

Big Red of the Cayuga

By Ray Schmidt

The annals of college football history are filled with tales of many excellent teams and players whose stories are limited to one unusual game or event they were involved in. Unfortunately, as the years pass this becomes the only thing that is recalled of them, and so their real greatness is lost in the dust of time. Such a case is the 1940 Cornell team of Coach Carl Snavely.

According to most historical football writing, the only thing of interest about 1940 Cornell is the infamous "Fifth Down" game with Dartmouth. What has been lost by repeated telling of the obvious, is that 1940 Cornell was an exciting and wide open offensive team, which was loaded with speedy backs and receivers, and Snavely blended them into what was probably the most advanced single wing attack of their time.

In 1939 Cornell had posted a stunning win over Ohio State (the Big Ten champions that year), behind the heroics of little Walt Scholl. This major victory paced the Big Red to an 8-0 record, which was good for a #4 national rating by the AP and an informal bid to the Rose Bowl. Coming into 1940 Snavely had virtually the entire squad returning, only this time they were experienced seniors and the storm warnings were going up all over the East. The Illustrated Football Annual made sure everyone had noticed, when they previewed 1940 Cornell with the comment that "once again comes the ominous rumble of drums along the Mohawk. From his wind-swept citadel high on a hill above the blue finger of water that is Lake Cayuga, Field Marshall Carl Snavely is about to launch a Red tidal-wave of destruction which should sweep Cornell into another Eastern championship."

Cornell was returning a core of outstanding backs that included the likes of tailback Walt Scholl, fullback Mort Landsberg, halfback Lou Bufalino, Walt Matuszczak and, from Brooklyn Boys High, the triple-threat star tailback Hal McCullough. To spread out the defenses a little, Snavely had two fine ends in Al Kelley and Jim Schmuck, and of the former it was said that "in Carl Snavely's book, Kelley is the best end he has ever coached. Keep an eye on the cagey, vicious-blocking iron wing ... the most underrated end in the East." Ready to provide this Red Phalanx with plenty of protection was a line that featured the All-American tackle Nick Drahos, Frank Finneran, Howard Dunbar and Fred West.

Snavely was a devoted advocate of a wide-open single wing attack, and with the 1940 Cornell team he had the tools to exploit the formation's possibilities to the fullest. The Big Red attack had little use for straight ahead power, as they instead used an arsenal of tricky spinner plays, reverses, traps, end-arounds, laterals, fake reverses and both short and deep slant-in pass patterns. One of Snavely's favorite plays was a counter that saw the tailback fake a wide run to the strong side of the line, and then pull up to throw a pass diagonally across the field to one of their speedsters waiting in the opposite flat. If you could conceive of doing something from the single-wing formation, Snavely had Cornell doing it, and this 1940 squad shaped up as more powerful than even the previous season's entry.

Amidst all this pre-season hysteria Snavely and others recognized the pressures and difficulties in navigating a second straight unbeaten season. Before the opener the Coach quietly observed that "we have a team capable of playing fine football. If it plays its best and gets its share of breaks, we should have a good season. But we don't expect to win them all, even though we will do our darndest to do so." A magazine observed that "Snavely ... is on the spot with everything to lose and nothing to gain ... Cornell has the man-power and the background for another brilliant, invincible season. But can the Big Red walk the tricky tight-rope of football infallibility?" Without Princeton on their schedule, Ohio State and Penn seemed like the only threats to the Big Red in 1940.

The 1940 opener was on October 5 as the Big Red hosted Colgate at Schoellkopf Field. Allison Danzig led off his story of the game by noting that "Cornell picked up today where it left off in 1939 and a strong Colgate team was riddled and torpedoed by one of the deadliest aerial barrages ever laid down". The Big Red connected on 11 of 16 passes for 248 yards as McCullough, Scholl, Bufalino and Kirk Hersey were seemingly everywhere making sensational catches.

After a scoreless first period, Cornell drove quickly from the Colgate 47 and McCullough fired a 6 yard pass to Landsberg for the first TD of the year. On their next possession the Big Red started from their own 15, and McCullough connected on passes of 44 and 20 yards before Bufalino ended the drive with a 6 yard TD run. Shortly before half-time Scholl intercepted a pass at the Colgate 22, and on the second play he fired a pass into the end-zone where Jim Schmuck made a great catch for the 17 yard TD and a 21-0 lead. In the third period McCullough passed to Kelley for a 23 yard TD, and then the 31 yard TD dash by Bufalino produced the 34-0 final score. Lost in the excitement was the fact that Colgate had been held to only 103 yards of total offense, and the supposedly weak Cornell pass defense had intercepted five passes.

Week two of the season saw Cornell traveling to West Point to meet a weak Army team, and the Big Red buried the Cadets under a 45-0 avalanche. Mort Landsberg was the star of the day as he blasted out repeated long-gainers, including scoring one TD. Scholl threw TD passes of 45 and 65 yards, and was on the receiving end of a 35 yard TD pass himself. The victory brought the Big Red the #1 national rating in the week's AP Poll.

