

Friedman to Oosterbaan

By Dick Parker

After a second place finish to Illinois in the 1923 Big Ten Conference race, Michigan coach Fielding Harris "Hurry Up" Yost interrupted his twenty-three year tenure before the 1924 season. As athletic director (since 1921), Yost appointed two-year assistant George Little to the head coaching job at Ann Arbor. Coach Little's lone season in charge produced shutouts in five of the team's six wins, but the Wolverines were also ravaged in the 39-14 defeat at the hands of the legendary Red Grange and Illinois, and then lost 9-2 to Iowa in the season's Homecoming finale. Apart from the ignominy associated with the Illinois drubbing, a previously unknown sophomore quarterback, Cleveland-born Benny Friedman, made his Michigan debut in the closing minutes of the debacle. His turn in the spotlight would have to wait until the next season.

Following the 6-2-0 (4-2-0 and fourth place in the Big Ten) 1924 season, George Little departed to assume the athletic director and football coaching jobs with conference rival Wisconsin. After a season on the sidelines, Fielding Yost returned in 1925 for his next-to-last campaign as the Michigan coach. In addition to the return of Friedman for his junior year, the squad also welcomed back a trio of All-Americans to be: Captain-elect and center Bob Brown, tackle Tom Edwards, and tackle/guard Harry Hawkins. New arrivals to the varsity included an end from Muskegon, Michigan named Benjamin Gaylord "Bennie" Oosterbaan, who, when teamed with Friedman, would become one of the greatest passing combinations in college football history.

Oosterbaan was a multi-sport star, excelling in football, basketball, baseball, and he was a champion in track as a discus thrower. Early in the fall of 1925 he somehow failed to impress assistant coach Tad Wieman, who advised him to forego the gridiron and stick to basketball. When Coach Yost, who had observed Bennie himself, heard about the conversation he quickly stepped in and the young wingman was restored to the football team. Yost would later say that the 1925 Michigan team turned out to be the "finest team" in his lengthy coaching career.

The 1925 season opened at Ann Arbor with an easy 39-0 win over a less than challenging Michigan State College. With a 13-0 lead in the third quarter, Coach Yost put sophs Louis Gilbert and Oosterbaan into the game. In his first varsity experience the young end caught scoring passes from quarterback Friedman and sub Gilbert. It could fairly be presumed that the Benny-to-Bennie aerial show had started. The following week at home the Wolverines had an even easier opponent in Indiana. The Hoosiers were crushed 63-0 in a contest reminiscent of Coach Yost's point-a-minute teams of two decades prior. Friedman scored once on a 55-yard run and passed for five touchdowns, two of them to Oosterbaan, and also kicked eight extra points.

Then it was on the road to Camp Randall Stadium in Madison, where Coach Yost was to engage his former assistant, George Little of the Badgers. After receiving the opening kickoff Michigan started on its 38 yard line, and on the first play Friedman tossed a scoring pass to halfback Bruce Gregory and then kicked the point after. Following his favored strategy, Coach Little choose to kick off once again. Friedman took the kick and ran it back 80 yards for a score. To wrap up yet another shutout win, Friedman passed 10 yards to Oosterbaan for a second quarter tally for a final score: Michigan 21 Wisconsin 0.

Next up was Illinois, the game again at Champaign, and this day would indeed be a different scenario from the Grange-led onslaught of a year earlier. In short, Grange was pretty much stymied by the Michigan defense, gaining but 56 net yards in 25 carries, and Michigan won 3-0 on Friedman's 24-yard field goal. "Bo" Molenda intercepted two Illinois' passes, running his total to five for the season. A pretty good Navy team (5-2-1 for 1925), including two eventual Hall of

Famers in halfback Tom Hamilton and tackle Frank Wickhorst, ventured to Ann Arbor the next week and was surprisingly overwhelmed 54-0 on this occasion. The Midshipmen could not stop the Michigan aerial game as Friedman threw two more scoring passes to Oosterbaan. The margin of defeat was the largest suffered by a Navy team in school history to that point.

A week later, Michigan traveled to Chicago on November 7 to play Northwestern at the one year old Soldier Field. Adverse field conditions caused by two days of driving rainfall made game cancellation a possibility but it was not to be. The mud engulfed terrain made both passing and running the ball all but impossible and a battle of punts ensued. Five minutes into the game, Leland "Tiny" Lewis, Northwestern's fine soph fullback, punted to Friedman who proceeded to fumble. and Northwestern's Mathews recovered on the Michigan four yard line. The Wolverine defense held for three downs and then Lewis kicked what turned out to a decisive field goal from the 12. In a telling bit of strategy in the third quarter, Northwestern took a safety when Lewis, preparing to punt from near his goal line. instead backed into the end zone and downed the ball. The decision was sound as Michigan was unable to score again, and the baseball-like score of 3-2 held up for Northwestern.

