RULES OF THE NAME,

or HOW THE EMMITT RULE BECAME THE EMMITT RULE

by Jim Campbell

Certain players had such a profound effect on the way NFL games are played that many of the rules are known by their names.

Many of the rules of football “were always just there.” Some evolved as the game evolved from a shoving match between sides of un-numbered, vigorous youths. But some rules were put into place because of the actions of a single player. Down through the years some of these rules have become known by the name of the player or players whose actions brought the rules into effect. But not all rules have a name associated with them -- some of the rules just made sense to enact. Perhaps some unknown ruffian did barrel across the line of scrimmage before the ball was snapped in an ancient game and level and cause an unsuspecting halfback to wonder if anyone else saw that runaway locomotive. But in reality, the 12-inch neutral zone probably just seemed like an idea whose time had come -- just the right thing to do.

What follows is an explanation of sorts of rules changes that can specifically or somewhat specifically be identified with a particular player or players.

THE BRONKO NAGURSKI RULE - The rules on forward passing ("they” always specified *forward* passing -- I guess because it had been legal less than 30 years) in 1932 stated that the forward passer had to be at least five yards behind the line of scrimmage before throwing. In the fabled 1932 indoor NFL championship game between the Chicago Bears and the Portsmouth (Ohio) Spartans, the Bears' Bronko Nagurski -- the leading power back of his day -- had been repulsed twice on straight ahead thrusts near the goal line and took what was thought to be a third successive whack at the middle of the line. Then, according to where your allegiance lie, he either did or did not backpedal to be the required five yards behind the line and fire a pass to fellow Pro Football Hall of Famer Red Grange for a touchdown. Potsy Clark, Spartans coach, protested vociferously -- but to no avail. The Grange TD reception stood. The PAT and a subsequent safety upped the final score to 9-0, Bears. As part of a series of rules changes to open up the offense in 1933, forward passing was made legal from anywhere behind the line of scrimmage.

THE BILL HEWITT RULE - Hewitt, a smallish (5-11, 191) but quick and highly-effective two-way end, played for the Bears (1932-36) and Philadelphia Eagles (1937-39, and 1943) and earned his entry into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. His trademark was, like Dennis Rodman today, his hair. No, Hewitt didn't sport a rainbow do. He played without a helmet, hair always visible -- mixing it up in the trench warfare that was the NFL of his day. He retired after the 1939 season, but came back in 1943 when World War II cut into the NFL's supply of able-bodied football players. But before the Off-Sides Kid (a nickname he earned from his quickness across the line of scrimmage) could suit up with the Philadelphia-Pittsburgh “Steagles,” NFL Rule No. 5, Section No. 3 stated that all players had to wear protective headgear.” Few doubted the origin of the rule. Because the rule was ostensibly aimed at Hewitt, he is sometimes erroneously referred to as "the last man to play without a helmet in the NFL.” There must have been a macho, guy-thing among the Bears of Hewitt's day. While most “Monsters of the Midway" wore helmets, such as the flimsy leather things were at the time, some Bears felt that helmets were optional. Dick Plasman, a rugged end, was one. He played after Hewitt’s retirement in 1939 until he (Plasman) was called up after the 1941 season to serve in World War II. Thus during the 1941 season, Plasman really became the last to play in the NFL sans headgear.

THE BAUGH/MARSHALL RULE - Under NFL rules in effect in 1945, an attempt from a passer's end zone that struck the goal post resulted in a safety for the defensive team. It was probably the last remaining of the many rules that discouraged passing as the game was evolving from the pioneer days. In the sub-zero 1945 championship game between the Cleveland Rams and the Washington Redskins, Sammy Baugh, the best passer of the day -- and some will tell you any other day, attempted a first-down pass from behind his goal line. It was taken by one of the day's many wind gusts off of Lake Erie and smacked into a goal post. A safety resulted in the game's first score: Rams 2-Redskins 0. It wouldn't be the last score, but in the end it would prove to provide the margin of victory -- Rams 15-Redskins 14. So incensed was the ‘Skins' volatile owner George Preston Marshall that when the

1946 Rule Book was published the rules then stated that a similar play would have been a touchback, which it is to this day -- no safety, no points.

