The Official Newsletter of the PFRA

The Coffin Corner

Mailing address:
Bob Carroll, ed.
The Coffin Corner
12370 Rt. 30
N.Huntingdon, PA
15642

Vol. I, No. 5 July, 1979

REPORT FROM THE ACTING PRESIDENT

Readers:

With a great deal of pride and an equal amount of trepidation, I am able to announce the founding of the Professional Football Researchers Association in Canton, Ohio, on June 22, 1979. It is the fervent hope of the few of us responsible for the launching that the ship will prove a more than satisfactory vessel to all those who wish to come aboard.

Briefly, I should like to trace what led up to the meeting and discuss the decisions that we made.

In February of this year, in response to several conversations I'd held with fellow researchers, I sent out the first (March) issue of The Coffin Corner to explore the possibility of establishing a pro football group similar to baseball's Society for American Baseball Research (SABR). For the first issue, the mailing list was limited to those men around the country with whom I regularly corresponded -- a mere eight.

Fortunately, they were a staunch eight, and over the next couple of months, they provided a number of useful suggestions. They also contacted other researchers known to them. By the time we got to the fourth (June) issue, our friends numbered nearly twenty, and we had some firm ideas of what kind of an organization we wanted.

Six of us -- Bob Braunwart, Vic Frolund, Joe Horrigan, Tom Nikitas, Jim Stewart, and myself -- were able to arrange our schedules so that we could get together in Canton over a three day period: June 21, 22, and 23. Happily, most of those unable to attend had provided us with their ideas on many of the issues we planned to discuss. Despite this, and even though we were a creditable third of those who had been involved up to that moment, we were supremely aware that we represented only a fraction of the members who would eventually join our group.

Our discussions were frank and open. Again and again we tried to put ourselves in "someone else's shoes." Still, as hesitant as we were, we all recognized the necessity of starting.

And, we did.

Some of the courses we adopted need, perhaps, a word or two of explanation.

The name of the group, PFRA, was shortened from our working title of Professional Football Researchers Association of America both for the sake of brevity and to encourage interest from football researchers outside the U.S. We all agreed that an acronym would have been nice, but the necessary "PF" did not lend itself to a logical example.

Although we considered widening the scope, we finally decided to focus exclusively on professional football. Certainly we could never presume to dictate what areas an individual member might pursue in his reasearch, but PFRA will stick to material relating to the pro game.

In electing officers, we were necessarily restricted to the six men present. At the same time, we wanted officers who had the backing of a majority of the membership. We decided on a compromise. Acting officers were elected for a three month period until we are able to hold a special election by mail involving all the members. Particulars of the special election are stated elsewhere in this issue. In addition to my being named as acting-president, Bob Braunwart was elected acting-vice president, and Vic Frolund was chosen to temporarily fill both the offices of secretary and treasurer. Fortunately, Vic has had plenty of experience with other groups as treasurer.

A constitution and a code of behavior were adopted. In drafting these, we were strongly guided by models provided by SABR. Eight years ago the founders of that society went through a similar organizing process. We all agreed that we should consider their experiences our collective mentor.

On behalf of PFRA, I would like to take this opportunity to thank SABR for its continued inspiration, guidance, and cooperation in both our Canton meeting and the period leading up to it. Without the society's help, PFRA might still be in the "hoping" stage.

Again, on behalf of PFRA, I must thank The Pro Football Hall of Fame for its cooperation and courtesy. Visiting the HOF is always a joyful occasion, but this time it was doubly so.

This seems as good a time as any to mention that unpleasant subject -- money. PFRA is a non-profit organization. However, someone must pay the costs. We plan to be self-supporting, and that means dues. The six of us spent a great deal of time discussing what would be a "reasonable" amount. Naturally, we considered need. But our first concern was what we could guarantee you, as a member, for your money.

First, your membership entitles you to be considered for election to office, to vote in elections and polls conducted by the association, to serve on association committees, and to submit material to be considered for publication in The Coffin Corner. Members who join by August 15, 1979, will be considered "charter members" and will receive a special membership card so stating.

Second, you will receive next spring the membership directory, containing the name, address, telephone number (unless unlisted), and area of pro football interest of each member. For a serious researcher, the directory alone is worth the price of membership.

