

The crippled champion

By Ray Schmidt

When Northwestern swept to the Big Ten co-title in 1926 behind the heroics of Ralph "Moon" Baker and Vic Gustafson, many observers had seen signs that the Purple's football program might at last be awakening. But with the coming of Dick Hanley as the new head coach in 1927 the Purple had lapsed back into average seasonal records for the balance of the decade.

With the arrival of the 1930 season Hanley was finally ready to reap the fruits of his recruiting efforts. The nucleus of a great team had been assembled in the 1929 season with offensive stars like Hank Bruder, Lee Hanley (the coach's brother) and end Frank Baker. To these Hanley added fine linemen like Dal Marvil, Jack Riley, Jimmy Evans and Red Woodworth.

Bruder, an outstanding running back from Pekin High School in Illinois, had been "jinxed" in his first two college seasons. In 1928 he had played only three games due to a muscle injury in his side, while in 1929 he had suffered a broken leg in the Big Ten opener and thus missed the rest of that season. But for 1930 Hanley was counting on Bruder to be the star back of the Purple team.

In their pre-season practice Northwestern had two new faces contending for backfield positions. The first was a sophomore from Joliet, Illinois High named Ernest "Pug" Rentner. Rentner was a track star and had been an All-State back in his senior year with touchdown totals that included five runs of 63 yards or longer. The other new back was Fayette "Reb" Russell who had prepped at Missouri Military Academy. A powerful 200 pounds and an all-around athlete, Russell had been an All-State quarterback for two years, captain of the basketball team and won three varsity letters in baseball. He had played quarterback for Nebraska's 1928 powerhouse, and was named Honorable Mention on the AP All-American team before transferring to Northwestern.

With Bruder, Lee Hanley and Al Moore at three of the backfield spots, "the battle for the fullback slot continues unabated. Pug Rentner and Reb Russell are putting up a determined effort to win the job with apparently little to choose between them. Rentner's ability as a passer and kicker, in addition to his running game, give him the edge." Then, fate stepped in to settle the backfield question. Three days before the season opener the right halfback, Al Moore, came down with the flu. Coach Hanley tried a new backfield arrangement that day in practice, as he shifted his brother from quarterback to right half, moved Russell to quarterback and gave the fullback job to Rentner, with Bruder remaining at left half. This probably would have happened eventually since both Rentner and Russell were showing so much promise that it was going to be very difficult to bench either one. The Purple backfield now averaged 185 pounds per man.

For this great backfield Hanley employed the Warner "Double Wing" formation. The Wildcats would set-up with an unbalanced line to the right with the wingbacks (halfbacks) a yard behind and a yard outside the ends. The quarterback lined up directly behind the right guard and the snap went to the fullback (tailback). This formation required a fullback who was a good ball-handler, line plunger and passer. The alignment also led to using the wingbacks for various types of reverses and double-reverses.

Most pre-season forecasters were aware of the potential powerhouse which Northwestern had assembled and the consensus was that "here is the best

bet for the Big Ten title, but it is no cinch. The line is the heaviest, most powerful and most experienced in the conference. The backfield hinges on the ability of Captain Bruder, who should be a great all-around star and on the showing of two highly touted fullbacks, Rentner and Russell. Northwestern seems to be the favorite for the championship this year, and rightly so."

The opener for the 1930 season was on Oct 4 against the very powerful team of Tulane coached by Bernie Bierman. The Green Wave had gone undefeated in 1929 as they won the Southern Conference title, and they were on their way to an overall record of 28-2 for the seasons of 1929-1931.

Tulane had opened the 1930 season the week before with an 84-0 win over Southwest Louisiana and, paced by their star backs Don Zimmerman and Hugh Whatley, the team from Dixie was expected to give the young Northwestern squad a lot more of an early test than they might want. Hanley was understandably concerned and noted that "we plan to shoot the works if necessary to win this game. We wanted a hard game for the opener, but I fear we have taken just a trifle too much for our own good."

On a beautiful day for football 35,000 fans watched the teams struggle through a scoreless first period. Then early in the second quarter Tulane's quarterback Dawson fired a pass which Bruder picked off in full stride, dodged two tacklers and sped 54 yards for the Northwestern TD and a 7-0 lead. Late in the period, after Bruder's punting had kept Tulane deep in their own territory, Lee Hanley returned a kick 15 yards to the Tulane 38 yard line. From here the Purple staged a drive behind the power running of Russell and Bruder, which ended when Rentner went over right tackle for the 1 yard TD and a 14-0 lead at half-time. Most of the second half saw Northwestern attacking in Tulane territory but coming away scoreless, while the Green Wave could mount only one scoring threat. So it ended as a 14-0 opening day win for the Purple of Coach Dick Hanley.

