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LEADERS & SUCCESS

Football Great Sammy Baugh His Attention To Accuracy Made Him A Super Passer

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It was 1937, and Sammy Baugh was tossing practice passes before his first game with the Washington Redskins. Coach Ray Flaherty told him it's easier for receivers to catch a ball thrown around their face. He should target the eye.

"Which eye?" Baugh asked seriously.

Vintage Baugh. A source of confidence and accuracy.

One of the top passers in National Football League history, Baugh finished first in single-season completion percentage seven times, the second-best all-time mark. He connected on 70.3% of his passes alone in 1945, an NFL record for 37 years. He holds the record for most seasons, five, with the lowest percentage for intercepted passes.

His skills went beyond accuracy. Before releasing the ball, he used an array of tricks to outwit defenses like no other passer of his time.

He avoided pass rushers by ducking, sidestepping and faking throws. He'd cock the ball like the baseball player he once was, bring it down, cock it again, fake a throw to one side and look to fire a completion to the other side.

Baugh then deployed his powerful arm. With a sling-shot throwing style, he made bullet-like throws even if hit hard and falling. He showed split-second timing with receivers and an uncanny ability to lead them.

"He's the only man I ever saw who could throw a football like a good infielder throws a baseball," Redskin Cliff Battles,

who played with Baugh in 1937, once said. "He throws from his shoulder, his hips, overarm, sidearm and underhand. He's never out of position."

Baugh, now 86, terrorized the primitive defensive backfields of his era, which consisted of only two cornerbacks and a safety. If the defensive backs went in one direction, for example, he threw the other way. When coverage got more complicated, he threw shorter passes aimed for his own backs. Defenses didn't know what to expect.

His passing helped start the NFL's offensive revolution of the late 1930s and early 1940s. Teams once run-oriented inserted more explosive aerial attacks.

"He gave pro football a radical concept... namely that the forward pass could be more than just a surprise weapon or a desperation tactic," Myron Cope wrote in "The Game That Was: The Early Days of Pro Football." "Sammy Baugh made the pass a routine scrimmage play."

Baugh played 16 seasons, throwing for 21,886 yards and 186 touchdowns, NFL records when he retired in 1952. In 1994, he was chosen one of the four quarterbacks on the NFL's 75th anniversary team, joining Joe Montana, Johnny Unitas and Otto Graham.

Baugh was multidimensional. He set four NFL punting records that still stand, including the highest career average (45.1 yards). In an era when players competed on both sides of the ball, he played safety on defense and intercepted four passes in a game, tying him with many players for the current record.

He became a charter mem-

ber of the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1963. How good of a triple threat was Sammy Baugh?

"The best," said Bill Dudley, a Baugh teammate in 1950 and 1951. "He could not only throw the ball; he could play defense and punt the football. He also ran it when he had to. He knew football, played it, and everybody had a lot of confidence in him."

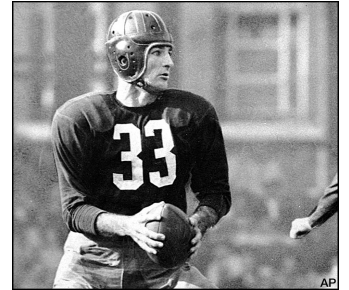
Baugh learned how to throw a football in his youth. Self-taught, he'd suspend an old tire from a tree and set it to swing like a pendulum. He then retreated 10 to 15 spaces and threw hundreds of footballs through the moving tire each day, driving himself tirelessly. His accuracy improved to where he hit the mark up to 90% of the time.

Such talent earned him a football scholarship to Texas Christian University. There, he discovered more about passing from coach Dutch Meyer.

Meyer was ahead of his time with offensive schemes. He unveiled a wide-open offense that focused on passing, particularly short, high-percentage throws. He subscribed to three S's for passing: short, sure, safe.

Baugh absorbed everything. In practice, he worked on his short passing game, throwing many balls into the left and right flat and up the middle. He programmed himself so that long passes should be used sparingly. By game time, he and the rest of the Horned Frogs were prepared. They won Cotton and Sugar bowls and the 1935 national championship.

"Everybody loved to throw the long pass," Baugh once said. "But the point Dutch Meyer made was, 'Look at what the short pass can do for you.' You could throw it for seven yards



PIGSKIN'S BABE: Baugh's passing made him an incomparable attraction, leading to his being called the Babe Ruth of football.

on first down, then run a play or two for a first down, do it all over again and control the ball. That way you could beat a better team."

Baugh began playing for the Redskins in 1937. Defenses were out to destroy the 6-foot-2, 185-pounder, who appeared too frail to play in the NFL.

But Ray Flaherty invented a version of the screen pass that protected Baugh. The Redskins set up in the old single- and double-wing formations on offense. Baugh received snaps at tailback. The offensive line then shifted left or right, depending on the play, giving him ample time to find receivers for short screens, similar to his days at Texas Christian.

He connected often in his first season, completing a then-record 91 passes, and led the Redskins to an NFL championship game win over the Chicago Bears. With Baugh at the helm, the Redskins won another title in 1942.

"Sammy Baugh was a magnificent athlete, dramatic, totally different than football players today," said Bernard Nordlinger, a Redskin attorney at the time. "He was like the Babe Ruth of football. He was an incomparable attraction."