

The Purdue Marines

By Ray Schmidt

War times have always done strange things to the game of college football. During World War II many schools were forced to temporarily drop the sport due to manpower shortages, while a large number of service teams sprang up to fill some of the void. Then there were those colleges that were conducting formal training for military personnel, and thus were able to supplement the ranks of their Varsity squads with these "temporary" college men.

As the 1943 football season approached, Purdue's football team was apparently going to be vastly improved due to having the use of seven naval trainees and 26 marine trainees from the school's V-12 program. Certainly Purdue football fortunes could use the help as they had gone 1-8 in 1942. The early preseason forecasts for Purdue were a little mixed, due to not knowing just who was going to be on the 1943 squad, but the Chicago Tribune noted that "Purdue is suspected as one of the teams which may have profited by the installation of a military training program."

When Coach Elmer Burnham, starting his second year, greeted the candidates for his 1943 Purdue squad he found only one returning letterman from his previous year's team. But he couldn't have been concerned when he looked at the players the V-12 program had made available to him. From a good 1942 Illinois team there were eight marines now wearing Purdue colors, including outstanding linemen John Genis, Mike Kasap and Alex Agase, and powerhouse fullback Tony Butkovich. There were seven lettermen from Missouri's 1942 Big Six champions and if that wasn't enough, there was Sam Vacanti from Iowa to play quarterback and halfback Stan Dubicki from Shurtleff College. Despite the cornucopia of football talent, Burnham was extremely concerned as the season opener arrived, bringing with it the powerhouse defending national service champions of Great Lakes. The Sailors had all new personnel for 1943 but they were again loaded with former college and pro stars. To make matters worse, the game was to be played at Great Lakes' Ross Field before 22,000 roaring sailors.

Purdue took the opening kickoff, and on the second play from scrimmage fumbled the ball away deep in their own territory. Two plays later Ray Jones of Great Lakes connected on a pass to ex-Notre Dame star Steve Juzwik, who raced in for the TD and a 6-0 lead after only 90 seconds of play. But Purdue, bounced back midway in the first quarter, using mainly the single wing, and staged a 42-yard drive behind the punishing running of Tony Butkovich, capped off with his three yard TD blast, and Purdue had a 7-6 lead. In the second quarter Purdue started from their own 25, as Butkovich blasted up the middle for a 21-yard gain. The drive ended when Bill Stuart raced right up the middle on a 24-yard TD dash and Purdue led 13-6 at halftime. A third quarter field goal by Dubicki stretched the lead to 16-6 but early in the final quarter Great Lakes, led by Emil Sitko, pounded 46 yards to a TD to cut the margin to 16-13. Then later in the period Great Lakes had to punt from its end-zone and Dubicki raced the return 33 yards to the Sailors' 12 yard line. Three plays later Dubicki swept around end for the TD that capped off the surprising 23-13 win for Purdue. The Tribune noted that "any doubts about the war time strength of Purdue's 1943 football team were convincingly dispelled."

The second week brought Marquette, another school with a V-12 program, and the Tribune noted that the game "will be a clash of two of the country's higher powered navy-loaded elevens. There's little if any difference in the ability of the lineups that will start", although Purdue had much deeper reserve strength, which is a key factor in their late-game power all during the season. Purdue stayed primarily with its running attack through the entire game as Stuart, Butkovich and the speedy Boris Dimancheff led the offensive, the latter two each tallying a TD. For good measure Sam Vacanti passed to Frank Bauman for a 36 yard TD to wrap-up the 21-0 win as "Purdue's battle wagon had too much fire power for Marquette."

Then came the wild game against Illinois that saw each team fumble ten times, Illinois losing seven of them and Purdue losing nine! Early in the first quarter Purdue recovered a fumble at the Illini 12 and on the second play Vacanti passed to Joe Buscemi for the TD. After another Purdue TD, midway in the second quarter Butkovich roared right up the middle for an 80 yard TD dash and a 21-0 lead. The rest of the game the teams battled back and forth, the biggest play coming when Stan Dubicki intercepted an Illini pass and raced 53 yards for a TD. Purdue did not have to punt until the fourth quarter, and then both kicks were blocked, one being recovered for an Illinois TD. For the day Butkovich scored 4 TD's and rushed for 207 yards to pace Purdue's 40-21 victory.

