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A Backward Glance at
the Forward Pass:
Giving Credit Where
Credit is DU!

The story of the Denison University Contribution to the Forward Pass Revolution in Modern Football.

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The forward pass has made football livelier and more exciting, especially for the fans.

While erstwhile Ohio State football coach and Denison alumnus, Woody Hayes [DU '35], was known for his playing theory of "three yards and a cloud of dust," it's the passing game that has generally surpassed the "grunt them out running games" of long ago. Where and when did this influential game changing football strategy arise? Read on!

The 1913 Notre Dame-Army Football Game Most fans and many sportswriters accept the common gridiron lore that the forward pass as a game-winning strategy originated under the shadows of the famous golden dome in South Bend, Indiana. Tradition holds that the famous Notre Dame player and later coach, Knute Rockne, was on the receiving end of aerial bombs thrown by the Irish quarterback, Gus Dorais, in the rout of the cadets from Army on November 1, 1913. This November upset of the highly favored Army team launched Notre Dame into its nearly unstoppable drive toward national prominence as a football powerhouse.

References to the significance for the development of football strategy initiated in this Notre Dame-Army contest abound.' *Fox News* recently claimed that Notre Dame "changed the game forever by utilizing the forward pass for something other than desperation."

USA Today this year claimed that against Army, Note Dame employed "an innovative game plan." The "Great Football Games" account boldly asserts: What happened on November 1" 1913 is a single incident that in American football annals is separated as both a highlight and a turning point in the development of the sport.... The Dorais-Rockne pass combination

made headlines on every sports page [and] a new conception was born.

Eastern sports writers raved about the forward pass.

The Baltimore Sun, for instance, had a six-column headline stating that "Notre Dame Shows the Most Sensational Football the Nation Has Ever Seen." *The New York Evening Telegraph* November 1" sports pages contained the following account: It took a so-called smaller college to come East and display an attack so versatile and dazzling that it may revolutionize the style of offensive play throughout this section of the country.

The football historian for "The Most Memorable Games" claimed that this contest on the banks of the Hudson "was an epochal event in football [and] marked a turning point in football history." An interesting historical sidelight is that a young Cadet gridder sitting on the bench that fateful November afternoon was Dwight David Eisenhower.

Dorais/Rockne combination coached by Harper has received singular credit for this "revolution" in college football. As you will see, it's also false.

Historical evidence demonstrates without a doubt that Gus Dorais and Knute Rockne must step aside and cede Denison

University's George Roudebush and Dave Reese this niche in the historical narrative of college football.

The Groundless Notre Dame Legend

Further tradition has it that the Dorais-Rockne passing combination was finely honed on the Cedar Point shores of Lake Erie during the summer of 1913, when both Notre Dame gridgers worked as bus boys at the warm weather resort. The passing plan developed over the summer was executed with perfection later that year as the Irish blasted the Cadets in what former *Columbus Citizen Journal* sportswriter Kaye Kessler called "Notre Dame's 35-13 stunning of Army in November 1913 at West Point."² Dorais became the first consensus All American football player at Notre Dame, and Rockne served as captain of that fabled 1913 Irish team.

In his *My Notre Dame*, Thomas Stritch writes that on the Notre Dame campus "baseball remained more important till Dorais and Rockne shocked the Knights of West Point out of their moleskins in 1913. From that day on Notre Dame and football became inseparable."³

Long-time *Columbus Dispatch* sports editor, Dick Fenlon, writing in 1985 about this development in modern day football of the forward pass,

began his discussion with the much-overlooked role of Denison University.

Perhaps General Abner Doubleday, putting aside his battle plans, did invent baseball. Maybe Benjamin Franklin, silly man, did fly a kite in the rain. Possibly, Christopher Columbus, looking for Calcutta, did fall upon America.

This kind of legend keeps going on. In "The Birth of the Modern Passing Game," the reader discovers that "the win revolutionized college football as the forward pass, a legal weapon since 1906, gained popularity as a legitimate offensive tool."

The Pigskin Post this fall noted the following: Notre Dame did not invent the forward pass but . . . they perfected it. Up to this point, the forward pass was more gimmick play and had never been used as a regular part of a team's offense.

