

Fesler : Deadly passer, All-American end

By Ray Schmidt

The two greatest players that ever wore the Scarlett of Ohio State played in the days before the Heisman Trophy and all its media-hype. One of these men, Chick Harley of the World War I days, is still vaguely recalled, while the other is nearly forgotten as a player and is remembered mainly as the Buckeye Coach who preceded Woody Hayes. The name of this great star is Wes Fesler.

He was from Youngstown, Ohio, stood 5'11½, weighed 180 pounds and was the epitome of the All-American boy. Playing for average Buckeye teams, he was named a consensus First Team All-America end in 1928 and 1929 during his sophomore and junior years. As the 1930 season approached everyone was stunned as Coach Sam Willaman decided to move Wes Fesler to the starting fullback position, from where he was running wild in scrimmages.

There were high expectations for Ohio State as they opened the 1930 season by hosting little Mount Union College. A gathering of 16,000 fans "were treated to a Roman holiday which promised golden things for the future", as the Buckeyes rolled to a 59-0 win. Fesler "showed impressively in his debut at fullback" as he scored one TD in limited action. (Note-unless shown otherwise, all quotes are from the Sandusky-Register.)

The second week saw Ohio State hosting Indiana in-the Big Ten opener. Fesler again started at fullback, but with only a 3-0 lead at halftime, Coach Willaman moved him back to his right end position. With ten minutes left in the game the score had not changed but then the soph backs of the Buckeyes (Lew Hinchman, Bill Carroll and Joe Benis) started to run wild and pounded over three TD's to produce the 23-0 win. Fesler did not score but "played his usual great game at end", both on offense and defense.

Next the Buckeyes fell 19-2 to national powerhouse Northwestern and Pug Rentner. Against this superior team "the Ohio ends, Fesler and Dick Larkins, played brilliantly." During the loss Fesler had suffered an extremely bruised wrist that necessitated putting his entire forearm in a plaster cast. With "Ohio's biennial big moment, from a football point of view, just around the corner" it was hoped that he would be able to play. The next opponent of course was Michigan, in a game that was regarded as "the nearest thing to a Harvard-Yale classic." In the 1929 game Allen Holman had whipped a TD pass to Fesler for the 7-0 win by the Buckeyes, but in 1930 Michigan had a powerhouse.

On October 18 a crowd of 68,000 jammed Ohio Stadium and watched, as Harry Newman and "the lightning-like attack of the Wolverines ... struck through the air with long deadly passes, sewing up the game before the second half was five minutes old." The two teams battled back-and-forth until, with two minutes left in a scoreless first half, Michigan received a punt on their own 46. On the first play Newman launched a deep pass to Harrison Simrall that was good for a 53 yard gain to the OSU 1. Newman then plunged in for the TD. At the start of the second half Newman paced a 46 yard drive, mainly thru the air, and capped it off by flipping a 14-yard TD pass to Hudson to round off the scoring in Michigan's 13-0 win.

But even in defeat, according to the Detroit News writer H.G. Salsinger, "Ohio State presented one heroic figure- Wesley Fesler, the best end in the

Midwest and probably the best in the country ... As a defensive end we do not think that any wingman approaches Fesler ... Repeatedly he cut in to stop plays at tackle and ... at the other end of the line. The best pass receiver on the field, he found himself guarded by two and three defensive men. Without Fesler the Ohioans would have been beaten at least twice as badly."

But Coach Willaman needed to generate some offense, and so he decided to move his star end back to the fullback spot for the Wisconsin game. "Fesler will be the busiest athlete on the field. He will play right end on defense but on offense he will select plays, throw most of the passes, catch some of them, do all the punting and probably run with the ball."

Late in the first quarter the Buckeyes came up with an interception at the Wisconsin 34. On the second play Lew Hinchman lateraled out to Fesler and Wes dashed 15 yards to the Badgers' 19. On the next play Fesler pegged a pass to Hinchman for 13 more yards, but here the drive stalled and the ball was lost on downs. Each team seriously threatened on several occasions but the game ended at 0-0.

