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Georgia Tech's 1917 backfield, better than the Four Horsemen

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PART 1

Notre Dame's famed Four Horsemen backfield of 1924 was a beautifully coordinated machine which exploded with blinding speed. But for sheer total performance, this writer rates the Georgia Tech backfield of 1917 superior, ranking as perhaps the greatest backfield college football had seen until the Glenn Davis-Doc Blanchard West Point outfit of the mid forties.

The East was still considered the center of the football world in the teens, with an occasional nod to the Middle West. Nobody, however, disputed Georgia Tech's claim to the national crown in 1917 because the Golden Tornado proved its merit on the field, scheduling the right opponents.

Georgia Tech dispatched nine foes without working up a sweat. The key games were against Pennsylvania and Auburn, Unbeaten Pittsburgh edged Penn 14-6. Tech crushed Penn 41-0. That result alone would have been enough to earn Tech the mythical national title. The clincher was an equally amazing 68-7 thrashing of Auburn in the season's finale. The week before Auburn had battled Big Ten champion Ohio State to a scoreless draw.

Tornado halfback Everett Strupper was named to most everybody's All-America team in 1917. Halfback Big Chief Joe Guyon, the old Carlisle star, was voted to most All-America second teams. Quarterback Albert Hill received some All-America attention, and all three backs were unanimous all-conference choices. The fullback was freshman Judy Harlan who gained much recognition after the first world war.

This writer is not an expert concerning grid formations. Tech probably operated from the short punt formation in vogue at the time, the

interim formation between the old T and the development of the single and double wing alignments, Judging from photos, Strupper and Guyon appear to have alternated at tailback, probably after Tech moved into coach John Heisman's famous jump shift from which the team paused for only a second and then ignited. Guyon and Strupper served as key blockers for each other, along with Hill, either into the line or wide.

Luckily, the Atlanta Journal, Atlanta Constitution, New Orleans Times-Picayune and other Southern papers were big on compiling statistics at the time and presented detailed game reviews. These papers, however, utilized their own method of computing team stats which often differed from the play-by-play figures,

All stats presented here for individual players are to be considered only "approximate" figures compiled from play-by-play reports. But the stats are close enough to the truth to provide an accurate indicator of how each gridder performed during the season. We'll let that ace statistical researcher, Mark Purcell, determine the "real" figures when he gets around to examining the 1917 season.

Strupper ranks among the greatest broken-field gallopers in Southern football history. And he caught and threw passes, returned kicks, blocked well, punted and played a bang-up defensive game. Strupper*s "approximate" rushing stats for seven games are 99 carries, 1002 yards, and a 10.1 average. Toss in the Auburn game, in which he reeled off several long runs, and Strupper probably rushed for about 1150 yards and an even higher average. He could be the national rushing leader of 1917.

Guyon may have been even better than Strupper. As a runner Guyon didn't bother with fancy stuff. A 200-pounder, he simply ran over people. Some sources state Guyon was the fastest football player in America at the time. He didn't carry the ball as often as he should have, apparently because he was a tremendous blocker. In addition, Guyon was a remarkable passer, kicker and defender. In later years historians would rank Guyon among the South's most versatile backs of all time. In six games Guyon rushed 84 times for 618 yards, a 7.4 average. He easily could have gained 200 additional yards in his other two games.

Hill and Harlan were mighty versatile performers, too. Hill was the club's workhorse plunger, blocked well, kicked, and was often spectacular on defense. He was the most underrated of Tech's stars. Harlan provided a fourth strong blocker in the backfield, and came up with notable big plays on defense. Hill's six-game rushing figures are 125 carries, 669 yards, and an average of 5.4. Since he played in all nine Tech games, Hill certainly gained more yardage than Guyon. In six games Harlan rushed 59 times for 341 yards and a 5.8 average.

Thus, only for the games roughly charted from play-by-play reviews, the Tornado backfield rushed for 2630 yards, averaging over seven yards per attempt. Throw in the missing stats and the total of the four backs is well over 3000 yards. According to the NCAA, in nine games the 1924 Four Horsemen rushed 336 times for 1944 yards. The real difference is the average gain, 5.8 for the Horsemen against a schedule no stronger. Include Tech's many long runs on kick, interception and fumble returns, and the all-purpose average gain margin is even greater.