The following week it was back home against Syracuse and the Orangemen put up a fierce struggle in the first half. The Big Red struck only three minutes into the game, when halfback Bill Murphy swept around left end on a reverse and dashed 44 yards for the TD. Early in the second period Cornell was on their own 47 when Scholl fired a pass to Landsberg in the flat, from where he raced down the left sideline, cut back to midfield to pick up blockers, and sped to the 53 yard TD. Syracuse then shocked everyone by staging an 80 yard drive, that ended with an 11 yard TD pass for the first points yielded in 1940 by the Cornell defense. After holding the Big Red to only a 13-6 half-time lead, Syracuse could not resist the second half onslaught that started when McCullough passed 37 yards to Schmuck for a TD. In the 33-6 win the Big Red racked up an unbelievable 542 yards of total offense for the day, 311 of them through the airways.

Then came the long-awaited, big inter-sectional game of the season with Ohio State. The Buckeyes had an excellent team in 1940 and they were out to revenge their 23-14 loss of 1939 to Cornell. Ohio State's 1940 record would eventually include three Big Ten losses to teams rated as Top Ten

nationally. A record throng of 33,500 flocked to Schoellkopf for the game.

On their first possession Cornell staged a short drive before McCullough punted it out at the State 11. From here the Buckeyes staged a 19 play, 89 yard drive that culminated with Jim Langhurst blasting in for the TD, and a 7-0 Ohio State lead with just two minutes left in the opening period. But Cornell came right back and marched 65 yards in 15 plays before losing the ball on downs at the Buckeye 15. Don Scott immediately launched a quick kick which Mort Landsberg returned 17 yards to the Ohio 47 and here came the Big Red again. After Lou Bufalino swept left end for 13 yards to the 32, McCullough whipped a pass over the middle to Schmuck. The receiver, a quarter miler on Cornell's track team, took the pass on the dead run, faked Scott completely out of the play, and turned up the sidelines for the dash into the end-zone for the TD to tie it at 7-7 at half-time.

The Cornell defense had shut down the Buckeyes after their opening march, and in the third period Ohio failed to even register a first down. Very late in the quarter Cornell took possession on their own 39 and little Walt Scholl, the hero of '39, came in at left half for the Big Red. On the second play Scholl passed to Bufalino for a 14 yard gain to the Buck's 40, and then slanted up the middle for 34 yards to the 6 as the quarter ended. On the next play Bufalino blasted off tackle for the TD and Cornell was on top 14-7. A few minutes later McCullough picked off Scott's pass, the fifth interception of the day by Cornell, and he raced it to the Ohio 15. On the first play Bufalino swept around left end and dashed to the TD and the 21-7 win for the Big Red. It had been a bitter struggle but Cornell still held on to the #1 national rating.

But Ohio State couldn't gracefully accept their second straight loss to an Ivy school. The next day newspapers carried Buckeye Athletic Director L.W. St John's comments that Coach Snavely had shown "poor sportsmanship" and "bad ethics", not to mention breaking the rules, by signaling plays to the Cornell players. (Coaching from the sidelines was not formally allowed by the NCAA Rules Committee until 1967) St John claimed that Snavely had signaled to his players on practically every play on offense, by means of a light-colored cylinder he "manipulated in his hands, each position indicating a different play". Cornell denied the charges and immediately came to the defense of their coach, who was said to be "a man of unimpeachable character and of the highest standards of sportsmanship". Matuszczak and Scholl, who had called signals in the game, both stated emphatically that they had received no signs from Snavely during the game. St John came out of his verbal scrap with the Ivies, somewhat the worse for wear.

The following week brought Columbia and their great coach Lou Little, in the final home game for the Cornell seniors. The game was only five minutes old when Bill Murphy whipped a 7 yard TD pass to Landsberg. Hal McCullough then took over the pitching and fired three more TD passes, Jim Schmuck accounting for two of them on plays of 66 and 24 yards, as Cornell roared to a 27-0 victory. The Big Red offense had racked up a total of 441 yards for the day, while the defense intercepted another four passes. Next came a weak Yale team, but the Elis played inspired football, and Cornell had to struggle for its 21-0 victory. For the first time all season the Big Red was unable to connect for any TD passes, and had to rely on power football to grind out their scores, except for the brilliant 37 yard TD dash by Landsberg in the last quarter.

