

“This Young Kid from Down South”: Bert Milling

by Mel Bashore

Although he now refers to himself as “an old codger,” when Bert Milling played for the University of Richmond he was credited with being one of the youngest team captains in the country when he was nineteen years old. Prior to college, he attended a small prep school in Mobile, Alabama. At University Military School (UMS) they only had thirteen players on the squad. The heaviest player on the team topped the scales at 150 pounds. The team was nicknamed the “Flea Circus” because of the diminutive size of its players. Milling played guard and in the two years that he played under coach Andy Eddington, they amassed a record of 20-2. Milling ascribed their winning record to an offensive medley of “spinner hand-offs, downfield laterals, and other razzle dazzle plays.”

He was offered a scholarship to Auburn, but when his pastor was able to garner a scholarship for him to Richmond, he accepted. In his freshman year he played end, then guard in his sophomore and junior years, and finally center and middle linebacker in his senior year. He made all conference in his junior year, but tailed off in his senior year. At the conclusion of his senior college football season, he played a couple of games with the minor league Richmond Arrows in the Dixie League in 1941. His name doesn't appear on the roster for the Arrows in Bob Gill's book *Southern Exposure: The Saga of Football's Dixie League, 1936-47*. In asking him about this, he offered some reflections:

In looking at the roster I recognize and played with “Moose” Faris and Ned Butcher at [the University of] Richmond. I do not recognize [Aubrey] Gibson or [Buddy] Ingalls. Nor could I find them in any of the [University of Richmond] school yearbooks that I have. Since I was still in school it's possible they listed me as one of them. Most likely Gibson. Since there is no program data about him and Ingalls has position, age, weight, etc. Possibly they didn't list me at all. I recall playing two or three games with them, probably from the delayed Norfolk game [30 November] on.

While playing with the Arrows, he practiced at night and played on Sunday afternoons. He received \$25 per game which was “a big boost” to his finances. The Arrows played the Wilmington Clippers in an away game on 7 December 1941. That date is more memorable as the day that Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. Milling recalled that “all during the game loud speakers would call for Lt. Somebody or Captain Somebody to report to duty.” On their return trip back to Richmond, they passed through Washington, D.C. Milling remembered:

on our return trip through Washington, D.C. we were stopped at both our entry and exit from the city. Armed service men got on and searched the bus thoroughly. And as we were going through the capitol it was lit up like a Christmas tree.

We did not find out until we reached Richmond that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor.

His memory of the Arrows final game of the season against the Kenosha Cardinals in Memphis, Tennessee, is vivid:

We picked up a Tennessee team on the way over composed of George Cafego as the quarterback, Bob Suffridge and Molinski as guards and others I can't recall. I do recall the Cardinals had Ki Aldrich as their center and I was amazed and fascinated with the ease with which Suffridge handled him. A forearm shiver and Bob was in the Cardinals' backfield on his back side. The game plan was for the Arrows to play one quarter and the Tenn. team the next. But when the Tenn. team went in for their turn, Molinski injured his leg and I was substituted. Not knowing their offensive plays was solved with Suffridge giving me my assignment as soon as the quarterback set the play. The Arrows won [29-13] and I intercepted my first and only pass in my “college” career.

After graduating from college, Milling enlisted in the Air Force. Before entering the service, he was visiting his fiance at her college in Fredricksburg, Virginia, when he got an unexpected call in September from the Philadelphia Eagles. During his sophomore year at Richmond, John Kellison had been one of the coaches. In 1942, Kellison was an assistant coach to Eagles' coach Greasy Neale. As Milling related:

John Kellison reached me by phone and asked if I would like to play with the Eagles since they had been hit so hard by the Army draft. I told him I had already enlisted in the Air Force subject to call but he said that would be fine. I could just play until being called at the huge sum of \$225 per game. I, of course, accepted [after calling home to obtain Mother's permission] and was not called up for service until the next January after the season ended.

His pro football earnings (netting about \$1500 by season's end) gave him the money to purchase an engagement ring for his fiance. He and Bosh Pritchard, also in his first year in the pros, roomed together in a Philadelphia hotel. He had played against Pritchard in college when the latter was attending Virginia Military. In Milling's words, in addition to being “a great ballplayer,” Pritchard was “a real ladies man.” Milling recalled, “After I had retired one evening, Bosh came into the room with a couple of girls and had one of them crawl into bed (fully clothed) with me and waken me. It was quite a shock, but I convinced them I was near getting engaged and they left.”

Milling was employed as a utility man with the Eagles. He snapped for punts, played outside linebacker, and occasionally saw duty as an offensive guard. With the Eagles, this was Milling's “first contact with a team using the ‘T’ formation.” He had played against a team employing the “T” only once during college. For Milling,

this was a new brand of football.

