

OX EMERSON

By Fred Crawford

Guards are the unsung and often forgotten men of the early years of pro football. One of the best examples of this is Gover (Ox) Emerson of the 1930's Portsmouth Spartans and Detroit Lions. Histories of pro football list him on the all-pro squad of the 1930's as Grover, with his correct name being Gover.

Gover Conner Emerson was born in the small East Texas town of Douglass, spelled with two s's, on December 18, 1907. While playing on his high school team in Orange, Texas, he acquired another name that has lasted to this day. On one play Gover missed his assignment and made an atrocious mistake, the team quarterback looked him in the eye and said, "Emerson, you are a big dumb ox."

In East Texas this was not an unusual expression and was often used by boys. The Ox portion of the statement stuck to Gover throughout his life. In fact today if you check the Austin, Texas telephone directory under the surname Emerson and run down the listings you will come across the name Ox. He is still living in Austin and looking forward to his 90th birthday. Football lost some of its personality when names like Ox, Bulldog, Bruiser, Ace and Tuffy disappeared from team rosters.

Emerson was the starting left guard on the University of Texas team of 1929 and 1930. He garnered all-Southwest Conference honors in 1930. He expected to play for the Longhorns in the 1931 season and was to be the team captain but he had participated in two plays with the varsity in the 1928 Baylor game and was declared ineligible for the 1931 season.

The Depression had begun and jobs were scarce. Emerson and two Texas teammates, Dexter Shelly and Lester Peterson, were offered professional contracts by the Portsmouth Spartans. Professional football was unknown in Texas at that time. Scores of the games were occasionally listed in some newspapers.

The Spartans were rebuilding in 1931 and brought in Potsy Clark as coach. Potsy believed in well-conditioned, well-drilled teams and worked the players hard. Along with Potsy Clark, an outstanding group of rookies were signed in addition to Center Clare Randolph from the NFL Chicago Cardinals and Glenn Presnell from the Ironton Tanks. The rookie crop included such all-time greats as Dutch Clark, Ox Emerson, George Christensen, Maury Bodenger and Bill McKalip. These men, along with several holdovers from the 1930 team formed the nucleus of the great Spartan teams of the 1930's.

Emerson's 1931 contract with the Spartans called for a salary of \$75.00 per game. In his eighth year of play with the Brooklyn Dodgers he earned \$150.00 per game, not an overwhelming amount for an all-time great guard even for that era.

To compensate for his size he used speed, quickness and an unquenchable desire to never get beaten at anything. Playing both offense and defense in a six-man line he excelled as a blocker and in leading the interference on off-tackle plays and end sweeps by the wingback.

With the revamped team the Spartans finished the season with a 11-3 record second only to the Green Bay Packers' 12-2 season. The improvement had everyone looking forward to the 1932 season.

The 1932 season ended with the Chicago Bears holding a 6-1-6 record even with the Spartan's 6-1-4 record. Tie games were not counted in the standings. The League Office scheduled a championship game in Chicago on December 16 to determine the league champion.

All close followers of pro-football know the story of this championship game. Due to the cold weather in Chicago the game was played indoors at the Chicago stadium where a circus had performed and just departed leaving the floor covered with four inches of dirt. Emerson's memory of the playing surface

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concerns the texture and odor of the dirt covering the playing area. He states that the area had been well used by the circus animals.

The field was 80 yards long (60 from goal line to goal line) and each time a team crossed midfield the ball was set back 20 yards to make the field 100 yards long.

Dutch Clark, the league's leading scorer, was not available to the Spartans because he had returned to Colorado and his off-season job as the basketball coach at Colorado College. He was ably replaced by Glenn Presnell.

The teams battled evenly for three quarters with no scoring. It appeared that this game might end in a scoreless tie. The teams had played two tie games during the season.

In the fourth quarter, the Spartan's "Ace" Gutowsky's pass was intercepted by the Bears and returned to the Spartan's 13-yard-line. Several plays later with the ball on the two-yard-line Bronko Nagurski faked a line plunge backed up and passed over the massed lines for a touchdown.

The Spartan players and coaches protested the play as being illegal, for the rules stated a passer must be five yards behind the line of scrimmage. To this day, Ox Emerson is adamant that it was an illegal play, for Nagurski's fake was straight at Ox and he was ready to meet the rush. But, as he says, in George Halas's town and stadium the Spartans plea was disallowed and the score counted. The Bears kicked the extra point and scored later on a safety making the final score 9-0 and a Chicago win.

