

GEORGE HALAS

“Unless we are very much wrong, this boy is going to stick,” the New York *Sun* newspaper reported at the start of spring training. “For he looks every inch the ball-player and handles himself like one.”

Prior to signing with the Yankees, Halas had already discovered that fate was on his side.

“He was supposed to be a passenger on a boat that was going to travel on the Chicago River and Lake Michigan called the Eastland with other employees of the Western Electric Company,” McCaskey said. “That morning, for some reason, he literally missed the boat, and it capsized. Hundreds of lives were lost, but he was late getting to the dock that morning.”

Halas had already reached great heights before he took his first swings in 1919. The son of Bohemian immigrants, Halas was born in 1885 in Chicago. He attended Crane Tech High School on the city’s Near West Side, lettering in football, basketball and indoor baseball. In the fall of 1914, Halas enrolled at the University of Illinois, where he began studying engineering. Athletics remained a significant part of Halas’s life in college, as he quickly established himself as a star on the Fighting Illini’s baseball and football teams, while also playing basketball.

During his sophomore season on the diamond, Halas batted .350, garnering the attention of Yankees scout Bob Connery. Shortly after that, the scout invited Halas to spring training, but he turned the offer down. Although Halas was more interested in finishing his degree, that journey would soon get delayed for a much larger cause than professional baseball.

When the United States entered World War I, Halas joined the Navy, intent on fighting for his country. Instead, he was stationed outside of Chicago at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station, where his main focus became playing football. Halas, the team’s end — a pass catching position now known as wide receiver — and the rest of the team won enough games during the 1918 season to earn an invitation to play in the Rose Bowl on Jan. 1, 1919.

From its very first day, that year was a whirlwind for Halas. He opened it by



Halas was a three-sport star at Illinois who caught the attention of Yankees scout Bob Connery. When it came time to negotiate a contract, Halas displayed the business acumen that would serve him well over many decades in the NFL.

catching a touchdown pass and intercepting another, which he ran back 77 yards, in his team’s 17-0 victory over the Mare Island Marines on New Year’s Day.

Shortly after carving his name into Rose Bowl history (he was retroactively named the game’s Most Outstanding Player after the award was created in 1953), Halas was discharged from the Navy and was awarded a degree from Illinois, despite not finishing all of his coursework due to his military service.

About a month later, the Yankees came calling again. This time, Halas was ready to listen. But before inking a contract that included a \$500 signing bonus, Halas gave the world a glimpse of his slick negotiating skills and sharp business acumen.

“The manager of the Chicago White Sox was Clarence ‘Pants’ Rowland, a friend of mine, and he kind of put in a phony bid for me,” Halas told *The Sporting News* in 1976. “That caused the Yanks to give me the bonus and a contract for \$400 a month.”

Halas arrived in Jacksonville ready to take the sport by storm.

“I considered myself in perfect condition,” he wrote in his autobiography more than a half-century later. “I was ready to astound baseball fans with my speed and desire.”

The writers covering the Yankees prior to the 1919 season agreed with Halas’s assessment of himself.

“The experts are all smoked up over young George Halas,” reported the *New-York Tribune*. “He is a husky youth with 180 pounds of solid stuff to put behind every swing.”

In a March 31 intrasquad game, Halas found a way to make a significant impression on Huggins and to further elevate his status on the team. After Halas walked, star shortstop Roger Peckinpaugh bunted. Halas took off for second, but rather than stopping there, he kept going. Caught off guard, the player who fielded the ball made a rushed throw to third base, and the baseball sailed into the outfield. Halas quickly made his way to home, ultimately scoring on a play that was intended to advance him to second base.

The Yankees took on the Brooklyn Dodgers and future Hall of Fame pitcher Rube Marquard the next day in Jacksonville. Like most rookies throughout baseball history, Halas was in the first stage of figuring out how to consistently hit curveballs.

“I knew Rube had a dandy curveball, but I figured he wouldn’t risk an arm injury by throwing a curve against a rookie in the spring,” Halas wrote many years later in his memoir.

Halas was right. Marquard threw a fastball, and the Yankees’ up-and-coming star drove the pitch to deep center field. With the ball rolling toward the wall, Halas made a wide turn at second base and sprinted toward third.

Although Halas could never have known it at the time, the decision to try to turn a double into a triple changed his life. And, that fateful, deadly serious choice on April Fools’ Day 1919 also altered the future of American sports.

Halas made it to third safely with a long hook slide into the rock-hard clay that