

THE NAGURSKI MYTH

By Jim Rasco

It all started when I was eight years old. It was question #7 in the regular sports quiz in Babe Ruth Sports Comics (issue #7, May 1950). Who was chosen both tackle and full-back on the same All-American team?" The answer given was, "Bronko Nagurski, Minnesota's great grid star, 1927." I filed that "fact" away in my memory and just assumed it was an accurate statement because I had seen it in print.

A half-century later, I read Jim Dent's book, Monster of the Midway. On page 40, Dent stated that, "Bronk was selected first-string fullback on every All-America team and was the starting tackle on several others." On the same page, Dent added that, "Legendary sportswriter Grantland Rice would choose only ten players to his All-America team in 1929, naming Nagurski as a fullback and tackle." While writing his book, I'm sure Dent read old stories regarding Nagurski.

So, I started checking old issues of Sport magazine in my library (I have every issue from the first one, September 1946, through the mid 1960s). Sure enough, in the November 1954 issue, Norman Katkov wrote the life story of the then 45-year-old Nagurski. Katkov stated, "He played end, guard, fullback and tackle and in 1929 was named to every All-America team in the country at tackle and, on many, at fullback."

In the October 1950 issue of Sport, Frank Graham stated, "Bronko made some All-America teams in 1928 but not all, although it is doubtful if there was a better player in the country," in discussing Nagurski's junior year. Still another article stated, "All-America selectors were in a tizzy trying to find a proper position for Nagurski. One newspaper solved the dilemma by naming a nine-man team plus Bronko -- at both tackle and fullback."

The statements in Dent's book and in the articles in Sport magazine just seemed too unbelievable to be true. Therefore, I decided to refer to Bernie McCarty's book and review all the actual All-America selections for the Nagurski era -- 1927, 1928 and 1929. According to

McCarty's and CFHS member Henry Bryan's research, Nagurski received NO All-America mention in 1927 nor 1928. In 1929, there were thirteen "major" A-A selections released. As I expected, Nagurski was nowhere close to "being named fullback on every A-A team and tackle on several others." The actual results were as follows for Nagurski's 1929 All-America selections:

First team tackle	- 9 selections
First team fullback	- 1 selection
Second team fullback	- 1 selection
Third team fullback	- 1 selection

The other major team of 1929 was Christy Walsh's All-America Board. Bronko was not named to the first team by the All-America Board and there were no second or third teams announced.

In addition, there were twelve "minor" All-America teams listed in McCarty's book Nagurski was



Bronislaw (Bronko) Nagurski, versatile Minnesota All-American tackle-fullback 1929.

named to seven "first teams" (six at tackle and one at fullback). He was not mentioned on the other five selections. By the way, contrary to the statement in Dent's book, Grantland Rice named Nagurski at tackle and Ralph (Pest) Welch of Purdue at fullback on his 1929 All-America team. I cannot imagine how the myth ever originated that Grantland Rice named Bronko at two positions on his 1929 team.

Rather than fading away, the "Nagurski Myth" continues to grow. In March 2004, Sports Illustrated released its election of the "All-Time Best" sports figures in the history of the state of Minnesota. Bronko headed the list and Sports Illustrated stated that he "was the only player ever voted consensus All-America at two positions in the same season (fullback and tackle, 1929)." Sports Illustrated should have realized it is almost a practical impossibility to be named a "consensus" All-America at two different positions on an eleven-man All-America team. Nagurski was named first team fullback on only one major All-America team in 1929; nowhere near a "consensus selection" at two positions. During the period from 1949 through 1952 many All-America selectors began to name offensive and defensive first teams, and I recall one selector naming four players -- Leon Hart, Les Richter, John Lattner, and Tom Catlin -- to both the offensive and defensive first teams during that period, but that was not 1929.

Before I wrote this article, I decided to search old newspapers to learn as much as I could about the various 1929 All-America selections. The most interesting voting results that I found were those released by the Associated Press. There were 215 AP voters in 1929, and Nagurski was named to the first team by 115 voters. Elmer Sleight of Purdue received 82 votes and was awarded one of the tackle slots. Nagurski received 65 votes at tackle and was named to the other first team tackle position. Nagurski also received 50 votes at fullback. Bernard Holm of Alabama received 37 votes --13 fewer than Bronko -- yet the AP named Holm its first team fullback and Nagurski only at tackle; "because more voters named him as a tackle than as a fullback" In my opinion, the Associated Press should have taken the unusual stance of naming Nagurski at BOTH tackle and fullback. Therefore, let's consider revising history and giving Bronko the distinction he truly deserves; as the only player who ever really was "voted" a first team selection at two positions on one eleven-man All-America team in the same season.