



In eighth grade, I was an interior lineman for the football team. Meaning, I wasn't very gifted at throwing, catching, or running with the ball. I was the football equivalent of the baseball Little Leaguer you would hide over in right field. That was fine. I was just happy to be in the game.

When playing defense, I knew from experience that I had little chance of penetrating the backfield, or tackling in pursuit. But I became very good at two things. One was being involved in loud hits. Our oversized shoulder pads had a plastic flap attached on top, so when you lowered your shoulder and met something with a crushing impact, the flap would smack down. Observers within a hundred yards would go "oooooh." The other thing I mastered was the inherent value of jumping over guys who were on the ground. From the sideline, the coach could see my jersey rise above the scrum, my arms waving.

So basically, my role was lowering my pads before getting run over by ball carriers. And on passing plays, my angle to the quarterback was a jagged, connect-the-dots route dictated by where the bodies were strewn.

During the postgame huddle, the coach would dramatically rave, "GREG POPELKA earned some extra playing time today. GREAT EFFORT by him. THAT is what I am TALKING ABOUT." (Think a thin, long-haired Chris Farley. Come to think of it, Coach was about 35, too. Although I am certain he did not 'live in a van down by the river'.) I loved that he held these talks where outsiders could hear him.

When I played offense, I was a messenger guard. Paul Brown invented messenger guards. As

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Written by {ga=googleeph2}

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far as I was concerned, it was an honor to fill a role invented by the 'inventor of football itself'.

Our coach liked to use messenger guards to send plays in to the quarterback. I think he especially liked having players near him on the sideline. That way, he



could grab their facemask, holler through it, and smack them on the helmet with his heavy clipboard.

“POPELKA!!” He was looking around for me, and appeared surprised I was standing right next to him. Number 57 on your mimeographed roster; number one in your heart. “Come here.”

Since I was already there, I hurriedly ran in place a little. His hand gripped my facemask, pulling me a bit off-balance. “Here is the play. Are you ready?!!” I said “YES SIR”. His eye contact remained steady. “OVER THERE, on that SIDELINE, is ED MODZELEWSKI. Do you know who that is?!?!” I said yes. But I wasn’t really sure. I had heard the name; it was a football name.

“ED MODZELEWSKI played with the CLEVELAND BROWNS, under PAUL BROWN. He is here, watching this FOOTBALL GAME.” (Football people never just say the word ‘ball’, or ‘game’. It is always ‘football’, or ‘football game’.) All of the players on our sideline were his audience. “WE are going to SHOW HIM how WE play FOOTBALL!!!” I was pumped. I waited.

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“686 Pump F-Stop on two. And remind them to protect the football.” I nodded. He pushed me away with his facemask grip, and sent me back onto the field with a WHACK of his clipboard on my forehead. I ran out to our quarterback, who always was pretty cool with me. He looked at me... I looked at him... the play clock was running, and he said, “What’s the play?”



“I don’t knowwwwwww!!! I don’t remember.” CRAP! I had been caught up in the moment. Over there somewhere was Ed Mo-juh-LESS-ski, and I did not remember the call. He said, “OK, we’ll run a play.” Well, whatever he called in the huddle was only understood by some of the offensive squad. Only about half of us moved on the snap, and it was clear we had no idea what we were trying to accomplish on the play. Our quarterback ran for his life before being clobbered in the backfield. He fumbled. The tackler had blown me up on his way by. (I did lower my pads in time, and the crowd groaned an “ooooooh.”)

The thing that could be dicey about being a messenger guard was that you were the one who had to go stand by the coach, even after a bad play. You were his lightning rod.

“WHAT IN THE WORLD WAS THAT?!?” I told him I forgot the play. To his credit, he moved on.

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Of the litany of innovations pioneered by Cleveland Browns patriarch Paul Brown, one was actually an improvement over one of his own previous inventions. His messenger guard model was state-of-the-art in the NFL, and in the 1950s, several head coaches were calling plays for their quarterbacks (a notable



exception was Vince Lombardi, who took the Green Bay Packers job in 1959. Lombardi maintained if he couldn't get his game plan in place during the week, he wasn't an effective coach).

Paul Brown was a notorious control freak, and his players weren't really supposed to think. That

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was his job.

In the early 50s, Browns fans John Campbell and George Sarles came up with the idea of putting a radio receiver in the quarterback's helmet. The coach could then directly communicate with him, precluding the need for messenger guards. This could avoid misunderstandings, and allow for a quicker pace for the offense. Coaches had dabbled with sign language, with results that were choppy at best.

Sarles was an electronic gadget salesman, and Campbell was a General Electric engineer. They worked together in Campbell's home laboratory to craft an early prototype; it failed to penetrate the bone structure of the head. The signal needed to be stronger. The resulting, 4-watt receiver was 2 1/2" in diameter and 1/2" thick. It was attached inside the top of the helmet. The earphone was attached inside the left earhole. The antenna consisted of strips of silver that were coated in paint. The power was supplied by a small battery that was said to last thirty hours.

When Sarles and Campbell approached Brown with their radio receiver, he asked for a demonstration. How far could the signal be received? Sarles donned a Browns helmet and walked out into the woods as Campbell communicated with him. The others began to become concerned when Sarles did not return. What happened was as he distanced himself from Campbell's house, a police officer stopped him. The men had been using a police broadcast frequency, and the specter of a grown man wandering about wearing a Browns helmet appeared suspicious, as well. It turned out that the officer was a Browns fan, and kept the secret.

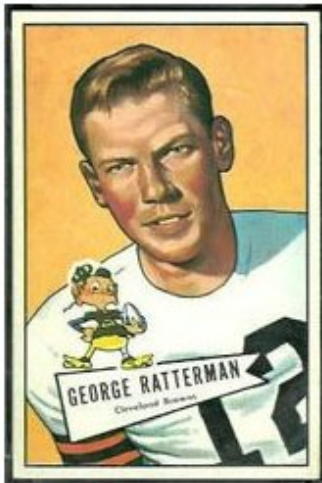
The receiver was first used in a preseason game against the Detroit Lions. Paul Brown had actually purchased a license that in effect allowed him to run a small radio station, in preparation for its use.

The Browns offense moved efficiently, early in that Lions game. No messenger guards were used, and the Lions coach obviously knew something was going

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on. Adding to the intrigue was the sight of Browns quarterback George Ratterman slowly



[George Ratterman had an eventful life before he gained fame in his post-football days](#)

