

# Football's greatest decade

By Bernie McCarty

College football reached a dazzling peak in the forties, a decade featuring many of the greatest teams and individual performers of all time. World War II was directly responsible.

This writer will explain why no other decade has ever matched the forties in the history of the game. Nor can any future decade because the conditions which prevailed in the forties cannot be duplicated. If World War III occurs nobody may be left to play football.

Football seemed to explode in 1940 as the Great Depression screeched to a halt and America geared up for war. Because of the sheer number of outstanding teams, perhaps 1940 can be termed the best single year in grid history. It was the last "peacetime" season prior to the enactment of the Selective Service Act,

"The campaign of 1940 surpassed the march of the calendar, dating back to 1869, for the number of fine teams and high-grade stars," wrote Grantland Rice in announcing his 1940 All-America selections in Collier's magazine. "I doubt that any past season has shown as many exceptionally good teams as

Minnesota, Texas A&M, Stanford, Boston College, Georgetown, Tennessee, Michigan, Cornell, Nebraska, Fordham, Northwestern, Washington, Mississippi State, Mississippi, Pennsylvania -- not to overlook Penn State, SMU, Lafayette, and Texas Tech." And add to the list Santa Clara and Duquesne.

"In checking over the long list of All-America nominations as the season ended there were certain distinct elements that caught attention," continued Rice. Among these were the "amazing number of brilliant backs from every campus sector, East and West, North and South. This list surpassed any harvest crop in football history."

The star of stars was tailback Tommy Harmon of Michigan who was proclaimed Athlete of the Year in all sports by the Associated Press. And based upon comparative scores, Michigan was probably the season's strongest team. But Minnesota upset the Wolverines 7-6 in the mud to win the Big Nine championship and the mythical national crown. The third super club of 1940 was Stanford. The Indians, guided by coach Clark Shaughnessy, introduced the modern T-formation to college football and rolled to an undefeated season and 21-13 Rose Bowl victory over Nebraska.

Boston College and Tennessee also fielded unbeaten clubs in 1940. In a spectacular Sugar Bowl showdown, Boston College edged the Volunteers 19-13. Mississippi State, unbeaten but tied once, nipped Georgetown 14-7 in the Orange Bowl. Georgetown's lone loss during the regular season was by one point to Boston College. Texas A&M, the 1939 national champ, was upset by Texas 7-0 for its only loss, then defeated Fordham 13-12 in the Cotton Bowl. Santa Clara's one loss was by one point to Stanford. Nebraska's only loss during the regular season was to top-rated Minnesota. Southern Methodist's one setback was administered by Texas A&M, Penn's lone loss was to Michigan, and Northwestern lost only to Minnesota, by one point, and Michigan.

During the war many colleges abandoned football. The Navy did not quit the sport, however. Navy and Marine trainees assigned to colleges were encouraged to play football at the schools they attended. It was not unusual to find a player who had starred at one school the previous season playing for a rival school the next year, after being transferred by the Navy.

Among wartime powerhouses developed with the aid of Navy and Marine trainees were Notre Dame, Purdue, Northwestern, Michigan, Georgia Tech, Duke, North Carolina and Texas. And of course the Army and Navy service academies at West Point and Annapolis were downright awesome.

Many small schools fielded their best teams ever with the Navy's help. Among

these were Southwestern of Texas, Southwestern Louisiana Institute, DePauw, Colorado College, Rochester, and Arkansas A&M.

A few all-civilian colleges also managed to assemble great teams despite competing against service-strengthened schools. And helping keep schedules competitive was the fact military base teams played the colleges. The base clubs featured established college and professional stars.

Then in one furious burst, in 1946, three different groups of players converged on college campuses at the same time. For the sheer number of powerhouse teams and great individual players, the period 1946 extending through 1951 stands alone in the annals of college football.

In the first group were the stars of 1945 who continued to shine in later years, debunking the opinion of some sportswriters who claimed wartime freshman standouts would fold in "real" competition. We know today that freshmen can step right into varsity football, or any sport, and immediately grab the headlines.

