

An Early Use of The Forward Pass

By George Macor (based on the NY Times article of November 2, 1913)

In the movie *Knute Rockne, All American*, a scene shows lifeguards Gus Dorais and Rockne practicing the forward pass on the beach at Cedar Point on Lake Erie. Dorais tells Rockne that Notre Dame will play Army that fall and Rockne exclaims "We're going to pass the Army, Gus --- we're going to pass' em dizzy!". Dorais responds "Rock --- if that works it'll make history!". That was the Hollywood version.

This first meeting between the teams was played November 1, 1913 on The Plain at West Point. Notre Dame coach Jesse Harper wrangled a \$1,000 guarantee from Army for the long 30 hour train trip from South Bend, arriving with 18 players but just 14 pairs of shoes!

The game had been arranged as Yale, an annual foe of Army, juggled its schedule, forcing Army to seek another opponent. In those days the schedule was made by the student manager. Cadet Harold Loomis had contacted many schools in the East, but was unable to fill the date. He finally consulted Spalding's 1912 Football Guide, and wrote to a number of schools, many of whom he had not heard of. A small "unknown" school from the Midwest promptly replied.

Army, with new coach Charles Daly, a 1905 graduate of West Point, had won their first four games while Harper, also in his first year at Notre Dame, had the "Midwesterners" off to a 3-0 start. Army had scouted Notre Dame's 62-0 win over Alma the previous Saturday and expected a powerful running game. Notre Dame won the coin toss and elected to receive, an unusual move in those days. In the first series, Dorais fumbled on his own 27 yard line. Army recovered but gained only 1 yard on three rushing plays. After two incomplete passes by Dorais and an exchange of punts, smashing runs by Notre Dame's Ray Eichenlaub and Joe Pliska got the ball to Army's 25 yard line where a Dorais pass was caught by Rockne at the five yard line and he went in for Notre Dame's first touchdown. Dorais kicked the first of his five extra points (called "goals" in those days). The first quarter ended with Notre Dame leading 7-0 but Army touchdowns by Paul Hodgson and Vernon Prichard put the Cadets into a short-lived lead. Starting from their 15 yard line, Dorais passes to Rockne and Pliska ended with a running score by Pliska and a 14-13 Notre Dame lead to end the first half.

Notre Dame's wide open offense (similar to today's "spread" version) was too much for the frustrated and confused Army team as two touchdowns by Eichenlaub and one more by Pliska in the second half resulted in a final score of 35-13. The diminutive 5-7, 145 pound Dorais would finish with an astounding 14 completions in 17 attempts for 243 yards with only one interception by Army's Prichard. The 6-0, 210 pound Eichenlaub ran for over 100 yards as well.

Bill Roper, the retired Princeton coach was the Umpire for the game and commented that "he had never seen the forward pass developed to such a state of perfection". And the partisan Army crowd actually cheered when Dorais completed one of his passes an unheard distance of thirty-five yards.

