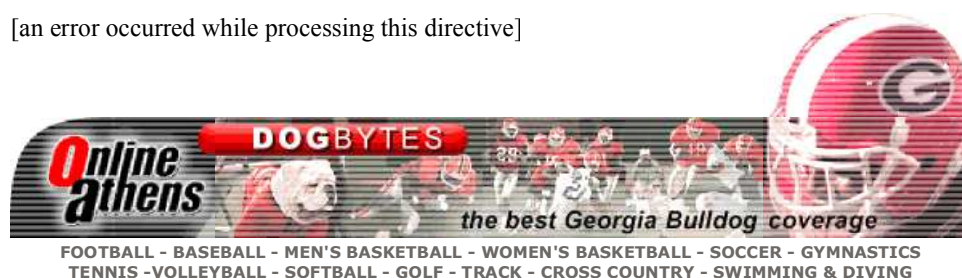


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LEGENDS

No. 3 University of Georgia
Athlete of the Century

Frank Sinkwich

By Marc Lancaster
Staff Writer

Frank Sinkwich was the first player from the South to win the Heisman Trophy. He set SEC single-season records for rushing, passing and total offense. He put together one of the best all-around performances ever in a bowl game. He was one of the greatest offensive players in college football history.

And he never would have come to the University of Georgia if Bill Hartman's car hadn't been low on gas.



Frances Frank Sinkwich

Born: Oct. 10, 1920

Died: Oct. 22, 1990

Hometown: Youngstown, Ohio

Years at UGA: 1940-42

UGA Highlights: Won Heisman Trophy in 1942, the first Southern player to win the award. Consensus All-American in 1941 and '42. Rushed for 2,271 yards and passed for 2,331 yards during his career, scoring 60 touchdowns - 30 rushing and 30 passing. Named Most Valuable Player of Orange Bowl on Jan. 1, 1942, after leading Georgia to a 40-26 win over TCU with 139 yards rushing, 243 yards passing and three touchdowns. Scored the only touchdown in Georgia's 9-0 Rose Bowl win over UCLA in his final college game, despite playing on two sprained ankles. As a junior, set SEC rushing record of 1,103 yards which stood for eight years and is still the seventh-best season total in UGA history. As a senior, set SEC passing record of 1,392 yards, which also held up for eight years. Still holds UGA record for touchdown responsibility in a season, with 27 in 1942. Original member of UGA Circle of Honor in 1996. Was the first Bulldog to have his jersey retired; his No. 21 was honored in 1943.

Personal: First draft pick of the Detroit Lions in 1943. Named All-Pro as a rookie that fall. Named NFL's Most

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It was the summer of 1939 and Hartman, backfield coach for Wally Butts, was on a recruiting trip in Ohio, a day-and-a-half drive from Athens, and things were not going well.

"We went there to contact the best back in Ohio, who was in Youngstown," Hartman said. "When we got there, the boy had already made up his mind to go to Ohio State. His name was Paul. ... I forget his last name now, but he went to Ohio State."

The long trip had apparently been made in vain until fate intervened.

"Coming back out of town, we stopped at a filling station to get some gas and got to talking to a filling station attendant," Hartman said. "And he said, 'Well, the best back in the state really lives right down the street here, about three or four blocks.' We said, 'Who is that?' And he said, 'Well, that's Frank Sinkwich.'"

Hartman promptly turned the Plymouth around and headed for the Sinkwich residence, where he found the player's father sitting on the front porch. A few hours of conversation later, Frank Sinkwich of Chaney High School had agreed to make a recruiting visit to Athens later that summer - not that Hartman was aware of what he had stumbled upon.

By all accounts, Sinkwich was physically unremarkable. Certainly, there was no such thing as a 6-foot-2, 210-pound running back in those days, but even among the smaller players of the day, the 5-10, 185-pound Sinkwich didn't stand out - until he touched the ball.

"Back at that time, you could do anything you wanted to with high school prospects," Hartman said. "We went out and got a ball and a center and we put (Sinkwich) at wingback first. We had some boys in summer school and the center would snap the ball to the tailback and Sinkwich would come around and take it on a wingback reverse. Well, the thing that impressed us almost immediately was how quick he could start. We saw with that quickness

that he could be a real good tailback in the single-wing, rather than as a wingback."

