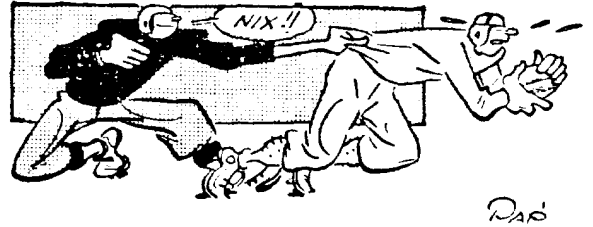


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# College Football Historical Society



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## An Interview: Billy Hillenbrand

Billy Hillenbrand was an outstanding player for the University of Indiana in the seasons of 1941-42. In 1942 he was voted a consensus All-America halfback, and he also won the Chicago Football Club's Big Ten Player of the Year and Back of the Year awards for both seasons. Billy recently met with us to discuss his football career. (NOTE- The Editors of the Journal would like to thank member Art Beldon of Indianapolis for arranging this interview for the Society members. It is the first of an occasional series.)

CFHS: Billy, can you tell us a little about your prep football career?

BH: Well, I was born on March 29, 1922 in Armstrong, Indiana which was a little town with one general store and a railroad crossing. Later, when we moved to Evansville I went to a parochial grade school called Saint Benedicts'. They played football and I'd heard somewhere that you could get a football scholarship to go to college and get an education. Well, I got mad and made up my mind I was going to get one in fourth grade, if you can believe it. I was 5'11" and weighed 155 pounds going into high school. I made the Varsity at Evansville Reitz Memorial High as a freshman in three sports; baseball, football and basketball; and I played all four years. I made All-State in football three years. I kicked off, punted and played safety on defense, and we had a run of 40 games without a defeat. My junior year we lost one game to Paducah, Kentucky 7-6; and the next year we lost one to Gary Emerson. In my four years we had only those two losses, and we won the mythical state title. My sophomore year was the best team and we scored 450 points to the opponents 6.

CFHS: What colleges recruited you the most actively?

BH: I was contacted by a lot of colleges but not to the extent of today because of the communications. I was pretty well sought after. I went to Indiana as an after-effect. Primarily I was going to West Point. It was all set. I took a physical at Fort Harrison and flunked the thing. There were two things wrong- my "bite" was bad and I had calcified lesions on my lung. They were dormant, but there were too many. They flew me to West Point to take another physical that lasted three days and I still flunked. So I finally decided on Indiana.

CFHS: What did Indiana's chances look like going into the 1941 season?

BH: In 1941 we had a nice batch of sophomore talent but very few of them played. Chuck Jacoby played most of the year as a wingback and I played, but most had to share a spot, even Lou Saban. Bo McMillin had a philosophy

of bringing you on slowly, but he shouldn't have. The sophomore cadre were pretty good and should have played and I think if they had played all year instead of the seniors, we'd have had a better season. I called the plays as a sophomore in 1941, played defense and offense. I played safety on defense and think I was in on almost 50% of the tackles we were so bad.

CFHS: Who were some of the top players you faced in 1941?

BH: Now Pat Harder of Wisconsin was a good one. One time Saban hit him close to the sideline, trying to kill him in addition to stopping him, and Harder did a complete 360 and landed on his feet. Dave Schreiner was a very good guy. Wisconsin's reputation was how hard they hit. They beat us 28-25 and we only kicked one extra point. Shows how talented we were. We didn't have the specializing they have today.

We played Otto Graham in '41 when he was a sophomore. Waldorf started Bill DeCorrevont, and they had this end named Motl; a good looking guy, and I played with him with the Rockets later. Well DeCorrevont comes over on a slant and threw a long pass about 35-40 yards, so there was some time to get back. Motl had his back to me and didn't see me. I made the interception and ran it back '72 yards. Northwestern had this Clawson, a big full-back and we couldn't stop him. Northwestern had a reputation then.

CFHS: What did the prospects look like going into the 1942 season?

BH: Starting 1942 football is starting to be a lot of fun. The bulk of our players were backs and we were still short on linemen. Our first game is against Butler. We kickoff and in 3 downs they don't get anything, and they kicked a punt short and I'm way back. I would always try to anticipate the bounce. I'm standing there and then I start running forward and go right thru the guys coming downfield, catch it on the bounce and go for a touchdown. I scored only the one TD. It was just like a practice game. We had so many backs. A wealth of them. They were good ballplayers.

