

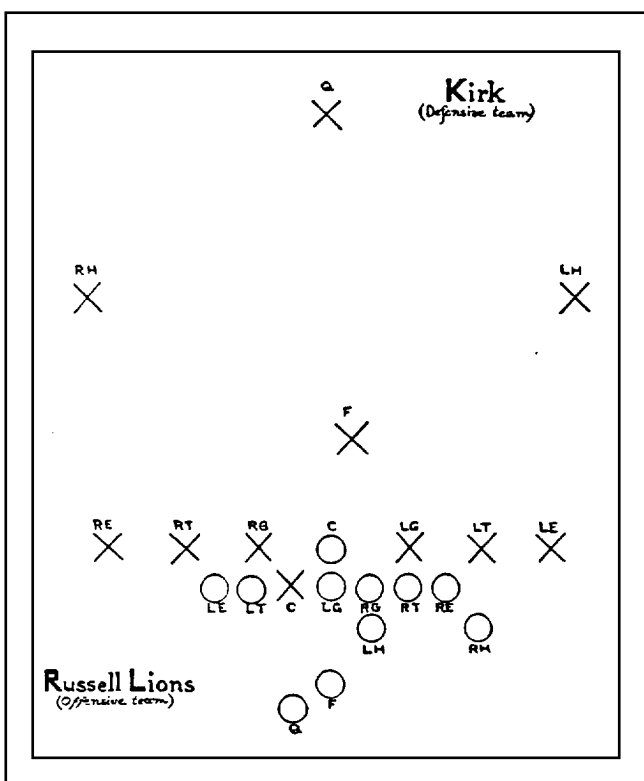
SINGLE WING POWER

By Jim Campbell

In the early 1930s while coaching at Bucknell, the famous offensive strategist and coach, Carl G. Snavely, said that “there is no way to improve on football beyond the unbalanced line Single-Wing.”

Certainly, there are those who would take exception to Coach Snavely’s statement of years ago, but one of those would not be Keith Piper, head coach at Denison University in Granville, Ohio. Piper, who was a fine single-wing center at Baldwin-Wallace during and after World War II, had his Denison teams still running the single wing; much to the chagrin of the Big Red’s opponents in the 1990s. He contended that no one really ever caught up with, or passed, the single wing offense. It just went out of style.

Once college football shook itself out in the 1880s and 1890s the basic offensive formation – as practiced by Amos Alonzo Stagg, Walter Camp, Fielding “Hurry Up” Yost, George Woodruff, John W. Heisman, and other pioneers – was similar to a “full-house” T-formation. The legalization of the forward pass in 1906, in response to the game’s brutality, gave birth to new offensive tactics. Glenn Scobey “Pop” Warner, then riding the crest of a wave of popularity as coach of the storied Carlisle Indian School, invented the single wing. As is the case today, imitation was then the sincerest form of flattery, and before long most football teams in the country were running Warner’s single wing.



While not as violent as the flying-wedge, guards-back, and other plays and formations that featured mass interference; the single wing was still a powerful offense. It’s basic play, the off-tackle slant, is still the “bread and butter” play of any modern running offense, what the single wing had, and what modern offenses that borrow from it still feature, was a double-team block at the point-of-attack coupled with a trap block at the same hole. Anytime two men block one defender, there is a good chance for positive yardage.

To achieve this double-team and trap block the single wing used an unbalanced line. Naturally, the center, who had to make a head-down, long snap to one of the deep backs, was over the ball. If the line were unbalanced right, or “strong right”, the center would

be flanked by the left tackle on his left and the left guard – sometimes called the “inside” guard to avoid confusion – on his right. Those two men would be flanked by the left end and right or “outside” guard. The outside guard would have the right tackle to his right. The right tackle would have the right end to his right. This whole process could be reversed simply by putting both guards to the left of the center, where they would be joined by the left tackle and left end to make the formation unbalanced left, or “strong-side left”. As the strength of today’s formations is determined by where the tight end is stationed, the single wing was “strong” to whichever side had the two guards. This alignment allowed the guards to “pull” and lead interference in making the signature double-team blocks.

