

Rapid Papit

By Ray Schmidt

The football history of the University of Virginia, while featuring an occasional excellent team, is more known as the school of the famous Bill Dudley, to the point that most other individual players have been forgotten. Yet within the same decade a new star came along at Virginia to eclipse Dudley's offense records, but today he is little remembered by football historians. His name was Johnny Papit, and he came highly-touted from Philadelphia. In his freshman season of 1947 he saw minimal action, but in 1948 Papit had rushed for 885 yards on 134 carries for an average Virginia team, and Coach Art Guepe had reason to optimistically look ahead.

For the 1949 season Virginia was recognized as a team that would score a lot of points and would have a surrounding cast of offensive stars to help out the star junior fullback. Coach Guepe had come up with speedy offensive players such as Gene Schroeder (end), Steve Osisek (left half), Ralph Shoaf (right half), Jimmy LeSane and Whitey Michels (quarterbacks). Preseason magazines noted that "the offensive mainspring continues to be Rapid John Papit ... and the backfield is built to exploit his abilities." In the opener with George Washington U. Papit started the scoring late in the first quarter with a 17-yard TD run and added another tally later on an 18-yard sprint. He finished the day with 203 yards rushing on 26 carries in pacing Virginia to the 27-13 win.

The second week of the season Virginia hosted Miami (Ohio) and the game was less than two minutes old when Papit broke loose for a 24-yard TD jaunt that the Washington Post noted "was done in the usual Papit style; he shook four or five tacklers en route". A bad Miami punt late in the quarter set-up the next Virginia TD as Michels threw an 8-yard TD pass to Schroeder for a 14-0 lead. But a chunky running back for Miami named John Pont dashed 43 yards to set-up one score, and then tallied early in the fourth quarter to cut Virginia's lead to 14-12. But the Cavaliers roared right back on a sustained drive until "Papit went all the way. He covered 28 yards, blissfully shedding tacklers" for the TD, and Virginia held off a late rally to escape with a 21-18 win as Papit racked up 196 yards on 26 carries.

Then Virginia ripped VPI 26-0 behind the two TD's of Ralph Shoaf, while Papit was held to only 82 yards and a 2-yard TD run. The following week Virginia took on the plucky Generals of Washington & Lee as Papit shot for Dudley's career rushing record. Early in the first quarter a recovered fumble set-up a 31-yard TD pass from Osisek to Shoaf to give the Cavaliers a 7-0 lead, but the Generals shocked Virginia with a sustained 81 yard march to tie the score. On Virginia's next possession, in the words of the Post reporter, "Papit decided to assert himself. The powerful runner burst thru the line with some good early blocking, then went all by himself on a 53-yard touchdown jaunt". Washington & Lee battled all the way and had scoring drives stopped on Virginia's 17, 8 and 3 yard lines. In the fourth quarter Michels passed to Osisek for a TD and a wild 51-yard TD pass play by Virginia as time ran out extended the winning margin to a deceiving 27-7. For the day Papit had rushed for 132 yards to bring his career total to 1690 yards, and shattered Bill Dudley's previous school career record.

The Cavaliers then traveled to Virginia Military (VMI), and on the first play from scrimmage from their own 25 Michels passed deep to Osisek who was behind the safety man at the VMI 40. The Post observed that "Osisek gathered the ball in and scored, unfingerprinted." When Virginia got the ball back

Osisek heaved a long pass to Myron Mausteller for a 55-yard TD. VMI battled back to tie it at 13-13 in the third quarter, but Papit raced a kickoff back 50 yards to midfield, and after a penalty he "charged over right guard on a 55-yard jaunt to the goal" for the TD that "brought the disintegration of VMI." Later Papit swept around right end and pounded 53 yards to VMI's 17 to set-up a Michels to Osisek TD pass as Virginia won 32-13. Papit, who was now the nation's leading rusher ended with 175 yards on 14 carries.

With the easy part of their schedlue out of the way, Virginia now faced the approach of four tough opponents, which would tell how good a team Coach Guepe had really assembled in 1949. First up was West Virginia and a fumble by Papit set-up a West Virginia score to give them a 7-6 lead in the second quarter. But the Cavaliers roared right back with a 60-yard drive led by Papit; who smashed off-tackle for gains of 10, 12, and 14 yards, before he scored the TD on a 6-yard run to give Virginia the lead at half.

The teams traded TD's in the second half, and West Virginia was threatening late in the game on the Virginia 22 yard line when Gene Edmonds came up with a big interception to save the 19-14 win for the Cavaliers. But the bigger news of the day was that "a pigskin powerhouse named Papit" rushed for 212 yards to bring his season total to 1,004 yards, and so shattered the legendary Bill Dudley's previous season mark of 968 yards which was set in 1941.