But then we played Ohio State. We get beat 32-21 and we just ran out of linemen. We had a lot of players in off-positions and they just beat us in the line and wore our linemen down. Bobby Cowan made this marvelous run (46 yard TD) and he had a nervous stomach and always tended to get the dry heaves. Well he made this run and we get back in the huddle and he's standing there going "ah-h-h-h", and we're all standing there laughing. I made a nice run too. A quick opening and I got by the two linebackers before they knew what happened, but their line was too strong.

In the first half with the Iowa Pre-Flight Seahawks our linemen at the timeouts would come back to the huddle and they were learning all kinds of things from these pros. They'd say "that guy even threw dirt in my eyes". They would pull all the stunts they could. Well I passed to Saban for a TD and we're ahead at the half and their coach must have really reamed them because they came back out and our linemen changed their tune. It wasn't so funny then because they were getting their butts whomped. But we played Fort Knox and that was a real mickey mouse game. Beat 'em 59-0. Before the game Bo says to me "Grantland Rice made you an All-American. I want you to score as many touchdowns as you can." Well I did everything I could to keep from scoring. I don't know why I did it. I made one TD because Chuck Jacoby got trapped and lateralled to me and I went on in.

So we go 7-3 in 1942 and everybody's coming back of any consequence. Then, Whammo. Here came the Army and busted it up. We'd have won the Big 10 the

next year barring any injuries or circumstances. Well, I got my orders in late November, 1942. We were to be called to duty on May 11, 1943. I played one season of Service football at Fort Benning, Georgia and later served in India.

CFHS: What type of game plans were usually prepared for you in the 40's?

BH: In the '42 season, to be quite honest, there didn't seem to be a lot of pre-planned strategy. I don't ever remember a play being sent in for me to call. I'd have an idea and call the play. To give you an example: we had a fellow named Ted Hasapes; about 5'8" and weighed 238 and tough as nails. Ted played end and was a good high school player and he wouldn't take a scholarship unless he was assured that he would play end. And if anybody deserved not to play end it was Ted Hasapes. So we're playing Pitt and have a good lead and Ted, who had never scored a TD, says to me "I sure would like to score. How about calling my pass." So we get in the huddle and I call his play. We're in the single wing and I go back to pass and I'm looking at the spot but no Ted. Well, I end up having to scramble and run. We get back to the huddle and I say to him "Damn you; only I said a lot worse; You ask me to do you a favor and throw you a pass. I call your play and you miss your assignment." Ted says "I know. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." So I call it again and he got out there in the open and he made the touchdown on a 7-yard pass.

Football was a lot different when I was at Indiana. We were so far behind the times because we didn't have the drills and specialization. We weren't smart like they are today. We didn't have the strategy. You didn't play on somebody else's weakness. We weren't that smart. We played Minnesota in '42

and beat 'em 7-0. They had an All-American tackle named Dick Wildung, and once in awhile we'd run the single wing to the left when we got poor field position on the sideline or something like that. So I called it to the left one time and Pete Pihos and I were supposed to take the tackle, block him and double team him. We did and drove him clear across the center and I looked at Pete and said "Hell, that Dick Wildung isn't so tough." And Pete says "That isn't Wildung. They switched him to the other side a quarter and a half ago!" So we didn't even know where people were playing.

CFHS: What kind of coach was Bo McMillin?

BH: For the time period he was very much a strategy coach. Bo had a good reputation as an intelligent coach for his time. Compared to today's coaches, just like comparing players, its just out of context. They're doing so many more things, they have so many assistants. Bo had two assistants. Bo

was a good teacher and players liked him very much. He was very much a disciplinarian like Paul Brown was. You were out of your mind if you thought of doing something bad. It was just understood. He never used cuss words. Lot of times Bo McMillin would beat teams he wasn't supposed to beat; but then on several other occasions teams he was supposed to whomp would turn around and beat him. Now whether that was his fault or the players, well I don't know.

CFHS: You only played pro ball after the War for three seasons. Do you regret not having played longer?

BH: I'm glad I didn't want to make a pro career out of it. The first two years I played a little defense. No face mask or face guard. You know, in all that football I never had a tooth knocked out, never a broken bone and my knees are sound. Talk about luck. Playing longer I'd have been beat up. I made up my mind I was going to play three years and get out and I did. In 1946-48 I probably made, with working on the side and giving speeches, close to \$15,000 a year. After three years I waltzed out of there and I bought a food brokerage business with \$5,000 down and that was my career. I was a food broker for 21 years. I sold that when I was 52 and semi-retired. But I had a lot of fun. I really enjoyed my athletics.