

FORDHAM'S LAST HURRAH

By Ed Gilleran Jr.

The fifty-thousand spectators who filed out of Yankee Stadium on November 28, 1942 believed they had witnessed the end of just another illustrious chapter in Fordham University's glorious football history. They thought that once World War II was over, and all the young men came back to the campus in New York City's Bronx a couple of years later, the next great chapters would be written. How wrong they were!

What they witnessed was the end! Sure, Fordham would resume football in 1947, but it was on a greatly de-emphasized basis. The coach had only a couple of seasons of high school mentoring behind him; the schedules were grueling; the defeats were many, some were overwhelming; while the spectators drifted away and the deficits mounted. In 1955 football at Fordham was cancelled. So this is a last look at the final episode of what used to be one of the nation's premier programs.

The ominous sound of war drums rumbling in Europe and Southeast Asia could be heard at Yankee Stadium on that November 28th afternoon in 1942. The Rams of Fordham, were taking on the cadets of the North Carolina Pre-Flight School. The future Navy pilots were coached by "Horseman" Jim Crowley, who had signed up with the Navy as a Lt. Commander, assisted by his ex-Ram assistant, Ed Kosky. Earl Walsh (Notre Dame 1922) Crowley's assistant at Fordham for ten years, guided the Fordham gridmen. His team was very young and inexperienced, but everyone who knew talent when they saw it said: "This group is a national champion in the making." However, most of the lads knew they would be in military uniforms in far away places before that was going to happen, and they were correct.

What made this game especially interesting was the fact that the "Cloudbusters" from Carolina were manned by a flock of former Fordham stars, as well as standout players from several other Eastern colleges. Carolina had lost only one game during the 1942 season, that by a point to Boston College. The cadets had gained impressive wins over Harvard, North Carolina State, Temple, Syracuse, Georgetown, Manhattan and William & Mary; along with a tie against one of the best of the service teams, Georgia Pre-Flight.

Seven positions on the starting North Carolina Pre-Flight lineup were filled by former Fordham players. John Witkowski, whose ability for snaring passes had been a deciding factor in Carolina's offense all season, was at left end. Steve Hudacek, a veteran of both of Fordham's bowl teams, was a terror at left tackle. Rounding out the left forward wall was Charlie Pierce, another ex-Ram, veteran of the Cotton and Sugar Bowl games. At the pivot post was Joe Kovach, who had seen plenty of action in a Maroon uniform as a Sugar Bowler, while the right flank spot was shared by two more Ram bowl game vets, Hal Boudreau and Vince Dennery. Listed among the Cloudbuster alternates on the line were ex-Rams John Kuzman, Don Brennan, Alex Sabo and Sesto Santarelli. Crowley's Pre-Flight backfield had two Fordham superstars, Bill Krywicki at quarterback and Len Eshmont at left halfback. If that wasn't enough, Crowley could call on two stellar former Cornell running backs, Lou Buffalino and Mort Landsberg, along with Harvard's Don McKinnon and Penn's Gene Davis.

The Pre-Flight schools were designed as a sort of Annapolis of the Navy's air arm. The mission was to provide aviation cadets with the preliminary training to equip them for later basic flying instruction at a Naval Reserve air base. This was the next step along the path which led to combat duty piloting a Navy or Marine Corps aircraft. Rigid military discipline was maintained, high standards of achievement were required in all phases of the curriculum: math and physics

as a basis for future studies in navigation, gunnery, engineering, electricity; along with the recognition of U.S. and enemy planes and vessels; military drill; identification of ordinance; seamanship; and communications.

Every Pre-Flight cadet participated in either varsity or inter-squadron sports such as wrestling, boxing, swimming, track, basketball, soccer and football. The Pre-Flight schools C.O. was Commander O.O. Kessing, who had said: "We intend to turn out mentally, physically and spiritually tough cadets - jungle-bred tigers, not pampered tabby cats." Following their training at the pre-flight schools, the cadets moved on to the naval air stations at Corpus Christi, Pensacola or Jacksonville.

