

1920s Lateral Pass Magazine Article

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The Literary Digest for November 19, 1927

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HOW THE LATERAL PASS "OPENS UP" FOOTBALL

"IT'S GOING TO BE HELL FOR LINESMEN," was the forcible reply of a notable center on one of our football teams when asked by Sol Metzger before the season opened what he thought of the lateral pass. Mr. Metzger, an old Pennsylvania end and an experienced football coach, explains in *The Sportsman* that altho the lateral pass is really as old as football, the new latitude given its use by this year's rules is bound to open wide the game and play an impressive part in its strategy. All the Rules Committee did was to change the rule about a fumbled lateral pass. Until this year, such a fumble could be retrieved by the defense and run for a touchdown. The new rule bars out this "pick-up-and-run" play. "A fumbled pass to-day, forward or lateral, one that strikes the ground, is a dead ball, and the team that tries it merely loses a down." In other words, the lateral pass "is governed by much the same legislation as the forward pass, with which the majority of football spectators are familiar." But Allison Danzig, writing on the sports page of the *New York Times*, comes to the conclusion after watching the early season games this fall that in spite of the use of the lateral pass, football "is still football and not Rugby." The lateral pass is an old maneuver that hasn't been used much of late, because "it is so apt to prove a boomerang; merely because the Rules Committee has encouraged its use by making it a dead ball, instead of a loose one, when it fails to reach its target, does not invest it with new charms." As Mr. Danzig goes on to say:

The lateral pass is still a dangerous instrument, as any play must be on which the ball is thrown wide of protected territory. Not only does it violate the fundamental principle of football, that of applying power before the man with the ball, but it gambles on one man catching the ball and getting away without protection when the opposing tackle and end and the secondary may rush in to intercept it, with a clear field ahead for a touchdown.

It is still as daring a play, in spite of the fact that it has been subsidized by legislation, as is the wide forward pass, the kind of pass that Jim Edwards of Brown threw from his 15-yard line and Paul Scull, Penn half-back, intercepted, to carry the ball for a touchdown.

It has been the teams that have combined deception and strategy with their use of the lateral that have gained the best results this season. The play in itself is a surprize stroke, but a fast charging line with a quick-witted secondary behind it can break it up pretty nearly every time, as Lafayette broke up Rutgers's laterals, in spite of the fact that Lionel Conacher taught Rutgers how to use the lateral.

Harvard used the straight lateral in its simplest form against Vermont, and used it successfully five times out of six for substantial gains, but the Vermont line and secondary did not offer the kind of defense qualified to give it a true test, altho Smith, the Vermont full-back, is as magnificent a secondary defense man as one could hope to look upon.

It is when the lateral is combined with a forward pass, particularly when it is used to draw the opponent off to one side and leave the other unprotected against a forward pass developing out of the lateral, that it usually achieves its best results.

How the lateral pass works at its best is vividly told by Mr.

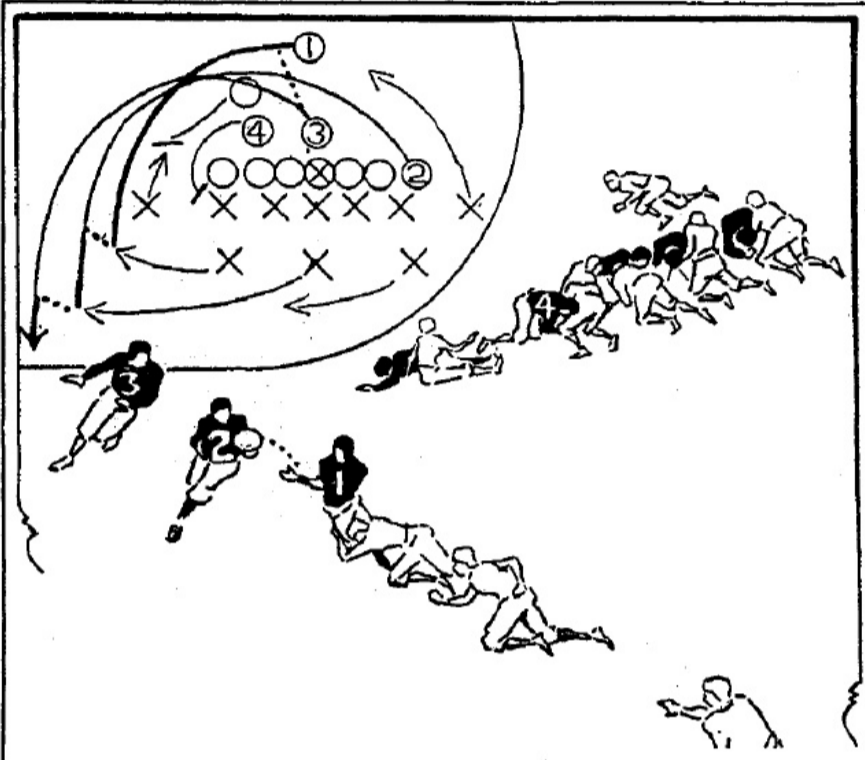
Metzger in his *Sportsman* article. He tells it so vividly because he himself was one of the chief heroes of the occasion when Pennsylvania unexpectedly utilized the lateral pass to beat Cornell, her old rival, in a Thanksgiving Day game of 1902. Metzger was playing end on a Pennsylvania team that was being beaten by a heavier Cornell eleven. The first half ended with Cornell ahead, 11-0. The second half had started—

