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The Forgotten Rams

By Ray Schmidt

Today it's a team practically forgotten, yet they're still considered a vital piece of college football history because of one game. They were arguably the greatest team ever produced by a school that fielded power-houses with great regularity prior to WW-II. With virtually the same lineup the previous autumn they had blown an almost-sure invitation to the Rose Bowl with a one point loss in their final game. Some modern historians, showing how relatively un-read they are, describe them as a "boring" team; yet they had an offense that impressed their contemporary viewers with its wide open style, a fleet of speedy running backs and a very successful passing attack. They were the Fordham Rams of 1937.

When Coach Jimmy Crowley opened pre-season practice for the 1937 Fordham club he welcomed back a flock of returning veterans from an excellent 1936 squad. When camp opened it was expected that Fordham's fortunes would once again revolve around their linemen, who were led by the likes of Alex Wojciechowicz (hereafter referred to in this article as "Woji"), Ed Franco, Alex Babartsky and John Druze.

But early on it became apparent that Crowley was loaded with outstanding backfield men. Four sophomore halfbacks; Steve Kazlo, Angelo "Butch" Fortunato, Pete Holovak and Dominic Principe, immediately became contenders for starting positions because of their excellent speed and running ability. When added in with such fine returning backfield men as Mike Hearn (FB), Joe Granski and Joe Woitkoski (HB), it was obvious that Fordham would always be dangerous on offense. The New York Times endorsed Crowley's backfield by noting that "Scouts from the practice sessions say that Fordham is going to have an attack this year. And not an attack of the jitters, the failing that came over the Maroon players last year.

Crowley's teams operated from the Rockne-type Single Wing attack that he favored as an ex-Notre Damer. The real power from the Fordham ground game would come off weak side plays, reverses and the planned use of the downfield lateral. It was also obvious that the Rams planned to operate a very diversified offense that made considerable use of the forward pass.

For their 1937 opener Fordham entertained the Diplomats of Franklin and Marshall at Randalls Island Stadium. With the game five minutes old Granski broke thru right tackle and raced 62 yards to the opening score, followed by his 41-yard scoring dash on a reverse around right end. In the second

quarter Crowley unleashed his reserve backfield, consisting mostly of sophs, and the romp was on. Dom Principe tallied three TD's in the quarter, while later Holovak tacked on three of his own, and Fordham came out with an impressive 66-0 victory. The second week saw Fordham, led by Principe's two TD's, blasting little Waynesburg 48-0. Of particular note in this game was the Rams' 6 of 14 passing, which accounted for 102 yards and three TD's.

After the season opener Thomas Deegan of the Times had noted of the game: "it easily bespoke Fordham's preparedness for the heavy guns which are waiting in the offing". What he meant, and what the media had been belaboring since pre-season practice had started, was that all Eastern football fans were eagerly awaiting the mid-October matchup with powerful Pittsburgh. The two schools had battled thru scoreless ties in both 1935 and 1936, but for this 1937 showdown Pitt was regarded as a solid favorite. Coach Jock Sutherland had an outstanding offensive machine that included names like Marshall Goldberg, Bill Daddio, Harold Stebbins and Dick Cassiano. This Pitt team was considered to be Sutherland's finest ever.

This third consecutive 0-0 tie game, before 53,000 frantic fans at the Polo Grounds, has been written of in numerous places, so the author will only mention the key aspects of what was a wild-and-wooly game, despite the lack of scoring. Pitt enjoyed something of an edge in the offensive statistics, and from the game account it is clear that the Panthers were constantly threatening to score; five lost fumbles was Pitt's undoing. Crowley made a key defensive move late in the first quarter when he moved Ed Franco from guard to left tackle. This definitely bolstered the Fordham defensive play, which was led by the brilliant play of Woji, along with the terrific punting of Woitkoski and Kazlo.

