

HUTSON BRINGS DOWN THE HOUSE!

By Pat Livingston

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The Steelers' rookie was upset. An All-America in a pro camp, he couldn't get over how the Green Bay Packers had walloped a great College All-Star team, 45-28, because the Stars didn't have a defense to stop a Packer receiver, Don Hutson, short of the goal line.

The rookie was Merlyn Condit, the finest running back who ever played at Carnegie Tech, getting ready for practice, as Tex Mayhew, the trainer, taped Condit's ankles, the Tartan grad confessed he was disillusioned in his debut against the pros.

"There's no excuse for a receiver to get open like that," Condit grumbled to Mayhew and Walt Kiesling, the Steeler's coach. "You can't tell me a good back, if he sets his mind to it, can't cover a receiver. Nobody's so good that somebody can't cover him."

"No one man can cover Don Hutson," shrugged the phlegmatic Kiesling. "The way you play Hutson, you double-team him -- or shoot him." Mayhew, strapping another strip of tape on Condit's ankle, agreed with the coach.

"Well, when we play the Packers, I'll cover Hutson," volunteered Condit. "He won't catch all those passes on me."

Kiesling and Mayhew traded glances, smiling at each other.

A couple of weeks later, in a game against the Steelers, Hutson caught the first 10 passes thrown his way. The Packers, who with the Chicago Bears dominated the NFL in those days, had the Steelers bagged by halftime.

Now this is not to embarrass Condit, a brilliant pro, but to recall the excellence of Hutson, the one player who, more than any other, symbolizes the Green Bay Packers. Hutson, the finest receiver I've ever seen, is the innovator who did more than anyone else's to make pro football the wide-open game it became.

Single-handedly, Hutson, the receiver who invented such routes as the Z-in and z-out, the button hook, the comeback and the hook-and-go, brought sophisticated passing to football. In a defensive game, he was the prototype offensive end.

Don't look for him in the record books, for most of the marks he established are gone. Hutson played in an era when NFL schedules called for 10 or 12 games a season, rather than the 14 and 16 of modern times.

He never caught 600 passes, receivers like Charley Taylor, Don Maynard or Raymond Berry did, but were you to extend his four-catch-per-game average to the number of games these fellows played, Hutson would be the only receiver in history to have caught 700.

And no receiver in the NFL, no matter how long he played, ever matched the 99 touchdown (passes) Hutson -- often the only receiver in the pattern -- scored during his 11 years with the Pack.

I got to thinking about Hutson. Unlike Berry, who is associated with Johnny Unitas, or Taylor, who dredges up memories of Sonny Jurgensen, Hutson dominated quarterbacks whoever they were, Cecil Isbell or Clarke Hinkle. In the '40s in the NFL, he was the man. He dazzled the game.

I recall a game while I and my Press city-side colleague, John Place, were at the Navy's midshipmen's school at Northwestern. Hutson, who would score 17 touchdowns that year, was on a streak, scoring a touchdown or more in an impressive string of games.

This game involved the Bears. Two years before, the Bears had walloped the Redskins, 73-0, and had lost only to the Pack, 16-14 -- on a Don Hutson field goal, of course -- during an incredible streak of 28 games. Wrigley Field was jammed. Although he couldn't get me a ticket, George Halas arranged with his brother, Frank, to pass me through the gate.

As I said, the Bears were awesome. With two minutes to play, they scored their final touchdown, taking a 38-0 lead against the hated Packers. More important to Halas, the Bears had stopped Hutson's touchdown spree -- or had they?

Taking the kickoff, with nothing at stake but Hutson's streak, the beaten Packers started to drive. Throwing on every down, usually to Hutson, Isbell worked the ball in for a first- and 10 around the Chicago 20, with seconds left to play.

The mob was wild. Hutson was trailed by Bears wherever he went. And as Isbell's three passes fell incomplete, the Packers had fourth and 10, some 20 yards short of the end zone, the clock running down.

Then came the most incredible premeditated play I ever saw on a football field. It was no accident. There were no disputes. At its completion, every article that wasn't nailed down came sailing out of the stands. Hutson, the enemy, drew a standing ovation, the wildest demonstration I ever saw bestowed on an antagonist. Lining up as a flanker, harassed by three Bears, the cagy old Alabamian ran a simple post pattern, diagonally in on the twin-poled uprights, Bears convoying him, stride by stride.

As the four men raced under the bar, Hutson hooked his elbow around the upright, stopped abruptly, flung his body sharply left and left the red-faced Bears scrambling around in their cleats. He stood alone in the end zone as he casually gathered Isbell's throw to his chest.

"I'll never forget that pass," said Harry Clark, the old West Virginia star, when I ran into him a couple of months ago. "How could I?"

"Halas was fit to be tied," recalled Clark, one of Chicago's defenders on the play. "He sent us in there, three of us, expressly to cover Hutson. That's all we had to do. Oh, were we sick."

"Do you know who the other defenders were?" asked Clark as an after-thought.

I didn't recall.

Clark smiled. "Dante Magnani and George McAfee," said he.

"Could you pick any defenders better than them?"