THE BUCKO/BASSETT RULE - Maurice Bassett was a robust fullback (6-1, 230) who joined the Cleveland Browns in 1954 as “the next Marion Motley.” Bucko Kilroy was an obstreperous veteran middle-guard in a rugged Eagles defense. Bassett was in the process of pounding opposing lines for 4+ yards everytime he took a whack at them. As a rookie out of Langston College he gained a respectable 588 yards.

In those days a runner was not down until he was down and forward progress had been stopped -- then the whistle blew the ball dead and the play over. In many cases several defenders were draped over the prone ballcarrier and another tackler would have both knees on the runner's shoulder pads to prevent further inching forward. It was not uncommon for a runner who was simply knocked off his feet to get up again. In a particular Browns-Eagles game, Bassett attempted this several times -- getting up again before the play would be whistled dead. Each time Kilroy was there. The not-so-gentle 250-pound Kilroy would plow into the rising Bassett. Over the course of the game Big Mo took a fierce pounding. The rules for 1955 were altered to read that "anytime a runner touches the ground, while in the grasp of an opponent, with anything other than a hand or foot, he is down."

THE LOU GROZA RULE - The Browns’ Hall of Fame tackle-kicker (he just may have qualified for Canton solely as an offensive tackle without kicking a single point) had the most publicized toe in football. Much was made of the length of tape, and later a special tee with a several-foot tail attached that guided Lou the Toe on the straight and narrow to the ball's sweet spot in attempting a field goal or PAT. After a decade, in 1956, the rule permitted “no artificial medium to assist in the execution of a kick." In laymen's terms, “Lose the tape, Lou!”

THE FRAN TARKENTON RULE - In the "rag days" of pro football there was a referee and an umpire wearing striped shirts. Eventually, other officials were added until the crew consisted of five whistle-blowers with the addition of a back judge in 1947. This was the norm through the Fifties and into the Sixties.

Scramblin' Fran Tarkenton debuted with the Minnesota Vikings in 1961. Not only did his waterbug ramblings play havoc with defensive linemen, but the five officials had their hands full trying to determine if Fran was really behind the line of scrimmage when he finally flung the pigskin downfield. In 1965 a line judge was added as the sixth (or Tarkenton's) official. Stationed on the line of scrimmage opposite the head linesman, the sixth official and the head linesman stayed right on the line to make sure Sir Francis -- or other mobile quarterbacks -- didn't cross over the line before throwing the ball. This helped the zebras. Only Fran's retirement after the 1978 season helped the panting linemen. It was also about this time that a seventh official (the side judge) was added to NFL crews.

THE DON CHANDLER RULE - Until 1965 only one official was stationed under the goal posts to rule on whether or not a field goal or extra point was good. The 1965 NFL Western Conference Playoff changed that. You remember the game – halfback Tom Matte used a wrist band while playing QB for the Baltimore Colts. The Green Bay Packers had the ball deep in Colts territory, trailing 10-7, with 1:58 to play. Don Chandler, who was also the Packers' punter, attempted a field goal from the 22-yard line. It didn't exactly split the uprights. In fact, a cityful of Colts fans will still tell you that Chandler's kick was outside of the upnghts. Even Chandler's body language and reaction seemed to indicate he had missed it. But the only man whose opinion counted -- the guy in the black & white stripes standing underneath and in the middle of the goal posts -- ruled the kick good. Tie game! Sudden death overtime coming up.

Stay tuned. With 13:39 gone in the fifth quarter, Chandler pumped a 25-yarder through the pipes -- there was little doubt about this one -- to win 13-10 and put the Pack back in the NFL title game. Since the AFL championship game was the nightcap of a TV doubleheader, some cynics suggested that the overtime was NFL-scripted to cut into the beginning of the AFL title game on another network. Beginning in 1966, both back judge and field judge – each stationed under an upright, thus eliminating a single man in the middle -- decide on whether a kick is good or no good. To further take the doubt out of close kicks, the uprights were extended to at least 30 feet above the crossbar.