Another service team, Camp Grant, was the next opponent and Purdue, now using primarily the "T" formation, decided "to submit their most impressive performance of the 1943 season." In the second minute of the game Genis and Agase blocked a punt that gave Purdue the ball at Camp Grant's 24. On the first play Vacanti fired a pass out in the flat to Dubicki, who shrugged off two tacklers and dashed to the TD. Later Butkovich and Vacanti ran for TD's to cap off the 19-0 win, but Dubicki had been lost due to a leg injury,

After the papers had been filled all week with concerns that the Purdue squad "may be entirely too complacent in preparing for the steadily improving Buckeyes", Purdue faced off against Ohio State on a cold, rainy day. Early in the game Butkovich lost a fumble on the Purdue 6 yard line. On the first play Dean Sensanbaugher of the Buckeyes swept left end for a TD and a quick 7-0 lead. For the rest of the first half Purdue pounded up and down the field, staging several drives, each time being turned away scoreless, after which Cecil Souder of the Buckeyes would boom a long punt out. At half-time Purdue held an 11-1 edge in first downs but still trailed. Coach Burnham sent a fired-up Purdue team out for the second half, and on their first possession they marched 83 yards in 8 plays, with Butkovich carrying on six of the plays, including the TD. The big play of the drive was the run of 46 yards by speedy Keith Parker. A short time later a fumble recovery at the Bucks' 49 started Purdue on an 11-play TD drive, and the line of Agase, Genis, Kasap and Dick Barwegen was now opening giant holes in the Buckeye line for the thundering runs of Butkovich and Parker. In the fourth quarter Boris Dimancheff chipped in TD's on runs of 32 and 15 yards. The Chicago Daily News noted that the 30-7 win marked "Purdue as no less than the second best college team in the Midwest, Put Notre Dame first but maybe Purdue would be a match." Everyone recognized that the secret to the success of the Purdue ground attack was that awesome line, which had both size and speed. Coach Burnham was being praised for doing "a splendid job in molding Navy and Marine trainees from several schools into an amalgam that certainly represents the best Purdue team since 1929 and 1931."

In game six against Coach Slip Madigan's "civilian" Iowa team Butkovich rushed for 149 yards and tallied 3 TD's and the Tribune writer said that "when they get around to picking All-American fullbacks it will be difficult

to overlook Master Butkovich." Iowa had surprised everyone with a 19-yard TD for an early lead and the two teams battled into the fourth period tied at 7-7, before Purdue overpowered the young Hawkeyes for a 28-7 victory.

It was no surprise when nine of the V-12 trainees (including Agase, Genis and Butkovich) received orders to report to Parris Island on November 1. This left one final game for them, against Wisconsin, but most of the marines took furlough the last week and missed all practices, only joining the team at Chicago's Edgewater Beach Hotel, enroute to Madison. Butkovich dashed 33 yards for an early TD to get Purdue rolling to a 32-0 win over Wisconsin, and for the day the bruising fullback scored three TD's to bring his scoring total to 78 points, which set a new Conference record. He also rushed for 147 yards to finish his season with a total of 833 yards (good for a #3 final national rating). The next day the military personnel began leaving from all the schools around the Conference and it became known as "Blue Monday".

The challenge now was whether Vacanti, Kasap and Dimancheff could lead Purdue through the last two games. A freshman named Bump Elliott was inserted in the fullback slot and the team headed to Minnesota, to be greeted by a snowy day and a field turned to slush by a pre-game military parade. On Purdue's second possession they marched 60 yards to a TD, paced by Vacanti's two clutch runs when all his receivers were covered, but Minnesota tied it by half-time. In the fourth quarter Minnesota was at Purdue's 7 yard line when Dimancheff made a big interception in the end-zone, and then with less than a minute to play a fumble gave Purdue the ball at the Gopher 18. On the second play Vacanti dropped back and passed deep to Dimancheff in the corner of the end-zone for the TD and a 14-7 victory.

The season finale was against Indiana and late in the first quarter Vacanti pegged a 38-yard TD pass to Frank Bauman for a 7-0 lead. The rest of the game Indiana marched up and down the field, threatening to score repeatedly, but each time Purdue's "spectacular defense" turned away the Hoosiers. On the last play of the first half Indiana's Pete Pihos intercepted a pass with a wide open field ahead, but somehow Vacanti managed to catch him at the 10 yard line. In the last quarter Indiana three times drove inside Purdue's 5 yard line, and from the one foot line they were unable to score on the last three plays of the game.

With a 9-0 record Purdue had tallied its first perfect season since 1929, and it was good for a share of the Big Nine title with Michigan, along with a #5 national rating from the AP. In post-season honors Alex Agase was named as a consensus First Team All-America guard, while Butkovich was named a First Team All-America back by United Press and Central Press, and Second Team by Look, INS and AP. But the real key to the team was Sam Vacanti. The Tribune said that he was the "man around whom the Boilermakers' play revolves. Vacanti is most versatile as he combines team direction with ball carrying ... and on defense he helps back up the Purdue line." The 1943 Purdue Boilermakers were a great team that would never have been, but for the course of world events far away from college football.