A 'special player'

After that brief workout, Georgia's coaches knew they had uncovered a special player and they were prepared to do anything they could to convince him to come to Georgia. But the only thing Sinkwich asked was that Georgia also offer a scholarship to his friend from Ohio, George Poschner, who had come on the trip with Sinkwich. The coaching staff didn't hesitate, and the Bulldogs had two more freshmen in line for that fall.

In those days, freshmen weren't eligible to play on the varsity; instead, they competed against other schools' freshmen a few times each fall. Sinkwich was an instant star for Georgia's "Bulldogs" in the fall of 1939, leading the way as UGA scored like an arena football team on the way to an undefeated season. The group became known as the "Point-a-minute Bulldogs," and Georgia's varsity coaches couldn't wait to get their hands on the freshmen the following year.

Even in practice, Sinkwich and his classmates were at times dominant - even Poschner, the throw-in player in the deal, made people look twice.

"As time went on, it became evident that Sinkwich was going to be a real good tailback and, surprisingly enough, Poschner was going to be a real good end," Hartman said. "In '39, that was my first year coaching the backfield. Since I'd played with the Redskins the year before, I would go out there with what we called the 'Red Devil' (freshman) team and scrimmage the varsity. I could take the ball and pass because I had led the National Football League for a while in passing the previous year, so I would take old Poschner at the end and be in the middle, and he'd catch the ball and we'd score two or three touchdowns against the varsity.

"By the time they were playing Georgia Tech in the final freshman game of the year - which was always a big game, it was always played at Grant Field and I guess we had 40,000 people there to see it - Sinkwich ran wild. He ran for a touchdown at one time, as I recall, I think there were 15 Tech men that tackled at him because some of them got up off the ground and had a second shot at him. He made a tremendous run - that was before you had many Polish or Croatian names, and Frank was Croatian - and the public address announcer was saying 'That guy Spankovich is at it again.' He gained a whole lot of publicity there."

When the fall of 1940 rolled around, everyone knew about Sinkwich. On the first day of practice, Sept. 2, a crowd of several hundred gathered to watch the varsity work out "under a boiling sun."

As the next day's Athens Banner-Herald reported: "Though considerably overweight - a factor that has caused considerable concern among alumni - Frankie Sinkwich showed the crowd and the coaches he still has his old hip-shaking ability as he raced through holes."

Sinkwich soon got himself into shape, and an article in the Sept. 12, 1940, edition of the Banner-Herald noted that Butts had six sophomores penciled into the starting lineup, including Sinkwich at tailback. That article, by young sportswriter Dan Magill, reported that Sinkwich had bumped juniors Heyward Allen and Hank Powers down to second- and third-string, respectively.

There were still some adjustments to make, though. Sinkwich had good running instincts, with the aforementioned quick start his strongest asset. But playing tailback in the single-wing set required a bit more skill - Sinkwich had to learn how to pass.

"His sophomore year, by that time, we had taught him to throw the optional run-pass out of the single-wing," Hartman said. "He could run out there and jump up and throw that running pass. It was strictly optional, depending on what the defense did. If they stayed back, he ran; if they came up, he threw."

His throws weren't a thing of beauty by anyone's standards, but as time went on, the mere threat of Sinkwich pulling the ball down and running made him a more dangerous passer.

Valuable Player in 1944. Joined Army Air Force in 1944 and suffered career-ending knee injury during a game in Colorado Springs. Moved back to Athens in the late 1940s and began career as beer distributor, which he would continue for the rest of his life. Briefly got back into football as head coach at University of Tampa from 1950-51. Inducted into National Football Hall of Fame in 1954. Co-chaired fund-raising drive for Butts-Mehre Heritage Hall, along with former coach Bill Hartman.

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"He was mainly an effective passer because he could fake the run," Magill said. "They were so scared of him running that he could detect them if they came in too close and he could find somebody open to complete a pass. He was effective for that reason; he wasn't the great type of passer that you see now as quarterbacks."

But he was good enough.

Sinkwich's varsity career didn't start with a bang. By the time the season opener against Oglethorpe University rolled around, Sinkwich had lost his starting position. Butts decided to go for more experience at the important position and Sinkwich carried only one time for 15 yards as a substitute against Oglethorpe. But the next week against South Carolina, he ran for two long scores and threw for another.