Third, you will receive twelve monthly issues of The Coffin Corner, the official PFRA newsletter. Each issue contains one or more research articles contributed by members in addition to PFRA news. In answer to several requests for the first four "unofficial" Corners, copies may be obtained free by requesting them on your membership application until August 15. After that, a service charge of one dollar each will be necessary. The "membership year" for the Corner runs from the July (this), 1979, issue to and including the June, 1980, issue.

When ordering back issues of the Corner, please specify which issues you want.

To help you, here is a list of the issues and the featured research articles so far:

No. 1 (March) - The First Pro All-Star Game from Pittsburgh Press, Dec. 4, 1898
No. 2 (April) - All Those A.F.L.'s: N.F.L. Competitors, 1935-41 by Bob Braunwart
No. 3 (May) - The Massillon Tigers in 1903 by Bob Carroll
No. 4 (June) - History of the Youngstown Patricians by Vic Frolund and History of the Ironton Tanks by Thomas S. Niketas

And, fourth, as a member you will receive a modest-yet-valuable, year-end, PFRA publication at a distinct membership discount. Plans for this bonus will be discussed in next month's issue.

Naturally, as membership increases, we will be able to increase the services to make PFRA membership even more attractive.

I sincerely hope that this brief report accurately portrays the intentions and accomplishments of the "Canton Six," as a sensationalist might portray us. If anyone would like further details, please feel free to contact me at The Coffin Corner.

Finally, I'd like to add my personal thanks to Messrs. Braunwart, Frolund, Horrigan, Nikitas, and Stewart for a wonderful and inspiring three days.

Sincerely,
Bob Carroll

Bob Carroll,
Acting-President PFRA

SPECIAL ELECTION OF PFRA OFFICERS

Eligibility:

Nominations may only be submitted by PFRA members. Nominees, to be placed on the ballot, must also be PFRA members. Since, at this time, it is unlikely that many members may know ALL of the other PFRA members, it is suggested that you go ahead and nominate on the assumption that your nominee will join. It will be the responsibility of the membership committee to contact all eligible nominees concerning their willingness to have their names placed on the ballot. A member may nominate himself, of course, and, in case of second thoughts, a member may submit more than one list of nominations.

Candidates will be considered for only one office. Should a member be nominated for more than one office, his name will be placed on the ballot for the office for which he received the most nominations. In case of a tie in the number of nominations for two or more offices, the highest office will take precedence. The order will be president, vice-president, treasurer, secretary.

The Nominations:

Members should submit nominations for the four offices to:

Thomas S. Nikitas
24 Whitman Ave.
Syosset, N.Y. 11791

Please specify which office you are nominating a member to fill.

All nominations must be submitted by August 15, 1979.

The Election:

Ballots listing all eligible nominees will be mailed with the September issue of the Corner. All ballots must be returned by September 15, 1979. The results of the election will be announced in the October issue of the Corner.

All members are urged to consider every phase of this election carefully.

Remember, we are electing the people who will lead the association during its first and, perhaps, most crucial year.

THE AIMS AND POLICIES OF THE COFFIN CORNER

As the official newsletter for PFRA, the Corner will try to fulfill three functions.

First, we will serve as the main channel through which association news will reach the membership. In addition to more serious and essential information such as that of the special election, announcements of meetings, etc., we will also conduct special polls such as the "10 Best" and "Green Bay" polls explained later in this issue.

Second, we will be a "connection" in the dissemination of pro football research information. We don't pretend to know all (or even many) answers. We do hope to aid you in contacting the proper source.

Third, we will publish each month one or more research articles contributed by members. We hope this feature will prove both informative and entertaining. Therefore, we are looking for lively and accurate material on team histories, trivia, old-time players, uniforms, fields, statistics, rules, etc. If you find it interesting, there's a good chance that we will.