Fesler played like a demon against the Badgers as he "selected all plays did all the passing, punted superbly, blocked well and ... engineered all of Ohio's threats to score. Throughout the game Fesler was forced to make his own tackles of Badger backs returning his punts and ... was the hero of the game." Late in the game when he was blasted by a blitzing tackle, the one-man gang had to go to the sidelines while the giant crowd was "roaring their tribute."

Then it was on to Baltimore to tackle Navy and the Buckeyes, "playing almost perfect football and ... showing superiority in every department of play", rolled to a 27-0 victory. After an early score, in the second quarter OSU recovered a fumble at the Navy 27, and shortly after Fesler

rolled out, dodged two tacklers and passed to Dick Larkins in the end zone for the TD. Hinchman and Horn added TD's in the second half, but the star again was Fesler, as he "was signal caller, punter, passer, ball carrier and right end on defense. His punting was good, his selection of plays conservative and clever." He was such a tower of strength on defense that "Navy gave up trying his end after the first quarter."

After their excellent win over Navy things didn't look too promising, for the next opponent was a powerful Pittsburgh team. Pitt had lost only to the eventual national champions from Notre Dame, and so were regarded as heavy favorites in what was the last home game of Wes Fesler's playing career.



Sandusky Register

Early in the first quarter Ohio State started at their own 39, and Fesler quickly led a march downfield as he connected on passes of 12 yards and 22 yards to Lew Hinchman. At the Pitt 16 Fesler dropped back and passed to Hinchman deep in the end zone for the TD and a surprising 7-0 lead. In the second quarter a Pitt punt only carried out to their 33, and on the first play Fesler rifled a pass to Horn for a 21-yard gain. The drive ended with a field goal and the lead was up to 10-0.

In the third period the Buckeyes came up with a big interception at the Pitt 35. On the second play Fesler passed deep to Bob Grady for a 34 yard gain to the 1 yard line, from where Hinchman plunged in for the TD. Pitt battled back with a score to cut the margin to 16-7, and in the final minutes of the game the Panthers had a first down on the OSU 1 yard line. The Buckeye defense rose up and stopped four straight plays by Pitt and so the great upset win was preserved.

After the game the famous Jock Sutherland called Fesler the best back he had seen all year (keep in mind Pitt had already played Notre Dame's great backfield), and his own coach said "it is almost unbelievable how well that boy can do so many things." Once again he was called "probably the best defensive end in the country and ... a one-man team."

The final game of his college career was at Illinois and again he played like a man possessed, starting in the first quarter "which saw Fesler kicking, passing and dashing the Illinois hopes with abandon." After his booming punt had put them in a hole, the Illini lost a fumble at their own 10 yard line and Fesler quickly cashed in by flipping an 8-yard TD pass to Grady. Just three minutes later Fesler's passing again led the Buckeyes downfield, his last pass to Horn for 18 yards to the Illini 1 setting up the TD on the next play.

Illinois struck for a TD in the second quarter, and with the Buckeyes clinging to a 12-9 lead late in the final period the Illini started a march downfield. Illinois had a fourth down at the OSU 3-yard line, when Pete Yanuskus attempted a sweep around Fesler's end spot, and he was dumped for a loss that ended the drive and saved the game for the Buckeyes. A game reporter wrote that "Fesler, Ohio State's one man fighting machine closed his spectacular college football career ... one of the greatest football careers in college football history."

In the post season Wes Fesler again reaped the awards his great play had earned. The United Press said he "comes close to being the greatest all-round player in the Big Ten ... is held to be the best end the Conference has ever seen. A wizard on defense, he is also a great catcher and thrower of passes, an exceptional punter and a real field general." Coach Willaman said that Fesler is "one of the very best backs as well. He is a great kicker, ball carrier and passer, a fine blocker." Fesler was named a consensus 1930 First Team All-America end by everyone, including the New York Sun, Associated Press, NEA, and United Press. In addition to earning First Team All-America end recognition all three years, Fesler was also a three year All-Big Ten basketball selection plus he played for OSU's baseball team. Not to mention that he graduated a Phi Beta Kappa.

H.G. Salsinger of the Detroit News summed up the Buckeye hero's football career when he wrote: "We know of no other football player today who has the instinct that Fesler has ... We know of no other player who can size up a situation as quickly. He is the finest football genius that has roamed the Valley of the Olentangy since the days of the great Chick Harley."