

Purcell disputes NCAA figures

By Bernie McCarty

Mark Purcell, a valued contributor to the CFHS Journal, is recognized as one of the country's leading researchers into the history of college football, primarily in the area of player and team statistics prior to 1937. Purcell has also discovered there are serious errors in statistical data for the period 1937, the first year the NCAA began compiling "official" stats, through the early Forties.

Colorado tailback Byron (Whizzer) White was proclaimed the individual national champion in four statistical categories in 1937, the first and only gridder to achieve this distinction. His titles were for rushing, total offense, scoring, and points from kicking. And White set an all-purpose running record which may still stand today.

White's accepted 1937 rushing figures were 1121 yards in 181 carries. He played in eight games. Purcell says White's true rushing stats are 159 carries for 1086 yards. That's only a difference of 35 yards, but there is a significant change in the number of carries, enhancing White's performance with a higher average gain per play. In either case, White retains his 1937 rushing crown, either by the old rule (total season yards gained) or new rule (based on average yards per game).

White's passing figures, according to Purcell, were 22 completions in 48 attempts for 314 yards. Thus, Purcell gives White 1400 total yards in 207 plays. The NCAA "officially" lists White as having gained 1596 total yards in 224 plays. So why the differences?

"The first statistical problem with White is that his scrimmage rush yards were inflated by feeding into his totals the post-season yards from the Cotton Bowl, thus inflating his rushing, total offense, all-purpose yards, and per-game averages all at the same time," said Purcell. "This is the basic error about White's stats in the standard reference a reader is likely to use, trustingly. For example, my copy of the Colorado media guide uses White's Bowl rush yards while omitting his Bowl passing to figure regular-season total offense yards for the Whizzer.

"What saves White's all-purpose running record is that in figuring another section of his yards, kick returns, there is a deflation of his overall punt return yardage from the original SID and Denver Post figures. This makes his final corrected sum total only about three yards lower than as printed in the guides -- and still a safe 17 yards per game ahead of the #2 record holder, Ollie Matson of San Francisco in 1951."

Also, according to Purcell, in 1937 Colorado as a team rushed for a 285.4 per-game average, and compiled a total offense average of 338.75. "The problem is that sometime after 1937, but before 1940, the old NCAA office inflated the Colorado rushing to 310.0 and total offense to 375.4," Purcell said.

Purcell lists two principal research sources, the Denver Post and the Colorado Sports Information Office at the time. And he cross-referenced game stats with newspapers which covered Colorado's opponents.

"The Post's coverage of White and the team, week by week, was intensive" said Purcell, "And the Colorado SID people were true professionals, whoever they were. The Salt Lake Tribune said there was no question Colorado had the best regional sports information operation.

"Aside from appearing in the Post, the correct Colorado figures were run in the Dec. 31 El Paso Times as pre-game publicity for the Cotton Bowl, meaning the stats were all over the wire services and the NCAA people had no excuse for not having them."