After strong performances against Columbia and Kentucky in the next two games, Sinkwich earned the starting nod against Auburn on Nov. 2 and he threw one touchdown pass. The boy from Youngstown was clearly on the right track, but his performance in the penultimate game of the year against Georgia Tech put to rest any doubts that he could become one of the best players in UGA's nearly 50 years of football.

On the Thursday of the week of the Tech game, Sinkwich was laid up in his dorm room with a 104-degree temperature. Two days later, he singlehandedly drove Georgia to a 21-19 win over its biggest rival, carrying the ball 28 times for 128 yards and throwing a pair of touchdown passes. It was the Bulldogs' first win over the Yellow Jackets since 1936, and Sinkwich earned everyone's respect for his part in it.

According to Magill's story in the next day's Banner-Herald, "Sinkwich's amazing running caused George Webb, Tech's star right end, to come into the Bulldogs' dressing room after the game and say, 'Sinkwich, you're the greatest ballplayer I've ever seen.'

"Claude Bond, Tech's trainer, stopped newsmen as they were leaving the gymnasium and said: 'Our boys just told me that this Sinkwich is the best and the cleanest football player they've ever played against. I wish you'd put that in the paper because I think it is the truth. Our boys said that guy's interested in only one thing - getting that extra yard.'"

That victory, and another in the season finale against Miami a week later, helped Georgia finish the season with a winning record at 5-4-1.

High expectations

Big things were expected of the Bulldogs as the 1941 season approached. Those who had made up the core of the '39 freshman team were now upperclassmen, and a strong senior class led by Allen, who would go on to form one of Athens' most successful car dealerships, was in place. Much like the modern schedule, the Bulldogs started out with Mercer, a non-conference patsy. The Bulldogs demolished the Bears 81-0 as Sinkwich ran for three scores and passed for another.

Next up was South Carolina, which was not an SEC school at the time, in a game that would be another turning point in Sinkwich's career. As told in Magill's book, "Bull Doggerel," Georgia led 27-6 in Sanford Stadium late in the game when Sinkwich had his second run-in with South Carolina defender Steve Novak.

"I had received a hard lick to my jaw - in the same place - in the first quarter on the handoff to our fullback," Sinkwich recalled. "I carried out a fake, and the South Carolina end, Novak, gave me a forearm to the jaw.

"On my last play of the game, though, I faked a pass and ran a good way, almost scoring. Cramps hit my legs, and I buckled. I was run out of bounds and someone piled on, hitting my jaw again with a knee. I think it was the same Novak. South Carolina was penalized to the 1-yard line for unnecessary roughness, and we scored immediately.

"When I returned to the sidelines, coach Butts asked me what ailed me, and I replied that I had a loose tooth. He commented: 'Oh. That's nothing!'"

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Actually, Sinkwich had broken his jaw. With a huge game against Ole Miss the next week, this was not good news. Team dentist Dr. Jimmy Allen (Heyward's older brother) wired Sinkwich's jaw shut, and Sinkwich flew to Knoxville, Tenn., to be checked out by Tennessee trainer Mickey O'Brien, in hopes that some protective headgear could be designed so he could play.

Allen and Georgia's medical staff began work on a helmet, but it wouldn't be ready in time for the Ole Miss game. So Sinkwich got a local machinist to make him a metal chin strap for protection against the Rebels, and he started the game with his jaw wired shut. Sinkwich ended up rushing for 98 yards and throwing a touchdown pass despite the difficulties caused by his injury. The teams tied, 14-14.

"The worst thing was trying to breathe through wired teeth," he said of the game. "I recall our trainer coming on the field with pliers to tighten up the wires which would get loose. There was no free substitution then, and I had to remain in the game if I wanted to continue playing."

Sinkwich's special helmet was ready for the next game against Columbia and he played the rest of the year with a large jaw protector attached to his helmet.

He seemed to get stronger as the season progressed. In a 27-14 loss against Alabama the week after the Columbia game, Sinkwich ran for 109 yards. It was the first of five straight games in which he rushed for more than 100 yards, culminating in a 155-yard effort against Dartmouth on Nov. 22.

