

Judge Steve Rosenblum: The New Sid Luckman

by Hon. James A. Shapiro

Let's face it: The Bears have not had a great, durable quarterback since the 1930s and 40s. Jim McMahon was good, but not durable. And the last great, durable quarterback the Bears had was...gulp...Jewish!

But fear not, Bear fans. There is still a great, durable Jewish quarterback out there. Unfortunately for the Bears, he's 55 years old, so unless they're looking for another George Blanda, he's not really eligible. Yet Judge Steve Rosenblum could probably do better than many recent Bear quarterbacks.

I know that because I've played pickup ball with him most Sundays during the fall and winter over the past decade. On the rare occasions when he throws my way (the alter cockers like me play center so they can at least touch the ball on every offensive play, although everyone is an eligible receiver), you almost can't NOT catch it because his passes are so accurate, with just the right velocity on them.

This pickup game has gone on in one form or another, from one field to another, since 1958. In fact, a couple of guys, Jonathan Stein (another landsman) and Rich Lansu, now in their 70s, have actually been playing since then and still play many—if not most—weeks. They started on Elaine Place in what is now Boystown. Then on to the parking lot at Fullerton and Stockton Drive.

From there the game moved to Waveland Park at Addison, where they played with Sid Luckman's son Bob, who lives in Highland Park, and was a third-string quarterback at Syracuse University. Then it moved to Barry Park at Lake Shore Drive. Then to Angel Guardian in Rogers Park, to Hansen Park (where they played on AstroTurf), to Portage Park, and finally to our current home at "old Wright Junior College" (now the Chicago Academy for the Arts) at Roscoe and Austin.

What's interesting about this pickup game is the diversity of the participants. The players include every ethnicity, color, religion, skill level, and occupation, from doctors, lawyers, and judges (Steve and I were the second and third), to cops and gangbangers. For two hours every Sunday from ten to noon in the fall and winter, no one cares who you are or where you're from. It's just about playing sandlot touch football like when we were kids.

Judge Rosenblum (then Assistant State's Attorney Rosenblum) walked on cold at Barry Park (by the old soccer field) without knowing anyone. He had come to Chicago right out of Ohio State Law School about 30 years ago and has been playing ever since.

Although Judge Rosenblum was not quite good enough to play as an undergrad at the vaunted football powerhouse Ohio State, he was certainly good enough to play defensive back in high school. He must have learned his quarterbacking skills through osmosis, or perhaps watching opposing quarterbacks make mistakes, because he plays the position well enough to compete with some pretty good pickup players literally half his age.

Judge Rosenblum also acts as "The Commish," organizing and leading the 90-odd "player roster" and negotiating/clarifying rules from time to time. Sure, let's get the Jewish guy to do it.

In addition to football, Judge Rosenblum has also played sixteen-inch softball for the Chicago Ants at Horner Park. He was instrumental in the Ants' championship year of 2002. He has also played in numerous "World Series" over the years in something called "Guy Ball" (real baseball with a hard ball) in Northbrook.

One Sunday, Judge Rosenblum was down three touchdowns to none after the first half. He led his team back from that deficit to a six touchdown to three comeback win with a searing, sizzling performance reminiscent of Tom Brady bringing the Patriots back against the Falcons in Super Bowl LI. Now in his fifties, he still has the arm to throw the ball long, even into an often biting wind. But his shorter and medium-range passes are what he's known for, rifling them in with nearly flawless accuracy and velocity.

You can tell he really knows the game too, because he coached me to my first ever sack on defense by essentially teaching me how to “stunt” an offensive lineman. Now in my 60s, I normally don’t have the speed to get to the quarterback before he releases the ball. Steve taught me how to do it, with brains over brawn, just like a good Jewish boy should.

This fall, the pickup game’s fate is uncertain because of the current pandemic, but if there’s a way to play socially distanced touch football, Judge Rosenblum will be out there at Old Wright Junior College almost every Sunday from ten to noon, throwing passes with just the right touch. So look out Mitch Trubisky and Nick Foles. Those footsteps you hear are from another great Jewish quarterback.

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