Among the wartime freshman heroes who continued to star in college and professional football after the war were Doak Walker of SMU, Bobby Layne of Texas, Glenn Davis of Army, "Skippy" Minisi of Penn, Herman Wedemeyer of St. Mary's, "Buddy" Young of Illinois, Bob Hoernschemeyer of Indiana, Phil Colella of Notre Dame, Harry Gilmer of Alabama, George Taliaferro of Indiana, Frank Aschenbrenner of Marquette, Bob Davis of Georgia Tech, and Columbia's Gene Rossides and Lou Kusserow.

The second group that landed on college campuses in 1946 consisted of the returning stars who had their careers interrupted by the war. Many players, such as Georgia's famed Charlie Trippi, Indiana's remarkable Pete Pihos, Ernie Case of UCLA, and Layne and Wedemeyer, actually began returning in time for the 1945 season.

Great service discharges rejoining their college clubs or choosing new schools in 1946 included Bob Chappuis, "Bump" Elliott and Bob Wiese of Michigan, Ray Evans of Kansas, Dick Huffman of Tennessee, Joe Golding of Oklahoma, Frank Broyles of Georgia Tech, Tom Fears of UCLA, Forrest Hall of San Francisco, Johnny Lujack, George Connor, "Ziggy" Czarobski, Jim Mello and Jack Zilly of Notre Dame, Alex Agase, Julie Rykovich and Perry Moss of Illinois, Clyde LeForce of Tulsa, Weldon Humble of Rice, Charlie Conerly and Ray Poole of Mississippi, Dick Barwegan of Purdue, Rudy Mobley of Hardin-Simmons, and Steve Suhey of Penn State.

Combining with the other two groups was the third and most amazing group of all, the 1946 freshmen, many of whom were already famous after competing right out of high school with military base teams. The 1946 freshman crop included the likes of "Choo Choo" Justice of North Carolina, Emil Sitko and Leon Hart of Notre Dame, Levi Jackson of Yale, Lynn Chandnois of Michigan State, Art Murakowski of Northwestern, Leo Nomellini and "Bud" Grant of

Minnesota, Eddie Price of Tulane, and Auburn's Travis Tidwell.

Name any school, and one of the best teams in its history, if not the best, was developed during the forties.

This writer believes West Point 1945 is the greatest team of all time. The 1944 Army team may actually deserve that title, but it was never tested. Army was also undefeated in 1946, 1948 and 1949. Army's top stars during 1945-1949 were the effulgent "Touchdown Twins", Glenn Davis and "Doc" Blanchard, Arnold Tucker, Arnold Galiffa, "Rip" Rowan, Bobby Jack Stuart and Gil Stephenson in the back-field, and up front Joe Steffy, Art Gerometta, Jack Green, Bill Yoemans, Joe Henry "Tex" Coulter, Al Nemetz, and the sterling end duo of Hank Foldberg and "Barney" Poole.

In 1945 the Newspaper Enterprise Assoc. simply picked the entire Army team as its All-American team, stating no group of All-Americans could beat the Cadets.

Only a world war could have brought together such a collection of players to one institution. But it took the coaching genius of Col. Earl Blaik to mold the players into a cohesive unit. In truth, Navy personnel was equal to Army's on an individual basis. The Middies never jelled as a team, however.

The 1951 Army outfit might have been as good as the 1945 Cadets, but the infamous cribbing scandal wiped out the team. Players scattered to schools all over the country. Tackle J.D. Kimmell earned All-America fame at Houston. All-America linebacker Elmer Stout finished his career at Oklahoma State,, Quarterback Bob Blaik, the coach's son and a shoo-in for 1951 All-American recognition, elected not to play football. Gil Reich, Blaik's sub in 1950, turned up as an All-America quarterback at Kansas. Gene Filipski became the first All-American halfback in Villanova history. Al Pollard, a stunning fullback who compared favorably with Blanchard, jumped right from his second year at West Point into pro football.