To facilitate these aims, The Coffin Corner has adopted the following policies:

1. We will accept for publication unsolicited material from members of PFRA only.
2. We do not guarantee that all unsolicited material will be published.
3. We will print primarily material that has not been previously published.
4. We reserve the right to edit for space or other considerations.
5. No payment will be made or is to be expected for material published.
6. Publication is not to be taken as absolute endorsement or agreement with the views or conclusions of the originator.
7. Material will be returned when accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed, envelope.
8. All rights are returned to the originator with publication.
9. We reserve the right to choose which issue will contain accepted material.
10. We subscribe without exception to the Code of Behavior for P.F.R.A. Members.

PFRA POLLS

In the June issue, the Corner began two polls. We announced that the results would be printed in this issue. However, it was almost immediately pointed out that this would be unfair; charter memberships will be accepted until August 15. We have already received a number of ballots. These will be counted unless superceded by a new ballot from the same eligible member. Results will be announced in the September issue.

10 BEST PROS NOT IN THE HALL OF FAME

This is open to any player, coach, or executive who has not been elected to Pro Football's Hall of Fame and who is eligible for same (i.e., retired for at least five years). Several ballots already received contained Fran Tarkenton's name. Sorry, he's not eligible, having just hung up his spikes. You may substitute a new name if you like.

A quick glance at the ballots received so far reveals that Alex Karras, Frank Gatski, Peggy Parratt, Paul Hornung, Verne Lewellen, and Fritz Pollard are picking up quite a few votes, but so are several others. Actually, we could easily find a hundred worthy candidates or more.

Address all responses to The Coffin Corner.

THE GREEN BAY PACKERS' ALL-TIME TEAM

Talk about riches! The Pack has had enough great players to make a half-dozen all-time teams. So think hard! You have to limit yourself to one coach, two wide receivers, one tight end, two offensive tackles, two guards, one center, one quarterback, two running backs, one kicker, four defensive linemen, three linebackers, four defensive backs, and a punter.

The list below is not meant to be all-inclusive; we probably left off your favorite player. You may not even agree with putting a player at a particular position. We present it only to remind you of some of the remarkable men who have been Packers over the years.

WIDE RECEIVERS: Boyd Dowler, Max McGee, Johnny Blood, Don Hutson, Bill Howton, Carroll Dale, Gary Knafelc.

TIGHT ENDS: Ron Kramer, Milt Gantenbein, Lavvie Dilweg, Marv Fleming.

OFFENSIVE TACKLES: Cub Buck, Forrest Gregg, Ernie Smith, Bob Skoronski, Dick Wildung.

OFFENSIVE GUARDS: Tiny Engebretsen, Lon Evans, Gale Gillingham, Russ Letlow, Mike Michalske, Fuzzy Thurston, Buckets Goldenberg, Jerry Kramer.

OFFENSIVE CENTERS: Nate Barrager, Jug Earpe, Jim Ringo.

QUARTERBACKS: Bart Starr, Tobin Rote, Cecil Isbell, Arnie Herber, Red Dunn.

RUNNING BACKS: Tony Canadeo, Jim Taylor, John Brockington, Paul Hornung, Donnie Anderson, Billy Grimes, Clarke Hinkle, Joe Laws, Walt Schlinkman.

KICKERS: Don Chandler, Fred Cone, Ted Fritsch, Chester Marcol.

DEFENSIVE LINEMEN: John Martinkovic, Bill Quinlan, Larry Craig, Lionel Aldridge, Willie Davis, Cal Hubbard, Bob Brown, Dave Hanner, Henry Jordan, Baby Ray, Mike McCoy.

LINEBACKERS: Tom Bettis, Lee Roy Caffey, Fred Carr, Charley Brock, Dan Currie, Bill Forester, Dave Robinson, Ray Nitschke, Clay Tonnemaker, Roger Zatkoff.

DEFENSIVE BACKS: Herb Adderley, Hank Bruder, Willie Buchanan, Bob Jeter, Bobby Dillon, Hank Gremminger, Jess Whittenton, Willie Wood, Andy Uram.

PUNTERS: Verne Lewellen, several listed at other positions.

COACHES: Curly Lambeau, Vince Lombardi.

PFRA-TERNIZING

Well-Deserved Honor

We are extremely pleased to announce that one of our original contributers, Bob Van Atta, has been inducted into the Westmoreland County Sports Hall of Fame in recognition of contributions to sports as participant, official, writer, announcer, statistician, and historian. Congratulations, Bob.

