

## A Strong year at NYU

By Mark Purcell

In the late twenties Coach Chick Meehan's New York U. teams were classified as a college football power, but as the 1928 season approached the Violets seemed in for a long year. Meehan had lost his star backs of 1927, Connor and Briante, and he was betting all his offensive marbles on the team's 1926-27 blocking back, Ken Strong, who was now being shifted to tailback. Having dropped Nebraska from the schedule seemed to insure a chance at a winning season, but it was expected to be a primarily defensive team. In fact, 1928 NYU would become one of the explosive college teams of 1920's football and Strong would turn in a Hall of Fame year at tailback,

The 1928 NYU schedule was divided, as so often with prewar college teams, into an easy first half and a challenging second half. Game five with Colgate featured an opponent rising in power and soon to be the dominant New York state team of the early 30's, but otherwise the real schedule began with Georgetown in game six. 1928 NYU would play five real games out of a scheduled ten, a fair ratio for a college team of this era.

In the opener against Niagara the new tailback Ken Strong shoved over three short TD's and kicked the extra points for all his team's points in a 21-0 win. The following week the counter-threat reverse runner Follet scored a pair of TD's, quarterback O'Hearn snuck one in, and the star receiver Barabee made a defensive TD by recovering a blocked punt for a 26-7 win over West Virginia Wesleyan. This game's scoring is striking in that it is the only time in 1928, win or lose, where Strong was not a notable offensive factor as a scoring threat, and one speculates that Coach Meehan made some offensive adjustments to increase his tailback's contributions.

The following three games (against Fordham, Rutgers and Colgate) form a continuum where the NYU offense smashed perfectly respectable regional rivals and Strong began his serious move towards consensus All-American recognition. Against Fordham, Strong had two TD runs, one for 55 yards, kicked four extra points and threw a 36 yard TD pass in NYU's 34-7 win. In the Violet's 48-0 win over Rutgers, Strong scored four TD's, including one on an 89 yard dash, added five extra points, along with passing for 170 yards and two TD's. In the 47-6 win over Colgate, the tailback ran for two TD's, tallied on a 75 yard interception return, added five more extra points and threw two TD passes. By now Strong had excited the media simply by straight scoring as he had 95 points in only 5 games. Papers more sophisticated than the New York Times eventually picked up also on Ken's yardage performance which, we'll see, was even more impressive.

Prewar national honors pretty well required a perfect-record season, so the next game against Georgetown was NYU's "Gotterdamerung", up to and including miserable weather and a muddy field. Georgetown had a high-scoring offense, but not in this game, as NYU blew them off the ball and led the first down statistics 18-2. Unfortunately, neither this nor an excellent performance by Strong personally, had any influence on the final result. Four times NYU drove inside the Georgetown 10, coming away scoreless each time. On the first drive NYU faced a second down on the Georgetown five, and NYU's quarterback fumbled the ball back to the 13 where the Hoyas' end, Ken Provincial, immortalized himself by scooping it up and taking off down-field. The faster NYU backs like Strong were locked in the mud going the wrong way while Provincial scooted down the field for the TD.

NYU ended up their next two serious drives with loose ball handling, one of the fumbles by Strong. In the last minute of the game, Georgetown's star punter Mooney, who kept NYU at bay all day, boomed the muddy ball 65 yards to the NYU 24. Since bad weather in the twenties usually meant no passing, this looked like the end of it for NYU but they gave it one more shot. Follet, with everyone keying on Strong, dashed 24 yards. Then Strong went around or through what one paper estimates as six defenders, and finally was hauled down in the mud 47 yards later at the GU 5 with time left for four plays. NYU went nowhere on two shots, and then a penalty moved the ball to the 1. Then Georgetown stacked up Hill and Strong on a pair of shots into the line as the game ended. The team statistics strongly imply that Georgetown's 7-2 victory was an upset, but it was a tremendous win for Coach Lou Little, and helped him get the Columbia coaching job in 1930.

After a 71-0 win over Alford, which should not have been on the 1928 NYU schedule, there were two more typical Strong-inspired wins in which the offense hammered a respectable defense into the ground. In NYU's 27-6 win over Missouri, Strong had two more of his short-shot TD's, plus the now expected sensational 77 yard run for one more, and he threw a 42 yard TD pass.

Next up was the Big Game against unbeaten Carnegie Tech which, like NYU, was having probably the school's all-time best season, though some Tech fans will hold out for the 1938 Sugar Bowl team. Carnegie's quarterback, Howard Harpster, had generaleed and passed his team to 1928 wins over Jock Sutherland's Pitt Panthers and Rockne's Notre Dame, a double play nobody else had ever pulled off. Indeed, the Notre Dame win the previous week may have left Carnegie a little too high for the NYU game that they needed to wrap up national honors. Carnegie had the homefield advantage, the game being played at Pittsburgh's Forbes Field. But once again Ken Strong and that NYU line blew out the opposition. One observer, Grantland Rice, to the end of his days listed Strong's performance as one of the alltime four best backfield jobs he had ever witnessed.