Three of the Pitt fumbles gave the Rams the ball inside the Panther 30 yard line. All three times the Pitt line rose up to smother Fordham, forcing Johnny Druze of the Rams to try field goals, all of which he missed. And of course there was Marshall Goldberg's 5-yard TD run on a reverse that was nullified by a holding penalty against Pitt's left tackle Matisi. Allison Danzig wrote that "It was a splendid achievement for Crowley's team to come up with a draw against the outfit that was supposed to be the best of the East". As a reward, Fordham was rated at #9 in the first AP poll of the year, while Pitt was placed at #3 and Yale at #5.

There was no letup in the schedule the following week as Texas Christian rolled into New York. This was a TCU team one year from a national title, and led by Dave O'Brien at quarterback with a big line that featured Ki Aldrich. Crowley got cute and tried a typical Rockne tactic of the 20's by starting his reserves as "shock troops", and on their first possession they lost a fumble at their own 13 yard line. Quickly O'Brien rifled a TD pass to Don Looney, but the little QB missed the PAT and it was 6-0. TCU then put up a seven man line on defense and Fordham responded with 22 pass attempts for the day, as they marched up and down the field. Seven times the Rams moved inside the TCU 30, four of them inside the 13, and each time they were stopped by the mud-spattered TCU defense. The visitors from Texas were able to move past midfield only four times ail day.

Finally, with two minutes left to play Earl Clark of TCU fumbled after being hit by a ferocious tackle, and Fortunato recovered for Fordham at the TCU 46 yard line. The Rams advanced to the 35, and then Granski launched a long pass thru the gathering darkness to Fortunato, who was knocked out of bounds at the 7 after the catch. Three plays later Woji opened a gaping hole and Dom Principe blasted the two yards needed for the TD. Stanton added the PAT and Fordham escaped with a 7-6 win.

The next week the Rams traveled down South to take on an undefeated North Carolina team that featured a pair of neat triple-threat backs in Crowell Little and Tom Burnette. On an extremely warm day in the beautiful setting of Kenan Stadium Fordham put on one of their premier efforts as, in the words of Arthur Daley, they unveiled "a brilliant attack that was dazzling in its deceptiveness and terrific power and a defense that was just as airtight".

In the first quarter Fordham staged an 88-yard march that was capped off when Joe Granski dropped back to pass, and instead "light-footed" Steve Kazlo took the ball on the Statue of Liberty play and pranced 25 yards around right end to the TD. The Tar Heels were never the same. In the third quarter Mike Kochel came roaring in to block Burnette's punt and the Rams had the ball at their own 44. After a drive featuring a 31-yard pass play from Granski to Fortunato, the TD came as Fortunato blasted in from the one. The statistics for the day racked up by the wide-open Rams' offense hardly reflected the complete dominance of Fordham in their 14-0 win. Carolina fans went away convinced that they had seen an awesome football team.

Then it was back to the Polo Grounds where the Rams again gave a demonstration of their power as they unleashed an air and ground attack that overwhelmed the great Cecil Isbell and Purdue by a 21-3 count. Right after this convincing win talk of the Rose Bowl chances for Fordham began to break out in newspapers around the country. But there was no time for Coach Crowley to bask in the glory because coming up were the always-tough Gaels from St Mary's in California, led as usual by their legendary Coach Slip Madigan. While St Mary's was having a disappointing campaign in 1937 they were still a good football team, featuring excellent backs in Lou Rimassa and Tony Falkenstein, and it was felt that a big winning margin for Fordham would greatly enhance their bowl chances.

The day of the game was mostly gloomy and a cloud of snow hung over the Polo Grounds to produce a field that was both muddy and slippery, but nothing was going to slow down the Rams of Fordham. Arthur Daley's impression of Fordham this day was that of "a marvelously drilled combination that blocked perfectly and had drive and fire from beginning to end." The Rams marched up and down the field as they piled up 290 yards of total offense and 16 first downs for the day to only 28 yards and one first down for St Mary's. Six times Fordham moved inside the Gaels' 25 while the visitors from the Coast only advanced past midfield once for the day.

