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Professional football's Jewish game changer

Book honors unsung phenom, Benny Friedman

By Len Abram
Special to *The Advocate*

In 2005, 18 years after NFL quarterback Benny Friedman died, Coach Bill Walsh welcomed Friedman into the NFL Hall of Fame. In the long overdue induction, Walsh addressed Friedman as if he were in the audience:

"Benny, you were really the catalyst that started the forward pass in professional football ... the person who demonstrated and proved to everyone that the forward pass can be effective and, more importantly ... consistently effective."

Today, Benny Friedman is hardly known as the person who changed the face of football. First-time author Murray Greenberg intends to right that wrong.

For football fans, Greenberg charts the history of the NFL from poor cousin, to collegiate football and finally to America's favorite and richest sport. He also tells a story of American meritocracy, of a Jewish kid from Cleveland, the son of Russian immigrants, who experienced national greatness – and a personal tragic end.

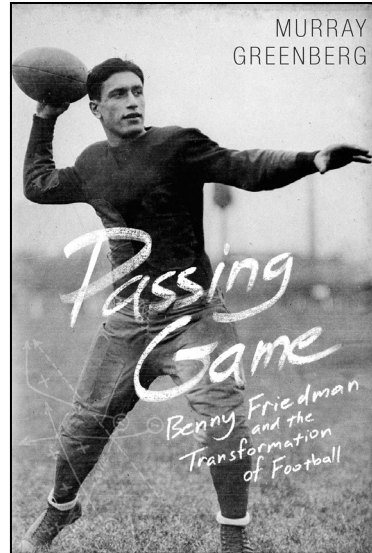
American football has always been a rough sport, an inheritance from English rugby. In 1905, college football had 18 deaths and 159 serious injuries. President Theodore Roosevelt, who had led men in war and recognized its value in strengthening bodies and character, intervened and saved the sport.

One new rule promoted the forward pass, which could leap over the brutal grind of gaining yardage through contact and collision. But the passer had to be five yards behind the line of scrimmage and an incomplete pass meant losing possession. In addition, the ball was hard to hold, let alone throw.

Greenberg shows Friedman as a teenager strengthening the tendons and muscles of his hands and arms. Over time, he developed a method of passing that was the model for form and accuracy (the book jacket has frames of Friedman throwing).

Friedman's conditioning had to be superb. High school, college and professional football players were required to play both offense and defense.

Now the NFL has more specialists than Mass General Hospital, but in the 1920s, Friedman passed, carried, tackled, ran interference and kicked



Jewish. After he was chosen captain of his college team, the Michigan Wolverines, hundreds of Jews across the country sent telegrams of congratulations, and kids lined up for autographs. He was their hero and representative. And within a decade, Jews were making their mark in boxing and baseball.

Like many of his generation, Friedman joined the military after Pearl Harbor. In his late 30s, Navy Lieutenant Friedman insisted on a combat tour on board a ship during the Battle for Okinawa. After the war, he continued playing semiprofessional ball and coached professional football.

He then had another opportunity to be a hero for Jews. Because Abram Sachar wanted Brandeis to be a secular Jewish university, the new president believed a competitive football team would emphasize that point. Sachar pleaded with Friedman to be its first and, as it turned out, last coach.

The faculty and student body never had Sachar's passion for football. One of the most outspoken students was radical Abbie Hoffman, whose values and politics were antagonistic to those of Friedman's generation, and to what football represented.

By 1959, Friedman felt betrayed by Sachar and Brandeis. The football program closed down, and eventually Friedman left.

Without much comment, Greenberg lets the football icon's words and actions speak for themselves. Readers may find Friedman easier to admire than to like. His supreme confidence and his outspoken candor were not always appreciated. He could be petty.

He also annoyed the NFL when he complained about its treatment of NFL veterans and when he promoted himself for the Hall of Fame – possible reasons for his late induction.

But Friedman was remarkable a long way from the football field. He lived life on his own terms, even with severe illness. Religion and society cannot endorse his choice of suicide, but we can still admire how Benny Friedman played the game.

extra points.

Moreover, Friedman and his peers often played the whole game, and Friedman once played three times in one week. Players were lucky to earn \$150 to \$200 per game, whereas Friedman in his prime earned \$750 (and thousands more in annual contracts).

To get Friedman onto the New York Giants, the owner of the Giants bought his entire lackluster team. Friedman turned the team into winners and money makers, even in the Depression.

Sports writers referred to Friedman, who had 20 touchdown passes (his closest competitor had six), as a phenome-

To get Friedman onto the New York Giants, the owner of the Giants bought his entire lackluster team.

non, an observation that makes questionable his late inclusion in the Hall of Fame.

Friedman brought so much excitement and innovation to the game of football that by 1934, the NFL changed its rules about passing and the football itself. The ball became the sphere of today – easier to hold and to pass. Friedman did indeed change the face of football.

Friedman's many achievements and lasting influence are all the more remarkable given his Jewishness. According to anti-Semitic stereotypes of 1920, Jews could not compete in athletics.

Friedman, however, did not consider himself a Jewish athlete, but an athlete who was

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"Passing Game: Benny Friedman and the Transformation of Football." Murray Greenberg. New York: PublicAffairs, 2008. 358 pages. \$26.95.