The *Athlon* sports writer suggests that "The cadets found themselves in the cross hairs of a ground breaking aerial assault that would change the game of football in America."

But Gus Dorais and Knute Rockne and Notre Dame did not invent the forward pass. It's a swell legend!

Fenlon goes on to write that it is a fact that "Dorais and the Rock

worked out all summer on the beach at Cedar Point perfecting the weapon that they unveiled in the 35-13 upset of Army. "But, Fenlon notes emphatically, "What *isn't a fact* is that the Irish were the first to turn the pass into a killer weapon."

The Granville Connection with Modern Football

Indeed, the primary contender in the historical debate regarding the origin of the fabled forward pass strategy is Granville's own Denison University. In his history of athletics at Denison, *The Big Red: One Hundred Years and More of Athletics at Denison*, by Richard Blackburn devotes some attention to the claim that a full year before the Dorais-Rockne passing combination that devastated the Army football team, famous Denison gridder and later eminent Cleveland attorney, George Roudebush, passed with a high degree of accuracy, especially in an awesome 68-0 victory over the Wittenberg Tigers. A newspaper account of the day reports that Roudebush threw passes "for all sorts of distance with wonderful accuracy."

Roudebush himself noted that he came to Denison "off the farm where I had practiced throwing stones and corncocks at hogs and chickens."

Legendary Denison coach Walter Livingston, "Livy" to generations

of Denison athletes, realized young Roudebush could throw a football as well as corncocks on the farm, so he teamed him up with another Denison sports legend and Roudebush's fraternity brother and roommate, Dave Reese. Reese, who some suggest may have been Denison's all-time greatest athlete, was a stellar basketball player. Livy concluded that if Reese could catch a basketball, he could catch a pigskin. So developed the famous and successful passing combination of Roudebush to Reese, which exercised the forward pass with precision in the autumn of 1912. Thus, by the start of the 1913 football season, in his junior year as a Big Red football player, Roudebush himself had spent more than half a season passing the football with great verve and success.

The Big Red gridders, under the watchful eye of Livy and the talented arm of Roudebush, had developed a mighty passing game a full year before Notre Dame's Fighting Irish pulled the upset of the Army Cadets along the Hudson River that beginning day in November 1913.

The Change in the Rulebook

The claim here is not that the first forward pass in modern football originated in either 1912 or 1913.

What is at issue is when did a team first develop and use the forward pass as a phenomenally successful strategic method to win football games.

Several historical sources suggest that as early as 1906, a kind of forward pass was permitted on the gridiron.

That year Coach Eddie Cochems of St. Louis University experimented with the forward pass.

Legendary coaches Pop Warner and Amos Alonzo Stagg had a couple pass plays in their repertoire but used them sparingly and often only in desperation last minute situations.

Yet the rules prohibited much activity in what today we would call a passing game.

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century football contests often were brutal and bloody encounters. Greatly disturbed by this gridiron violence, in 1905 Theodore Roosevelt summoned to the White House a blue ribbon committee of university administrators with the charge to either clean up football or see it banned in the United States. One item that arose from these discussions, which Carl Mattison Chapin called "The Great Reformation of 1906," was the implementation of a modified

version of the forward pass. The rule permitting the forward pass was adopted for the 1906 season.

The pass was thought to be an avenue for eliminating some of the more violent situations in the nearly barbarous line play of the day.

Yet there were severe restrictions. The football then had an unwieldy shape that made throwing a forward pass difficult.

An underhand forward lateral was the common forward pass of the day. Furthermore, the passer needed to execute the pass within a five-yard area on either side of the center who snapped the ball. Within a few years, this rule was changed to five yards behind the line of scrimmage.

A pass was declared illegal if it went more than twenty-yards in the air. To assist the referee's calls, the field was chalked off into five-yard squares; this is how the nickname "grid-iron" came about. Moreover, if a pass were touched and then dropped by a potential receiver, a free ball much like a fumble resulted. It is no surprise that many football coaches did not deploy this new option. This was particularly true for Eastern colleges and universities, where the coaches accepted the forward pass only in theory as a way to get Roosevelt off their backs. All of this is important background material in understanding the many

historical references to the 1913 Notre Dame/Army football game.

