

Walter the Second

By Ray Schmidt

The 1906 season at the University of Chicago had been one of excitement and sadness for followers of the Maroons. The 1906 season was the first year where the forward pass entered the game of college football, and there was no greater innovator or proponent of the new offensive weapon that year than Coach Amos A. Stagg of Chicago. The Maroons had used the forward pass sparingly thru their first three games, but in the last two contests the aerial combination of Walter Eckersall to Walter Steffen had exploded. Steffen tallied TD's on pass plays of 75 and 96 yards, along with several other long scoring jaunts as part of a five-touchdown game against Illinois, to give promise of a great season in 1907 as he would succeed Eckersall as the quarterback. The sadness came in the Spring of 1907 with the graduation of Walter Eckersall, thus ending the career of one of the game's all-time great players. To think that the mantle of greatness might pass to Steffen was more than could be expected.

Practice for the 1907 Maroons of Chicago began three weeks before their opener with Indiana. While many thought it would be a rebuilding year on the Midway, Coach Stagg had other ideas. Entries in the Tribune noted that "it is no secret that Coach Stagg is burning with ambition to make a fine showing with his team...Stagg is not satisfied with the work of his team, and will not allow the men to relax for a single day in their practice, as he intends to put a team in the field ... which will bring back the championship, wrested from him last year".

In discussing the Maroons and Indiana on the day of their opener, the Tribune added that: "At quarterback Steffen is all to the good. A better general, better in the open, and far superior on defense ... a remarkable kicker. His punts frequently travel forty to fifty yards and are extremely hard to catch because of the lack of spiral motion." Along with his new quarterback, Stagg had assembled a backfield featuring speed and power in the persons of Captain Leo DeTray, Harold Iddings and Merriam. At one end spot was Pat Page, who would be key to Stagg's plans for an expanded passing attack. The Tribune noted that "Page has shown great speed and accuracy ... and handles the forward pass to perfection." As the newspapers would later realize, what Stagg had done was assemble a cast of players "capable of adapting themselves to the new kind of game. The players comprising this year's team are all-round athletes ... and the new game requires the ability of men proficient in numerous skills."

Despite all this, when the Maroons opened their 1907 season on Oct. 12 as hosts to Indiana, there was still an air of pessimism over the prospects of a football life without Eckersall. What the fans got in the opener was a spectacular offensive show. Early in the first half Steffen threw a pass good for 20 yards to Page, to set-up a 35-yard field goal by Steffen to open the scoring. Not long after Steffen returned a punt back 40 yards, followed four plays later by a 30 yard cross buck by Iddings for a TD. Indiana then kicked off to Chicago and Steffen dashed 45 yards on the return, and a few seconds later he raced 45 yards to the TD to give the Maroons a 15-0 lead at half-time. In the second half Ferguson and DeTray added scores to round off the 27-6 win for Chicago.

For the day Steffen completed seven passes for 83 yards, rushed for 109 yards on 10 carries, returned 12 punts for a total of approximately 223 yards and "handled the team in masterly fashion." The Chicago team had

compiled a total of 328 yards rushing and 132 yards passing on ten completions in what was an awesome offensive show for 1907. Eckersall, covering the game for the Tribune, said that "the Midway team was a surprise to everyone ... and Stagg clearly showed he has a team to be feared by all comers. Indiana was not a weak team by any means".

The next week, with Illinois keying on Steffen the Maroons held just a 10-6 lead at the half. A different Chicago team came out in the second half and quickly DeTray blasted up the middle on a long TD dash to open the gates for the Maroons. When Steffen finally broke loose for a 60-yard TD dash, it rounded off a 42-6 Chicago win. Eckersall wrote that "DeTray played the best game of his career... Hewitt and Page gave evidence of being the best men working the forward pass thus far shown in the west. Stagg has a team especially adapted to the new game."

Stagg had two weeks to prepare for the Minnesota game that Eckersall predicted "will be the pivotal contest in western football". The Gophers 4-2 win in 1906 had spoiled the season for the Maroons, but in 1907 Chicago was a strong favorite. Just before the game Eckersall wrote that "the general style of play of both is vastly different. Chicago has perfected the forward pass as well if not better than any team in this part of the country. Minnesota may attribute its victories to the use of old-style football with a few variations. The Chicago eleven as it stands today is a better balanced, faster and more skilled combination than the Gopher team."

With 18,000 fans jamming Northrup Field in Minneapolis, the Maroons were stunned on the second play from scrimmage as Capron swept around end and dashed 35 yards. Chicago held, but a short time later Capron broke loose for a 30 yard run to set-up his short field goal for a 4-0 Gopher lead. The teams exchanged a couple punts and then the Maroons started on their 50 yard line. On the first play Page connected on a long forward pass to Steffen, who outran everyone for a 60-yard TD and a 6-4 lead. The two teams battled back and forth until late in the first half when Capron kicked a beautiful 43 yard field goal that landed on the cross bar and bounded over to give Minnesota an 8-6 lead at halftime.