Chapters

Tom Nikitas is interested in the possibility of setting up PFRA chapters, perhaps on a regional basis. At present we have received responses to the Corner from nearly twenty different states. Subdivisions might be a terrific idea. The PFRA has designated Tom as a committee of one to look into this idea. Send any thoughts you have on this to Thomas S. Nikitas, 24 Whitman Ave., Syosset, N.Y. 11791.

What Did You Do, Lawson?

One of the most aggravating things to any researcher is that just as soon as he accepts something as gospel, some new piece of information enters the picture. In the last issue, we made reference to the celebrated exploit of Lawson Fiscus, the 1890's Greensburg star. In every account we'd ever read, ol' Lawson was accused of kicking an opponent in the face and breaking his jaw. Now, we come across this from the Pittsburgh Press, November 25, 1894:

> "Bad blood and the tramping on the neck of a player in the football game at Jeannette this afternoon (Nov. 24) between Jeannette and Greensburg resulted in the breaking up of the game after the first half. Neither team scored. It is charged by Jeannette that Fiscus, Greensburg's full back, while running with the ball, tripped a Jeannette man and purposely tramped on his neck. The Jeannettes made a vigorous kick and insisted that the player Fiscus was out of order and demanded that he be removed or the game would stop. Greensburg's Pennsylvania Dutch blood came to the surface and the game was declared off, with louder talk probably than has been heard in Jeannette for some time."

Now, in the overall cosmic scheme of things it may not matter a whole lot whether Lawson kicked, tramped, or hit the poor fellow with his mustache. Perhaps it didn't matter much to the victim either, one being about as bad as another.

Yet, somehow, it does matter.

For years we've put our faith in Lawson the Kicker. Now, we must face the fact that he may have been Lawson the Tramper! Is nothing sacred?

Reminders

Don't forget that there are three different addresses concerning the PFRA. It's a little confusing, so make sure that you are writing to the right one. Submissions to the Corner, including the "10 Best" and "Green Bay" polls go to the address on the first page, upper right corner.

Nominations for officers go to Thomas S. Nikitas at the address at the bottom of page three.

Applications for membership go to the address on the membership application included with this month's issue.

And, Now ....

This month's issue is a bit heavy with weighty subjects, so we are presenting a pair of research articles that can be read mostly for fun. The second one deals with one of the great performances in pro history. The first is more of an oddity.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE 13TH IMPORT

By Bob Braunwart & Bob Carroll

Quick! What major league pro football team went into a regular season game with the least chance of winning? The 1976 Tampa Bay Buccaneers? The 1960 Dallas Cowboys? Perhaps the 1943 Chicago Cardinals, a mob so mopey that the players had faces redder than their jersies? Although these fabled aggregations managed to stumble through their seasons without once tripping over victory, they each had a mathematical chance of winning every time they were able to find their way out of the locker room before kickoff. They had at least a prayer.

The only major pro team ever to trot out onto the field with absolutely no -- read that, "zero" -- chance of triumph was the 1959 Saskatchewan Roughriders of the Canadian Football League. They played their last two games of that year after the contests had already been recorded in their loss column. More surprisingly, they turned around and won one of them -- sort of.

Most Americans think the Canadians' game is a little odd, anyway. Up there they get only three tries for a first down, and there's an extra back cavorting around the field. They even have something called a "rouge" which goes onto the scoreboard rather than the cheerleaders. But to see their favorite team playing a game already officially lost would set most U.S. fans to scratching their heads. Talk about rooting for an underdog!

It was a confusing situation, to say the least. Present Minnesota Viking coach Bud Grant had the dubious honor of coaching the team that lost to Saskatchewan despite winning the game. Or, to put it another way, Grant's Winnipeg Blue Bombers won the game they lost to the Roughriders. Or ....

Well, let's go back a bit.

1959 was not a season that football fans in the province of Saskatchewan can remember with much joy. When the province is called "Canada's breadbasket," the reference is usually to its bountiful wheat crop, but in 1959 the "breadbasket" seemed to be where every other CFL team was kicking the Roughriders. Fans staggered out of Taylor Field at Regina, the Riders' home park, shellshocked from seeing their heroes ridden roughshod over by such scores as 0-55, 8-61, and 13-53. It was disaster time for a team that had been a power in the CFL's Western Conference for almost a decade.

