

# RAY ELIOT'S FIRST TEN

By Dick Parker

With the unrelieved decline in the football fortunes at Illinois, beginning in the mid-1930s and extending into the 1940 and 1941 seasons—with ten straight conference losses; legendary head coach Bob Zuppke agreed to step down. “Zup”, as he was affectionately referred to, had coached at the University of Illinois for 29 seasons, winning 131, losing 81 and tying 13. But college football, in all its insights and strategies, had pretty much passed him by. Change was called for at Illinois, and not too soon for frustrated alumni and fans.

Coach Zuppke’s successor was a former player who later joined the Illini staff as a line coach. He was born Raymond Nusspickel in Brighton, Mass., but later became Ray Eliot. As a Zuppke assistant for five years, Eliot had developed a strong rapport with associates and players, was well liked, and had their collective respect for his knowledge of all aspects of the game. He was a fine choice for head coach of the Illini.

The 1942 season was Eliot’s first as head coach and, as it turned out, the most successful of his four World War II impacted years. The season began with four straight wins—the longest victory string for Illinois since 1934 when the team had won their first six outings. On October 10, 1942, the underdog Illini hosted the defending two-time national champions from Minnesota and shocked the college football world with a 20-13 upset win.

Most noteworthy in the win over the Golden Gophers was the alert play of Illinois guard Alex Agase, who scored a second quarter touchdown after stealing the ball from Minnesota All-America back Bill Daley, and then scooting 38 yards for a score. With the game tied 13-13 late in the fourth quarter, a bad snap by the Minnesota center sent the ball rolling loose in their end zone where Agase pounced on it for the winning score. For his performance against Bernie Bierman’s team—which had won 18 straight before a 7-6 loss a week earlier to the Iowa Pre-flight “Seahawks” service team—Agase’s claim to the first of three All-America selections was greatly enhanced. For the year, Coach Eliot’s team went 6-4-0 overall, 3-2-0 in the then Big Nine, tying for third place with Michigan.

The quality of play at Illinois for the next three seasons reflected the departure of many players to the military. For the Illini, such key personnel as fullback Tony Butkovich, Agase, end Joe Buscemi, and tackle Mike Kasap were all sent to Purdue as Marine Corps recruits. There they played for a talent-laden Boilermaker team which went 9-0-0 and was ranked number five in the country by the Associated Press for 1943. With its ranks pretty much depleted except for freshmen, Illinois won but three and lost seven for the 1943 season.

The season of 1944 turned out to be more rewarding, with Coach Eliot’s forces gaining the somewhat unexpected services of Chicagoan Claude “Buddy” Young, a diminutive but explosive running back. Young arrived in Champaign with plans for only running track but was convinced by Coach Eliot that he could also make it in football. Another solid newcomer was Paul Patterson who, along with Young, sparked the limited Illini squad to a record of 5-1, and 3-3-0 for sixth

place in the conference. Both players were gone to the Navy by the 1945 season, and the Illini again floundered.

The following year (1946), with the war concluded and the transition to peace time taking hold, the service veterans who were able, returned to school and the sporting ranks. For 1946, Illinois would realize the nucleus of a formidable team that included Alex Agase, Buddy Young, Julie Rykovich, Capt. Mac Wenskunas, Art Dufelmeier, Isaiah "Ike" Owens, quarterback Perry Moss (a transfer from Tulsa), and Dwight "Dike" Eddleman, an all-around star athlete.

Illinois opened the 1946 season on the road with a 33-7 rout of Pittsburgh, but followed this solid start with a 26-6 loss to eventual national champion Notre Dame, which was led by All-America quarterback Johnny Lujack. A bounce-back 43-7 win over Purdue was most encouraging, but suspicions of mediocrity arose as the prior year's Big Nine champ, Indiana, beat the Illini 14-7 in Bloomington. This loss served to refocus Coach Eliot's squad, and they proceeded to register successive wins over Wisconsin (27-21), Michigan (13-9) Iowa (7-0), Ohio State (16-7), and Northwestern (20-0); to wrap up their first conference title since 1928 and earn the first Rose Bowl bid under the newly signed pact between the Big Nine and the Pacific Coast Conference.

