of a possible "perfect" season. Detroit was strong, having only lost twice, but one of those was to Green Bay, 9-7. That loss almost got Lions quarterback Milt Plum ridden out of town on a rail. His late interception in the flat led to Green Bay's winning field goal. Fans weren't interested in the fact that Plum's receiver fell down just as the pass left his hands. The criticized him for his bonehead call. In truth, the decision to throw the pass was made on the sideline, but Plum got the blame.

The Packers were favored, but the Lions were determined to get even. All 300 pounds of tackle Roger Brown spent the day careening after Green Bay quarterback Bart Starr. When Starr escaped Brown, he was beset by Alex Karras, Sam Williams, and Darris McCord. In what was possibly the most unhappy time he ever spent on a football field, Starr was sacked eleven times for 110 yards! Jim Taylor, the NFL's leading rusher, managed a paltry 47 yards.

Meanwhile, Plum got sweet revenge with a couple of touchdown passes. When the smoke cleared, the dust settled, the fog lifted, and the obese lady warbled, the Lions had a gorgeous 26-14 win.

To Lions fans, that game was even more satisfying than their annual turkey and trimmings.

Year	Det	Opponent	OP	Att.	R
1934	16	Chicago Bears	19	25,000	L
1935	14	Chicago Bears	2	18,000	W
1936	13	Chicago Bears	7	22,000	W
1937	0	Chicago Bears	13	24,173	L
1938	14	Chicago Bears	7	26,278	W
1939-44	No	Thanksgiving Day Game in Detroit			
1945	21	Cleveland Rams	28	40,017	L
1946	10	Boston Yanks	34	13,010	L
1947	14	Chicago Bears	34	27,214	L
1948	14	Chicago Cards	28	22,957	L
1949	7	Chicago Bears	28	24,385	L
1950	49	New York Yanks	14	28,000	W
1951	52	GB Packers	35	32,247	W
1952	48	GB Packers	24	39,101	W
1953	34	GB Packers	15	52,607	W
1954	28	GB Packers	24	55,532	W
1955	24	GB Packers	10	51,685	W
1956	20	GB Packers	24	54,087	L
1957	18	GB Packers	6	54,301	W
1958	24	GB Packers	14	50,971	W
1959	17	GB Packers	24	49,221	L
1960	23	GB Packers	10	51,123	W
1961	9	GB Packers	17	55,662	L
1962	28	GB Packers	14	57,578	W
1963	13	GB Packers	13	54,016	T
1964	24	Chicago Bears	27	52,231	L
1965	24	Baltimore Colts	24	55,036	T
1966	14	San Francisco	41	53,189	L
1967	7	LA Rams	31	54,389	L
1968	0	Philadelphia	12	47,909	L
1969	0	Minnesota Vikings	27	57,906	L
1970	28	Oakland Raiders	14	56,597	W

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1971	32	Kansas City	21	54,418	W
1972	37	New York Jets	20	54,418	W
1973	0	Washington	20	46,807	L
1974	27	Denver Broncos	31	51,157	L
Year	Det	Opponent	OP	Att.	R
1975	0	LA Rams	20	69,552	L
1976	27	Buffalo Bills	14	66,569	W
1977	14	Chicago Bears	31	71,373	L
1978	17	Denver Broncos	14	71,785	W
1979	24	Houston Oilers	30	63,897	L
1980	17	Chicago Bears	23	75,397	L OT
1981	27	Kansas City	10	76,735	W
1982	6	New York Giants	13	64,348	L
1983	45	Pittsburgh	3	77,724	W
1984	31	GB Packers	28	63,698	W
1985	31	New York Jets	20	65,531	W
1986	40	GB Packers	44	61,199	L
1987	20	Kansas City	27	43,820	L
1988	0	Minnesota	23	46,379	L
1989	13	Cleveland Browns	10	65,624	W
1990	40	Denver Broncoes	27	73,896	W
1991	16	Chicago Bears	6	78,879	W
1992	21	Houston Oilers	24	73,711	L
1993	6	Chicago Bears	10	76,699	L
1994	35	Buffalo Bills	21	75,672	W
1995	44	Minnesota	38	74,559	W
1996	24	Kansas City	28	75,079	L
1997	55	Chicago Bears	20	77,904	W
		(Detroit 28-28-2)			