In his thoughtful account of the forward pass and its Denison connection, *Dispatch* sports editor Fenlon interviewed George Roudebush on the front porch of his northern Granville Township farmhouse. "Roudy," who later served as a football official for a quarter century, gave this rendition of the football situation regarding the rules governing the forward pass during the early years of the twentieth century:

But the whole thing was, Rules 6 through 12 provided that the forward pass would be thrown five yards behind the line of scrimmage, but not to exceed 20 yards, and nobody wanted to throw the ball into the line of scrimmage.

My first year eligible [as a Denison University sophomore], 1912, they [The football Rules Committee] changed it from 20 yards to any distance.

Roudebush points out that what made possible the development of the passing game for modern football was this relaxation of the rules governing the forward pass.

The rule makers did away with the five and twenty-yard restraints. The new rules also prohibited deliberate interference by the defense. These new rules made possible a wide open passing game for college football.

But a problem arose early on, not with the institution of the rules change but with the promulgation of the new set of rules regarding the forward pass.

In 1912, football was still what today would be called a "minor" sport on college campuses, and not every institution bought a copy of the newly printed 1912 edition of the rulebook. Only a few coaches knew about this rule change. Roudebush noted that not even Ohio State knew about it. Before adopting the forward pass as part of its game plan, Denison lost to the Buckeyes that fall 34-0 in the second game of the season.

1912 Denison Team Discovers the Forward Pass

Roudebush went on to tell Fenlon that the Denison trip to engage the College of Wooster's Fighting Scots in the third game of the 1912 season produced the passing game for the Big Red. The Wooster coach, L.C. Boles, had a copy of the new rulebook—Roudebush guessed that it might have been the only one in the whole state! In the Wooster game, Roudebush remarked that the Fighting Scots "threw the football all over the park, and we couldn't find out why." The game ended in a 3-3 tie.

Reflecting on what the Denison eleven talked about after the game, another member of the

1912 Denison team; tackle Lester Black, told how the Denison players developed a plan from their newly found knowledge of the power and effectiveness of a forward pass strategy: Several of us discussed the uncanny ability of George Roudebush, our substitute quarterback, in throwing a football. As a result of that discussion, Livy was approached with the idea of playing Roudy at half regularly so that use could be made of his prowess as a passer. Always eager for anything that would improve the team, Livy approved the idea and immediately devised new plays.

Two seniors were our regular ends, Chuck Mitchell was at left end and at the end of the season, *The Denisonian* described him as one "who can handle the forward pass to perfection." At the other end was Red Brown, also a senior, who was described by *The Denisonian* as "a sure man on the forward pass."

The Denison University Marching Band, circa 1913 Livy had watched Dave Reese's all-round athletic ability when he played for Doane Academy [then the preparatory school at Denison University]. Thinking that a basketball player should be a good man to catch passes, Livy devised a shift so that Dave, our center, while still centering the ball, was at one end of the line and thus was eligible to receive

passes. In the case of Black, a tackle, the problem was easier; to become an eligible pass receiver, all he had to do was to line up outside his end. ' Observing the possibility of deftly using the forward pass at the Wooster game, and depending on Livy's ability to listen to his players, the Denison eleven adapted marvelously to the new rules and went on to an outstanding remainder of their 1912 football season. This Denison team had several sophomores who jelled in the next two years to produce the famous 1914 Ohio Conference Championship football team.

The Big Red Adapt to the New Passing Rules

The next thing the Denison team under Livy did was get its own copy of the new rulebook. With this new strategic possibility, the passing expertise of halfback Roudebush blossomed.

Roudebush himself noted that Denison "scored 19 points in our first three games. In the next five, we scored almost 200! "The passing strategy had begun in earnest.