Our quarter-back, Dave Dale, called our guards back—the play that had won great fame for Pennsylvania, almost a decade previous, but the play that Cornell had piled up on itself all that first half. Then came a signal we all wanted. Our right half-back was to skirt Cornell's right end. I was to follow, running wide in a half-circle so as to be outside our half when he crossed the line of scrimmage. Dale himself, after passing the ball

to the half-back, was to swing wide of and behind me as he circled down the field. Something new was to be tried in football under most trying conditions. A weaker team sought victory over a stronger eleven via the unusual route. Here was a test, if ever there was to be one.

Our hearts beat rapidly as the signal was called. Then came the snap of the ball, and we were off. Our ball-carrying back just reached the line of scrimmage when a Cornell secondary came smashing into him, throwing him for a loss of several yards. But just before this tackler propelled his frame into our back the latter tossed the ball several yards to his left and rear where I caught it running at top speed.

I think I gained some twenty yards before another Cornell back pounded his way into me with a neat tackle. Again the stunt worked. Turning as he came crashing at me on his last lunge, I caught sight of Dale, our quarter-back, a few yards back and to my left. I tossed Dale the ball and Dale placed it within striking distance. We pounded out our first touchdown. The second, and the winning score, followed. The unbelievable had happened. Penn's little team had conquered the Big Red team of Cornell. But what is most pertinent about that victory is the fact that Penn's success was made possible by use of a lateral pass—the play we had used—conceived by Dr. Carl S.



A TYPICAL USE OF THE LATERAL PASS

This is the way Penn dumfounded Cornell in 1902. Mr. Metzger in the accompanying article describes in detail this play, in which he took a prominent part. Incidentally, lateral passes were featured when Pennsylvania defeated Harvard on November 5, this season. To return to the explanation of the above diagram, we note that center passes to quarter-back No. 3, who passes to No. 1. No. 1 skirts end, followed by end No. 2, and No. 2 by No. 3. As No. 1 is tackled, he lateral passes to No. 2. As No. 2 is tackled, he lateral passes to No. 3.

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Williams, our coach and a former star quarter-back.

Mr. Metzger goes on to tell of a more recent spectacular use of the lateral pass in a game on the Pennsylvania field. But this time it was used against Pennsylvania by that meteor of the 1925 football skies, Red Grange of Illinois, to make his second touchdown of the game. Incidentally it was the third time that Coach Zuppke had used the play in all his coaching career. As Mr. Metzger describes the way Grange used the play against Penn:

As used against Penn, Grange knelt down apparently to hold the ball for Britton for a try for goal by place kick. The ball was passed to Grange in this kneeling position, and he gave every evidence of holding it. That drew upon him the charge of all of Penn's linesmen. Just as they were about to block what they thought was to be a kick, Grange arose like a flash and threw a forward pass to his right end, who stood

in his position on the scrimmage line. That forward pass in turn drew the attention of all of Penn's men to this right end. Grange was deserted. In fact, no opponent could knock Grange down after he had made this forward pass, for that is illegal.

This overlooking of Grange was just what Zuppke had planned. Off like a scared rabbit, Grange circled back of his right end toward the side line, and his right end made a lateral pass to him as he ran by. Grange caught it far to the right of the scrimmage line with none between him and Penn's goal. That meant another touchdown.

Mr. Metzger goes on to tell of other celebrated instances of the use of the lateral pass, such as that by Georgia Tech in 1906 and that by Glenn Warner's "Pittsburgh Panthers" in 1917. He reminds us that when Frank Hinkey, "the greatest end of all time," was coach at Yale a few years ago, he started the season full of enthusiasm for the lateral passing principles embodied in Canadian Rugby.

What is the effect of the increased use of the lateral pass going to be on football

strategy? Mr. Metzger doesn't know exactly, but he is sure of one point, and that is that it is going to make things harder for the defense, and especially for linesmen:

Figure it out for yourself. Suppose you were backing up a line and your forwards had cut down all the interference. That's what good tackles and ends have been doing for years. There you are coming up the field at full speed for the runner as he breaks for the side of the field in an effort to circle the end and score on your team. "Easy meat!" you say to yourself as you come tearing up and across the line of scrimmage prepared to hit him from the side and turn him into the soil for some three or four yards loss, just the sort of tackle that sets your supporters off into nine long "Rahs" with your name on the end. And then, you note, just on his outside and a few yards to his rear, a trailer, one of his team-mates coming along at top speed. You know that if you make that tackle, the ball will be tossed laterally to this trailer. You also know that if you don't, he is going to tear loose for that touchdown and your coach is going to drop the gymnasium right on your head as soon as he can get hold of you after the game.

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