

RED BADGRO

By Bob Braunwart & Bob Carroll

"I was a little on the quiet side," Morris Badgro admits today, "but when the referee blew his whistle it was football for the next 60 minutes."

That statement pretty well sums up Red Badgro's career in pro football. A quiet, self-contained man -- some would say he lacked color -- playing a position that had not yet become a glamorous one, but playing it supremely well. So well, in fact, that he was voted an all-league end four times between 1930 and 1934.

A native of the state of Washington, he was considered one of the most gifted all-around athletes ever to come from the West Coast. Standing 6'1" and weighing 195 pounds, he was a large man, though hardly a behemoth, in that distant age. At the University of Southern California, he starred in football, basketball and baseball. In the opinion of many, he could have played any of them professionally, but in 1927 he opted for his favorite -- football.

He joined Red Grange's New York Yankees. There he paired at end with another West Coast redhead, future Pro Football Hall of Famer Red Flaherty. With all that "Red Power," the Yankees got away to a flying start, winning their first three starts. Then THE redhead, Grange, went down with a leg injury and the rest of the season turned into a downer. The Yankees finished toward the bottom of the NFL standings, a new experience for Badgro who had enjoyed winning seasons at USC under Howard Jones and Gus Henderson.

"In 1928 and '29, I decided to give baseball a good try with the St. Louis Browns in the American League. I played for Tulsa in 1928 and then went up to St. Louis for the next two seasons." Red was a fast outfielder, hitting .284 in his rookie year, but again he'd cast his lot with a loser. The Brownies were famous for their years of frustration in baseball.

"I then decided I liked football so much I would play again, but in the meantime the Yankees had broken up so I signed with the Giants in 1930." Red was an instant hit at the Polo Grounds as New York made a valiant run after defending champion Green Bay. At the end of the season, he was named to the unofficial all-league team.

The next year the NFL named an official team for the first time and again Red was chosen, creating one of those oddball trivia questions that point up the coincidences in sport; name two former St. Louis Browns baseball players who were picked on the first official all-NFL team. Answer: Badgro and Chicago Cardinal fullback Ernie Nevers, a Brownie pitcher from 1926 through 1928.

Red Flaherty joined the Giants in 1931, giving New York the best pair of matched, redheaded, West Coast ends in the history of the game. Flaherty took all-league honors in 1932 and then Badgro returned to the mythical all-star eleven in 1933 and 1934.

He still regards his four all-league selections as his top pro football thrill. "Being picked right along with the greatest players of all time ... Red Grange, Mel Hein, Johnny Blood, Mike Michalske, Cliff Battles, Bronko Nagurski!"

Badgro fit comfortably with these future Hall of Famers. There are those who will tell you that the NFL never produced a better two-way end than Red, pointing out that even Don Hutson had to slide into the backfield on defense.

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All that Red lacked, in spite of his nickname, was "color," that indefinable something that translates into box-office appeal. When old timers swap stories, they are more likely to talk about the swashbuckling of Johnny Blood or Nagurski's sheer physical presence. "You've gotta have a gimmick," goes the old saw, but Red's only gimmick was playing his position brilliantly.

The Bears' Bill Hewitt, Badgro's only serious contemporary challenger to the title of best two-way end, had his idiosyncrasy of playing without a helmet, making it easy for fans to spot him by his blonde hair. Badgro kept his red locks under a helmet. Yet, for all his flair, not even Hewitt was named all-NFL more often than the Giants' star.

Badgro's reputation was earned primarily as a blocker and defender, skills that win ball games rather than headlines, but he was a fine receiver when he got the chance. In those days, most teams didn't throw as many passes as some individual players catch today, and Red's top mark of 16 caught in 1934 may seem tiny to a modern fan. However, it should be remembered that no one grabbed any more in that season.

He specialized in the key pass-- the one that set up or scored the big touchdown. Undoubtedly, his most spectacular reception came in a 1933 game against arch-rival Green Bay. The Giants held a slim lead in the third quarter when tailback Harry Newman unloaded a long pass toward New York's Dale Burnett. Packer fullback Clarke Hinkle was there and, as both jumped for it, the ball bounded away. Badgro had left his pattern as soon as the pass was thrown. He swooped in, grabbed the ball before it touched the ground, and stepped across the goal line to seal a victory for New York.

Typically, Red is prouder of a defensive play he made against Hinkle in another game. New York had just taken a narrow lead when the Packer star broke loose on the kickoff. "He had a blocker in front of him and I was the only New York player between him and the goal," Red recalls. "Hinkle was one of the greatest ball carriers Green Bay ever had." Nevertheless, Badgro managed to ward off the blocker and dump Hinkle to save the game.

Plays like this led New York coach Steve Owen to pick Red as one of his all-time Giant ends, first on an imaginary eleven-man team in 1946 and later on an expanded 23-player squad given in Owen's biography, *My Kind of Football*. Badgro was Owen's kind of player: "He could block, catch passes and would be sick for a week if we lost a ball game."

In his book, Owen recalled an incident that challenges Badgro's quiet image:

"Red Badgro ... was one of the few fellows who could talk through a game without getting in trouble. He knew how to do it. Red had to block on big Turk Edwards, a great tackle with the Redskins ...

"Badgro told Edwards funny stories to keep him laughing and in good humor, so he wouldn't think too hard about playing football. In one game Red and Turk well under control when I sent in a rookie at right halfback. The kid didn't know how to talk. He got fresh and finally hit old Turk right on the chin.

"I took him out and put Dale Burnett back in the position. On the first play Turk rammed into our backfield and stretched Burnett's neck about a foot and a half. When he came to, Dale asked what was happening with Edwards. Badgro said: "That kid came in here and riled him, and now we are in for it."

Red's modest comment: "Turk Edwards and I were real good friends and I will say that no one 'handled' him very much. I just thought maybe by trying to keep him in good humor he could be a little easier to play against."

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The Giants had great teams during Badgro's best years, appearing in the first three NFL Championship Games. As a matter of fact, Red caught the first touchdown pass ever thrown in a championship game, a 29-yarder from Newman in the second quarter of the 1933 game. But that contest also gave Red his most frustrating experience on a football field. With only seconds to go and Chicago in front, 23-21, Newman threw a pass to Red. Only Red Grange stood between Badgro and a Giant win, but Grange was one of the surest tacklers in football. Badgro made ready to lateral to Mel Hein, who was coming up fast behind him. Grange, who later described this as his toughest moment in football, seemed to have only two choices -- tackle Badgro and let Hein score or go after Hein and let Badgro score. Instead, he took a third option -- he tackled the ball and Badgro at the same time. As Hein looked on helplessly, the two redheads went down in a heap and time ran out.

In 1936, Badgro retired from playing to take a job coaching the Syracuse team of the new American Football League. It was not a happy experience. "Syracuse went broke the second week of the season," Red remembers. "As I was still in the East, I decided to play in the NFL one more year." Brooklyn had obtained his option during the winter, so in his first game back Red found himself facing his old New York Giant mates.

He proved he was far from washed up -- the *Times* described him as "superb" on defense -- as he led a lackluster Dodgers team to a startling 10-10 tie.

After leaving pro ball, Red spent many years as one of the most respected end coaches in the country, first under Lou Little at Columbia and later at Washington U. He was known for his ability to take ordinary physical specimens and turn them into all-stars.

Today, he lives in quiet retirement in Kent, Washington.