

THE BLOND TERROR

By Bob Royce

Friends of George Fenton called him “Doc”; sportswriters called him “the Blond Terror”, and some oldtimers who followed the game called him “the greatest player in the history of Southern football”. The few who were qualified to compare him with Jim Thorpe and other stars at Eastern schools did so favorably. What won the respect of friends and foes alike was Fenton’s seemingly natural ability to do everything well with a football. He caught passes with one hand, tossed them unerringly, ran well behind his blockers and was a positive genius as a placekicker.

Despite his many talents on the gridiron you won’t find Fenton’s name on any of the recognized All-America selections of his day. Until 1917, players at Southern colleges seldom got listed higher than the final paragraphs of the honorable mention column. Yet few of the superb athletes who were so honored left so lasting a mark as did the unheralded Fenton. Many of the records he established while an undergraduate at Louisiana State University were still standing some 70 years later.

Doc Fenton never heard of L.S.U. until the summer of 1907. A Scranton, Pa. boy, Doc had prepped in Canada, where he’d played soccer, and attended Mansfield Normal, where he played football. His plans for the future were still uncertain when Edgar Wingard knocked on his door and introduced himself as the new coach at Louisiana State. Wingard was a good salesman. When the Tigers opened the season in Baton Rouge on Oct 11, his ends were Doc Fenton and Bill Seip, another Pennsylvania boy who’d played at Susquehanna. Wingard’s charges polished off Louisiana Poly that day, 28-0, then embarked on the toughest schedule LSU had ever faced.

The Tigers traveled to Texas where they played two games in three days, losing both to the University of Texas and the Aggies, 5-12 and 5-11, respectively. They won their next four games against Howard, Arkansas, Mississippi State and Mississippi, running up a total score of 120-23 points. On Nov. 23 LSU lost a squeaker, 4-6, to Alabama in the final minute of play, and the following week beat Baylor, 48-0.

Wingard’s seminal season as head coach was not sensational, but having won six of nine games it was a decided improvement over the school’s previous four year record. So, when word reached Wingard that Havana University was seeking a United States opponent for a post-season game, he leaped at the chance. On Christmas day, LSU became the first US team to play football away from the North American Continent. The Cubans had grown cocky from their victories over service teams but they were no match for the Tigers of LSU, who won 58-0.

Including the post-season game in Havana, Doc Fenton had scored 14 touchdowns and kicked enough conversions and goals to give him a total of 94 points, a school record. In fact only two previous LSU teams had scored more points in the 15 years the school had been playing the game.

The following fall Wingard lacked a quarterback and chose Fenton to fill the slot. Although Doc reluctantly agreed to the change, he fit into the new slot quite readily, proving that Wingard had made the right choice. The 1908 Tigers warmed up with easy, lopsided victories over the New Orleans Gymnastic Club and the Jackson Barracks teams before taking on the Texas Aggies in New Orleans. Partly aided by a visiting player’s wrong-way run, LSU beat the Aggies, 26-0. The tigers piled up the score, 55-0, against a hapless Southwestern (Tenn) team before traveling again, this time to Auburn, Alabama.

Auburn was no pushover; it had already beaten a powerful Sewanee team and was undefeated. In a hard-fought battle, LSU emerged with a 10-2 victory sparked by Fenton. The team seemed to leapfrog from that success, easily beating Mississippi State, Baylor, Haskell, Louisiana Poly, and Arkansas in

succession. Fenton and company had beaten all ten opponents, running up a total of 442 points in 450 minutes of play while allowing opponents to score a mere 11 points. The Tigers claimed the championship of the South and celebrated the title with a banquet and a parade through the middle of Baton Rouge.

But the sports editors of many newspapers throughout the South, whose votes determined the championship, said “no” to the LSU claims. LSU had been charged with professionalism by a rival coach who remained anonymous, but who had promised to provide proof to Grantland Rice of the Nashville Tennessean that seven Tigers, including Fenton, were “ringers” paid to play the game. The Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association met in December to hear the charges. The jealous coach, however, reneged on providing his testimony; Rice had no proof, and conference officials after hearing LSU’s counter evidence, cleared the school of all charges. It was too late to save the championship however, for a majority of the sportswriters already had jumped to conclusions and awarded the mythical title to Auburn.

The notoriety kept Doc Fenton off a number of the 1908 All-Southern selections, but nothing could erase the fact that, with a total of 125 points to his credit, he was the nation’s leading scorer. All told, he had made 13 touchdowns, 36 extra points and six field goals.

The Blond Terror had every right to expect the 1909 season to be even better. In fact, it started well for him, with a 70-yard punt return for a touchdown in the opening game against Jackson Barracks. But, despite a 6-2-0 season, some of the sparkle was gone. Wingard had been asked to leave and had been succeeded by Joe Pritchard, who taught the Vanderbilt system. He, in turn, was replaced after four games by John Mayhew, the All-America halfback from Brown, who seemed more intent on competing with Fenton than with beating Arkansas.

On top of that Mike Lally, Doc’s favorite blocker, had been bounced out of school and the value of a field goal had been reduced to three points. While these two factors cut down on Doc’s scoring total, he still racked up nine touchdowns and converted often enough to tally 50 points. The season wound up on a high note for the Tigers, however, as they beat Alabama, 12-6, in Birmingham, and John Heisman named Doc Fenton as quarterback on his All-Southern team

The Blond Terror might or might not have been every bit as good as those Eastern quarterbacks who made All-America in the latter years of the first decade of the century, but he left a huge indelible mark in the annals of Southern football.

In 1958 Missouri jumped off to a 13-0 lead over Kansas, and with just 18 seconds left to play the Jayhawks still trailed 13-7 and were stuck at their 20 yard line. But then Larry McKown fired a long pass that found Homer Floyd for an 80-yard touchdown strike to tie it at 13-13 with no time left. Facing sudden defeat, Missouri’s Dale Pidcock roared in to block the PAT and save the tie.