With Michigan's shutout streak now ended, it was back home for the major rivalry with Ohio State. Prior to 1925 Michigan held a lopsided victory margin of 16-3 with two ties, going back to 1897. On this day, fullback "Bo" Molenda scored from a yard out after an Ohio punt was blocked close to their goal line, and Friedman kicked a second period field goal to produce a 10-0 win. Friedman had a sub-par day, completing but seven of 26 pass attempts for just 71 yards. The 1925 season ended the following Saturday when Michigan hosted Minnesota and produced another impressive shutout - their seventh in eight games - 35-0. Gopher coach "Doc" Spears had such stars as Herb Joesting, John Murrell, and Harold "Shorty" Almquist in his lineup but they were stopped cold. On the Michigan offensive side, both Oosterbaan and Molenda scored twice and Gilbert once.

Michigan again claimed the Big Ten championship (Coach Yost's ninth) with a 5-1 record (7-1-0 overall), and outscored opponents 227 points to three. The Wolverines were given a tie with Alabama for the #2 ranking in the Dickinson National Ratings, finishing behind only Dartmouth. After the final game of the season, students on the Northwestern campus staged protests and claimed the conference title for their school's team on the basis of the 3-2 win over Michigan. But the following day Northwestern's president, Walter Dill Scott, announced there would be no disputing the Wolverines title by his school. Yost, in a 1931 conversation with noted sportswriter H.G. Salsinger of the Detroit News, said of his 1925 team: "The majority of teams (opponents) made fewer first downs against the '25 team than they scored touchdowns against other teams. If you counted every first down scored against this team as a touchdown, they would still have gone through the season at the head of the parade.' In post-season honors, Friedman and Oosterbaan were named consensus All-Americans, while Brown, Hawkins, and Edwards also received All-American mention.

1926 would be Fielding Yost's 25th and final season, and at his disposal was a solid nucleus of veteran performers, and optimism for yet another conference crown was understandably high. Opening at home against non-conference foe Oklahoma A&M (coached by 1914 Michigan All-American Johnny Maulbetsch), Michigan had little trouble in scoring a 42-3 triumph. With a 20-0 lead at halftime, Michigan didn't tally again until late in the fourth quarter with two touchdowns coming on Friedman scoring passes. A week later Michigan State College visited Ann Arbor and was dispatched more handily than in 1925, this time by a 55-3 final.

With its third successive home game Michigan faced Minnesota in what would turn out to be the first of two games in 1926 between the two teams. Little suspense developed as Michigan started impressively, scoring all of its 20 points in the opening half while holding the Gophers scoreless for the day. Bo Molenda scored a TD for a 7-0 lead in the first quarter, and then George Rich ran seven yards for the tally that made it 13-0. Chicago Tribune writer Harvey Woodruff described the action which followed in the second quarter as the 'prettiest play of the day,' as Lou Gilbert of Michigan scored from close to midfield with some skillful open-field maneuvers, aided by high-level blocking. The next week, again at Ann Arbor, Illinois, with Red Grange now gone into pro ball, came in with a 3-0 record for the season – two of the wins coming against non-conference foes Coe College and Butler. The "Maize and Blue" of Coach Yost prevailed 13-0 over the 'Orange and Blue' of Coach Bob Zuppke in a well played contest. Michigan's scoring came from another Molenda touchdown, along with a conversion and two field goals by Friedman.

With four straight wins and the season progressing in a fashion much like the year before, Michigan next traveled to Municipal Stadium in Baltimore to take on a Navy team which was still smarting from the 54-0 pounding of the year before. No doubt with their loss to Northwestern at mud encumbered Soldier Field in 1925 still vivid in their minds, Michigan now faced an opponent bent on revenge. Once again a neutral playing site would prove to be Michigan's undoing. This time Navy was a strong team with a 5-0-0 ledger to-date, led by the All-Americans in the making, Captain Frank Wickhorst at tackle and backfield ace, Tom Hamilton. The day's only touchdown was made on a short plunge by the Midshipmen's Howard Caldwell, the first touchdown given up by Michigan since the Iowa season-ender of 1924. Hamilton kicked the point after, while earlier delivering a field goal, to produce the 10-0 Navy win.