THE JIM TRIMBLE RULE - Some may suggest this is really the Mike Ditka Rule, since a film clip of Iron Mike being leveled by an upright is frequent fare on TV. But Ditka wasn't the only player to be rudely introduced to a goal post. Many suffered a similar fate. In 1967 the NFL adopted a “slingshot” goal post, with one middle upright for the first ten feet of the goal posts -- up to the crossbar. Jim Trimble, a former NFL coach, still holds the patent on the single-prong device.

THE BEN HAWKINS RULE - Ben Hawkins was a hotshot wide receiver with the Eagles, 1966-1973 and the Browns, 1974. The Newark, NJ, native came to the League via Arizona State, and was a bit of a fashion plate. After

a League-leading 1,265 yards on 59 catches in 1967, the Hawk wanted to make a fashion statement of sorts on the field as well. He apparently liked the look and feel of a loose chinstrap, letting the unbuckled piece of equipment dangle in the breeze as he ran his fly patterns.

As cool as it supposedly was, the NFL took a dim view of the sartorial splendor and shortly instituted a rule that stated a chinstrap must be buckled at both ends -- not just one. For a time, Hall of Famer Don Maynard did Hawkins one better -- the wiry Texan played *without* a chinstrap. He simply wore his Riddell so snuggly that it stayed on minus a chinstrap -- well, it did most of the time.

THE BUBBA SMITH RULE - Bubba Smith, Michigan State's All-Galactic defensive end, played at a level -- early in his Baltimore Colts career -- that warranted his being the first overall choice in the first-ever AFL-NFL combined draft in 1967. Simply put, Bubba was a force. Then came the 1972 preseason, a game vs. the Pittsburgh Steelers in Tampa. It was in the meaningless game's final quarter. Smith had reentered the game after playing well earlier. He rushed Terry Bradshaw, forcing the Steelers' QB to throw hurriedly. The ball was intercepted by Colts d-back Rick Volk. Bubba peeled back to block. As he got near the sideline, Smith got tangled up in the first down chains and suffered a season's wipe-out knee injury. When he came back in 1973, he wasn't the same old Bubba, and unfortunately he never would be.

At the time the chains had several-inch points that anchored them into the ground – they weren't easily dislodged. After the severity of Bubba's injury was realized, the NFL issued an equipment change. The first down stakes would no longer have a sharp metal point, but a rubber cap at the bottom of the pole -- much like your ordinary, household device to give a kitchen stool or chair a little stability. It was too late for Bubba, but it has probably saved numerous players from a fate similar to his. Having a rule identified with him is the very least to which the one time All-Pro is entitled.

THE BEN DAVIDSON RULE - It took until 1976 to enact the rule that prohibited a defender from "running or diving into, or throwing his body against or on a ballcarrier who falls or slips to the ground untouched and makes no attempt to advance, before or after the ball is dead," but undoubtedly it had its roots in a key Kansas City Chiefs-Oakland Raiders game somewhat earlier. At a critical juncture, Len Dawson scrambled out of the pocket and downfield. As he came to rest, with no help from an opponent, Dawson awaited the whistle that would kill the play.

Instead, Gentle Ben Davidson nearly killed Dawson. As Lenny lay on the ground, not attempting to rise, Ben morphed himself into a 285-pound guided missle and locked on -- silver helmet first -- to Dawson's prone figure. Within the letter, if not the spirit, of the rule Davidson was within his rights -- but that didn't prevent assorted Chiefs from coming to the aid of their fallen comrade. After much chaos, and a little "woofin',” order was restored and the above rule was soon added to the NFL rule book.

