

Frank Sinkwich and the Contending Lions of 1944

By T.J. Troup

When a Heisman trophy first round draft pick joins a team that went winless the previous year the expectation of improvement is inevitable. Such was the case when Frank Sinkwich took his Heisman trophy with him to join the Lions for the 1943 season. However, Frank Sinkwich's rookie season of 1943 could hardly be called a stunning success. For instance, take Sinkwich's game against the Packers. He threw 7 interceptions. While the Lions still hoped that Sinkwich would deliver performances at the pro level as well as he did at Georgia they still drafted Northwestern star Otto Graham with their first pick in 1944.

The expected competition at the tailback position never developed and when the 1944 season began on October 1st in Green Bay Sinkwich remained the starter. In a chilling mist before 18,556 the Packers defeated Detroit 27 to 6. The only Lion score came on a Sinkwich to Bob Westfall aerial. Before 15,702 fans in Detroit on October 8th the Lions won their first game of the season 19 to 14 over the Brooklyn Dodgers. The two key plays of the game both involved Sinkwich; the first ... a 72 yard touchdown run (he scored 2 rushing touchdowns in the game), and the second ... one of the more improbable plays of the year. Sinkwich passes and Dodger all-pro and future Hall of Famer Bruiser Kinard intercepts and returns 26 yards, but when Kinard is hit fumbles and in the scramble Sinkwich recovers the loose ball. In Cleveland on October 15th the Lions lost a tough decision to the Rams 20 to 17. Sinkwich tossed a 34 yard touchdown pass to Art Van Tone, and ran 5 yards for a score. All around Frank also kicked a field goal in that game. The journey to Wrigley Field in Chicago on October 22nd gave Bear fans a chance to see an improved Detroit Lion team. The Lions were able to tie the World Champion Chicago Bears 21 all and a glimmer of hope arose for the rest of that season. During the game Bob Westfall scored twice on the ground; including a 75 yard sprint, and Sinkwich tossed a 17 yard touchdown pass to Jack Matheson. Home to play the Packers on October 29th the Lions took a step back as they were shut-out by the talented Green Bay squad 14 to 0.

After these first five games Sinkwich had gained 384 yards rushing on 96 carries and had thrown 3 touchdown passes. The Lion defense had intercepted only 7 passes and had allowed 10 touchdown passes. In their last 26 games the Lions had won only 4 games, but the second half of the season would be far different.

The 1943 Chicago Cardinals had joined forces with the Steelers to become known as an amalgam known as Card-Pitt. Playing in Pittsburgh in a driving snowstorm

the Lions won decisively 27 to 6 as Sinkwich ran and passed for a touchdown. Card-Pitt traveled to Detroit on November 12th to complete the back to back games and received a thorough trouncing 21 to 7 as Sinkwich again scored twice. November 19th, 1944 is a special day in Lion history. Frank Sinkwich became the first Lion to throw 4 touchdown passes in a game. Sinkwich would hold this record for 34 years until Gary Danielson broke it in December of 1978. Art Van Tone, Bob Keene, and Jack Matheson (2) caught the td passes. Van Tone also scored on a 92 yard kick-off return, and intercepted a pass. This 41 to 21 victory is significant for the following reason; for the first time in 41 games the Lions defeated a team that would finish the season with a winning record. After 8 games Sinkwich had rushed for 533 yards. Even though he was in position to win the rushing crown, it was his long completions in the passing game that led to victory.

The 26 to 14 victory at Cleveland was costly for Sinkwich, but not the Lions. Sinkwich threw 3 touchdown passes; all to Dave Diehl (first Lion to catch 3 touchdown passes in a game). Sinkwich sustained a broken cheekbone in the game and though he would play in the Lions final game of the season; his role would be vastly different. With a second place finish riding on the outcome...who would play tailback? Bob Westfall's performance is one to be revered for the ages for all fans ... Lion or otherwise. Entering the game Westfall had thrown 17 passes all season. The Boston Yanks were passed dizzy as Westfall completed 15 of 30 for 260 yards and 3 touchdowns ... to Keene, Diehl, and Hackney. Sinkwich's contribution was kicking all five extra points and his second field goal of the season.

The all around player has always been revered in league history ... and occasionally the reward has been the league MVP. How was Sinkwich able to win this coveted award over such luminaries as Don Hutson, Sammy Baugh, Sid Luckman, and Steve Van Buren? Sinkwich finished the year by throwing 9 touchdown passes in the second half of the season (all victories) and by averaging 7.16 yards per pass finished 3rd in the league in that category. He also was 3rd in rushing, 2nd in scoring, 2nd in punting average (including a 73 yarder at home vs. the Packers). Sinkwich also returned 11 punts for 148 yards, and 6 kick-offs for 144 yards. During the five game win streak Frank contributed 3 interceptions of the 19 recorded by the Lions. A handful of men have won both the Heisman, and the league MVP; but how many of them played in only 20 league games in their career. Frank Sinkwich stands alone.