The backfield consisted of a tailback (the key man on most single wing systems), a fullback, a

quarterback or blocking back, and a wingback. The tailback, the left halfback, was vital because he usually handled the ball most of the time. He was usually a “triple threat”, which meant that he could run, pass, and kick effectively. In the days when teams sometimes punted before fourth down, this was very important. He was called the tailback, because he was the deepest man when the backfield lined up. He was directly behind the center, or perhaps slightly to the left or right, depending on the particular coach’s whim.

The fullback was stationed a yard or so closer to the line than the tailback, and usually behind the inside right guard. The fullback ran smashes into the middle mostly, and blocked. The quarterback primarily was a blocking back and in most systems he called the plays. He was set behind the outside guard – or maybe as wide as the right tackle. The wingback, or right halfback, was usually posted outside the right end, although some systems had him lined up behind or inside the end. Wingbacks also blocked, went out for passes, or occasionally ran an inside reverse. Sometimes the wingback would be on the left side, which was referred to as the “wing left” formation.

Once the single wing caught on, various refinements were added by coaches, but there were really only a couple of basic systems. They became known as the “Tennessee Single-Wing” and the “Michigan Single-Wing”, perhaps because those two schools and their coaches were so successful using the formation over the long haul. The man responsible for the Tennessee juggernauts of the 1930s ’40s and ’50s was General Bob Neyland; a classmate of Dwight D. Eisenhower at West Point. Neyland, always referred to as the “General”, used a balanced line with a guard, tackle, and end to each side of the center. Michigan was tutored by Herbert “Fritz” Crisler, who actually brought his system from Princeton, where he had learned it under Coach Bill Roper.

Other coaches famous for their use of the single wing during its heyday included Bill Alexander (Georgia Tech), Bernie Bierman (Minnesota), Howard Jones (Iowa and Southern California), Andy Kerr (Colgate), George “Red” Munger (Penn), Red Sanders (Vanderbilt and UCLA), Andy Smith (California), Dr. Jock Sutherland (Lafayette and Pittsburgh), Wallace Wade (Alabama and Duke), and Carl Snavely (Bucknell, Cornell, and North Carolina).

Each of the above coaches, and unnamed others, added his own touch to the formation, but the basics remained. Some of the most fabled players in college football history were products of the single wing from Jim Thorpe and Red Grange, to Charley “Choo-Choo” Justice and Paul Giel; with Bronko Nagurski, Sammy Baugh, and Tommy Harmon in between; all were single wing tailbacks.

The one coach who didn’t use the single wing was Knute Rockne. Rock had his own system, the Notre Dame box. It was similar to the single wing; the only real difference in the box formation was that the tailback and fullback were lined up at the same depth in the backfield. But while everyone was jumping on the single wing bandwagon; its inventor, Warner, was jumping off. He eventually moved his fullback out to a position at the opposite end of the line as the wingback, and so had the “Double Wing” formation.

As World War II drew near, two football games – both the responsibility of the same man – did more to render the single wing unfashionable than anything else. Clark Shaughnessy, who moved to Stanford after the University of Chicago dropped football before the 1940 season, installed a man-in-motion wrinkle in the T-formation for the Chicago Bears, and all the Bears did was maul the Washington Redskins in the 1940 NFL Championship game by a score of 73-0. Shaughnessy also took the new T-formation with him to Palo Alto, where Warner had coached through much of the 1920s and ’30s and Stanford shocked the college football world by running and passing Nebraska dizzy in an upset win in the 1941 Rose Bowl, to cap off a perfect season. The T-formation then became “all the latest rage”.

Still, the purists hung on. But by the 1950s nearly everyone had jilted the single wing to heed the

siren call of the T-formation. In the early 1960s the only major colleges still banging away with the single wing were Princeton, Tennessee, and UCLA. By 1964, only Princeton would remain; and the Tigers ran the wing through 1969. During the single wings final years, tailbacks Hank Lauricella and Johnny Majors were named All-America at Tennessee; fullbacks Homer Smith and Cosmo Iacavazzi were named All-America while playing at Princeton; and tailbacks Paul Cameron and Bill Kilmer were chosen to All-America squads while playing at UCLA.