With the single- and double-wing an opponent was considered blocked when he was on the ground. Screen and shield block were new to my vocabulary. The only "T" I had encountered was in my junior year against University of Virginia when our coach said he had seen this formation years ago in the Ivy League and all you had to do was use a seven-man line and squeeze. Well, after they had checked, screened, and shielded us, Bill Dudley got into our backfield quickly and there was no one there to tackle him. Result: 44-0, I think. I actually found the pro offense easier than college since everything was based on timing. No roll blocks, crab blocks, etc. It was said the only 300-pound player in the league was a tackle with Washington [probably referring to Wee Willie Wilkin], but he was just there and it was only necessary to screen him. [He was] not quick on his feet like the 300-pound plus men in the league today. The backs ran harder, the quarterbacks were better passers and ball handlers, and the receivers more skilled than any I had encountered.

The Eagles practiced and played the majority of their home games at Shibe Park. Practices "consisted more of conditioning and timing than full speed contact." Milling admitted that he never got to "fully appreciate" Greasy's "shuttle" defense. In this system, as described by Milling, "the defensive line shifted either right or left or charged straight ahead on the ball snap to confuse the offensive blocking assignments." Everyone would shift except "the offside end, and the linebacker on that side would plug the hole left by the tackle's shift." The signal for making the shift "was given by the center linebacker facing away from the ball with a hand signal across his chest." It "worked fine unless the offense anticipated the right or left movement and cut off one of the defensive men." Milling described his role in this defensive scheme:

I was assigned to call right, left, or straight ahead with finger signals against my jersey between plays while facing away from the offensive team. The calls were supposed to be random to confuse the opponent, but if they ever anticipated the call and cut off the linebacker who supposedly filled in the weak side, it left a gaping hole there. And don't think it didn't happen. Greasy kept saying, "Just wait until my running back gets back from the service."

Milling recognizes that today's defenses "are so much more sophisticated ... that this [shuttle defense] system seems juvenile." Milling couldn't recall the name of the back Greasy was anxious to see in his backfield, but it may have been Pete Kmetovic, a fleet Stanford grad, who was the Eagles number one draft pick in 1942. Kmetovic didn't see action in Greasy's backfield until after the war and by then, the whole show for the Eagles was geared around Steve Van Buren. Milling played in a couple of pre-season exhibition games. He also recalls being in more than the two regular-season games that he is listed as having played in *Total Football II*. He reasons that he couldn't have accumulated as much money as he netted to purchase his engagement ring if he hadn't played in quite a few

games. He attested, "I was used as a utility man in almost every game for a few plays."

He was impressed when they traveled to New York to play the Giants. This was the big time and their train "pulled in to a station that was directly beneath the hotel where we stayed." Even though they lost the game, they popped a few champagne corks afterwards. His fiancée traveled to Washington to see him play against the Redskins (7 December). He recalls:

I was shamed because while playing outside linebacker the Redskin receiver I was assigned to cover came at me once and I covered him beautifully. On the next play he came again, gave me a head-fake in, and was then wide open behind me to the outside. Fortunately Sammy Baugh overthrew the receiver. I was trotting toward the bench even as my replacement was coming [on] to the field.

His most embarrassing moment occurred playing in an away game against Green Bay. This must have been a pre-season fray as the teams did not meet during the regular season. It was another losing game for the Eagles; something on the order of 7-0 in Milling's memory. In this game, he centered the ball ten feet over the punter's head. Don Hutson scored the game-winning TD – going down ten yards, crossing center, catching the pass, and going in for the score. He recalled the great respect that the Eagle defense had for Hutson: "In one instance Hutson just stood up and faked in position from one side to the other and our man assigned to cover him tripped trying to guess which way Hutson was going and fell flat on the field."

After the 1942 season ended, Milling trained as a bomber pilot and served a tour in England as a co-pilot on B-24s flying missions over Europe. He flew two missions on D-Day. He said, "I was certainly happy to be in the air and not with the troops in the landing forces which we could see as small ants as we flew over the beachheads." When those missions were finished, his crew was assigned to a ferrying outfit based in Wharton, England. While based there, the coach of a service football team recruited him to play. They won the ETO championship in White Stadium in London without Milling. He had gotten married just after getting his wings and wanted to return to the states. His coach (who was also the personnel officer) tried to hold up his orders to return home until after the game, but Milling out-flanked him and hitched a ride home on the *Queen Elizabeth 2*. After the war, the Eagles sent him a letter (he called it a "required letter") offering him a chance to play again. Instead, he took the opportunity to enter a small family business from which he retired in 1997. He lives in Mobile, Alabama.

Milling recalls with fondness his year with the Eagles: being chosen to play "with these famous players." He said, "all of the team was very nice to this young kid from down south."