The first half was not a blowout, and indeed Harpster moved Carnegie the entire game with a passing attack, as he completed 18 of 31 attempts for the day. NYU barely managed a 7-7 tie at halftime. But in the second half Strong took charge, both running and passing, as he broke off five runs over 20 yards, in addition to tallying two TD's, as NYU registered a 27-13 win. For the day Strong ended up with 26 carries for 223 yards, 8 of 15 passing for 108 yards and one TD, plus a couple extra points. This was his All-American game.

Five days later, NYU had to finish the season with a good Oregon State team which had a clone for Carnegie's Harpster in their own passing quarterback, Howard Maple, who may have been the Coast's best passer that year. This also

meant that Oregon State knew enough about passing to do a good defensive job on Strong's air efforts. Early in the game, Follet ended an NYU drive by going 18 yards for a TD, and late in the game, after an interception of one of Maple's passes, Strong passed and ran NYU in for another TD. However, in between these two exploits the Oregon State offense staged two legitimate TD drives of 70 and 55 yards, featuring Maple's passing. Furthermore, on punts the NYU safety Follet fumbled the ball away twice, and Oregon State cashed in both these free gifts for TD's. NYU's 25-13 loss was like the Georgetown defeat in that an opponent had forced the Violets' offense to do the job on the ground, and at the same time took advantage of very poor ball-handling by NYU.

It was a letdown ending to what had been for NYU an exciting autumn. The Oregon State loss left NYU, Carnegie Tech and Georgetown 1-1 among themselves and something like a tie for second in the East behind Army, which went 8-2 with a much stronger schedule. (I haven't forgotten that Boston College went 9-0 in 1928). In later years Ken Strong went on to play minor league baseball, and he had a successful career playing football in the NFL which earned him a place in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Available game reports imply that 1928 NYU used a standard Notre Dame single wing with O'Hearn at quarterback and Hill at blocking back. This left Strong at tailback and Follet, the other serious runner, listed at fullback. But Follet was used as a light runner whose best play was a reverse, and the game reports read as though Hill often functioned as the fullback. Many of Strong's TD's came, as they always do for any high-scoring back, from his being assigned the inside running that another offense might have turned over to a blocking fullback. But unlike 1927 NYU, where the tailback Conner was balanced off by an inside runner at fullback in Briante, the 1928 NYU offense used the other backs to spread the defense. Follet was dangerous running outside, and the two receiver ends, Nemacek and Al Barabee, were both deep threats on Strong's long passes. Follet and Barabee each scored 7 TD's, and they were the counter-threats who helped Strong keep destroying perfectly respectable 1928 college defenses.

In a published book, Strong's 1928 total offense figures are shown at nearly 3,000 yards on a 2:1 rush-pass ratio. His per-game averages of 200 yards rushing and 300 yards of total offense are, for a back mostly used as a runner and who also played defense, as incredible in 1988 as they would have been in 1928. There is some tentative verification for these yardage claims, by using a UP wireservice story that gave Ken 1689 "scrimmage" yards through 8 games. Adding to it his rushing figures for the last two games we arrive at a 10 game total of 2032 rushing yards (203.2 per game) which fits the book's claim just quoted above. If "scrimmage" in the UP story means "total offense", a definition sometimes given the term in the prewar press, then we arrive at a figure much lower than the 3000 "claimed" yards of total offense.

I believe that "scrimmage" in the context of the UP article means Ken's RUSHING figures, and that he indeed did make his 2000 yards rushing and

3000 yards of total offense for the year. In the post-1937 statistical era, his 200 yards per game rushing average would not be reached until 1971 (Ed Marinaro, Cornell), and the first 3000 yard total offense figure was not compiled until 1964 (Jerry Rhome, Tulsa). If we take "scrimmage" to mean TOTAL OFFENSE, then Ken's total offense was "only" a little over 2122 yards, and there have been other prewar backs, such as Lloyd Brazil of Detroit and Dutch Clark of Colorado College, who did this well or better. All the yardage figures that I have located for NYU and Ken Strong of 1928 come from outside the New York Times, which is useful only for game report details. It's unfortunate the standard source on prewar New York City college football is the Times, since as late as 1928 the Times was still not even doing team yardage stats, which we badly need for NYU, much less individual player figures.

Despite some of the questions still unanswered about the 1928 NYU Violets, the fact remains that they were an outstanding team, and Ken Strong registered one of the landmark individual seasons of college football. He and the Violets of 1928 deserve a special place in the annals of the game.