Seven years earlier, in 1953, things had been better. That's when the Roughies hired Frankie Filchock, the old Washington Redskin tailback as coach. Filchock's first move was to import another American, former Notre Dame All-American Frank Tripucka, to do his quarterbacking.

Tripucka was a proven commodity, having seen service with several NFL teams before coming north. He had a knack for the big play, and he could handle pressure. At South Bend he'd he'd succeeded all-time Irish great Johnny Lujack at QB in the late 1940's and kept the team undefeated for still another year. Once Filchock installed him as the Roughriders' triggerman, he led Saskatchewan to four straight second place finishes.

The Roughies had an off-year in 1957 and Filchock was let go. George Terlep, another American with Notre Dame credentials, took over as caoach, and, with Tripucka still calling signals, immediately returned the team to respectability in 1958.

Unfortunately, they'd grown restive around Regina over so many good-but-not-good-enough finishes. The particular object of the fans' ire was Tripucka the quarterback, proving that Canadian and U.S. fans have a lot in common. Frank was on the wrong side of 30. According to some Rider fans, his pitching arm hadn't aged gracefully.

Criticism from the stands didn't upset Frank so much as it bothered the Roughriders' front office. Over the winter Frank gave them an out; he requested and received a one-way ticket to Ottawa.

The change in personnel was followed by a change in the Riders' fortunes. With a

new man at quarterback, Terlep's Roughies stormed through the 1959 season the way Custer stormed through the Indians. Defeat piled on drubbing, and before long Saskatchewan decided they could solve all their problems by changing coaches, proving that Canadian and U.S. front offices have a lot in common. Terlep was sent packing to Ottawa where he became backfield coach. The twist came with his replacement. Named as the new Roughriders' coach was -- of all people -- Frank Tripucka! Proving God knows what!

Unfortunately for the Roughies, Tripucka was only allowed to prowl the sidelines. Under CFL rules, each team was limited to no more than twelve U.S. players on its roster. At the time of Frank's return, the Roughies already had an even dozen imports cluttering its roster. For Coach Tripucka to send in Quarterback Tripucka was verboten unless another American was dropped. And, after the thirteenth game of the season, the Riders lost that option. At that point the rosters were frozen and no new imports could be added or subtracted.

In the fourteenth game, Saskatchewan lost every eligible quarterback it had!

Unbelievably, all three -- count 'em, three -- quarterbacks went down with injuries as the Roughies were humiliated 45 to 6 before their home fans. First, regular Don Allard separated a shoulder. Then, second string Ron Adam aggravated an ankle injury. And, finally, third string Jack Urness made it a not-so-grand-slam with a badly gashed leg. Saskatchewan faced the unappetizing prospect of playing its final two games with, perhaps, a goal post at quarterback.

To make matters worse, if possible, the final two opponents had already treated the Roughriders like badminton birds, racking up three victories apiece and an aggregate total of 260 points to 51! The Edmonton Eskimos, sceduled for a Saturday game, had clinched second place in the west; Bud Grant's Winnipeg Blue Bombers, who would close the season two days later, were the division champs. It looked like the Eskimos and Bombers could phone in their victories.

In fact, had they been allowed, the Roughies might have simply closed up shop and gone home for the winter. But there was one fly stomping through that ointment. What could be done about the fans with season tickets? They'd already paid and they expected to see, if not a Saskatchewan victory, at least some semblance of a contest.

In desperation, Roughrider president Sam Taylor announced that the quarterback for the final two games would be -- who else? Frank Tripucka!

The idea was about as legal as clipping the referee. As the thirteenth import, Tripucka had no more eligibility than he had feathers. However, neither Edmonton nor Winnipeg minded much. After all, by playing an ineligible quarterback, the Roughies automatically forfeited, giving the Eskimos and the Bombers each one more win. Besides, everyone agreed that Tripucka's presence would be worth about 2,000 more fans at each game. All things considered, everyone figured to gain. Saskatchewan had a quarterback, Edmonton and Winnipeg had wins, and the fans had games that were more sporting than hunting rabbits with dynamite.