Having already lost Reb Russell when it was announced that he was ineligible to play for two weeks "on a technicality", Northwestern's offense suffered another setback when Hank Bruder was too ill to play as the Scarlet and Gray from Ohio State charged into Dyché Stadium. The Wildcats got an immediate break when Holcomb, the Buckeye fullback, lost a fumble on the Ohio 27 yard line. Two plays went nowhere and then Rentner fired a pass to Hanley in the end-zone for the TD and a 7-0 lead. But the Buckeyes battled right back and, starting from their 20, marched behind the running of Horn and Hinchman to the Purple 5 yard line. Here Frank Baker, from his defensive end spot, made the big play in sacking Hinchman for a 10 yard loss and the Buckeye drive ended.

Then in the second period Northwestern started a drive from midfield as Rentner and Hanley began ripping off nice runs. The drive ended as Rentner passed to Baker in the end-zone for the TD and a 13-0 lead. Two minutes later Rentner intercepted a Holcomb pass near midfield and outran the Buckeyes into the end-zone for the TD to end up the 19-2 Wildcat victory. The next day Hanley led all members of the football team, the athletic department and fifty fraternity men through inoculations against the

spread of the smallpox that had felled the "hard-luck" Bruder.

Then the Purple went on the road to meet a young Illini team and they needed a Rentner interception to ward off an early threat. Later Rentner passed 20 yards to Baker for the first TD, and in the third period Rentner passed 22 yards to Baker for another score. Illinois then kicked off, and Rentner roared straight up the middle of the field, shook off two tacklers, cut to the left sideline and raced 98 yards for the TD that broke the game open. When Frank Baker intercepted Gil Berry's pass and returned it 50 yards for a TD, it capped the 32-0 victory for the Purple.

The fourth week of the season found the Praying Colonels of Centre College visiting Northwestern. This game saw the return of Reb Russell and the big back celebrated by blasting for a pair of first quarter TD's on runs of 13 and 22 yards. Centre fought back in the second period and staged a nice drive that resulted in the first TD of the year given up by the Wildcat defense. But a short time later Rentner's 26 yard TD run started an avalanche of TD's by Russell, Hanley, Baker and Rentner again, for the 45-7 victory.

For the Minnesota game Bruder was back but was obviously still feeling the effects of his illness. The game was scoreless well into the second quarter before Rentner connected on a 30 yard TD pass to Baker. Shortly after this Rentner passed to Baker in the flat, who quickly lateralled to Hanley, and the fleet back raced for a 72 yard TD. In the second half Russell's power running pounded the Gopher line into submission on two long TD drives, and more than matched that of Minnesota's Jack Manders. The 27-6 victory stamped Northwestern as a candidate for the national title. Of major consequence was a serious injury to Pug Rentner's right arm which ended the season for the brilliant sophomore.

With Rentner out, Coach Hanley moved Russell to the fullback spot. While he was an extremely powerful line plunger, Russell was not as good a ball handler or passer as Rentner. Bruder and Russell staged another exhibition of power football against Indiana in producing the drives for the first pair of TD's which were scored by Russell on short runs. Bruder and Hanley fired TD passes to round off the easy 25-0 victory.

With one conference game still to play, attention in the Northwestern camp was already being focused on the showdown with Notre Dame. Recognizing the great attraction of the Notre Dame game, the athletic officials at Northwestern sought to have the game moved from Dyché Stadium to the more spacious Soldier Field in Chicago. Rockne said it made no difference to him where they played and Stagg's Chicago team would be on the road that day. Northwestern indicated that the anticipated additional gate proceeds of approximately \$200,000 would be turned over to charity, and this being the Depression, that would be no small amount of change.

But Northwestern failed to reckon with the Big Ten Faculty Committee and the Shriners. On Thanksgiving Day, five days after the Notre Dame game, the Shriners would be sponsoring a benefit game at Soldier Field between West Virginia and Oregon, and they felt that holding the Notre Dame game on the same field would hurt their anticipated attendance. For whatever reasons,

the Faculty Committee disallowed the request for fear that approving the move might establish "a precedent to further inroads on the rules."

