

The Lost Skill of Drop Kicking

By Rick Gonsalves

When the NFL was in its infancy, drop kicking was the way players scored extra points and field goals. This skill too, was carried over from rugby. From 1920 to 1933, the football was shaped like a watermelon. Because of its blunt tip, the ball would provide the kicker with a dependable bounce, once it hit the ground. But in 1934, the ball became slimmer and more pointed for the passing game. Since it would not now give a dependable bounce when dropped, this form of kicking disappeared.

Several players, however, became very proficient drop kickers. Jim Thorpe could hit on kicks up to 50 yards. Wilbur "Fats" Henry once boomed two 45-yard field goals for Canton against Toledo on December 10, 1922, which set an NFL record for the longest from a drop kick. At one point in his 8-year career, he converted 49 straight extra points, the most ever in the NFL by drop kicking.

John "Paddy" Driscoll of the Chicago Cardinals kicked a 52-yard field goal against Milwaukee on September 28, 1924. For years, it was believed he'd topped Henry's record for the longest field goal by a drop kick.

However, newspaper accounts of the game clearly indicate he placekicked his boomer.

John may have set an NFL record by drop kicking four field goals from 18, 23, 35 and 50 yards in one game against Columbus on October 11, 1925. Whether all four, including the 50-yarder were all drop kicks is in dispute. His 11 field goals that year set another league mark for the most in a season. Elbert Bloodgood of the Kansas City Cowboys tied Driscoll's record for most field goals in one game by drop kicking, hitting from 35, 32, 20 and 25 yards against Duluth on December 12, 1926.

And Earl "Dutch" Clark was the last player to drop kick a field goal in the NFL in 1937. He connected on a 9-yarder for Detroit against the Chicago Cardinals on September 19, 1937.

Earl kicked for the Portsmouth Spartans from 1931 to 1932 and for the Detroit Lions from 1934 to 1938. He led the NFL in field goals with three in 1932 and in scoring with 55 points. Clark topped the league again in scoring with 55 points in 1935 and 73 points in 1936.

About the skill of drop kicking, the late "Dutch" Clark said, "I stood 8 ½ yards behind the line of scrimmage with my feet spread 12 inches apart. I preferred to receive the snap from center directly at my knees.

DUTCH CLARK

"Since I was a right-footed kicker, I took my first step with my right foot. I held the ball straight up and down with a hand on either side of the nose. As I was taking the second step with my left foot, I dropped the ball as close to the ground as possible. Just as the nose of the ball touched the ground, I kicked it with my right foot.

"The longer the kick, the more upright my stance was. I also put more of a tilt on the ball and swung my leg into it in order to get more power. Accuracy, though, was lost with distance.

"On a short field goal or extra point, I used more of a crouch for accuracy and consequently less power, snapping my leg into the kick. Height depended on the angle of the ball when my foot hit it and follow through came naturally. In drop kicking, keeping low and meeting the ball as it touched the ground required a great deal of concentration."

Even after the shape of the ball changed, the drop kick did not disappear completely. Dick Tuckey of the Cleveland Rams did drop kick 2 PATs against the Chicago Bears on October 23, 1938. On November 13 during that same season, Brooklyn's Ralph Kercheval drop kicked an extra point against the Philadelphia Eagles. Ray "Scooter" McLean of the Chicago Bears drop kicked an extra point against the New York Giants in the fourth quarter of the NFL Championship game on December 21, 1941.

Joe Vetrano, however, of the San Francisco 49ers, scored the last points in pro football from a drop kick. Playing the Cleveland Rams in an AAFC game on November 28, 1948, Vetrano lined up for a PAT

attempt. His holder mishandled the snap from center but the quick thinking Vetrano retrieved the ball and managed to drop kick it through the uprights to save the extra point.