A week later, Georgia Tech held him to 64 yards rushing, but he made up for it by throwing for 197 yards and three touchdowns in a 21-0 win at Grant Field.

Sinkwich's regular-season yardage totals were unprecedented. His 1,103 yards rushing set an SEC record, which stood for eight years, and his 1,816 yards of total offense set another conference standard. He earned All-America honors and finished fourth in the Heisman Trophy voting.

Better still, the Bulldogs wrapped up the year with an 8-1-1 record and earned a trip to the Orange Bowl against Texas Christian in their first-ever postseason appearance. It was before a record crowd of 35,786 fans in Miami that Sinkwich gained serious publicity outside the Southeast for the first time.

Sinkwich had the ball in his hands on every play of the game, slicing apart the Horned Frog defense at will. After Georgia took a 7-0 lead on a 2-yard run by Ken Keuper, Sinkwich took over. Before the quarter was out, he fired a 61-yard touchdown pass to Melvin Conger and a 60-yarder to Cliff Kimsey. In the second quarter, Sinkwich hit Lamar Davis for a 15-yard score, helping Georgia take a 33-7 halftime lead. Sinkwich added a 43-yard touchdown run for Georgia's final tally in the third quarter. He finished the day completing 9 of 13 passes for 243 yards. He also rushed 139 yards and accumulated 382 yards of total offense and four touchdowns.

Sinkwich's touchdown run came on his signature play, in which he took the snap, faked a handoff and went up the middle. The play, which exploited Sinkwich's starting speed, produced 25 of the 30 rushing touchdowns Sinkwich scored in his Georgia career.

"Spin 87 was his favorite play," Hartman said. "We'd trap the defensive guard with the blocking back, and (Sinkwich) did a half-spinner to the wingback and fullback coming around. Then he came up to cut in behind that trap and they were cross-blocking at the line of scrimmage and we pulled the strong-side end through the hole ahead of him. He was virtually unstoppable on that play because he got there so quick."

"We were scrimmaging out there one day against the first-team defense, and we had Bill Godwin backing up the right side of the line, who weighed about 235 and was a pretty good linebacker. Sinkwich was in the huddle with coach Butts, and coach Butts said to Godwin, 'We're going to run Spin 87 right at you, can you stop it?' And Godwin said yeah he could. And (Butts) told Sinkwich that, he said, 'Yeah, he can stop you.' So we ran Spin 87 right at Godwin and Sinkwich hit him and walked right up his chest, knocked him down and did a tattoo on him with those quick feet and ran about 40 yards."

It was a feeling most defenders got used to over the course of Sinkwich's career.

Bigger expectations

Georgia's success in '41 raised expectations to an almost unheard-of level for the next season. The Point-a-minute Bullpups were now seniors and everyone knew about Sinkwich. Avid Georgia fans were excited that he would be joined in the backfield by the previous year's star freshman player, a youngster named Charlie Trippi.

As many of their contemporaries were sent overseas to fight in World War II, the Bulldogs prepared for what many expected to be their finest season ever. Things went as planned from the start, even though they opened the season with a nail-biting 7-6 win at Kentucky.

Georgia won its first nine games as Sinkwich led the way with an even more balanced effort than he had given the year before. A 35-13 win at Cincinnati on Oct. 24 was Sinkwich's statistical high point. He rushed for 136 yards and three touchdowns and threw for 227 yards, including touchdown passes of 90 (which is still the fifth-longest in UGA history) and 80 yards to Lamar Davis.

The five-score performance is still the best single-game effort in school history. Ray Goff tied the mark against Florida in 1976, as did Robert Edwards against South Carolina in 1995. Sinkwich finished 1942 with 27 touchdowns, a mark that still stands - the closest anyone else has come is Eric Zeier's 25-touchdown performances in 1993 and '94.

Georgia rolled until it suffered its first loss of the year against Auburn on Nov. 21. The Tigers held Sinkwich to just 31 yards rushing, his second-lowest output in the final two years of his career. The only lower point came in 1942 against the Jacksonville Naval Air Station, when Sinkwich was knocked out on the game's fourth play with a bruised pelvis.