By this time the national media, in describing Cornell's season, was saying that "there can't be any questioning that they are the pass masters of the country and their vigilance in pass defense is likewise distinguished. Ithaca has become the football capital of the nation". Then came the well-known "fifth down" game. Coach Earl Blaik of Dartmouth installed a defensive set-up that saw his linebackers, guards and tackles playing a yard and a half off the ball, in essence creating six linebackers, plus he had Landsberg shadowed everywhere he went on the field. The strategy worked, and Cornell was held to only 181 yards of total offense for the day, while locked in a defensive struggle with the Indians. In the scoreless first half the Big Red had been unable to move the ball to midfield, while Dartmouth once moved to Cornell's 6 yard line. A great drive by Cornell in the third period had only been stopped when Ray Wolfe made a brilliant interception in the end-zone. Dartmouth had finally managed to get on the board in the final quarter when Bob Krieger kicked a 27 yard field goal for a 3-0 lead. Then came the fateful moments of the game as Cornell drove from their own 48 to a first down at the Dartmouth 5 with less than a minute to play. Three blasts into the line moved the ball to the 1 before a penalty moved it back to the 6. On the fourth down play Scholl's pass was batted down in the end-zone, but there arose a dispute over whether there had been a double off-side penalty. In the confusion the referee gave Cornell another play from the 6 yard line, and Scholl then passed to Murphy for the TD with two seconds left, for the apparent 7-3 win.

After the game there arose a considerable uproar over the disputed penalty and two days later, after studying game films, Referee William (Red) Friesell admitted he had been in error in allowing the final play. Cornell at once voluntarily issued its famous telegram that awarded the victory to Dartmouth by a 3-0 score, thus touching off wild celebrations there. As the dejected Cornell players prepared for the finale with Penn they learned that their loss had dropped them to #5 in the AP Poll, but there were more serious problems than the low state of morale. Lost to the Big Red through injuries were several players, including the fine left guard Howard Dunbar.

From the beginning of the season the Cornell-Penn game had been greatly anticipated, and even though each team had a defeat, the game was considered to be for the unofficial championship of the Ivy group. Penn was led by their great back Francis X. Reagan, and the game proved every bit worth the scalpers' price of \$25 for "a pair". Early in the first period Cornell staged a rapid 78 yard drive, with McCullough and Murphy hitting three straight passes to account for 55 of the yards, Landsberg going 3 yards for the TD. Two minutes later Cornell had the ball again, when Bill Murphy swept around right end and sprinted down the sideline to the 60 yard TD and a 13-0 lead. On their next possession, at their own 8, McCullough surprisingly tried two passes from his own end-zone, and the second was

intercepted, which led to a quick TD by Reagan. In the second period the great Penn back tallied again on a 12 yard run, before he dashed 52 yards to set-up the field goal that gave Penn a 16-13 lead. Cornell came right back as McCullough completed two quick passes for 55 yards and they were on Penn's 11. Then an apparent TD pass was disallowed when McCullough was ruled to have been within 5 yards of the line of scrimmage. On the next play McCullough passed to the wide-open Schmuck in the end-zone, but he dropped the ball as the half ended. In the third period McCullough tallied a TD to give the Big Red a 20-16 margin, but Francis X. came back to score his 17th TD of the year, this one on a run of 16 yards with seven minutes left. Penn then held on for the 22-20 win, despite Cornell having out-yardaged the Quakers by a margin of 314 to 187, in what was one of the most thrilling games in Ivy history. Allison Danzig said that "in the last analysis Penn won because it had a powerful running back and kicker in Reagan, a fighting line and the heart to come on savagely when its cause looked hopeless".

From a statistical standpoint 1940 Cornell (6-2) racked up an impressive record in all areas. The NCAA Guide shows the Big Red as #2 nationally in total offense with an average of 368.1 yards per game (Lafayette was #1 with 368.2), and #1 nationally in pass offense with a 186.3 yards average. My figures, compiled from game reports, show Cornell completing 84 of 151 passes, including 16 for TD's and 14 interceptions. On defense the Big Red held the opposition to an average of 143.5 yards total offense and they allowed only 39 pass completions in 109 attempts. The Cornell pass defense, highly suspect at the start of the year, allowed only one TD pass all season and intercepted 26! Mort Landsberg was the leading rusher with 105 carries for 445 yards, while the star tailback McCullough had rushed 72 times for 175 yards and completed 41 of 71 passes for 797 yards (The previous player stats courtesy of M. Purcell). The leading scorers were Landsberg with 7 TD's, Schmuck with 6 and Bufalino with 5. McCullough threw 8 TD passes (only scoring two all season himself), and Scholl pitched 4 TD strikes. Nick Drahos kicked virtually all the PAT's and was elected First Team All-American tackle for the second straight year.

At the end of the 1940 season Cornell was voted only #15 in the final AP Poll. There had been rumors late in the season that Snavely would be leaving for another position, but immediately after the final game it was announced that he would be returning in 1941. In speaking with Danzig, Snavely said that "of his three powerful teams of 1938 through 1940, the '40 team was the best until weakened by injuries", but in later years the coach changed his mind and called them his "greatest team" at Cornell.

After the final game of 1940 Danzig wrote of Cornell that there were "many teams with far worse records ... but none that has more galling memories of what might have been". That was certainly true, but the Big Red had shown that dignity and honor were more important than merely being called "the winner". Cornell had been an outstanding football team, in what many feel was the greatest year for overall quality of play in the history of the college game. But despite all the triumphs and adulation, Cornell never forgot the true spirit of college football.

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Montana State's quarterback, Sadler, toted a punt return 90 yards through a snowstorm for a TD to beat North Dakota State 6-0 in their game of 1929.