And in every other facet of the game, offensively and defensively, except perhaps in the matter of overall team speed, the nod goes to the Golden Tornado. Individually, the argument can be made Guyon and Strupper were swifter than any of the Horsemen.

Hill captured the national scoring title in 1917, tallying 22 touchdowns. Strupper was the #2 scorer with 20 touchdowns. And Guyon probably ranked among the nation's top 10 scorers with 15 touchdowns and eight conversions. Harlan counted five TD's, while Bill Fincher, who played everywhere in the line, booted 49 extra points.

Like the Four Horsemen, Georgia Tech's backs benefited from a solid line in 1917. Captain Walker Carpenter was an All-American tackle. Center Pup Phillips had been named to Walter Camp's All-America third team the year before. And Fincher would later earn first team All-America honors as an end.

Now for a review of the season. Morgan Blake of the Atlanta Journal covered Tech in inspired fashion, and certainly was Joe Guyon's biggest fan. All quotes presented here are by Blake unless otherwise noted.

Georgia Tech scheduled two games on opening day, defeating Furman 25-0 and Wake Forest 33-0. Coach Heisman split his squad for the two contests. Hill and Harlan saw duty in both games, while Strupper and Guyon performed only against Wake Forest. Strupper ran wild, racing for 198 yards and three touchdowns, one a 70-yarder, in just nine carries. The real excitement for Tech fans, however, was provided by Guyon. Big Chief had been ineligible to play in 1916 because of the conference transfer rule. On his first carry from scrimmage Guyon dashed 75 yards to paydirt and immediately captured the heart of every Tornado rooter.

One wonders why Guyon ranks among the most popular athletes in Georgia Tech history. There was no more racist area in the country at the time. Perhaps it was because Guyon didn't look like an Indian. He was bigger, appeared more muscular, and was far handsomer than Jim Thorpe, for example. Or maybe it was because Georgia Tech was always a leader among Southern schools concerning race relations.

Tech 41, Penn 0. Penn's only losses were to Tech and Pitt. This was Strupper's finest hour, coming through against powerful Penn in the contest that shocked

the East. Strupper rushed 13 times for 173 yards and two touchdowns. The New York Evening Telegram termed Strupper a "20-year old marvel. Southern critics hail Strupper as being superior to even Mahan, Oliphant, McLaren or any of the other backs whose achievements have featured recent gridiron campaigns. He already has proven his superiority over (All-America fullback) Howard Berry in the game in which Tech overwhelmed Penn. Berry stood directly in front of the onrushing southerner four times, but each time Strupper managed to evade him. He is like a phantom in an open field and picks his openings with uncanny skill."

Hill was the workhorse, as usual, with three touchdowns and 104 yards in 27 plunges. And Harlan helped out with a 66-yard interception return for a TD. Tech's defense was as awesome as its attack. In the first half, from scrimmage, the Tornado gained 276 yards, Penn 11. Penn went to the air in the second half, once reaching the five-yard stripe before being hurled back to the 25.

Strupper sailed 70 yards on Tech's second play from scrimmage after being launched into the secondary by the blocking of Hill and Guyon. Two leaping defenders appeared to have Strupper sandwiched, but he turned on the juice and burst between them, Berry, the last defender, had a clear shot and missed completely. The Golden Tornado's second scoring advance was a beauty and went like this: Guyon 25 kickoff return, Hill 2, Guyon 17, Hill 2, Strupper 16, Hill 2, Guyon 10, Hill 5, Guyon 0, Hill 2, Strupper 12, Hill 1-yard TD. The tally was 20-0 at intermission, and Tech demoralized Penn by parading 60 yards in five plays with the second half kickoff. Here's how it went: Strupper 30 return, Guyon 18, Strupper 0, Hill 5, Strupper 20, Hill 27 yards for the score.