Sinkwich and Georgia didn't let the disappointment of the Auburn loss bother them. The Bulldogs bounced back the next Saturday to crush No. 2-ranked Georgia Tech 34-0 in Athens and earn a Rose Bowl berth against UCLA on New Year's Day.

Unfortunately, Sinkwich entered the final game of his college career with a pair of sprained ankles. He was forced to turn over much of the rushing load to his heir apparent, Trippi, and the sophomore responded with 27 carries for 115 yards against the Bruins. But he couldn't crack the end zone.

The game went scoreless into the fourth quarter, with 90,000 fans on hand in Pasadena. Finally, Georgia blocked a Bob Waterfield punt out of the end zone for a safety and a 2-0 lead in the fourth quarter. Later in the fourth quarter, Clyde Ehrhardt picked off a Waterfield pass and returned it to the 25-yard line.

Georgia pounded the ball in and Sinkwich eventually got the call from the 1-yard line. Sinkwich ran it across, and Leo Costa added the PAT for a 9-0 Georgia win.

The Bulldogs were consensus national champions that year, the school's first title. Sinkwich became the first player from a Southern school to win the Heisman and was the only player from the region to capture the award until LSU's Billy Cannon won it in 1959.

Sinkwich finished his career with 2,271 yards rushing, 2,331 yards passing and 60 touchdowns - 30 each on the ground and through the air. But numbers couldn't reflect the impact Sinkwich had on the program. Through his performances in high-profile games, Sinkwich forced the rest of the country to pay attention to Georgia football for the first time.

"He put us on the map," Magill said.

Sinkwich was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1954, with his achievements still fresh in the minds of the voters. Nearly 60 years after the end of Sinkwich's college career, it can be difficult to put his numbers in perspective, compared to Herschel Walker's gaudy running stats and Zeier's equally impressive passing numbers.

But an undated magazine article from the 1950s offers some insight into the importance of Sinkwich's accomplishments. The one-page story, drawing heavily on statistics, asserts that Sinkwich was in fact the best offensive player ever, superior even to the Galloping Ghost, Red Grange of Illinois.

"The greatest offensive back in modern intercollegiate football - and your record book will prove it - was Frank Sinkwich of the University of Georgia," it reads.

At the end of the story is a chart of the two players' statistical totals in their three-year careers, and Grange's 4,280 yards of offense from 1923-25 fell more than 300 yards short of Sinkwich's totals.

An unfortunate injury

Unfortunately, the end of college marked the beginning of the end of Sinkwich's greatness on the football field.

Because of his flat feet and high blood pressure, he was not accepted into the Marine Corps, so he signed with the Detroit Lions. He was an All-Pro player his first two seasons in the league and was named the league's most valuable player in 1944.

After that season, he was accepted into the Air Force and was sent to Colorado Springs. While playing on the Air Force football team there, Sinkwich suffered a serious knee injury. Two operations couldn't fix the damage, and at the age of 25, Sinkwich's career was over.

He coached for a few years, at Furman and Tampa University, but he eventually gave up football altogether and came back to his adopted hometown of Athens to start a family. Sinkwich became a beer distributor in Northeast Georgia and stayed one for the rest of his life.

His son, Frank Jr., still runs the Miller Lite distributorship his father used to be involved with. Frank Jr. has lived his entire life in Clarke County, attending Athens High and UGA, and while he never inherited his father's athletic ability, he shares his dad's affection for the town and the university.

"He loved athletics, he lived and breathed it," Frank Jr. said. "On Saturdays, TV was made for him to watch not just football, but all sports. He was an avid fan of everything."

As a fan, Sinkwich was a major supporter of UGA athletics for the rest of his life, and he chaired the committee to raise funds for construction of Butts-Mehre Heritage Hall along with his mentor, Hartman. The building was completed in 1987.

Three years later, on Oct. 22, 1990, Sinkwich died in Athens after a long battle with cancer. He was 70 years old.

Back in Youngstown, Ohio, a monument honors one of the town's favorite sons. On April 28, 1988, Chaney High School's football field was renamed Frank Sinkwich Athletic Field.

If Bill Hartman had enough gas in his tank in 1939, that field might be named something else - maybe after Paul Something-or-other.

"You know, that other boy, he never did play at Ohio State," Hartman said. "He went, but he never turned out."

Sinkwich, though, turned the history of Georgia football around.