THE TOM DEMPSEY RULE - Tom Dempsey was an inspirational NFL player. Despite a withered right arm and a right foot that was more of a stump than anything, the tenacious kicker played 11 seasons and set a still-standing NFL record with a 63-yard field goal. His kicking shoe (on display in Canton, OH) resembled the proverbial blunt instrument. It had an unyielding, hard plate on the front that was bigger than the kicking surface of any other kicker's shoe. Apparently, there were those in the NFL who simply didn't want to get beaten -- period. It mattered not that a courageous athlete overcame a considerable birth defect to play what many think is the most grueling of sports. The powers-that-were passed a rule in 1977 that said, “a shoe on an artificial limb must have a kicking surface that conforms to that of a normal kicking shoe.” Dempsey's limb was not artificial, it just wasn't like anyone else's kicking in the NFL -- but the rule applied.

THE DEACON JONES RULE - Deacon Jones, Ram Hall of Fame defensive end, is so identified with the headslap that he titled his autobiography what else?, “Headslap.” It was a tactic that was nearly as old as the pro game, but perhaps no one employed it better or with more notoriety than the speed-rushing Jones. NFL rules-makers didn't enact regulations barring the maneuver during Jones' career, which ended in 1973, but when they got around to it in 1977 nearly everyone felt the rule was instituted to make Jones keep his hands to himself. It wasn't, it was to prohibit the Deacon's disciples from continuing the head-jolting, brain-rattling, mind-boggling move.

THE GREG PRUITT RULE - Greg Pruitt wasn't the only NFL running back or wide receiver to wear a tear-away jersey in the '70s, many did. But it seemed Pruitt used the “T-shirts with numbers” to better advantage than the others. Browns equipment manager Chuck Cusick used to order the scatback's No. 34 shirts by the dozen. The ex-Sooner gained more than 1,000 yards each season from 1975-77 and racked up 960 yards in 1978 -- all this while scaring the bejabbers out of kick-cover teams as a kickoff and punt returner.

Well, by 1979 enough would-be tacklers, who usually ended up with a fistful of cotton instead of Pruitt, made enough of a stink that that season's rules did away with the type of jersey that was first pioneered by Tom Harmon of Michigan in the 1938-1940 era. A Pro Football Hall of Fame Photo Contest entry from the time depicts Pruitt about a yard-and-a-half away from a hopeful tackler, connected by only a length of stretched-out, stressed-out jersey.

THE MEL RENFRO RULE - For years a second offensive player could not legally catch a deflected pass unless a defensive player had touched it in the meantime. In Super Bowl V, a Johnny Unitas pass intended for Eddie Hinton was tipped, but not controlled by the wideout. Mel Renfro, Cowboys defensive back, made a stab at the ball and it was ruled that he tipped it ever so slightly (he said he didn't) into the welcoming arms of Colts HOF tight end John Mackey, who rumbled into the end zone on what was judged to be a 75-yard touchdown. No wonder a classic photograph of a lonely and dejected Renfro on the Cowboys' bench after the gut-wrenching 16-13 loss gained wide circulation. Despite the Immaculate Reception happening in Pittsburgh -- Frenchy Fuqua, Jack Tatum, Franco Harris & Co. -- a year later in a dramatic playoff game, it took the rules mavens until 1978 to allow a “double touch” by the offense.

THE LESTER HAYES RULE - This particular piece of NFL legislation could just as easily have been called the Fred Biletnikoff Rule, since the Raiders’ Hall of Fame wide receiver was a walking, living, breathing commercial for “stickum,” but it was enacted after Ol' Sticky Fingers was retired and Hayes was still playing. Hayes, a cornerback, who like Biletnikoff, slathered himself with the sticky stuff – hands, arms, ankles (where he kept his stash) -- picked off a League-leading 13 passes in 1980. Perhaps it was felt that too many of them simply stuck to his hands. At any rate, no stickum was allowed from 1981 on. Lester's interception total dropped to 3 in his first no-stickum year. Hmmmmm...

