

BULLET BILL DUDLEY

and the Steelers of 1942 and 1946

By T.J. Troup

The Pittsburgh Pirates from 1933 through 1939 won only 22 of the 80 games they played in the National Football League. Renamed the Steelers in 1940 Pittsburgh won only 3 of 22 games in 1940 and 1941. The Steelers first draft choice in 1942 was future Hall of Famer Bill Dudley.

This essay will examine his contributions to the Steelers during his short 26-game tenure with Pittsburgh. The 1942 Steelers posted their first winning season in their history. Dudley led the league in rushing as a rookie with 696 yards, and in rushing attempts with 162 carries. Dudley also led the league with the most punt return yards with 271, and in kick-off return average with 27.1 yards per return, and tied for the league lead in kick-off return touchdowns with 1.

The Steelers began the 1942 season with two losses by identical scores of 24 to 14 against the Eagles and Redskins. Dudley began his career with a 107 yard rushing performance against Philadelphia which included a 44 yard run. The next week against Washington Dudley returned a kick-off 84 yards for a touchdown (he was one of only 8 men to accomplish this feat in 1942). On October 4th the Steelers defeated the defending eastern conference champion Giants 13 to 10.

Pittsburgh finished second to the Bears in rushing for the season with 1,851 yards, but more importantly the Steelers averaged 200 yards per game in their 7 victories, and only 111 in their 4 losses. Besides Bullet Bill the Steeler ground attack included tough inside running by Dick Riffle, and speedy Andy Tomasic.

Bill Dudley intercepted a pass in 3 consecutive games (all victories), and Pittsburgh began to establish themselves as one of the best pass defense teams in the league. Pittsburgh then "pitched" back to back shut-outs against Brooklyn (Bullet Bill scored the only Pittsburgh touchdown with a determined 7 yard run) and Philadelphia.

These wins set up their biggest game of the year against Washington at home in Forbes Field. The Redskins stopped the Steelers 14 to 0. Rebounding from this difficult defeat Pittsburgh embarked on its first four game win streak in its history. On November 1st the Bluefield Bullet gained 135 yards rushing which included one of Dudley's great runs with a 66-yard weaving cantor. The Steelers limited the Giants to only 80 yards passing on 19 attempts; while intercepting 3. A journey to Briggs Stadium was eventful as the Steelers erupted for a season high 35 points in the victory over Detroit. Returning home to Pittsburgh the Steelers beat the Cardinals as Dick Riffle played his best game of the year. Pittsburgh gained 226 yards rushing, and for the first time in their history returned interceptions for over 100 yards (Riffle intercepted 2). Though the Steelers shut out Brooklyn again and set a new team standard with their 7th victory, Pittsburgh could not catch the new eastern division champion Redskins.

December 6th saw the Steelers end the season in Green Bay with a loss to a powerful Packer team that passed for 260 yards and 3 touchdowns.

Bill Dudley and his teammates allowed only 46 completions, 3 touchdowns, and 4.42 yards per pass in their 7 victories! Amazingly the Steelers set an offensive record that will probably never be broken. Pittsburgh did not complete one pass for a touchdown in any of their 7 victories.

After the season Bill entered the military, and the Steelers combined with Philadelphia and the Cardinals for the seasons of 1943 and 1944. When Bill returned for the last four games of the 1945 season the Steelers were mired near the bottom of the eastern division with a record of 1 win and 5 losses. Bill's return sparked the Steelers to a 23-0 shut out of the Cardinals for their second and final victory of the season.

1946

Optimism rained supreme in Pittsburgh as the 1946 season began. Bullet Bill would be eager to prove to all that he would be every bit the player he was as in 1942. Dudley would lead the Steelers to the brink of their first division title with his all around outstanding performance.

By allowing only 117 points the Steelers were the stingiest defense in the league. Pittsburgh never allowed more than seventeen points in any one game, yet the Steelers themselves only scored more than sixteen points once.

After three weeks Pittsburgh had a record of 1-1-1. Then Bullet Bill's amazing all around skill took flight as he intercepted six passes in the next four games and took the league lead in that department with 8. After the first 7 weeks the Steeler ground attack averaged 143 yards per game.

Dudley was among the league leaders in punting and kick-off returns, he led the entire NFL in rushing with 604 yards, punt returns with a 14.2 average per return, and interceptions with 10. The best example of his excellence occurred in the 14-7 victory over the Redskins on November 3rd. In that game Bill returned an interception 80 yards for a touchdown, 3 punts for 80 yards (including one return of 52, and a kick-off for 31 yards.

This victory gave Pittsburgh a record of 4-2-1. Due to a staggered schedule the Giants record at this point was 4-1-1. When the two teams met on November 24th the Giants with a record of 5-2-1 were in first place with the 5-3-1 Steelers close behind. Though Dudley intercepted his 10th and final pass of the season, and he returned 3 punts for 36 yards, the Steeler offense could gain only 86 yards rushing and was shut out by the stalwart Giant defense and the final score was a tight 7-0.

Though the Steelers, led by Dudley, set an NFL record for fewest yards allowed passing in a season with 939, the Bluefield Bullet with his great performance could not win the keys to the kingdom and the Giants went on to play the Bears for the Championship.

During his 26 game career with Pittsburgh Bill Dudley averaged 99 yards per game offensively (rushing, passing, and receiving) and 64 yards per game on returns (kick, punt, and interceptions). Pittsburgh's record in Dudley's 26 game Steeler career was 13-12-1. In contrast, and as an indication of Dudley's impact Pittsburgh won just 31 of 122 games without Dudley from 1933 through 1946.

AND THEN

Tragically for Pittsburgh, Dudley announced his retirement after the 1946 season. In reality, he was retiring from Steelers' coach Dr. John Bain "Jock" Sutherland.

The legendary Sutherland had been a great coach at the University of Pittsburgh and had also coached the Brooklyn Dodgers to their most successful seasons before the war. When he was hired as Steelers' mentor in '46, great things were expected of the combination of Sutherland and Dudley.

But the dour Sutherland erred badly in his handling of Dudley. In an apparent effort to show his squad that he played no favorites, he spent the season criticizing Bullet Bill in front of his teammates. Nothing Dudley did was good enough. It seemed almost personal.

Dudley, a great team player, suffered in silence. He would have been the last player on the team to openly oppose the coach. His season was a miserable experience personally even though he was the best player in the league.

Dudley's announcement that he was quitting football left Pittsburgh owner Art Rooney with no choice. Although the problem had been caused by Sutherland, Rooney had to back his coach. A deal was worked out with Detroit. For the next three seasons, Dudley starred for the Lions.

Sutherland was indeed a great coach. Even without Dudley, the Steelers improved their record in 1947. But Sutherland died before the 1948 season.

--- PFRA