Despite the defeat, with three conference games remaining Michigan was still in good shape to capture another Big Ten title. Wisconsin was the next visitor to Ann Arbor and the Badgers experienced what would turn out to be their third consecutive shutout defeat at the hands of the Wolverines. Nostalgia was in the making on this day as it was Captain Benny Friedman's final home game, as well as Michigan football's final game at old Ferry Field. A new hero was to emerge in the Badger clash – Wally Weber – who tallied twice on short yardage thrusts. Other scores making up the 37-0 final were registered by Friedman, Oosterbaan, and soph Leo Hoffman.

With the season narrowing down to two games, Michigan ventured to Columbus to face an undefeated Ohio State team coached by John Wilce, and the Buckeyes would prove ready for 'that team from the north,' as later Coach Woody Hayes would put it. The crowd was a then-record 90,411, and the home team took a 10-0 lead in the first quarter. An anxious Michigan halfback, Wally Weber, was quoted as saying to Oosterbaan, "Ben, at this rate they're going to beat us 40-0." His self-assured teammate supposedly replied, "Dammit, Wally, we haven't had the ball yet." The second period found the superb receiver taking a 21-yard TD aerial from Friedman, who again converted and later added a field goal to tie the score 10-10 as the half ended.

On the last play of a scoreless third quarter Michigan got a major break when Buckeye Elmer Marek fumbled a Gilbert punt, and the ball was recovered by Michigan tackle Ray Baer on the six yard line. Then on the following fourth down play, Friedman passed to Hoffman in the

endzone for the touchdown and then kicked the point-after for a 17-10 Michigan lead. Later in the fourth quarter Ohio's soph halfback Byron Eby scored on a seven yard run, and so in this most dramatic game in one of college football's greatest rivalries the stage was set for the game tying point-after. But it was not to be, as drop-kicker Myers Clark was forced to hurry his kick and the attempt was missed. With another opportunity to pull the game out. Bill Hunt of the Buckeyes fired a pass but it was intercepted by Friedman at the Michigan 38 yard line, and the game ended three plays later. Final: Michigan 17 Ohio State 16.

It was now November 20 and the final Saturday of the 1926 season. Under a unique scheduling predicament, created by the fact that no other Big Ten member school except Iowa and Wisconsin would agree to play Minnesota, the Gophers had been unable to fill a complete conference agenda. The existing rules stipulated that a member team had to play four conference games in order to be considered for a championship. Fortunately for Minnesota, an accord between Coach Yost and Coach Clarence Spears of the Gophers opened the door for the playing of two games between the two schools in 1926. Having won the earlier game 20-0 at Ann Arbor, Michigan now faced a far more resolute adversary at Minneapolis.

In the game considered as the traditional skirmish for the Little Brown Jug trophy, Minnesota scored first when two-time All-America fullback Herb Joesting, who was called a "second Ernie Nevers" by Chicago Tribune writer Walter Eckersall, scored a TD from less than a foot away. Backfield mate Bob Peplaw then missed the point-after and it was 6-0. Michigan was outgained by a wide margin on the frozen field but received another game-saving break, when in the fourth quarter the ever resourceful Oosterbaan alertly picked up a mis-directed snap from center intended for Gopher quarterback "Mally" Nydahl and raced 60 yards for the game tying score. Friedman converted the PAT and the 7-6 margin held up for the needed win for Michigan, thus preserving what turned out to be a two-way tie for the Big Ten title with Northwestern with records of 5-0 each.

The Wolverines finished the 1926 season with a 7-1-0 overall record and a tie for the #3 spot with Notre Dame in the Dickinson System national rankings, behind only Stanford and Navy. Both Benny Friedman and teammate Bennie Oosterbaan were again named consensus All-Americans for 1926 – the only time in college football history when battery-mates were so honored in consecutive seasons. Oosterbaan would return in 1927 for his senior season and would once again be named All-American, while Benny Friedman would go on to play several seasons of pro football – most notably with the New York Giants (1929-1931) and the Brooklyn Dodgers (1932-1934). Fielding Yost retired as football coach after the 1926 season, thus ending one of the greatest sagas in Michigan gridiron history. Assistant coach Tad Wieman, who had thought Oosterbaan should stick to basketball, became head coach at Michigan in 1927 but lasted just two seasons. Bennie Oosterbaan returned to Michigan and served as head coach from 1948-1958.