Roudebush remarked that the football was "fatter" in 1912 than it is today and hence it was difficult to handle. Many players entrusted to pass the football would try to "palm it in the middle. "Roudebush, who also played baseball for the Big Red,

drew upon skills that had been finely honed by throwing those stones and corncobs from his early days on the farm in Newtonsville. He passed the ball by gripping it near the end and throwing it to his intended receiver with a pitching motion.

This new passing weapon was so successful that the next week Denison beat the Otterbein Cardinals 60-3 and the Tigers of Wittenberg 68-0 in short order the following week. Reporting on the match with Wittenberg, the *Columbia Dispatch* in its November 2, 1912, edition noted that "Roudebush again starred by throwing passes for all sorts of distance with wonderful accuracy." ⁹ *The Newark Advocate* for the same day offers the following account: The forward pass was worked time and time again, giving enormous gains to Denison. The game was featured by the wonderful passes of Roudebush, which were the best seen on the Denison gridiron for many years. Five or six passes for 30 or more yards were successfully made.¹⁰

The following three games that closed out the season were all victories and against larger institutions: Denison 31-University of Cincinnati 13; Denison 13-Miami of Ohio 0; and Denison 17-West Virginia University 6. The passing arm of George Roudebush carried the day—and the season—for the Big Red of little Denison University in

Granville, Ohio.

Newspapers of the day provide factual accounts of the great ability of Roudebush to be a forward passer of distinction. *The Columbus Dispatch* in reporting on the Wittenberg game noted that "the Springfield bunch was outclassed and seemed to have no idea ... how to break up the forward pass. "Another example of stellar forward passing came a week later when Denison beat Cincinnati 31-13; *The Advocate* sports writer reports that "Granville's well trained and conditioned athletes showed too much dazzling work in the forward pass for Cincinnati to cope with." 11 Following the second to the last game with Miami University, *The Cincinnati Enquirer* reported that "Denison by Brilliant forward passes defeated Miami 13 to 0." A description of the final game of the season against West Virginia played in Fairmont, W.Va., noted that "the forward passes and long end runs of Denison bewildered... "the West Virginia Mountaineers. 12

In describing for Denison 's own institutional history the very successful 1912 gridiron season, the *Adytum*, which is the college yearbook, focuses much attention on the role of the forward pass in Denison's football success that year.

The striking feature of the season was the development of the open

style of play. "Livy" started out by running the team much as it had been the year before, but after the Ohio State and 'Wooster games, the team was drilled in the use of the forward pass until it became the leader in this style of play.

The *Adytum* comments on the dramatic change after the Wooster game.

The Otterbein game showed a change in Denison 's style of play, the forward pass being used to such advantage that the game resulted in a walk-away 60 to 3.

The Wittenberg game was a repetition of this and gave us our highest score of the season, 68 to 0. Cincinnati could do little better and were easily taken into camp to the tune of 31-13. Miami fought hard but the Denison bunch succeeded in chalking up a 13-0 score in one of the season's best games. The West Virginia team could not solve our system of offence and were forced to yield to the better team, 17-6.

In all, Denison amassed a total of 211 points to our opponents 65.

Here's to the Championship in 1913!

This *Adytum* summary conjoined with the newspaper accounts provide substantial evidence that the Denison football team of 1912, using the passing skills of

George Roudebush, executed with distinction the craft of throwing the forward pass accurately and used this newly justified strategy deftly to win football games, some played against larger institutions.

The 1912 *Adytum* description of Roudy the passer is explicit about his football throwing abilities and this contribution to Denison's winning ways on the gridiron: This year's style of play brought out a new star in the person of "Roudy." "Roudy" went out for quarterback and since he couldn't very well take Deeter 's place, he made his presence so felt on the second team that Livy was forced to give him a place at half on the regular team, where his beautiful long forward passes furnished all sorts of the spectacular element to the team 's work.

Here's hoping that "Roudy's" arm is working as well next year.

These events occurred one full *year* before the Dorais/Rockne passing duo mesmerized the Cadets of Army in that fateful November 1913 football match.

Roudebush's passing skills transformed football for Denison and ultimately for everybody. This young Denison sophomore led the "revolution" in modern football by elevating the forward pass to a significant offensive weapon. At the time, the Denison home football games were played

on old Beaver Field, which was located where the present Denison University heating plant stands on South Main Street.