Emerson continued his sterling line play through the 1933 season though the Spartans slipped to a 6-5 record as Dutch Clark remained in Colorado as athletic director of the Colorado School of Mines.

During the 1932 and 1933 seasons money was tight with the Spartan management. Large crowds would turn out to watch practice but with high unemployment in the area very few people could afford the price of a game ticket. The players' salaries were always in jeopardy. The only solution was to sell the franchise to Dick Richards who moved the team to Detroit and renamed it the Lions.

With a more stable salary situation Dutch Clark returned to the team for 1934 and the Lions finished 10-3-0, second to the Chicago Bears' 13-0-0 record. Once again Emerson did yeoman work in the Detroit line.

The year 1935 was the Detroit Lions! The team led the Western Conference with a 7-3-2 record. The Lions depended on an overpowering rushing offense to lead their charge to the title. With Ox Emerson leading the way for them, four of the top ten rushers in the league were Lions.

The title game against the New York Giants was played in the sleet and rain on a slick, soggy University of Detroit field. The Detroit line controlled the game, punching holes in the Giant line allowing Detroit to score two quick touchdowns in the first period and pressuring the Giant Offense to disrupt any continuity in the Giant attack. With a final score of 26-7 the Lions recorded the first NFL Championship for the city of Detroit.

The 1936 and 1937 seasons were beset by injuries and disagreements between the ownership and coaches leading to Coach Potay Clark leaving after the 1936 season and Dutch Clark being named player-coach for 1937. With Ox Emerson blocking and leading the way the 1936 team set a rushing record of 2,885 yards in a twelve-game season that lasted 36 years. It was finally broken by the Miami Dolphins in 1972 in a fourteen-game season.

Following the 1937 season Emerson retired and joined the Brooklyn Dodger football team as line coach under his old Lion Coach Patsy Clark. Injuries to key Dodger linemen forced Ox back into the pads and he finished his active career with the 1938 edition of the Brooklyn Ball Club.

Emerson returned to Detroit, working in the Personnel Department of the Ford Motor Company and coaching at Wayne State University where he received his Master's Degree in American Diplomatic History.

He joined the Navy in 1942 and attained the rank of Lieutenant Commander. He served on the Aircraft Carrier Block Island which was sunk in the Atlantic by a German submarine. After several hours on a life raft he and several members of the crew were picked up by a destroyer.

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Transferred back to the United States Emerson coached the Corpus Christi Naval Air Station team in Corpus Christi, Texas, until his discharge. He stayed in Corpus Christi coaching Alice High School and Delmar Junior College until he was offered the freshman coaching position at the University of Texas in 1951.

He stayed at Texas U. until the end of the 1956 football season and returned to high school coaching in the Austin, Texas area. In 1976 he retired from coaching and taught American History at St. Louis Catholic School until his final retirement in 1985.

Ox Emerson surely has the credentials to rank as one of the best of his time. In eight active seasons, he was named to the consensus All-Pro Teams six times, four on the first team (1932, '34, '35 and '36) and twice on the second team (1933 and '37). Emerson is not forgotten in Detroit. In 1961, he was voted to the Detroit Lion's All-Time Team as a well-deserving Offensive Guard.

GOVER CONNER EMERSON

Born: December 18, 1907, at Douglass, TX

5-11 200, University of Texas

All-Southwest Conference Guard - 1930

University of Texas - Longhorn Hall of Honor

1961 Elected Member of Detroit Lions

All-Time Team

Chosen by the Hall of Fame Selection Committee on the All-Pro Squad of the 1930's

Year	Team	GM	Tm Rec.	All-Pro Honors
1931	Ports	13	11-3-0	-----
1932	Ports	12	6-2-4	1st- UP, EY
1933	Ports	11	6-5-0	1st- UP, CN, EY
1934	Det	13	10-3-0	1st- UP, CN, EY. 2nd- OF
1935	Det*	7	7-3-2	1st- UP, GA, EY, CN. 2nd- OF, NJ
1936	Det	9	8-4-0	1st- OF, UP, MS, FL. 2nd- EY
1937	Det	10	7-4-0	1st- INS. Hon.Men.- OF
1938	Bkn	11	4-4-3	Hon.Men.- OF
		86	59-28-9	

*-injured first five games

All-Pro Honors: OF = Official League Team; UP = United Press; EY = *Collyer's Eye & the Baseball World Magazine*; CN = *Chicago Daily News*; GA = *Green Bay Press-Gazette*; NJ = *New York Journal*, MS = *Milwaukee Sentinel*; FL = Ray Flaherty in *Boston Herald*; INS = International News Service.