

THE FIRST FORWARD PASS IN TEXAS



by Ronnie D. Foster

After writing several books on the fallen warriors from my home of McKinney, Texas, I decided to take on something a little less daunting. While doing research I had seen many interesting articles about McKinney High School football. As a 1966 graduate of MHS I had heard many of the stories, but there were so many great tales going back to the late 1800s that I thought they should be retold.

One of the stories that really caught me by surprise was from this column by sports writer H. D. Mouzon of the McKinney Courier-Gazette in 1948:

In the year 1904 things began to happen on McKinney's sport front and several innovations were introduced into the game of football that later were to spread and become everyday occurrences on the gridiron. Few local fans are aware of the fact that the first forward pass ever thrown in a football game in Texas was thrown right here in McKinney. And still fewer followers of the sport know that the much-used Statue of Liberty play was originated on a west McKinney pasture.

Roy Kirkpatrick, who played on and coached a number of McKinney teams soon after the turn of the century, attended Washington University in St. Louis in 1902 and played on the football team where he learned the use of the forward pass in a game with St. Louis University. Eddie Cochems coached the St. Louis eleven that year and used the pass against Washington. Cochems is generally credited with having originated the play.

When I read Mr. Mouzon's statement, I thought, wow, that's quite a claim, the "first forward pass in Texas". With the storied history and tradition of football in Texas, I was thinking, 'how could that be?' Sounded like some hometown folklore to me. So, I looked further. Having never heard of Cochems I found this quote from Hall of Fame Coach David M. Nelson: "E. B. Cochems is to forward passing what the Wright Brothers are to aviation and Thomas Edison is to the electric light."

It was starting to make sense. Roy Kirkpatrick played in the same town, as well as against Coach Cochems, and learned football strategy from the master of passing and one of the best coaches in the history of college football. Therefore, it is very realistic that the first forward pass in Texas football did happen in McKinney.

H. D. Mouzon describes the very play:

During the 1904 season the local gridders played a game with Greenville in which Kirkpatrick first employed his forward pass. With Creash McCarty doing the throwing and McCarty Dowell on the receiving end, this is the first time the now famous play was ever used on a Texas gridiron.

The play started with Dowell being instructed to hide out along the sideline between plays and to get down field as soon as the ball was snapped. Then the players lined up for the scrimmage, however, the McKinney end was nowhere to be seen and, even though the McKinney quarterback didn't know what had happened to him, the play was called anyway.

When Graves received the ball, he glanced around and saw Dowell emerge from the crowd about 40 yards downfield, so he let go a mighty heave of some 50 yards straight into the end's arms and he galloped across the goal for the score. The amazed Greenville eleven couldn't figure it out. All they were sure of was the fact that they were a touchdown behind.

Five years later in 1909, McKinney High School football records officially began, with schools pledging to field only high school students. Before then, small towns didn't have enough students to fill the teams, so outsiders were regularly brought in. Practice and some games were held on a cow pasture at the Kirkpatrick farm in southwest McKinney. Under coaches Roy Kirkpatrick and Guy Rambo, the McKinney High team would go through that first official season undefeated and unscored on, with the forward pass a main feature of their offense.

In that first season they played six games, tied two, won four and were unscored on. In the 111 years since that remarkable season, MHS has fielded many championship teams, but none have never matched that season record of "unbeaten and unscored on".

The E. W. Kirkpatrick house, built in 1902, located at 903 Parker Street in McKinney, is listed on the National Register of historic places. In 2020 it is still home for Kirkpatrick family descendants. •

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