Not since 1921, when California rolled over mismatched Ohio State, 28-0, had the two conferences clashed in the Pasadena-based Rose Bowl. Illinois' opponent would be UCLA, an estimable foe which had gone 10-0-0 for the 1946 season and was ranked number four by the Associated Press. Illinois was rated number five, but because of their two regular season losses the Illini were disparaged by the West Coast press which felt that only Army, which had dominated college football for three seasons, would be a worthy opponent for the Bruins. Sentiment had it that the Big Nine's participation should be put off for a year so that a UCLA versus Army game could be played. But the new five-year Rose Bowl agreement had been finalized and so Illinois would venture out to Pasadena, and obviously, Coach Eliot didn't need much in the way of incentives to spur on his under-regarded squad.

Suffice it to say the Illinois forces showed up better than well prepared, and convincingly thrashed the benumbed UCLA Bruins of Coach Bert La Brucherie by a score of 45-14. Leading the onslaught were Buddy Young (with two touchdowns), Perry Moss, Julie Rykovich, Paul Patterson, and Russell "Ruck" Steger. The only excitement for UCLA came in the second quarter when Al Hoisch returned a kickoff 103 yards for their final points. Following the game, Coach La Brucherie flew to New York to fulfill a previously scheduled speaking engagement before the American Football Coaches Association. He was to speak on "Football Defense", but told people he might ask to be excused seeing as how his team had given up 45 points to Illinois.

After five seasons under Ray Eliot's tutelage, Illinois' record (including the Rose Bowl) stood at 24 wins, 23 losses and two ties - a .511 percentage. But it would not be until 1951 that an Illinois team would again end up ranked in the top ten in the wire service polls. A year previous, in 1950, the Illini went 7-2-0 overall and 4-2-0 in the conference. A win over Northwestern in the conference finale would have given Illinois the conference crown since Michigan had gone 4-1-1, but the Wildcats prevailed 14-7. For 1951 there was a lot of optimism on the Champaign campus, as Coach Eliot would have the services of returning stars such as fullback Pete Bachouros, center/linebacker Chuck Boerio, halfback Johnny Karras (nicknamed "The Argo Express", from his high school days), defensive back and pass interceptor of the first magnitude, Al Brosky, fullback Bill Tate, and captain-elect Chuck Studley.

The 1951 season opened at home against UCLA and, after a 7-7 score at halftime, Illinois got moving with Karras scoring his second and third touchdowns of the afternoon. The final score was 27-13, Illinois. A week later, and once again at home, the Illini faced an excellent Wisconsin

team With the Badgers ahead 10-7 in the third quarter, Illinois put up a truly memorable goal line stand after pass interference was called on the Illini Brosky to give Wisconsin a first down on the Illinois one-yard line.

Supposedly, linebacker Chuck Boerio yelled to Badger quarterback John Coatta, "Hey, Johnny, send (freshman fullback Alan) Ameche at me!" - whereupon the future (1954) Heisman winner was stopped for a three-yard loss. (Curiously, a 1976 reference work on the history of Big Ten football refers to linebacker Boerio as "Chuck Boyle", the misnomer being perpetuated in a newer work published eleven years later!). After stopping the Badgers at this juncture, Illinois scored the winning touchdown with Karras going in from two yards out in the final period - his second score of the day - to produce the final score of 14-10. The Illinois team, now at 2-0, next traveled to Syracuse where they had pretty much an easy time in winning 41-20. Two touchdowns by Karras brought his to-date total to seven.

The following Saturday found the team playing the Washington Huskies in Seattle where they had to try stopping premier running back Hugh McElhenny. "Hurryin Hugh," as he became known, scored twice but was also stopped in an Illini goal line stand in the manner of two weeks previous against Ameche. (McElhenny was selected All-America by only the Associated Press of the major selectors, and he was the number eight finisher in the Heisman Trophy voting for 1951, while Karras would finish number six in the voting.) Against Washington Karras did not cross the goal line for the first time in a 1951 game, but the offensive leaders for Illinois on this occasion turned out to be former prep teammates at Chicago's South Shore High, quarterback Tommy O'Connell and fullback Pete Bachouros—neither of whom started the game. With the game tied at 20-20 in the fourth quarter, O'Connell passed to fullback Bill Tate, who was standing alone in the end zone, for his second touchdown as Illinois survived with a 27-20 win.

For game five on the Illinois schedule, Karras scored all three touchdowns in a 21-0 blanking of Indiana at Bloomington. Helping Karras to amass 374 total rushing yards were Don Stevens, Bachouros, and Tate. Sam Rebecca, a reserve quarterback, continued his fine extra point kicking as he converted on all three opportunities Al Brosky intercepted two Hoosier passes in the

end zone, while Stan Jones picked off one.