Early in the game the Gophers had been slashing thru the Chicago line, but gradually the Maroon defense had strengthened as play continued and they would dominate the second half. On their second possession, when play resumed, the Maroons were forced to punt but a Minnesota penalty on the play gave Chicago a first down. Quickly Steffen rifled a pass to DeTray who ran it in for a 35-yard TD. As he went into the end-zone the bleachers at the east end of the field collapsed and tumbled several hundred people to the ground, but fortunately there were no fatalities.

Several minutes later Capron boomed a 75-yard punt out of his end-zone, but a roughing penalty on the play against Minnesota put Chicago at the Gopher 35 yard line. From there DeTray swept around end on a TD dash to give Chicago an 18-8 lead. Late in the game Capron added a 30-yard field

goal, but the Maroons had avenged themselves with the 18-12 victory.

Eckersall called Steffen the hero of the game and wrote that "the victory was clean cut and decisive. Its execution on the forward pass hardly could have been excelled and ... in the latter half the Gophers seemed bewildered by the almost reckless execution of the forward pass ... The Maroons knew infinitely more about the fine points of the game. They were better coached and better conditioned, as they played the whole game with the original eleven ... superior in all departments of the game." Chicago's balanced attack had registered 147 yards rushing and 125 yards in passing.

Next the Maroons hosted a hapless Purdue team that was "out-classed in both modern and ancient football by Chicago's lightning and bewildering attack... out of this dazzling assortment the wonderful work of Walter Steffen stood alone. With a field just suited to quick turning, the little quarterback gave the finest exhibition of elusive running ever seen on a western grid-iron." All Steffen did for the day was break off TD dashes of 80, 65 and 70 yards, another run of 40 yards and a punt return of 60 yards for his fourth TD of the game in the 56-0 victory.

The final game of the season was the one Stagg had prepared for all year; the Carlisle Indians of Glenn "Pop" Warner were coming to Marshall Field for their first meeting ever with the Maroons. Carlisle carried a 9-1 mark, having suffered a 16-0 loss to Princeton which was blamed on weather conditions, and they had just beaten Minnesota 12-10. Eckersall said that "the game will furnish a comparative estimate of the strength of the east and west ... and great hopes of national honors are based on the outcome."

Before the game Coach Warner suggested the historical importance of the game to offensive concepts when he said that "his men were the best exponents of the new game in the east, and from the reports received in the east from the west he understood that Chicago was by far the most accomplished team in the west in the new style of football and that the game between his men and the Maroons should be the most spectacular game of the season. Furthermore, the reason that other teams were not using the forward pass in the east was that they have not realized as yet the possibilities of it."

Carlisle took the field without their great quarterback Frank Mount Pleasant, who was out with a broken hand, but within twenty minutes the Indians were in command of the game. Early in the first half Carlisle staged a drive behind the power running of Houser and Hendricks, and it was capped off with Houser's 20-yard field goal. Several minutes later the Maroons seemed to be getting started when Steffen passed to Merriam for a 20-yard gain, followed by Page's run of 10 yards. But a penalty stopped Chicago and Steffen's punt attempt was blocked by Little Boy and the Indians had the ball on the 15 yard line. Soon after Houser booted the field goal to give Carlisle an 8-0 lead at halftime.

Early in the second half another Steffen punt was blocked to give Carlisle good field position, but the Maroons somehow dodged two scoring threats, once taking over on their two yard line. But finally Houser connected with Exendine on a long TD pass to make it 14-0. Late in the game Steffen fumbled a punt and the Indians had it on the Maroon 35, from where they battered it in close for Houser's third field goal of the game. Steffen averted the shutout with a 43-yard field goal, but Carlisle's 18-4 victory prompted the Tribune to note that the win "demonstrated their superiority over the Maroons individually, collectively, and in every department of the game. They showed themselves masters of modern football and gave such an exhibition of its possibilities as will not be forgotten by anyone."

The 1907 season ended with Chicago regaining the Western Conference title and sporting an overall 4-1 record. In post-season honors Eckersall named Steffen, DeTray and Iddings to the First Team backfield on his All-Western team. Steffen was also named Third Team quarterback on the Walter Camp All-America team. Individual scoring for the year was as follows: Steffen 8 TD's, 2 PAT's and 4 field goals; DeTray - 6 TD's and 2 PAT's; Iddings - 3 TD's; Page - 10 PAT's and 1 field goal. The papers noted that "the wise ones ... say the 1907 team is a better one than its predecessor."

Walter Steffen was elected "unanimously" to the position of team captain for 1908, which seemed only fitting for someone whom Eckersall regarded as one of "the two greatest generals of the country ... a most accomplished player of the highest degree. He has great executive ability and that initiative which goes to make a good leader." Stagg would have 15 of his regulars back in 1908 plus help from an excellent freshmen team. While no one on the Midway had forgotten the exploits of Walter Eckersall, they now looked with great anticipation to the return of Walter Steffen.