The following week Virginia traveled to Philadelphia as two TD underdogs to take on Penn, and the Cavaliers were accompanied by more than 10,000 fans. On Penn's first possession of the game they lost a fumble on their own 33 yard line. Guepe had conceived a game plan that intended to use Papit as a decoy, so when the Penn defense quickly formed into a seven man line expecting the slashing runs of Papit, Michels instead threw a pass to Osisek out in the flat and the speedster dashed for a 31 yard gain. Two plays later Shoaf blasted in

for the TD.

Just five minutes later Virginia started a drive from their own 21. Michels kept completing passes as the Cavaliers moved to the Penn 38, and there he pitched out to Osisek, who faded back and threw a perfect pass to Schroeder at the 5 yard line. On the next play Papit blasted into the end-zone and Virginia led 13-0. Midway in the second quarter a Penn pass was intercepted near midfield, and the Cavaliers quickly drove in with Michels passing to Osisek for a 16-yard TD that, in the words of the Post reporter, "settled the issue to all intents and purposes" in Virginia's 26-14 win.

This was the first time Virginia had ever defeated Penn in the history of their series and the Washington Post called the win "easily the most monumental triumph in the 62-year football history of Thomas Jefferson's school." The reporter went on to describe the scene as "when the final gun sounded, thousands of Virginians swarmed down on the field for an assault against the goal posts. An equal number of Pennsylvania defenders met the charge and a

20-minute miniature riot ensued with the Southerners finally winning out." Papit had rushed for only 54 yards "in Virginia's finest football hour", but Michels and Osisek had "plastered the Quakers".

Next up was the expected battle of great running backs as Eddie Price and powerful Tulane came in. Things went bad quickly as Tulane took the opening kickoff and staged a 69-yard scoring drive, and then their "monstrous line" took over and dominated the first half as Virginia failed to advance past midfield. Down 14-0 Virginia opened the second half by staging an 80-yard scoring drive, but when the Cavaliers punted after their next possession, Jimmy Glisson of Tulane raced it back 64 yards for the TD that effectively ended the game. For the day Papit had rushed for 113 yards, including a dash of 43 yards, but Eddie Price matched this with 100 yards and one TD. Tulane had posted a thorough 28-14 win that the Post said "was the State's biggest calamity since the fall of Richmond", and it ended Virginia's Bowl dreams.

This brought it down to the season finale as the Cavaliers traveled to meet North Carolina, which was the Southern Conference Champion and would be headed for the Cotton Bowl. Virginia played much better than the previous week and drove inside the Carolina 30 yard line four times, but fumbles and interceptions stopped them each time. It was scoreless until North Carolina staged a 72 yard march in the second quarter that was capped off by the great Charlie Justice racing around end on a 14-yard TD run. Then just before halftime Justice whipped a pass to Art Weiner who was streaking down the side-line, and this resulted in a 63-yard TD for the Tar Heels.

With less than two minutes left to play, a bad punt set-up a quick 44 yard Virginia scoring march and a 2-yard TD run by Michels. Then the Cavaliers recovered the onside kickoff, followed by a 22 yard pass to Schroeder and an 18 yard sweep by LeSane to set-up a first down on the Carolina 8 with 33 seconds left. Here the Tar Heels rose up and batted down three straight passes thrown by Osisek before they sacked Shoaf on the final play of the game. Papit rushed for only 69 yards and the 14-7 loss for Virginia was, in the words of the Post, "a disappointing end for a season which started so well."

All things considered the 7-2 record had been a success for Virginia and Coach Art Guepe. True Sports magazine said it was "the finest Cavalier group in years, probably even better balanced than in Bill Dudley's great days". For the season, on offense Virginia had compiled per game averages of 226.1 yards rushing; 109.1 yards passing on 61 of 140 with 11 interceptions and 12 TD passes. On defense the Cavaliers allowed their opponents averages of 102.1 yards rushing; 128.7 yards passing on 77 of 169 with 10 interceptions and 8 TD passes. Johnny Papit finished off his season with totals of 197 carries for 1214 yards and scored 9 TD's. This record-breaking performance was rewarded with the following All-America backfield recognition for 1949: Associated Press Third Team, Sporting News Third Team and NEA First Team.

In 1950 Papit and Steve Osisek would return to continue the Cavaliers on their way to a four year run of excellent seasons. Papit would run for another 949 yards in 1950, to finish his college career with rushing totals of 536 carries for 3237 yards and a 6.1 average. For Virginia it was one of the golden periods in its football history, and certainly Johnny Papit deserves to be remembered as the outstanding running back he was.

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When fullback Oscar Jones' girl friend couldn't understand how football players ever got clean after a game, he asked her what she thought the scrub team was for.