

The Great Jewish Quarterback

In the 1920s, when pro football occupied a lowly place in the American sports universe, the National Football League's New York Giants were money losers and not very good, either. So Tim Mara, the team's owner and a legal bookmaker, sought to upgrade the team's skills and its box-office appeal. His eye fell on the Jewish quarterback of the Detroit Wolverines, Benny Friedman, a former star at the University of Michigan. Friedman, Mara reasoned, was good, very good, and, in a city with New York's Jewish population, had the potential to expand the team's fan base.

But the Wolverines' owners refused to trade Friedman. So Mara did the next best thing: In 1928, he bought the Wolverines and moved the team to New York, paying the quarterback a stratospheric \$10,000 a season. The 1929 Giants had a great season, turning a profit for the first time, and Friedman became a Big Apple star.

That was only one highlight in the career of the famed quarterback, subject of a new biography, *Passing Game: Benny Friedman and the Transformation of Football*, by Murray Greenberg. That title contains no hyperbole: Friedman made the forward pass an integral part of offensive football rather than simply an afterthought to the running game. His arm strength, his touch, his accuracy and his imagination revamped the game's strategy. At a time when the ball itself hindered passing—it was shaped more like an oversized melon than the sleek pigskin of today—and the rules required passers to throw from at least five yards behind the line of scrimmage, Friedman's passing records, first at Michigan and then in the NFL, are amazing.

Football's early record-keeping was far from the encyclopedic statistical enterprise it is today, but after being named a two-time All-American in college, Friedman was named all-NFL four times. He was the first player to throw 20 touchdown passes in a season and the first to throw four touchdown passes in one game, and he set a career record of 66 touchdown passes that lasted into the 1940s. In an era when

players played both offense and defense, he was a renowned tackler. He also was a gifted runner, and he kicked extra points and field goals.

The son of immigrants who settled in Cleveland, Friedman was one of the first major sports heroes to capture the hearts of America's Jews. Not that there weren't other Jewish football players at the time. Greenberg relates that Friedman's presence forced two University of Minnesota linemen, George Abramson

and agility. The boy from the ghetto passed with unerring and uncanny ability."

In his later pro years, Friedman also coached at Yale. After retiring as a player, he coached for nine years at City College of New York, where many of his players were Jewish walk-ons with minimal gridiron experience. Following World War II, in which he served as a naval officer, he became the first athletic director, and football coach, at the new Brandeis University. He was selected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio in 2005.

Greenberg, a Brandeis alumnus who learned of the respect his former players had for their coach, wonders what took so long. "The lack of popularity of the pro game in his time may have been part of it," he speculates. "Maybe his personality played a part—he was self-assured to a fault."

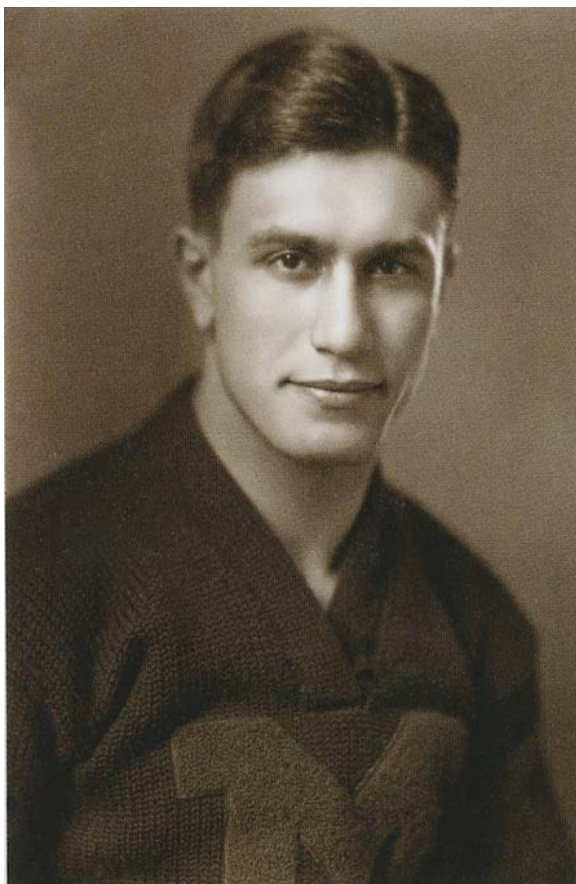
Could anti-Semitism have played a role? "I haven't uncovered any hard evidence," Greenberg says. "It's something to speculate on."

Several former Brandeis players mounted a campaign that led to his selection to the Hall of Fame. At Friedman's induction ceremony, his nephew David Friedman, a Massachusetts optometrist, related how his uncle attributed his injury-free football career to his mother and her faith.

"Mounted on a wall in his parents' home was a *pushke*, a charity box," David Friedman told the national television audience. "When he was in high school, he observed his mother dropping a few coins in the box and seeing her lips move as if she was in prayer. When

he asked what she was doing, she said she was protecting him from injury by putting 18 cents (the number stands for *chai*, which means life) into the *pushke*. From that day forward, as far as Friedman was concerned, it was his mother's faith and *chai* that kept him healthy."

Eventually his luck ran out. His enshrinement in the Hall of Fame occurred 23 years after he committed suicide in 1982 while despondent over ill health.—Boris Weintraub



and Louis Gross, to abandon their practice of calling signals in Yiddish, something they ordinarily did without fear of tipping off the other team.

Friedman's Jewishness, which he considered a simple fact of life, was not lost on others. Sportswriters, while singing his praises, often singled it out as worthy of comment. One wrote in 1930 of "that redoubtable descendant of Palestine, Benny Friedman, not so much a giant in physique as in football ability, mentality,