

MAYBE THE BEST

By Ray Schmidt

In the annals of Big Ten football there have been many outstanding teams down through the years, and fans of the legendary conference usually can never agree on the formidable question as to which might have been the greatest. But there was one Big Ten gridiron outfit that was held in considerable awe by its contemporaries, although today it is frequently not regarded as even the best in the history of that school. The team in question is the offensive powerhouse of the 1947 Michigan Wolverines.

In a Football News article written in 1969, Harry DeVold rated the teams of 1947 Michigan and 1945 Army as the two best squads of the 1940's. Yet when a poll of a so-called "panel of football experts" was published by the Sporting News in 1988 as the basis of the book "College Football's Twenty-Five Greatest Teams", the 1947 Wolverines were only ranked #14, behind 1968 Ohio State and the Michigan State teams of 1965-66, also from the Big Ten.

One of the frequent knocks against the '47 Michigan team is the schedule against which they piled up such sensational offensive statistics. Yet six of their ten opponents compiled winning records for 1947, although admittedly only Southern California was considered a nationally-ranked team. But again, modern day football historians need to remember that 1947 has to rank amongst the best seasons in college football history, in the area of overall playing talent. Consequently, teams with a marginally winning or losing record in 1947 weren't necessarily all that bad.

To take this exercise a bit further, consider the Notre Dame team of 1947. In yet another example from college football's history where the school from South Bend is awarded something it in no way deserved; the Irish of 1947 were named National Champions by the Associated Press. Michigan had been rated as the top team in the nation as late as the beginning of November, yet without losing a game, the Wolverines were voted into the runner-up slot in favor of Notre Dame. Today such happenings (ie 1994 Penn State and Nebraska) cause a media uproar of no small noise level.

While this writer does not usually spend much time on things such as this, what is revealing in regards to the criticisms of Michigan 1947 schedule, is an examination of "vaunted" Notre Dame's list of victims in 1947. In their nine games the Fighting Irish played only three teams that managed winning records that season (Purdue, Army, and USC), yet nothing is ever said by football historians about the merits of Frank Leahy's record that year.

The composite record of Notre Dame's foes in 1947 was 29-46-7, while the opponents of the Wolverines that Fall amassed a total record of 41-45-5. The two powerhouses had three common opponents (Pittsburgh, Northwestern, and Southern Cal), and in all three cases Michigan pulverized the opposition far more convincingly than did the Irish. In fact, the 1988 Sporting News list of the top 25 teams of all-time does NOT include 1947 Notre Dame.

Based on the above, modern day football historians need to disregard any comments that seek to discount the accomplishments of the 1947 Wolverines as reflecting a weak list of opponents, and just appreciate their offensive firepower for the awesome thing that films show it to be.

Right from the start as the 1947 season approached, there was complete agreement that Michigan and Notre Dame would be the teams to watch. Fritz Crisler was going into his tenth and last season as the head coach of the Wolverines, and was well regarded as an offensive genius. Francis J. Powers of the Illustrated Football Annual wrote that "Crisler has no peer in devising and perfecting score-cycles, and opponents must be ready to repel every play in the book ... As usual, the team will have the speed and deception characteristic of Crisler units ... the scores may well roll until the scoreboards shudder." Street and Smith magazine very conservatively called Michigan just a co-favorite with Illinois in the Big Nine title chase for 1947.

Crisler had lost eight of his top linemen from the 1946 squad, but the returning forward wall was fast and deep with reserves. The line would include the awesome 31-year old future hall-of-famer Alvin Wistert at tackle, the third member of the northside Chicago brothers to star at Ann Arbor. In the backfield Michigan would feature an armada of offensive talent led by halfback Bob Chappuis, nicknamed "The Toledo Terror". Chappuis had set a conference record in 1946 with 1,039 yards of total offense. Joining him would be speedsters Chalmers "Bump" Elliott and Jack Weisenburger, along with quarterback Howard Yerges. To make matters worse for Wolverine opponents, Crisler was an advocate of two-platoon football, and he would overwhelm everyone in 1947 with waves of fresh troops.