"After the deeds of the immortal trio, Strupper and Guyon and Hill have been heralded to the four corners of the globe -- let us render unto Caesar's that which is Caesar's, Let us speak for the moment of John Heisman. Surely it must be a genius who can mould a machine like this in so short a time. Every piece of the juggernaut worked in harmony. The runners were protected by a moving wall of human brawn. This interference to us was the most remarkable feature of the afternoon. This together with the famous Heisman jump shift makes a combination that we don't believe any team in America could handle successfully. Like old wine, John Heisman improves with age."

Tech 32, Davidson 10. Davidson was the second best club in the South in 1917, whipping Auburn, the team that tied unbeaten Ohio State, 31-6. This was the only game in which none of Tech's backs gained 100 yards rushing. Combined, however, the Tornado quartet hammered Davidson for 236 yards in 55 carries. There may have been a letdown following the big triumph over Penn.

With Tech leading only 6-3, Strupper was mainly responsible for breaking open the game in the second half. In order he ran nine yards for one touchdown, passed 16 yards to Hill for another tally, and set up yet another score by recovering a fumbled punt at Davidson's 29. And Strupper's 105 yards on six punt returns helped keep Davidson in trouble. Harlan added the final TD by hauling back an interception 40 yards. Hill totaled three touchdowns, while Guyon was an all-around standout. Guyon uncorked several long punts and came up with an amazing defensive play when he missed a tackle, got up and ran the ball carrier down from behind to prevent a score.

Tech 63, Washington & Lee 0. Everybody starred here, with top honors to Hill who scored four touchdowns, "Hill was the miracle man of the tremendous victory. He was ably assisted by Joe Guyon. The big indian was the incarnation

of fury in his assaults on the line that cracked under his bull-like rushes like the Huns before a British tank. But taking the whole game into consideration, Albert Hill must be awarded laurels as the greatest hero of the day."

Hill scored on 40 and 14-yard runs from scrimmage, and plucked a fumble out of the air and scooted 30 yards to the goal line. The most startling play of the contest followed a Guyon punt into the endzone. "While the Generals stood in a trance and gazed at the ball, Hill dashed after the pigskin and fell on it for a touchdown." Guyon scored 3 TD's and kicked seven conversions. Strupper, hampered by a leg injury, played only in the first half and still rushed for 128 yards and one TD in 15 attempts. Pup Phillips also had a spectacular tally here, returning an interception 30 yards.

Tech 83, Vanderbilt 0. And this was not a weak Vandy club. Everybody contributed in sensational style. But it was Guyon who blew writer Blake's mind. Here is Blake's passionate appraisal of Big Chief's performance.

"Up until Saturday afternoon, Alexander Hiawatha, right halfback for the Ojibways in the early days of American traditions, was considered the most famous Indian in history. But Saturday Hiawatha's crown was usurped by the Hon. Joseph Guyon. No tongue can tell, no pen can proclaim the wonderful work of this mighty Indian athlete in that terrific Vanderbilt debacle yesterday. No single hero in gridiron annals has ever touched in all-around work Joe Guyon's matchless performance on Grant Field, when he led the "Golden Tornado" to a brilliant victory of 83 to 0 over the dazed warriors from Vanderbilt.

"Guyon has been great in all the games this year. But Saturday he was the superman. Whether it was in running with the ball, supplying interference, hurling faultless forward passes or smashing the Vanderbilt attack, he was always in the limelight. The Commodores could not stop him. Seldom could they even throw him off his feet.

"And in making interference -- oh, ye Immortal Gods! He blazed a path for the other backs to follow that was beautiful to behold. Sometimes he would bowl over two and three Commodores with his own agile body. His shooting of forward passes was absolutely perfect, and four times his long ones to Guill and Strupper and Hill paved the way for touchdowns."

Blake apparently got carried away and credited Guyon with 344 yards on 12 "runs", a figure officially accepted by the NCAA as a pre-1937 national mark for average gain. Two big gains attributed to Guyon in Blake's summary don't exist (40-yard run was nullified by penalty). Guyon's truer stats, from play-by-play review, are nine rushes for 124 yards, two kickoff returns for 95 yards, and four pass completions for 80 yards -- a total of 15 plays for 299 yards which isn't bad.

To be continued in CFHS issue No. 4