Pete Elliott, a former college head coach at Nebraska, California, Illinois, and Miami, was a single wing quarterback (the blocking back) while playing for Michigan from 1945-48. In the Michigan System the quarterback was more than a blocker only. Says Elliott, "First, we called all our own plays, unlike today's quarterbacks; and that was a real perk. Then we could run with the ball on some plays, pass it on others, and go out for passes. It wasn't all just knocking people over. Remember, Earl Britton and Forest Evashevski were quite famous as blocking backs for Red Grange and Tom Harmon".

Elliott continued, "We lined up in the T when we came to the line, then shifted to the single wing. Sometimes we even ran from the T, but not often. Although, what's the use of having it if you don't run from it once in a while. We also had the buck-lateral series and the fullback-spinner. They were very versatile and very Michigan."

"The buck-lateral was fullback-oriented", added the personable Elliott. "The direct snap went to him rather than the tailback. He could fake the line buck, lateral to the tailback, or lateral to the quarterback, or lateral to the wingback coming across the formation – all with his back to the line. Or he could then turn around and run up the middle himself."

"The spinner featured the fullback too. he would get the ball and spin in a full, 360-degree circle. As he was doing this, the tailback would cross in front of him and either take the ball or leave it for the

wingback, who could cross from the other side and either take it or leave it. Sometimes the quarterback would take the ball or just fake, and of course, the fullback could handoff to no one; spin completely and head for the hole himself. We also had many tailback plays, and great tailbacks when I was there; Bob Chappuis, Wally Teninga, and Chuck Ortman."

Coach Homer Smith tells how Princeton remained fullback-oriented even long after Fritz Crisler left for Michigan. Under coaches Charlie Caldwell and Dick Colman, the Tigers retained much of the offense Michigan later ran. with a tailback like Dick Kazmaier – the last single wing player to win

the Heisman Trophy, in 1951 – the Tigers utilized his triple-threat talents. But when Princeton didn't have a solid sterling tailback the fullback was the key. Says Smith, "The fullback was a trap runner. We ran inside and outside traps. Inside was over guard; outside was over tackle. It must have been effective; I was ninth in the nation in rushing in '52."

Frank Lovecchio, a successful physician and ex-blocking back at Princeton, substantiates Smith's assessment; "I usually handed off to the fullback in the buck-lateral series, led on power plays, or slipped out into the flat as a safety-valve on pass plays." In 1964, when Princeton was the only major college team still using the wing formation, Iacavazzi finished with 909 yards – ninth best in the nation – in nine games for a 528 yards per carry average. Good enough for All-America honors and a \$100,000 signing bonus from the New York Jets.

Jack Stroud, a great tackle at Tennessee and later a 12-year veteran with the New York Giants; gives a lineman's perspective: "It was all power. We used shoulder blocks, not those dance steps you see now. No hands, no grabbing; just line your helmet up with his numbers and mow 'em down. Our guards pulled, our tackles pulled, the blocking back would lead, and the wingback would get into the flow. They talk about 'student body right' and 'student body left', that's what we had at U.T."

While coach Keith Piper of Denison was the only college coach still exclusively running the single wing, elements of it are still alive today. Evashevski, in the 1950s, took the formation to Iowa and devised the Wing-T formation. Dave Nelson, a tailback/wingback at Michigan in the 1940s, made the Wing-T famous and successful at Delaware. After Nelson's retirement from coaching, Harold "Tubby" Raymond, an ex-Wolverine guard, carried on the tradition.

Susquehanna University, from Pennsylvania, a team that was in the 1991 NCAA Division III quarterfinals; has had great success with the Wing-T over the last decade under head coaches Bill Moll, Rocky Rees, and Steve Briggs. All are proponents of the Delaware Wing-T. Moll says. "The system incorporates the best of the single wing – two men blocking one man at the point of attack, and another blocker applying a trap block I always liked those numbers. Our 132-Power couldn't be a lot different from what Harmon and Evashevski ran at Michigan. Other teams don't like to see you coming at them with it.

If the saying "What goes around, comes around" applies to the world of college football, keep your eyes on the offensive horizon; the Single-Wing formation just might be coming around again.