The season kicked off with a bright and sunny day on September 27, and a visit from arch-rival Michigan State, as 70,115 fans looked on. Harry Warren of the Chicago Tribune wrote that the onlookers "saw a well balanced powerhouse roll up touchdowns thru long, sweeping runs, bursts into the line, and via forward passing." The Associated Press noted that the Wolverines were "rolling just about as they pleased by land and air."

On their first possession of the season the Wolverines marched 53 yards to a touchdown, tallied by fullback Weisenburger on a three-yard run. By halftime it was 28-0, before a 20-point third quarter explosion finished off the Spartans on the way to a 55-0 win. Chappuis scored three touchdowns, all on short runs, as Michigan piled up 504 yards of total offense, evenly distributed between running and passing. In a historical footnote; this was the first game for former Crisler assistant,

Clarence "Biggie" Munn, as the head coach at Michigan State.

The next two weekends the Wolverine offense continued to operate in high gear, as Stanford, 49-13, and Pittsburgh 69-0, were easy victims. The matchup against Stanford was the first between the two schools since the 1902 Tournament of Roses game, and it looked like a rerun of that old-time contest as Michigan scored four touchdowns in the first nine minutes of play, and had a lead of 42-0 by halftime. Chappuis fired scoring passes of 59 and 57 yards, while Weisenburger sailed up the middle on a spinner play for 62 yards and another TD. Pitt actually held the Wolverines scoreless for the first 17 minutes of play, before Chappuis finally connected with Bob Mann on a 70-yard scoring pass.

By now the Wolverines were rated #1 in the country as they headed to Northwestern to face a Wildcat team that had lost five regulars to injury. Michigan scored twice in the opening six minutes of play, the first score set up by a 54-yard punt return by Gene Derricotte. But Northwestern fought right

back with a scoring march capped off by Art Murakowski's first of three touchdowns for the day. In the second quarter Michigan staged drives of 80 yards in 12 plays, and 66 yards in two plays with Mann racing the last 51 yards to paydirt, to build a lead of 28-7 by halftime. In the third quarter the Wolverines tallied two quick TD's, and then Weisenburger tacked on a 30-yard TD dash to round off the scoring in the 49-21 win.

The following two weeks brought the most significant test of 1947 for the Wolverines, as they faced off against Minnesota and Illinois. A crowd of 85,938 showed up in Ann Arbor expecting to watch Michigan crush underdog Minnesota, but in the words of the AP writer, "Minnesota's great line threw sand in the hitherto high scoring Michigan machine ... and vaunted Michigan barely managed to defeat surprisingly stubborn Minnesota."

In the second quarter the Gophers staged a drive of 48 yards that took an incredible 14 plays, with Everette Faunce plunging one yard for the TD and a 6-0 lead. With the Minnesota defense choking off the Michigan running attack with just four net yards in the first half, it took a 40-yard TD pass from Chappuis to Elliott just before intermission to put the Wolverines ahead 7-6. Derricotte tallied on a 21-yard run in the fourth quarter, but it still took a pass interception late in the game by John White to hold off Minnesota for the 13-6 win.

Down in Champaign the next Saturday the Illini also used strong line play to throw the Michigan attack off balance. But late in the first half Elliott used a tremendous block from Mann to break free on a 74-yard punt return for a TD, before Illinois fought right back as Russ Steger shook loose for a 53-yard run to set up the tying score. Before the teams went to the locker rooms the Wolverines still had time to stage a lightning-like drive of 78 yards, highlighted by a pass from Chappuis to Elliott good for 50 yards. Henry Fonde bolted up the middle for 15 yards and the touchdown, and then the Michigan defense held off the Illini in the second half for the 14-7 win.

After the ordeals of the previous two weekends, Michigan had an easier time of it in cruising to wins over Indiana, 35-0, and Wisconsin, 40-6. Against Indiana, Chappuis had a field day as he passed for 103 yards and two touchdowns; while keeping the Hoosiers off-balance with 14 runs for 48 yards. The only long scoring play came on a 50-yard TD pass to end Bill Rifenburg.