The only one who complained was Edward H. La Borde, president of the Calgary Stampeders, Although his team was in fourth place and could no way be affected by the games, he wrote a long, angry letter to CFL President G. Sydney Halter ranting about the supposed injury to the "dignity of the game." In as much as no one saw anything dignified in letting the Roughriders get clobbered by a score that would make a better telephone number, La Borde's letter had as much effect as hitting an elephant with a butterfly.

On Saturday afternoon, Edmonton came to town. Regina fans, 8,000 strong, cheered Tripucka as they hadn't done for years. Although he was a bit rusty, Frank responded by scaring the igloos off the Eskimos. He actually had the Roughies in front up to the closing minute. Then, one of his tosses went astray, and Edmonton turned the interception into a last-play field goal to win, 20-19. Later, Coach Tripucka second-guessed Quarterback Tripucka, suggesting that the field general should have played things sake. But, win or lose, the Rider fans hailed it as the Roughies' best showing of the season.

The real payoff came on Monday night at Winnipeg as 14,282 fans turned out to watch their divisional champs take on the revitalized Roughriders. Grant's Bombers

worked hard, but they had their own injury problems with several regulars out or slowed. Meanwhile, Tripucka was magnificent.

He zinged the Bomber defense for a lusty 208 yards on 17 of 29 passes. When he wasn't passing the Bombers blue, he handed off to Ferdy Burket, an American out of East Oklahoma State (where?), who ran for over 100 yards and five touchdowns, one short of the CFL record. When it was all over, the Roughriders, who hadn't scored more than three TDs in any game all season and who had defensive totals that looked like a collection of Social Security numbers, had defeated the champs, 37 to 30 -- on the scoreboard.

Officially, of course, because of Tripucka's ineligibility, the game went into the books by the forfeit score of 2-0 Winnipeg. But try telling that to Saskatchewan!

Perhaps it was in the stars. The province was named after the Saskatchewan River which flows through its heart. The Cree Indians called it Kis-is-ska-tche-wan, meaning "river that turns around when it runs." In 1959, the biggest "turn around" in Canada was provided by the Roughriders in that last glorious game.

The next year, Frank Tripucka showed up at Denver to be the Broncos first quarterback under his old coach, Frankie Filchock. This was the famous crew with the vertically-striped socks, and some of their performances were rather strange. But it's doubtful that Tripucka ever played in anything that topped the lost game he won as the thirteenth import.

WEE DAVEY'S BIG DAY

By Bob Braunwart & Bob Carroll

When Davey O'Brien trotted on a football field, he looked like a little boy who had sneaked in with the grown-ups. But no one laughed when he started tossing the ball.

In the late 1930's Wee Davey succeeded the fabled Sammy Baugh as the premier flinger at Texas Christian University when Baugh moseyed on to fame and fortune with the pros. O'Brien succeeded more than chronologically. Before he was finished at T.C.U., the pint-sized thrower had broken all of Baugh's school passing records and led the Horned Frogs to the 1938 National Championship. He closed out his college career with a great day in the Sugar Bowl. He completed 17 of 28 passes for 228 yards and even booted a field goal in driving his team to victory over sixth-ranked Carnegie Tech. For his season's efforts, he was voted the 1938 Heisman Trophy.

The Philadelphia Eagles, perennial doormats of the National Football League, made Davey their first draft choice of 1939. In those days, every football player who could run across a yard line without tripping didn't hanker after a pro career. As a matter of fact, none of the three Heisman winners who preceded O'Brien had accepted an N.F.L. contract. With a degree in geology, Davey allowed as how he'd rather hunt oil wells in Texas than touchdowns in Pennsylvania. However, Bert Bell, owner and coach of the Eagles, made the T.C.U. All-American a fabulous offer -- $12,000 a season plus a percentage of the gate. That's small potatoes today, but it was top money in 1939 with the country still struggling out of the Depression. Davey thought it over and decided the oil wells could wait.

Many experts questioned whether Bell would get his money's worth. None doubted Davey's ability, but they wondered how his 5'7", 150 pound frame could stand up to the beating the pros would give it.

