

# Whizzer White: a pop-art icon of the Thirties

By Mark Purcell

Byron "Whizzer" White, Colorado University 1935-37, was one of the pop-art icons of the Thirties. As a Phi Beta Kappa Rhodes Scholar and football All-American who blew the PE types off the field between cracking his law books, White was the sports hero of the decade who came closest to capturing the special college-boy appeal of Christy Mathewson.

White's whole legend grows from one fantastic 1937 superstar senior season. As a sophomore he suffered a permanent knee injury that should have shelved him as a running back, but what saved him was his natural athletic ability and playing a lot of basketball at Colorado U. (CU). The basketball court sudden cuts and turns somehow strengthened the supportive leg structure so that he could make the same cuts and turns on a football field, and by 1936, as a junior, he was already a star regional back in Rocky Mountain Conference football.

I speculate that White ran like a gymnast somewhat on the Jon Arnett model. Most photo-stills of great runners, except the faked shots taken on the practice fields, look unexciting because of course the main concern of the football runner is focused on body balance, being able to smash through arm tackles. By contrast, there is a 1937 Denver Post action-still of White that looks posed, so off-balance and stylized is White. But of course, for White it wasn't "off-balance,"

When he reached his big year, White's regional feats in the Rockies were so superlative they are on paper almost uninteresting. In the second of his two big 1936-37 games against the traditional rival Utah, he basically won the game with a brilliant 89-yard fourth quarter punt return against 10 unblocked Utah coverage men. This made it 10-7 Colorado in an exciting contest, but like a showoff he broke away later for a 57-yard TD run. In the same way White had two games, not one, where he is credited with 83-yard punts over the opposition's safety man, to the one-yard line.

Nine of his 16 season TD runs went 46 yards or longer, and the game reports give the general impression he threw away anything under 20 yards or so. This impression is not misleading. As a senior star player on his team, White was the logical choice to quarterback it and call the plays. Early season the CU coach was griping to the Post that White was letting his fullback, Cheney, have all the short chipshot TD's and thus was damaging his All-American chances.

My own guess is that White was only partly being altruistic and partly making a tradeoff: letting his lead blocker Cheney have the small-size TD's, in turn psyching him up to clear the way for all those 46-yards-plus TD's of White's. White's ability to conduct himself in public was flawless, and he seems to have never had any of the social problems, fueled by surrounding jealousy, that affected some superstars. He made Phi Beta Kappa during the football season; when the CU president went into the locker room after a game, he found the Whizzer on the rubbing table in the middle of a law book.

When White was lured into the pre-war NFL by a superstar-rookie salary, he seems to have had the same socializing ability, though this was helped by his continuing to be a superstar player. In later years White was successful in a political appointment and became one of John Kennedy's most successful

personal appointments after he joined the Supreme Court. Also, the Career Achievement Award made by the NFL Players is now in White's name, a very suitable choice. But back to 1937.

As a conference, between 1925-41 the Rookies were mostly dominated by Ike Armstrong's Utah teams, with CU second-best or good first-division. But 1934-37 Utah suffered the mysterious four-year drought suffered elsewhere the same four years by such regional dynastic powers as USC and Michigan. CU had a good coach, Bunny Oakes from Montana, who had an excellent five-year reign at CU until his mysterious resignation immediately after winning the 1939 conference title.

With his star tailbacks, Kayo Lam 1935 and White 1936-37, Oakes seems to have run some standard version of the prewar single wing built around a triple threat tailback. The offense was rush-oriented and Oakes, technical innovation, according to White, was in how he coached punt returns. The CU safety was coached to take the ball on the run, with his momentum built up. Whatever Oakes had them doing, Rockies, defenses could not handle it in the mid-30's, and both Lam and White killed their foes on kick returns. In fact, Lam (at 145 lbs.) had 1935 all-purpose season stats extremely similar to White's for 1937.

But White, who has the size of a big prewar halfback, had several advantages over Lam. He was more dangerous on pass defense and he was a memorable punter, obviously with great leg drive. No doubt the Rocky time zone air was a little help here, but White went on to average 40 yards per punt in the pros in such eastern areas as Pittsburgh and Detroit. What White gave CU was "the package." In 1937 there may have been individuals as good in single offensive areas, but there was no better punter than White, no better kick returner, no better scrimmage runner, and perhaps no better pass defender. This would be fantasie now with one player, but prewar football, with its high premium put on the kicking game, made White even more valuable in his own era.

How well could he pass? The greatest pro-college tailbacks of White's time, the late 30's, were either excellent, or at the least, very effective passers: Cecil Isbell, Parker Hall, Tan Harmon, Kenny Washington. By their standards, White was, in college, a marginal passer, though he did the team passing. His NFL Stats, in David Neft's Pro Football book, suggest White worked on his passing in the pros, especially his interception percentage.

The other limit we can put to White's 1937 achievements concerns his schedule. That year (1937) CU played five major foes in a total of nine games, counting the Cotton Bowl. Four breathers is a little high by the late 30's; the man who beat White for the 1937 Heisman, Clint Frank of Yale, played seven teams

(8-game season) as good as anybody White played, except his Bowl foe, Rice of the SWC. In compensation, though, White and the starters would get pulled by coach Oakes once they blew out to a commanding lead, and by depression rules for a star senior player, White had fairly low actual playing time. In the final against Denver, the coach definitely let White stay in to run up his statistics, but Denver was a very competitive team that just could not handle White. Even in this game White avoided the chipshot TD as his three TD runs ranged from 19 to 52 yards. This was aside from two TD passes, four extra points and a 55-yard kickoff return.