Somehow dropped to #2 in the rankings behind Notre Dame, the Wolverines took it out on Wisconsin on a wet day in Madison as they clinched the Big 9 title and a berth in the Rose Bowl. Chappuis rifled three touchdown passes, while Derricotte scored on a 77-yard punt return and Weisenburger tacked on a 22-yard scoring dash. The Wolverines piled up 417 yards of total offense against a Badger team that came into the game undefeated in conference play.

The regular season came to a close on November 22 with a visit from Ohio State, as 85,938 fans turned out to watch the Wolverines wrap up their first all-winning campaign since 1932 with a 21-0 win. The Buckeyes came into Ann Arbor with only two wins on the season, but for the first half of play Michigan had all it could handle. No less than four times in the opening half the Wolverines staged long drives deep into Buckeye territory, only to come away empty-handed on each trip. Just before the opening quarter came to a close Michigan finally sustained a march of 69 yards to paydirt, with Elliott blasting the final three yards for the TD and a 7-0 lead.

The Wolverine backfield seemed a little out of kilter the entire afternoon, but in the third quarter an 80-yard drive was capped off with a three yard scoring run by Chappuis; and in the final period Weisenburger scooted seven yards for the last tally. Despite scoring only three times, Michigan had piled up 450 yards of total offense.

The stunner for this great armada of offensive firepower came on December 8 when the Associated Press released its final rankings, and there was Notre Dame sitting at the top of the chart with 107

first place votes to just 25 for Michigan. Despite the obvious disappointment for Coach Crisler and his team, Michigan nevertheless headed out to Pasadena to take on the #8 rated team in the nation, the Trojans of Southern California. The 1948 Rose Bowl game was to be a mismatch of colossal proportions.

Before a full house of 93,000 fans, the Wolverines put on an offensive display that left even such veteran observers as Red Smith and Grantland Rice more than impressed. After watching Chappuis and Weisenburger run all over the field in Michigan's 49-0 romp, Alex Kahn of United Press wrote that, "Between them, they ran and passed Southern California into football oblivion", while "the brilliant field-generalship and pass catching of Howard Yerges was the key to Michigan's drive.

Weisenburger scored three touchdowns, while Chappuis threw two of the four Wolverine scoring passes of the day. Michigan piled up 491 yards of total offense, while a good USC team could manage just 133 yards and only moved past midfield twice all day. Michigan had a lead of 21-0 by halftime, and for good measure the Wolverines punctuated their great season with a three touchdown explosion in the fourth quarter. Elliott, Yerges, Derricotte, and Rifenburg all chipped in touchdowns to the impressive display.

Not only did Michigan wrap up the 1947 football season with a record of 10-0-0, but their school's name was prevalent everywhere in the national statistical leadership charts. The most prestigious award was coming out on top as the nation's Total Offense leader for 1947, with 3714 yards in nine games for an average of 412.7 yards per game (238.8 rushing and 173.9 passing). The Wolverines were also the #1 passing team in the country, with 77 completions in 153 attempts for 1565 yards. Individually, Weisenburger was the team's leading rusher with 682 yards, while Elliott added 438. Chappuis did it all with 976 yards passing and 419 rushing, as he again led the Big 9 conference in total offense. Chappuis, Elliott, and ends Robert Mann and Lenny Ford, all received All-America mention for 1947; with Chappuis being named as a unanimous First Team All-America halfback, and runner-up in the Heisman Trophy balloting. Bump Elliott was named the Most Valuable Player of the Big Nine Conference.

The sportswriters who had awarded Notre Dame the national championship in the Associated Press poll must have been having trouble sleeping, or maybe it was all the commotion and controversy they were involved in resulting from their voting in early December; because after the bowl games the AP conducted a special "unofficial" poll among the writers to give them a second chance. To no one's surprise Michigan piled up a 226-119 edge over Notre Dame, but the balloting did not change the "official" AP rankings for 1947, so Notre Dame remains in the records as the national champion.

But the Michigan Wolverines of 1947 live on in the memories of Big Ten and college football fans everywhere as one of the great teams of all-time. Or as Time magazine described Fritz Crisler's last team, "a collection of chrome-plated, hand-tooled specialists".