The Next Two Football Seasons
Roudebush continued his forward passing bombardment as a throwing halfback for the Denison Big Red. What is interesting historically is that on November 1, 1913—the same day that the Dorais/Rockne duo flabbergasted Army through the forward pass—Roudebush and his Denison teammates carried out a forward pass offensive onslaught against the Bobcats of Ohio University on the loser's home field in Athens, winning by the lopsided score of 52-0. Of course, this event in Athens that day occurred long before the ESPN advances of instantaneous football news and interest stories. Earlier that season, Roudebush connected on three touchdown passes in a 31-0 win at Wittenberg. The *Advocate* notes that in this second game of the season, "The forward passing of Roudebush was very accurate and three of his passes resulted in touchdowns."¹⁵

In a 47-0 rout of Ohio Wesleyan in 1913, the *Adytum* reporter notes that "This game was one of forward passes and Roudy had the Wesleyan bunch completely bewildered."¹⁰ The *Advocate* noted that Roudebush threw two scoring passes and scored four times himself in this rout of Ohio Wesleyan.

Roudebush was at the helm of the Denison pass work and undoubtedly there is no other man in the state who can combine such great accuracy and distance to his passes. Roudy had plenty of time to choose his man."

In this game, Roudebush completed 19 of 42 passes, including 13 completions for 150 yards in the fourth quarter alone.

The 1913 Denison Big Red indeed was a ferocious passing machine by the middle of its second season of using the forward pass as an effective offensive strategy.

The football fame of the Denison gridders must have been widespread, because for the final game of the 1913 season, the Denison team traveled to Rochester, NY, for a game before four thousand fans with the University of Rochester. The next two *Adytums* reiterate Roudebush's phenomenal passing skills.

The 1914 team continued its wizardry with the forward pass. Commenting on the football success of this Ohio Conference Championship team, the editors of the *Adytum* wrote the following:

Denison was recognized as one of the most perfect exponents of the new forward pass and lateral pass game in the Buckeye State.

Perfection of the open style of play was the reason for a Denison success. Coach Walter Livingston earnestly groomed his men in the various new methods of attack. His proteges attested their ability to put the advice of the sterling leader into practice by making consistent gains with his plays.'

In the victory over Oberlin, the newspaper reporter notes that "Denison worked the forward pass with success and scored a touchdown by this method in the second quarter with a beautiful pass Roudebush to Dutch Thiele "Roudebush came back the next week to throw two touchdown passes in another win over Ohio Wesleyan.

Certainly these scoring totals alone would indicate that the Denison passing game was exceedingly productive. And it began definitely in the fall season of 1912, when Livy and his team capitalized on the tremendous throwing abilities of a Denison sophomore student from Newtonsville, Ohio. Roudebush was a four-sport letter winner, playing for the Big Red in football, basketball, baseball, and tennis.

Righting the History of College Football on the Forward Pass

It is the Denison 1912 Big Red football team that deserves the historical credit and acknowledgement for first

establishing, perfecting, and executing the strategy of the forward pass, not the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame. *Newark Advocate* executive sports editor, Jim Wharton, wrote accurately when he jotted down the following account: News clippings from the 1912 Denison season prove that Roudebush was a passing wizard in his own right—a year before Rockne unleashed the forward pass with sensational results against Army. 22

This historical evidence refutes passages like the one quoted earlier from *The Pigskin Post* asserting that before the 1913 Notre Dame/Army game "the forward pass was more gimmick play and had never been used as a regular part of a team's offense. "Without any doubt, the 1912 Denison Big Red gridgers used effectively the forward pass, not as a gimmick but as a powerful offensive weapon.

Kave Kessler ends his 1982 article by writing, with some sense of astonishment considering the "three yards and a cloud of dust " policy of Woody Hayes, "To think that [the forward pass] was perfected in the school that spawned Woody Hayes as a player [guard] and coach!"

A Postscript

In considering this story and its importance in the history of football, one continues to see the effect of public relations and newsworthy stories. That the 1913 Notre-Dame football team caught the imagination of the Eastern sports press corps is undeniable.

