The Best Game Ever
Fifty years ago the Colts and Giants, with 17 Hall of Famers, met in the title game. Raymond Berry and John Unitas shone brightest

By Mark Bowden

This was the game that launched pro football into the stratosphere of billion-dollar franchises and multimillion-dollar player salaries. With 17 future Hall of Famers on the field and on the sidelines, it was watched by a TV audience of 45 million, the largest ever to witness a football game to that point. It remains in the memory of many sports fans.

Fifty years ago, on a freezing afternoon in Yankee Stadium, pro football's best offense, led by the Baltimore Colts' John Unitas, met the best defense, led by the New York Giants' Sam Huff, for the 1958 NFL championship. The teams fought a brutal seesaw battle that ended, fittingly, in a draw. What followed was the first sudden-death overtime in league history and still the only one in an NFL championship game or Super Bowl.

Few fans have understood that the key to victory in that game was not its celebrated coaches nor any of its marquee stars, but an ungrudging wide receiver who lacked the pure athletic ability to play pro sports and whose peculiar obsessions made him an oddball to his teammates. He was, nevertheless, the prototype of the modern football player.

The tall, skinny young man in glasses who moved next door to Al Brennan had some unusual exercise habits. Every morning in the fall and winter, like clockwork, he emerged from his house in Lutherville, Md., dressed in a gray sweat suit and carrying a weight with a rope tied around it. He stood at the top of the stairs that led from the empty grandstand at Wise Field and then walk out to the center of the sun-baked gridiron. There he would set up the son of the local football coach, Brennan would have seen him perform the same exercise on the steps of the empty grandstand at Wise Field and then walk out to the center of the sun-baked gridiron. There he would set up a piece of paper down on the grass and, for an hour or more, race off carrying a football in one direction or another, stop, return, catch his breath, consult the paper, assume a set position and sprint off again. Sometimes he would angle off to the left for a short distance, sometimes to the right. Sometimes he would stop and turn back a few steps, or perform a shuffle that looked like little dance moves before abruptly changing direction. Sometimes he would run only 10 yards and sometimes the length of the field before he came back. There didn't seem to be any pattern to it, so it would have been hard for anyone to guess that the young man was playing an entire football game at the split end position in pantomime.

He had chosen the film of a particular game, observed each route run by the wide receiver, timed each play and interval between plays with a stopwatch and, in tiny, meticulous handwriting, sketched the patterns and noted the sequences. Every play, whether the receiver was thrown the ball or not; every huddle; every
timeout; every stretch the wideout spent on the bench between offensive series. Then, consulting this handwritten script out on the grass, he acted out the game from whistle to whistle. Out on the playing field of his hometown in the dead of summer, there was no one to observe his obsessive devotion, no teammate, no coach. There was no one he was trying to impress. It was pure desire. No, not just desire. The young man in gray sweats and glasses was desperate.

His name was Raymond Berry, and he was a football player unlike any other his Baltimore Colts coaches had ever seen. A lowly 20th-round draft pick, he was not expected to last long when he reported to his first training camp in Westminster, Md., in the summer of 1955. It was the job of Charley Winner, the Colts’ ends coach, to check him in. “Hey, Ray, welcome to training camp,” Winner said. “We’re glad to have you.”

“My name is Raymond,” he replied.

The famous 1958 championship game would turn on a sequence of three plays in the fourth quarter, but to fully appreciate it you first need to appreciate Raymond. At a time when most NFL players had full-time jobs off the field, he was, at age 22, a full-time football player. He worked at the game night and day. NFL and college teams had long used film to break down the formations and tendencies of their opponents, to plan strategies and to instruct players, but the players themselves generally viewed such classroom sessions as a chore, and a bore. Not Raymond. He bought a 16-mm projector, and when his day of practice and mandated classroom work was done, when his teammates were out drinking beer, he would go home and study film on his own. He focused on his position alone. He scrutinized the men who would be defending against him, corners mostly, but also linebackers and safeties. He sought out film of successful receivers and studied their routes and their moves, making page after page of notes in his tidy little handwriting.

He was different in other ways, too. While most young athletes spent their paychecks or bonus money on cars or booze or women, Raymond spent his on things such as contact lenses, then an expensive novelty, and a specially fitted tooth guard -- a precaution that many of the rough men in the game would have considered borderline unmanly. It didn’t stop there. No detail was too small to absorb Raymond. He found the canvas fabric of his practice football pants too heavy and binding, so he had the manufacturer make him pants out of the stretchy, lightweight material used in the Colts’ game uniforms. To keep the pants from getting lost in the team’s daily piles of laundry, Raymond would hand-wash his gear after practice and hang it up in his locker to dry.

Imagine how professional football players in the 1950s viewed a teammate who insisted on wearing custom-made practice pants, on doing his own laundry and on being called by his full first name. These were men with missing teeth and broken noses. Most were hard-drinking, fun-loving rowdies, many of them veterans of World War II and Korea. To them there was something unnatural about Raymond’s approach to football. A real man showed up hurt, or with a hangover, and he didn’t outthink his opponent -- he kicked his ass.

He had always been extraordinarily organized and self-possessed, a tall and lean boy with narrow, wide-set eyes, wavy brown hair and a thin smile that unfolded at a slight angle and made you wonder what else he meant by it. He looked more like a grocery-store clerk than a football player. He was quiet but not shy. His dad was known to one and all back in Paris as Ray, which is why young Raymond insisted on his full name. He was his own man. He was poised, as though he pondered everything a little harder than anyone else. This made him generally impervious to what other people thought and made him, among other things, uncoachable -- or, more accurately, in no need of coaching. The way you handled him was to leave him alone. Off the field he carried slips of paper in his shirt pocket on which he made observations and lists of reminders.

Sportswriters found that he could talk your ear off, not just about how and why he had made a particular move but also about when and where he had dreamed it up. He had sketched it out at some point, broken it down into its component parts and named them, rehearsed the move a thousand times in his head and then a thousand more on the field, and held it in reserve to use at precisely the right moment. To a degree considered hilarious and sometimes tiresome, Raymond was cerebral in his approach to the game -- or, more precisely, to his position, because he knew he was suited for only one job at the pro level. He was deconstructing and reinventing the position of wide receiver.

The idea of splitting a player out to one side so he could concentrate exclusively on running pass routes was relatively new. It had been only nine years since Los Angeles Rams coach Clark Shaughnessy, one of the game’s greatest innovators, had created the position by placing Elroy (Crazy Legs) Hirsch seven yards wide of his teammates on the line of scrimmage. Inspired by Hirsch, Raymond decided he, too, would play that position.