In the final conference game, after trailing Wisconsin 7-0 at half-time on a blocked punt TD, the Purple roared back with a fury. A fumble recovery at the Wisconsin 6 yard line led to a quick TD by Russell to tie the score. The Purple next staged a short drive behind the battering runs of Russell, Bruder and Hanley, with Hanley scoring the TD on a 20 yard run. A final TD by Russell capped off the 20-7 victory, which assured the Purple of a tie for the Conference title with Michigan, and touched off parties and celebrations all over the campus.

The big finale was scheduled for November 22nd against an undefeated Notre Dame team considered to be greater than even the 1924 team of the Four Horsemen. Rockne lamely said they were quite battered after the Drake game and he feared that their murderous schedule had taken too much out of the Irish. They also had suffered a loss when Joe Savoldi quit school in mid-November to avoid being expelled, after claims were made that he was married, which was clearly against the school's regulations. Despite this most bettors had Notre Dame as 2-1 favorites, or two touchdowns, in what was expected to be the clash for the national title.

Throughout the first half Northwestern was clearly the dominant force as they maintained possession of the ball most of the time. In the second period Clark of Northwestern intercepted a pass and returned it to the Irish 40. Behind the power running of Russell, Bruder and Hanley to Purple blasted to the Irish 7 yard line. Here Russell, on his seventh straight carry, crashed into the middle and fumbled, with Frank Carideo recovering at the 3 for Notre Dame.

A few seconds later Carideo also fumbled and Northwestern had the ball back on the Irish 5 yard line. Russell plowed into the line twice to move the ball to the 2, but Bruder then fumbled and Notre Dame had it back at their 1. The Irish punted out to their 35 and the scoreless first half ended.

In the second half the balance of power shifted to Notre Dame, beginning with a drive from their own 33 to the Northwestern 30 yard line. Time-after-time the Irish staged medium-length drives only to be stopped by the powerful Wildcat defensive line. Carideo kept the Wildcats bottled up for most of the second half with his excellent punting, booting kicks out of bounds in succession at Northwestern's 2, 10 and 11.

Then with eight minutes left in the game Carideo punted again, but a roughing penalty gave the Irish a first down at the Wildcat 25. After the loss of two yards Marchmont Schwartz slipped over right tackle, cut to the sideline and sped 27 yards for the TD and a 7-0 Notre Dame lead. The Northwestern crowd was stunned.

After exchanging a couple punts Notre Dame intercepted a pass at the Wildcat 25 with less than three minutes to play. The drive was about to stall when Schwartz completed a 13 yard, fourth down pass to Conley at the 1. Dan Hanley then crashed in for the TD and the clock ran out shortly on Notre Dame's 14-0 victory.

After the game Coach Hanley stated his belief that the Wildcats had played better in all aspects except the passing game. He also refused to discuss the critical roughing penalty that led to the first TD of the contest. What Hanley also didn't discuss was how much the Purple missed the passing and ball-handling of Rentner at the fullback spot. Without Rentner the attack

lacked the diversity that could have made the difference in the game. Many years later the great Northwestern lineman Jack Riley stated that Rentner's absence meant much more than Savoldi's and cost the Purple the game. In words that ring down through the decades Hanley said that "I'll take issue with anyone who says the best team won."

Statistically the 1930 Wildcats (7-1) are a difficult problem due to the fact that the media was still inconsistently reporting game figures. After extensive researching I have so far compiled six games that show the Wildcats with an average of 238 yards per game total offense (146 rushing/92 passing) and 135 yards per game on defense (75 rushing/60 passing). Five of the top ten individual scoring leaders in the conference were Wildcats, headed by Reb Russell's league leading total of 49 points.

In post-season honors the Wildcats added the number four spot in the National Dickinson Ratings (behind Notre Dame, Washington State and Alabama) to their Conference co-championship. Red Woodworth at guard and Frank Baker at end were voted first team AP All-Americans, while Bruder was voted to the second team with Rentner and Russell receiving Honorable Mention. On the North American Alliance AA team, picked by four prominent coaches, Reb Russell received first team selection with Baker on the second team. Even today most historians consider the 1930 Wildcats as the best team ever produced at Northwestern, and one of the greatest teams in Big Ten history.