Bell had his own reservations. He insured Davey with Lloyds of London. For every game Davey missed because of injury, the Eagles would receive $1,500. The policy was partly for publicity, of course, but it underlined the possibility that the Texan would finish his pro career in traction.

As the tailback in the Philadelphia single wing, Davey had to run with the ball as well as pass it. In either case, the Eagles' blocking was strictly -- well -- for the birds. Additionally, Davey had to play defense in those days of one-platoon football.

Yet O'Brien showed an amazing ability to bounce back up every time he was smashed down by an opponent who outweighed him by 100 or so pounds. Happily, Bert Bell never collected a cent from Lloyds.

O'Brien's passing was even more amazing. Although the ragtag Eagles let every opponent monopolize the football, he got it often enough to set records for yards gained and completions in his rookie season.

It was all for naught. Despite Davey's personal heroics, the Eagles were hopeless. In game after game, teams withstood Davey's passes long enough to outscore Philadelphia. Headlines trumpeted "Little Davey and Goliath," but Goliath always won.

For the 1940 season, the script didn't change. Davey passed and passed, and the Eagles lost and lost. For a while it looked like they'd never win a game. Finally, in the next-to-last contest of the season, the Eagles edged Pittsburgh -- another doormat -- in a kind of futility bowl.

Philadelphia was scheduled to wind up the 1940 season at Washington against the Redskins, the class of the N.F.L.'s Eastern Division. Although the game figured to be a blow-out, pre-game interest peaked over an expected passing duel between O'Brien and the Redskins' number one weapon -- Sammy Baugh.

It looked like a natural -- two great Texans throwing their hearts out in the nation's capital. Two T.C.U. grads competing for the title of Mr. Forward Pass! Physically, they couldn't have been more different: Baugh was as slender as the Eagles' chances but he was tall; O'Brien was short enough to go through a locked turnstyle and hardly bend over.

The shoot-out never really came off. Washington needed the win to clinch their division championship, and they chose to play a careful game. Baugh hardly passed at all as the Skins kept the ball on the ground. Running against the Eagles was easy enough, and Washington wasn't taking any chances. By the fourth quarter, the Redskins had two ground-based touchdowns and a safe, 13-0, lead. O'Brien had passed well when he got the chance but he hadn't put any points on the scoreboard.

The Eagles finally held Washington deep in Redskin territory, and Baugh dropped back to his goal line to punt. Besides being a great passer, Sammy was one of the best punters who ever laid foot to ball. This time he really belted one. When the ball stopped rolling, it was on the Philadelphia two-yard line -- a kick of 85 yards!

Fans began heading for the exits. The Eagles were dead. Or so they seemed.

O'Brien had nothing to lose. He began passing on every down. His tosses went here, there, everywhere -- but most of them found Eagle receivers. The suddenly-befuddled Redskins couldn't stop them. Philadelphia roared down the field on Davey's arm. When Frank Emmons gathered in a 13-yarder, it climaxed a 98-yard drive for a touchdown. The PAT was blocked but the Eagles still had a chance to tie. The fans went back to their seats.

With time running out, Philadelphia got the ball again at its own 31. The Skins knew what was coming, and this time they stayed with Davey's receivers. Twice he tucked the ball under his arm and scampered for first downs. Each time his 150-pound figure disappeared beneath a pile of burgandy jersies, it looked like the end. Each time he got up to throw again. And what throwing! Redskin fans, used to Baugh's brilliance, gaped as O'Brien connected again and again.

The fairy tale ended on the Washington 22-yard line with only seconds remaining as the Redskins proved themselves champions by batting down Davey's final toss. As the little passer left the field, 30,838 fans rose and filled Griffith Stadium with a roar. Even the Redskin players applauded.

He had fired 60 passes, completed 33, and gained 316 yards. All were records at the time. As a comparison, the previous record for completions had been set earlier in the season by Baugh with 23 -- ten fewer than O'Brien's total. There had never been anything like it.

For Davey, it was a farewell performance. He had announced in November that 1940 would be his final season. Henceforth, he would take on a new challenge as a special agent for the F.B.I. His salary would shrink to $3,200 a year, but with World War II on the horizon, it was time for a real All-American to start throwing for Uncle Sam.