The other super outfits of 1945-1949 were Michigan and Notre Dame. According to various polls, Army was the national champion in 1945, Notre Dame and Army shared the 1946 championship, Michigan and Notre Dame shared the 1947 title, and in 1948 it was Michigan and in 1949 Notre Dame. Many football "experts" rate the 1947 Notre Dame and Michigan clubs the finest in the histories of the two schools.

The following list is not intended to include all the top clubs of the forties. A few teams not already mentioned which could qualify as the best ever fielded by their schools are Texas 1941 and 1947, Virginia 1941, Ohio State 1942, Wisconsin 1942, Tulsa 1942, Notre Dame 1943, Purdue 1943, Northwestern



Fullback Norm Standlee, star line blaster on Stanford's unbeaten 1940 team.

1943 and 1948, Navy 1945, Alabama 1945 Oklahoma State 1945, Indiana 1945, Georgia 1946, Nevada 1946, Illinois 1946, Penn State 1947, SMU 1947, Kansas 1947, California 1948, North Carolina 1948, Rice 1949, and Oklahoma 1949.

All-time gridgers who frolicked during the forties? We'll list a few not already mentioned earlier in this essay, and hope to inspire letters from fans whose favorite choices were omitted.

Linemen: Chuck Bednarik, Penn; Rudy Mucha, Washington; Dave Schreiner, Wisconsin; Bill Willis and Warren Amling, Ohio State; Mal Kutner, Texas; Vince Banonis, Detroit, Dick Scott, Don Whitmire and Dick Duden, Navy; Charles Milner, Duke; Paul Severin, North Carolina; Ernie Stautner, Boston College; Len Ford, Bob Mann and the Wistert brothers, Alvin and Albert, Michigan; Bob Suffridge, Tennessee; Rod Franz and Bob Reinhard, California; "Bulldog" Turner, Hardin-Simmons; Burr Baldwin, UCLA; Clayton Tonnemaker and "Bud" Grant, Minnesota; Bill Fischer and Jim Martin, Notre Dame; Ray Apolskis, Marquette; "Chub" Peabody, Harvard; "Buddy" Elrod, Mississippi State; John Rapacz, Wade Walker and "Buddy" Burris, Oklahoma; Casimir Myslinski, Army; and Bill Swiacki, Columbia.

Backs: Bill Hillenbrand, Indiana; "Sonny" Franck and Bruce Smith, Minnesota; Bob Steuber and Paul Christman, Missouri; Norm Van Brocklin, Oregon; Frank Reagan and Bob Odell, Penn; Bill Dudley, Virginia; "Crazylegs" Hirsch and Pat Harder, Wisconsin; "Smackover" Scott, Navy and Arkansas; Bob Westfall, Michigan; Paul Governali, Columbia; Steve Van Buren and Y.A. Tittle, LSU; Creighton Miller and Angelo Bertelli, Notre Dame; Charlie O'Rourke and Mike Holovak, Boston College; John Kimbrough, Texas A&M; Frankie Albert, Norm Standlee, Pete Kmetovic and Hugh Gallerneau, Stanford; Bill Daley, Michigan and Minnesota; Bob Fenimore, Oklahoma State; Eddie LeBaron, College of Pacific; Frankie Sinkwich, Georgia; Tony Butkovich, Purdue; Glenn Dobbs, Tulsa; Otto Graham, Northwestern; Jackie Jensen, California; and Les Horvath, Ohio State.

And from the tailend of the decade; Johnny Karras, Illinois; Hugh McElhenny, Washington; Kyle Rote, SMU; Ollie Matson, San Francisco; Dick Kazmaier, Princeton; Harry Agganis, Boston U.; and Vic Janowicz, Ohio State.

Aside from birth and death,. there are never precise beginnings and endings in life. The super decade actually includes the period 1939 through 1951. This writer concedes there was one other decade nearly as wonderful considering the total number of great teams and individual players -- the twenties. But that is another story.