Rockne himself always knew how to ingratiate himself with news people, especially sports writers. Grantland Rice's fabled story of the "Four Horsemen" grew out of Rockne 's appreciation for the press.

The Gipper story would be another example. There were no big time sports writers at the games where Denison 's highly talented George Roudebush hurled the pigskin with such accuracy. Nonetheless, Roudebush and his corps of receivers rightly and unequivocally deserve the recognition of perfecting the forward pass strategy a year before the Dorais/Rockne duo surprised the cadets of Army.

Roudebush graduated from Denison with his class in 1915 and entered the Law School at the University of Cincinnati. He was "drafted" by the famous Canton Bulldogs and played part of a season in the same.

Only by spectacular forward passes was Denison able to win the victory. Two of those seemed to go half the length of the field

and as each was successfully executed, groans of despair came from the Wesleyan stands."

During Roudebush's senior year, the *Adytum* sports editor wrote the following about Denison's stellar passer: Roudebush must also be recognized as the best forward passer in Ohio and one of the best in college football.

Forty-five yards was his longest completed pass in a game, but a sixty yard one squirmed out of the receiver's arms in the Miami fray.

The description of Roudebush's gridiron accomplishments during his Denison years also refers to adept passing abilities: Roudebush—We are very much afraid that "Roudy" will be drafted by the Germans to throw their 42 cm shells for them, for he sure does put a lot of push behind his passes and hits the mark every time. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, he is the best passer in this or any other state, and moreover he can carry the ball with the best of them. We will miss him at left half next year.'

The editor of the *Cleveland Athletic Club Journal*, Matt Fenn, gives sophomore George Roudebush and the 1912 Denison Big Red football team the historical credit as "first revolutionizing the game of Football by dramatically proving the effectiveness of the forward

pass."²² It is instructive to consider the point spread between Denison and its opponents during this three-year span when the team continued to perfect its forward passing strategy.

1912: Denison—211; Opponents—65; 1913: Denison—173; Opponents—59; 1914: Denison—183; Opponents—65. Grand total: Denison—567; Opponents: 189
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The 1913 season only had seven contests because a blinding snow storm forced the cancellation of the second game in November. This team might have scored over two hundred points for a second year in a row.⁶

He played in same backfield with the legendary Jim Thorpe. Roudebush once recalled that the Bulldogs mailed him the plays and signals in Cincinnati, and he would study this information while going on the train to the game sites. He was paid a hundred dollars a month for his football services with the Bulldogs, later an original member of the newly founded National Football League.

When the United States entered the First World War, Roudebush applied to Officer Candidate School and served in the infantry as a captain. Stationed at Camp Sherman near Chillicothe, he

played for an army team that went against Ohio State and its famous All American, Chic Harley, in a Thanksgiving Day contest on the old Ohio Field in Columbus.

After serving in France in 1918, Roudebush returned to Cincinnati and finished law school. Yet he still had his football yearnings, and he played in the starting backfield for the 1919 Dayton Triangles, another George Roudebush died in 1992 at the age of 98.

One of Roudebush's favorite receivers, Dave Reese, also graduated in 1915. Reese was captain of the 1914 Ohio Conference Championship team and received many accolades for his football abilities.

Reese and Roudebush were fellow students at the University of Cincinnati, where Reese graduated from the Dental School. Later Reese became the first commissioner of the Mid-American Athletic Conference.

Roudebush once recalled that "Dave and I roomed together and played football, basketball and baseball together for seven years." Reese was a star basketball player on the 1912-13 Denison team that beat Notre Dame 47-13. This basketball team was the undisputed state champions.

charter member of the National Football League. A football official for a quarter century, Roudebush was a seventy-year member of a large Cleveland law firm more recently known as Arter & Hatten. He served for nearly half a century with the Trustees of his alma mater in Granville and is a member of the Denison University Athletic Hall of Fame.

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Cookie Sunkle kindly dug out old copies of the *Adytum* from the college yearbook files. Most of the photographs used are from these *Adytums*.