

Georgia Tech's 1917 backfield, better than the Four Horsemen

By Bernie McCarty

PART 2

An Atlanta Journal photo shows Georgia Tech halfback Big Chief Joe Guyon wildly blasting four Vanderbilt defenders out of his way. Part One of the saga of Georgia Tech's great unbeaten 1917 team, emphasizing the remarkably talented Golden Tornado backfield, ended in the middle of reviewing Guyon's performance against the Commodores. Guyon scored on 48 and one-yard runs, returned a kickoff 75 yards to set up a TD, and passed to handyman Shorty Guill, who worked in the line and backfield, for yet another tally.

The rest of Tech's backfield also enjoyed a field day. All-American halfback Everett Strupper scored 4 TD's and raced for 147 yards in 14 carries. In addition, he completed three passes, caught one pass for 34 yards and returned five punts for 111 yards. Quarterback Albert Hill gained 169 yards in 25 rushes and scored three TD's, one a 55-yard burst. And freshman fullback Judy Harlan carried 15 times for 132 yards and a pair of scores.

As noted in Part One, all statistics presented here, compiled from play-by-play reports, are to be considered only "approximate." The information is readily available in Southern newspapers and perhaps Georgia Tech will assign a staff member the task of compiling more accurate "official" figures.

Tech 48, Tulane 0. This was a solid foe with a 5-3 season record. Again, all four Tornado backs romped for over 100 yards rushing. The New Orleans Times Picayune reported, "In Georgia Tech the local pigskin enthusiasts saw the greatest football machine that has ever appeared on a New Orleans gridiron. Its driving power was nothing short of wonderful. Strupper, Guyon, Hill and Harlan form a backfield with no superiors and few equals in football history. Guyon was a consistent gainer, but his passing was the element which ranked him a star. Guyon's passing was so accurate it suggests possibilities yet undeveloped in the Tech offense."

Guyon scored one TD, passed for two TD's, and his aeriels set up two more tallies. He completed six of 10 passes for 91 yards and added 112 yards on the ground. Hill's two TD's included a 48-yard trip, and he topped the Tech rushing chart with 140 yards in 24 carries. Strupper gained 118 yards and authored two TD's, one on a 33-yard flip from Guyon. And Harlan's 111 yards included a 30-yard TD ramble. The game was called with six minutes to go because of darkness.

Tech 98, Carlisle 0. This was Carlisle's last football season and certainly did not compare to the Indian powerhouses Guyon had played with before transferring to Georgia Tech. The Atlanta Journal's Morgan Blake commented, "Sir Albert had a great day, even greater than all his wizard exhibitions heretofore. Everett Strupper played like a veritable demon. At one time four Carlisle men pounced on him from all directions, and yet through some super-human witchery he broke loose and dashed 10 yards further. On another occasion he attempted a wide end run, found that he was completely blocked, then suddenly whirled and ran the other way, gaining something like 25 yards before he was downed." Guill started at fullback in place of Harlan. Guill's "line bucking was one of the big features of the afternoon."

Billy Sunday, a well-known Southerner, was a spectator at the game and was called upon to speak to the crowd. "That jump shift is about the slickest offense I ever saw," said Sunday. "I want to tell you that I've seen all the great Harvard and Princeton teams in action, but never one as great as this team of Tech."

Hill and Strupper scored five TD's each, with top honors to Hill who crossed the goal line on 75 and 58-yard punt returns and a 20-yard fumble return. Strupper's tallies included a 32-yard run from

scrimmage and a 32-yard fumble return. He roared for 165 yards in 13 carries, completed four passes for 51 yards, and returned a field goal attempt 35 yards. Guill scored on 42 and five-yard runs and netted 108 yards in 12 tries. Guyon, perhaps for sentimental reasons, may have asked to be taken out midway through the second period. Before he retired Guyon reeled off runs of 25, 22, 20, 15 and 15 yards, scored one TD, and completed the only pass he threw. The game was cut short by 10 minutes.

Tech 68, Auburn 7. The Tigers lost only to the South's two top clubs, Tech and Davidson, and tied unbeaten Big Ten champ Ohio State 0-0. Four Big Ten teams were ranked among the top 13 in the nation by the New York Tribune. This writer does not have access to play-by-play reports on the contest. The individual statistics should be sensational. According to the listed team figures Tech piled up 472 yards on the ground in 84 rushes, and added another 145 yards on 11 pass attempts.

Guyon tallied four TD's and apparently had his best day in the air. He pitched a 15-yard TD pass to Guill and may have thrown for other scores. Strupper scampered 62 and 50 yards to the endzone, escaping four defenders in the secondary on the longer jaunt. Hill also scored two TD's and obviously ran well.

"Albert Hill and Everett Strupper were as great as ever, and that's enough to be said," wrote Blake. "Strupper made two beautiful runs, and Albert was the chief gainer in the first half." It was the performance of Guyon, however, which turned Blake on.

"The greatest hero of the game was Joe Guyon. I never saw Jim Thorpe. I never saw Ted Coy, But I can't believe that America has ever produced a greater football player than Joe Guyon. Yesterday he was the storm center of the Tech drive. Words cannot be coined to adequately do justice to this remarkable player. In practically every play of the game he figured in some way, mostly in a large way. And Joe Guyon is a gentleman and a man. And he has won the hearts of all red-blooded Atlanta fans, who love him, his mighty deeds and unrivaled excellence on the gridiron this year. All hail to the Chief.