Fordham's coach, Earl Walsh, a 1920s halfback for Knute Rockne at Notre Dame, had a group of players who, if they had not had to go off to war, would have been another bowl team in the making. Walsh, an off-season attorney, had 20 men back from the Sugar Bowl championship team; plus a half-dozen outstanding freshmen, permitted to play by the NCAA's war emergency eligibility rules. There were some classy ball-carriers in Ray Elster, a former Chicago prep star; Joe McCrane, who ended up playing at West Point; Ed Benson, who played for the New York Giants after the war; and a halfback named Al Litwa who could punt a football 60-70 yards with incredible regularity.

Among Coach Walsh's freshmen linemen were Jim Carrington, who would later gain All-America honors at the Naval Academy; George Reiss, a future Fordham captain and star; Tom Potter, who later played for Notre Dame; a great field goal kicker, Ed Lynk; and three very talented ends in Ed Hintenberger, Chet Fortuna and Frank Malinowski. Frank was so gifted a pass catcher that Fordham fans created a song about him that was a parody of the war-time tune: "Praise the Lord and pass to Malinowski."

If the freshmen Coach Walsh had at his command warmed the South Dakotan's heart, the sophomores playing their first varsity football must have made Earl ecstatic. Harry Squatrito later starred for the El Toro Marines; George Elder was every bit as good as his famous brother, Jack of Notre Dame; and there was Venton Yablonski who, after the war, would become a headliner at Columbia.

Earlier in the 1942 season the Rams had engineered a big upset by beating Missouri, 20-12. They traveled to Purdue and won, 41-7, and took the measure of West Virginia, 23-14. North Carolina was battled to a scoreless tie, and old rival St Mary's was defeated, 7-0. But the going was rough against Louisiana State and two of the nation's best, Tennessee and Boston College.

The 1942 season, and an era, ended on a glorious note for Fordham as Walsh's Rams upset the favored Carolina cadets, 6-0. Steve Filipowicz, the versatile fullback, set up the only score of the game in the first period with a sterling 50-yard pass completion to Al Litwa. After making the catch, Al was dragged down by Ram alumnus Len Eshmont just two yards from the goal line. Fordham's long-distance pass play came as no surprise to most observers. Filipowicz, Jimmy Hearn, Joe Andrejco and Litwa had banged the line to put the ball at Fordham's 48 yard line, where it was third down and six to go. Litwa then faded out to the right, and everyone in Yankee Stadium knew what was coming, but they didn't know just how perfect Filipowicz would make the pass. The 50-yard play, a 40-yard pass combined with a 10-yard Litwa run, was the only important pass completion of the entire game.

Then on his second attempt, Filipowicz piled over for the touchdown. He not only won the game, but also the Madow trophy, the only player ever to win the Madow twice. The cadets' ex-Ram Kovach then crashed through and blocked George Cheverko's extra-point attempt. No one thought six points would be enough for Fordham to win, and the crowd settled back and waited expectantly for the Pre-Flight ground forces to start rolling. But Fordham left the field at halftime with the six-point lead still intact, and the cadets had never been able to get any closer than the Ram's 35 yard line.

In the third quarter, Landsberg sped to a gain of 36 yards before he was hauled down by Fordham's Yablonski just three yards from the end zone. Fordham then mounted a furious defensive counter-attack, and the Carolina cadets lost a total of 21 yards on the next four plays. In the game's final minutes the Cloudbusters generated a devastating attack that appeared headed for a certain score, gaining 58 yards and moving to a first down at the Ram 13. But again the Fordham defense rose up and stopped the visitors at the 10, and the Rams punted out of danger. The Cloudbusters then took to the airways, but Joe Ososki of Fordham batted down what might have been a touchdown pass for the cadets, and that was the ball game.

As the curtain came down late that afternoon on Fordham's Golden Era of football, Jim Crowley, the architect of so many glorious Fordham teams, smiled in defeat and shook hands with his successor at Rose Hill, Earl Walsh. The days of big-time football were over for the Rams.