I think White and his fans would have rated the two Utah games his best, with the 1936 contest possibly being his best single game. The team statistics are weird enough to show the peculiar problems White created for 30's Rockies, defenses. Utah had a sound, boring ball-control offense which outyarded CU from scrimmage about 2:1 and out-first downed CU by a 19-3 margin. In reply White made one scrimmage TD and his one pass completion was good for another 35-yard TD. But where he killed Utah was on the kicking game and turnovers. His long punts negated Utah's ball-control yardage 80 that Utah wound up with only 7 points in the game, and worse, White scored three more TD's on kick returns: 88 yards with a kickoff, 40 and 33 yards returning desperate Utah punts from their endzone after White's own kicking had backed them up. By all the rules of statistics, Utah had been the dominant team yet wound up looking at a 31-7 loss.

In 1937 in the big season game for both teams, Utah once again was physically dominant during the first three quarters, and White once again was effective running from scrimmage. But this time Utah held him down to one field goal for a 7-3 Utah lead. In the fourth quarter a Utah punt went to White on the CU 11-yard line and a Denver Post reporter counted 10 men down on coverage for Utah. White probably made the usual on-the-run CU-style catch but his running angle was negative, back towards the sidelines. White found his opening at the five and cut upfield, but the reporter could see no further cutting room for him at all in a crowd of tacklers. But White had enough speed and agility to use this sideline apace to race back 95 yards for the TD, kick the extra point, and turn the game around. When CU got the ball back later, White broke off a 57-yard run and finished with close to 170 scrimmage yards and all his team's points in a 17-7 win over, except for him, was probably a better team.

In 1937 Utah was in the midst of a five-game streak for White where he would run up 110-210 rushing yards from scrimmage each game. He would score 2-3 TD's each game, kick extra points and have his individual scoring up to 21-23 points most of the time before the coach pulled him. Utah and Denver were probably the only foes in this stretch that he faced as late as the fourth quarter. His individual honors were consensus All-American and second place in the Heisman voting.

The team reward was an invitation to the January, 1938 Cotton Bowl to face Rice, the SWC champion. The late 30's Cotton Bowls were private promotions and mainly showcases for some visiting star player who would draw a crowd in Dallas on New Year's Day.

Colorado's opponent, Rice (5-3-2), had come out on top in a weird 1937 SWC season. Probably the best team by overall personnel, TCU, went 4-4-2 playing a brutal schedule. (TCU was 1938 consensus poll national champion with mostly the same personnel.) Rice opened scoreless in its first three games, but by scheduling luck these were all non-conference games. The star Owl sophomore

recruit, Ernie Lain, who did their passing, recovered from a preseason injury and came back to lead them to a 5-1-1 record the rest of the way. Lain was a good inside runner and a more effective college passer than White, and Rice was a solid team with overall personnel superior to Colorado's and playing on a familiar field in Dallas.

Rice defended White to 63 scrimmage yards, not much even then, and what is more important, the Whizzer was neutralized on those deadly kick returns, Rice followed the prewar book on how a team plays orthodox football and yet at one point very early in the game Colorado was leading 14-0 in an era when major games were decided by low scores. If CU had physically belonged on the field with Rice, those 14 early points would have probably been enough to guarantee a tie at the minimum.

What had happened early was two Rice turnovers, one a fumble lost at its 40. This set up the only serious CU drive of the whole game, as they pushed the ball down to the Rice eight where White hit his wingback Anconio with a TD pass. The other turnover came when White picked off a pass and returned it for 47 yards and another score. His automatic PAT kicks put CU up 14-0.

After this Rice took White out of the game with a ball-control attack, inside running and short passing, that made White at safety irrelevant. Rice, winning 28-14, ran up over 400 yards in total offense. Their star Lain had 201 yards himself, doing all the significant team passing.

This seems to leave us with only one question concerning the Whizzer's college career. Comparatively, in his own time, how good was he? The big running halfback of White's time (1936-37) was Marshall Goldberg at Pitt. Goldberg had the better rushing year in 1936; 1937 vs. much the easier schedule, White was better. Some expert who saw them both play during 1937 told the Denver Post he believed Goldberg had slightly the quicker pickup and drive hitting the line, but that White was more dangerous in the open field. This subjective estimate pretty well fits their player stats which appear in Steve Boda's 1969 Galaxy book. From the special evidence of his 1938 senior season at Pitt, Goldberg was the better blocker. But otherwise White had too many guns and talent and was the superior tailback.

The 1937 Heisman Trophy went to Clint Frank of Yale. Frank was a very good back, a more effective college passer than White, an unusually great defender who both intercepted passes and played smashing linebacker, a good man under pressure and an inarguably sound choice for the Heisman. For 1937, after researching microfilmed newspaper reports on both backs, I regard White as incomparably the star collegian football player of the year. But he and Frank have more or less accompanied each other into sports glory as the football legends of that interesting season.