"But the greatest feature to Joe's work was his uncanny ability to hit the bull's eye every time with his forward passes. In fact when you have a man who can hurl a forward pass with the accuracy of a trapshooter breaking a clay pigeon, then verily you have the most dangerous attack in football of the present era. And Joe is the most deadly man in this respect I ever saw."

They don't make sportswriters like Blake anymore. He continues. "There were scores of thrilling individual plays of the game, but there were three that will linger always in my memory; three that stood out above the rest.

"One was Joe Guyon's mad pursuit and capture of Duke Ducote after that worthy had eluded the entire Tech team. I have read in Frank Merriwell fiction of such plays, but never until yesterday did I see one.

"Ducote, starting on his 18-yard line, smashed over right tackle, broke through the secondary defense and dodged Strupper, the safety man, cleverly, and was off. But twenty yards behind him thundered the mighty Indian, the fleetest foot on the American gridiron, and yet in a race of eighty yards, with a handicap of twenty yards, it didn't seem possible that even Joe could overtake his man.

"The big audience rose on tiptoes and gasped for breath as the race progressed. Over the chalk marks tore Ducote. After him came the Redskin, Nearer and nearer drew the pursuer, and just as the Auburn halfback was crossing the 25-yard line, Guyon hurled his 190 pounds through the air and brought him down. It was a magnificent flying tackle.

"The second great play was Everett Strupper's sixty-five yard run for a touchdown, the longest of the game. But it was not the length of the run that featured it was the brilliance of it. After getting through the first line, Stroop was tackled squarely by two secondary men, and yet he squirmed and jerked loosed from them, only to face the safety man and another Tiger, coming at him from different angles. Without checking his speed Everett knifed the two men completely, running between them and dashing on to a touchdown."

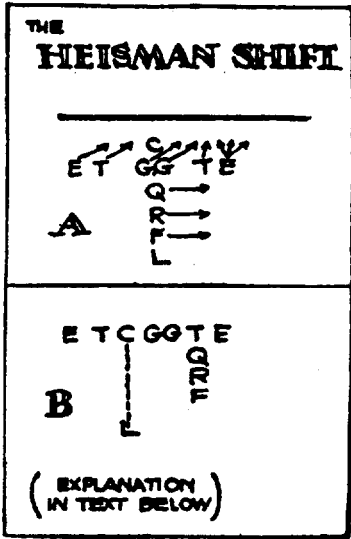
No football team or individual gridder ever had a better publicity man.

In summary, prior to 1917, only Harvard's Brickley-Mahan duo compares favorably with Strupper-Guyon. The Harvard immortals had the edge in kicking. Concerning famous later quartets, the entire Tech backfield can be likened to Notre Dame's 1930 Schwartz-Carideo-Savoldi-Brill tandem, or Army's Blanchard-Davis-Tucker-McWilliams quartet of 1945. The Irish group had no edge at all, while Army's thunderers possessed greater sheer speed. Even fullback Blanchard was a 10-second sprinter. In the matter of overall skill., however, perhaps no backfield in the history of the game was superior.

As a team, at every position, Georgia Tech in 1918 could have been even better. We'll never know. America was at war, and just three veterans, including Guyon, returned. Freshmen started at the other eight positions.



Tech coach
John W. Heisman



Illustrated above is the famous jump shift formation created by Georgia Tech coach John Heisman. The team lined up in the formation shown in Diagram A, shifted to the alignment in Diagram B, stopped for a split second and then exploded. Strupper and Guyon alternated at the deep back position, galloping behind a phalanx of blockers in a formation closely resembling the yet-to-be developed single wing. The ball could also be centered to any of the other backs, and in fact the quarterback, Hill, was the club's heavy-duty runner in 1917.

Guyon operated in the backfield and at tackle to utilize his blocking ability. He was named an All-American tackle.

Only Hill would have been missing from the 1918 backfield. Strupper was elected captain, but entered the military and never returned to complete his senior campaign. Harlan went into the Navy, then returned later to star. Joining the team in 1918 as freshmen were Buck Flowers and Red Barron, two of the brightest backfield operatives in Tech history. Freshman Bum Day was named the 1918 All-America center by Walter Camp.

One can only wonder concerning the effectiveness of a backfield containing Barron and Flowers with Strupper, Guyon and Harlan. The following figures have been published, but may mean little because statisticians at the time tended to forget yards lost, and included kick returns and pass receptions, even forward passes, as part of a player's "rushing" total. In 1920 Flowers was credited with an 8.2 average per carry, and was a phenomenal punter, dropkicker and kick returner. In 1921 Barron was credited with 1459 yards "rushing".

The 1918 Golden Tornado crew ran up huge scores against inexperienced Southern schools: 128-0 over North Carolina State and 118-0 over Furman. Even Camp Gordon, Strupper's team, lost 28-0. The lone loss was to Pitt's

all-veteran cast. There was a measure of revenge, however, concerning Pitt. The Panthers rolled undefeated until their final game, tumbling 10-9 against Cleveland Naval Reserve. Among the Navy stars was a back named Judy Harlan.

This has been a fairly comprehensive review of Georgia Tech 1917 and what might-have-been in 1918. It would be fun to hear from CFHS Journal readers regarding their choices for the best college backfields of all time, This writer obviously is committed to Army 1945, with Georgia Tech 1917 a close second.