But time-after-time the Gaels defense held off Fordham, until in the third period the Rams marched to St Mary's 12 yard line. Then John Lock handed off to Bill Krywicki on an apparent reverse, only to have Krywicki lateral it out to a sprinting Joe Woitkoski who swept around left end and into the end zone for the TD. The 6-0 score was hardly indicative of Fordham's performance, and no less an authority than Allison Danzig felt that the impressive win had significantly improved their chances for a Rose Bowl bid.

Then it was time for the annual season finale against the Violets of New York U. The 1937 season for NYU had been disappointing, with three defeats already, but Coach Mal Stevens would get no sympathy from Fordham. Memories of NYU's major upset win of 1936 that had cost Fordham a bowl bid, and a desire for revenge, provided all the incentive that Jimmy Crowley and the Rams needed.

On a rainy, murky day a crowd of 65,000 fans flocked to Yankee Stadium, and what they saw on the muddy field was an NYU team that was completely prepared and had nothing to lose. Time-after-time the obviously superior gold and maroon clad Rams pounded at the NYU defense, only to have the inspired Violets come roaring back. Neither team was really hampered by the field conditions until late in the game, and the large crowd was in a constant uproar.

Early in the second period Fordham started from midfield after a punt, and on their second play Granski rifled a pass to John Druze good for 33 yards to the NYU 3 yard line. On the next play Principe plowed in for the TD and Fordham led 7-0. A few minutes later the Rams got the ball back at their 40 after a punt. On the first play Granski faked a reverse, then swept around right end and followed Principe's blocking on the way to a 60-yard TD run to make it 13-0. But just before halftime Ed Boell of NYU completed four passes on a drive that ended with a short TD toss to Dunney, and Fordham led by only a score of 13-7 at the half.

By the start of the fourth quarter a torrential rain was coming down and it was so dark that the floodlights in the Stadium had to be turned on. Early in the quarter Fordham guard Jimmy Hayes intercepted a pass deep in his own territory and lumbered thru the mud all the way back to the NYU 19. A few plays later Granski rifled a pass down the middle to Woitkoski for the TD that wrapped up Fordham's 20-7 victory.

After the game praise for the 7-0-1 Fordham team abounded. John Kieran of the Times wrote that "there is little doubt that the Maroon machine of this campaign was the best ever turned out, going all the way back to the 1909 team". Slip Madigan of St Mary's said that "I don't think California could do better than invite Fordham to the Rose Bowl. A team with speed and with power down the middle. An outfit with an exceptional line."

But it was not to be. After #1 rated Pittsburgh turned down an "unofficial" Rose Bowl bid to meet Cal because of the players' unhappiness over their experiences of the past year, the bid went to the unbeaten #4 rated Alabama team. While extremely disappointed, Coach Crowley had too much class to register any public complaints in the newspapers.

The 1937 Fordham Rams finished the season rated #3 in the AP Poll. For the season the Rams averaged 302.4 yards per game in total offense (215.1 rushing and 87.3 passing with a minimum of 7 TD passes) and their defense yielded an average of 142.2 (84.1 rushing and 58.1 passing), while coming up with 16 defensive pass interceptions. The leading scorers were: Dom Principe-7 TD's; Joe Granski- 4 TD's; Pete Holovak and Joe Woitkoski with 3 TD's each; and John Druze with one TD and 12 PAT's. A total of 12 different players tallied TD's during the season for the Rams.

From a team that dazzled everyone that saw them, only three of the linemen received All-America mention. Ed Franco at tackle and Alex Wojciechowicz at center made numerous major selector First and Second Teams; while Al Babartsky at tackle was named to the NANA First Team and the INS Third Team. Upon his retirement from coaching in 1954 Frank Leahy, the Fordham line coach in 1937, called Alex Wojciechowicz "the greatest linebacker I have ever seen." In later years no less a chronicler of Fordham football than Tim Cohane would call the 1937 edition of the Rams the greatest team in the school's history. The 1937 Fordham Rams deserve to be historically remembered as the brilliant and exciting team that they really were.