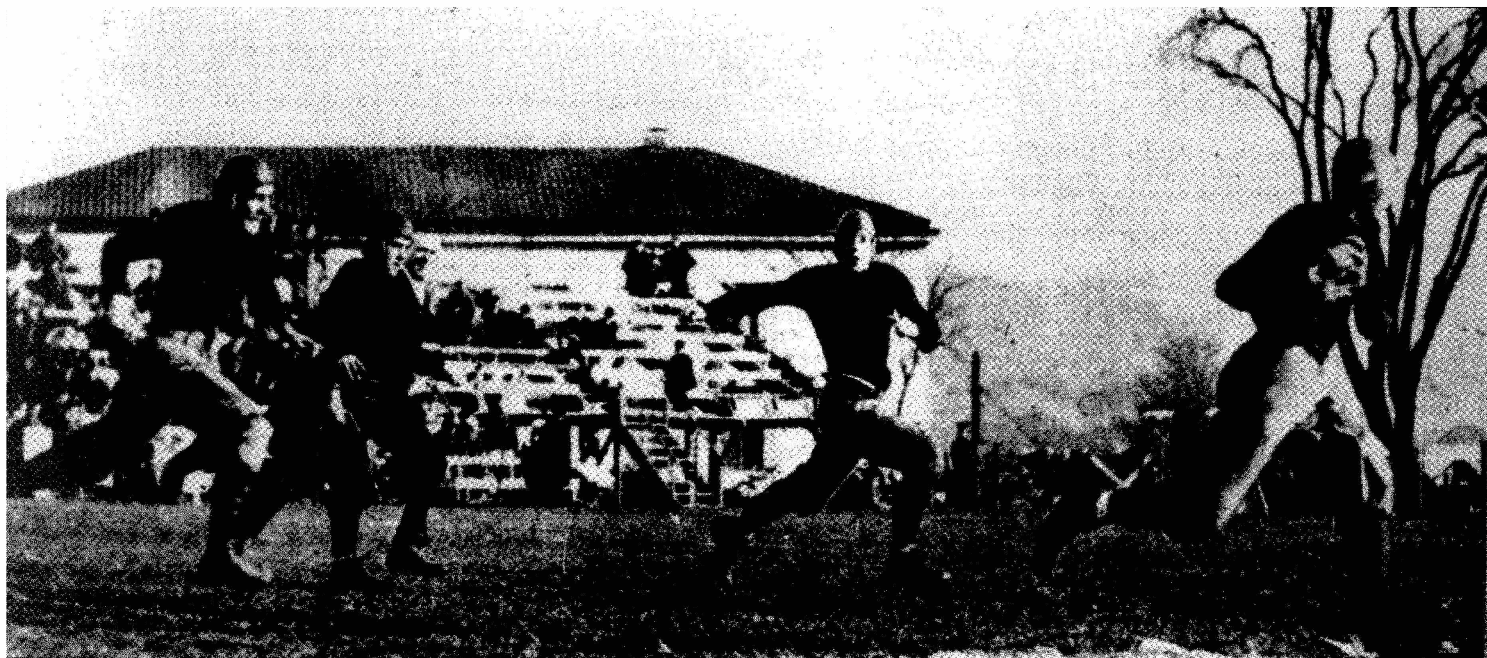
This was not the first use of the forward pass (Eddie Cochems, coach of St. Louis University is credited with that honor) but given the venue and the efficiency of Gus Dorais, it demonstrated a more colorful part of the offense compared to the traditional Eastern lumbering, blunt force running game. The forward pass was only used in desperation.

Army would not lose again, ending the 1913 season with a 22-9 win over Navy at the Polo Grounds in New York City and an 8-1 record. After the Army game, Notre Dame won away games and first time meetings with Penn State, Christian Brothers and Texas, finishing with a 7-0 record.

On the Army bench for the game was running back Dwight Eisenhower, unable to play because of a leg injury. He would become a member of the 1915 West Point "Class The Stars Fell On", as 59 members eventually became general officers.

Harper would coach four more years at Notre Dame, finishing with a record of 34-5-1. His record against Army was three wins, two losses with all games played at West Point. His successor at Notre Dame was Rockne who continued the Army series except for 1918 when the influenza epidemic curtailed the schedule of games. The Army-Notre Dame game gained attention and was moved to New York City, first at Ebbets Field in 1923, then at

the Polo Grounds in 1924 (the "Four Horsemen" game). The 1925 game in Yankee Stadium was the start of an annual event that was played every year (except 1930 when the site was Chicago's Soldier Field) to the 0-0 tie in 1946 which featured four past and future Heisman Trophy winners: Army's Blanchard and Davis and Notre Dame's Lujack and Hart. Rockne's record against Army was 9-2-1. Overall, Notre Dame leads the series 39-8-4 with the Irish a 44-6 winner in the most recent game (2016 in the Alamodome in San Antonio).



Rockne (right) scoring Notre Dame's first touchdown



Coach Harper and Rockne