It was home again in Memorial Stadium on November 3 to face Michigan on a bitter, wintry afternoon when many of the original crowd of 71,000-plus eventually retreated to the comfort of the stadium's inner structure or to their parked cars. The direction and leadership of Tommy O'Connell would be the difference in this one, as with but 70 seconds left to play and a scoreless tie after three quarters, he passed six yards to receiver Rex Smith in the end zone. Smith had beaten Wolverine defensive back Dave Tinkham to make the touchdown catch that gave Illinois a 7-0 win over the defending conference champion. The year before a similar scenario had unfolded at Ann Arbor, with severe cold limiting effective performance as Illinois had also won that one by a count of 7-0, with a score from within the Michigan 10-yard line.

The next game was "Homecoming" for 1951 at Illinois, and the opponent was Iowa-the eventual last place finisher in the conference. The 40-13 win came easily for Illinois, with end Joe Vernasco scoring three times and Karras twice. With his second touchdown, Karras came within one of the Illinois scoring record of 13 in a season which was held by Red Grange (1924) and Buddy Young (1944). Iowa did not score until the final quarter, when no less than five fumbles by Illini reserves made things much easier for the Hawkeyes, who scored their 13 points for the day.

Then it was on to Columbus to face Ohio State in the game that would cost the Illini what would have been their first perfect season since 1923; when sophomore Red Grange had led them to an 8-0-0 ledger. The outcome on this day against the Buckeyes was a scoreless tie; for Illinois the first such result since 1947 in a game against Army in Yankee Stadium The Buckeyes five man line held Illinois to a woeful net rushing output of just 48 yards. In another matchup of offensive kingpins; Ohio State All-America Vic Janowicz, who had been awarded the Heisman Trophy the year before as a junior, gained a net of 15 yards on 14 carries; while Karras finished with a minus 11 yards on a comparable number of carries. The game, through frequent miscues-fumbles and interceptions-provided scoring opportunities that neither team could take advantage of, and the scoreboard remained inactive to the end.

Northwestern was the season closer for 1951, and Illinois needed to win or tie to claim the conference championship and the right to play in their second Rose Bowl under Coach Eliot. The final score, in another difficult ballgame, was Illinois 3 Northwestern 0. A second quarter field goal by the very reliable Sam Rebecca provided the razor thin margin of victory for the Illini over Bob Voigts' Wildcats-their first since the previous championship season of 1946.

Thus Illinois completed its first unbeaten regular season since 1927, with an overall record of 8-0-1, 5-0-1 in conference, and it was then on to Pasadena once again where the opponent would be Stanford. For the season some solid achievements took place by the Illini. Defensive back Al Brosky had intercepted at least one pass in all nine games, while Johnny Karras' final tally of 12 touchdowns gave him a third place ranking among all-time Illini scorers for one season.

January 1, 1952 marked five years since the last Rose Bowl appearance by Illinois. But it had been 11 years since Stanford's great team of 1940, with 1951 coach Chuck Taylor in the lineup as an All-America guard, had defeated Nebraska by a score of 21-13. In the 1952 Rose Bowl battle it was all Illinois, as fullback Bill Tate scored twice and ran for 150 yards on the way to being named the game's MVP. Illinois' ground game was the major factor in the 40-7 win, as the Big Ten champs picked up 361 yards to just 53 for the Indians. Playing for Stanford on this day in a substitute halfback role was future Olympic decathlon champion Bob Mathias. After ten seasons as head coach at Illinois, from 1942-1951, Ray Eliot had guided the Illini to two conference titles and two one-sided wins at the annual Rose Bowl game His reign at Illinois was to continue for eight more seasons.

\*\*\*\*\*

In 1922 Minnesota traveled to Northwestern, and late in the game the Golden Gophers had a lead of 7-0 and were staging a long drive. With a strong running game, along with some forward passes, Minnesota moved to the Northwestern two yard line and was ready to finish off the Purple. Then Gopher fullback Mitchell bulled up the middle, but just before going into the end zone he fumbled the ball forward. Purple defender Chuck Palmer scooped up the loose pigskin and set sail up the sideline and, trailed by a wall of blockers, he galloped 105 yards for the Northwestern touchdown. After the PAT, Minnesota was sent home with a stunning 7-7 tie.

"Football is not a game where a great national championship is possible or desirable. The very nature of the sport would forbid anything like such a series of contests as are played in baseball."

Walter Camp

Collier's Magazine

Dec. 13, 1919