THE KEN STABLER RULE - A large segment of pro football fandom liked to think that the Raiders played slightly, or sometimes more, outside of the rules of the game. The black-clad Raiders did little themselves to dispell the thinking. In a Week 2 game in 1977 at San Diego, the Silver & Black Attack was in dire straits in the game's final seconds -- though in the red zone, behind 20-14. Kenny Stabler was back to pass one last time. His receivers were covered, so the inventive Snake did the only thing a true Raider would do. He bent, if not broke, the rules. He fumbled the ball -- forward. Running back Pete Banaszak was nearby, but couldn't or wouldn't pick it up – instead he booted it toward the end zone. Then tight end Dave Casper got into the act. He soccer-dribbled the ball into the end zone as time expired and fell on it. Touchdown! Errol Mann's PAT gave the Raiders a 21-20 victory, despite the Chargers protestations.

Ex post facto or after the fact, that sly, good ol’ boy Stabler confessed that he, indeed, fumbled forward on purpose. That was enough for the rules committee. No more “Immaculate Deceptions," or “Holy Rollers.” On fourth down or any down in the final two-minutes of play, if a player fumbles, “only the fumbling player can recover and/or advance the ball,” was how the rule read for the 1979 season.

THE MEL GRAY RULE - It was one of those typical offensive-minded games between the St. Louis Cardinals and the Dallas Cowboys in the mid-70s when both teams had formidable attack units. But the score of the Monday Night Football game was relatively low (17-10) despite a considerable amount of yardage being generated. Late in the game the Cardinals tied the Cowboys when Jim Hart connected on a 49-yard pass to speedy Mel Gray (not to be confused with a latter-day kick returner of the same name). Gray, out of Missouri, leaped high into the air to snag Hart's throw. As he was coming down he was waffled by a Dallas defender and the ball came loose, although the diminutive Gray held it for a considerable length of time. He actually had the ball as he descended to touch one foot down. It was the other foot on which the Cowboys focused their attention. Replay-after-replay showed a spectacular catch by Gray, but his second foot did not touch down before the ball was knocked loose.

Too late! The officials ruled a valid catch and a touchdown. Even Howard Cosell couldn't change the ruling. Jim Bakken's subsequent PAT knotted the game, and a Hart to Jackie Smith pass moments later won it as the Cards outscored the Cowboys 21-3 in the game's second half. It was not too long after this incident that the rules committee made it mandatory that both feet needed to be down in the end zone for a completion and score.

THE MARK GASTINEAU RULE - The Jets' one-dimensional speed-rushing defensive end irritated offensive linemen beginning with his rookie year, 1979, by doing an attention-seeking dance after sacking a quarterback. Giving up a sack is humiliating enough without the added choreography. Gastineau wasn't the only offender -- just the most offensive.

So in 1984, the NFL (aka No Fun League) prohibited – violators subject to a 15-yard penalty -- "prolonged, excessive, or premeditated celebration." The sack-dance, like your grandparent's Charleston, became a thing of the past.

THE EMMITT RULE - Emmitt Smith is one player who when only his first name is mentioned everyone knows exactly who you mean. With the Nineties and vast exposure via TV, many players when scoring are faced with a dilemma: Do I spike the ball first, or rip off my helmet so the folks back home can see me? Why don't I have a third arm so I can do both at the same time? No one refined this bit of hot-dogging better than the Cowboys' workhorse running back. To some it seemed Emmitt broke the plane, spiked the ball, and unbuckled his helmet all in one motion. By 1996, the NFL had seen all it needed to see of this. Starting in 1997, it was a 15-yard penalty for a player to be hatless anywhere, anytime, between the white lines. To his credit, Emmitt reacted rather well on the occasions he crossed the goal line last year.

The above doesn't pretend to include the rationale for all rules changes, nor mention all of the players who brought about changes in the way the game is officiated, but it's a start.

And, oh yeah, did you notice how many of the above incidents involved members of the Pro Football Hall of Fame?