

MR. MARA

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The National Football League, organized as the American Professional Football Association in Canton in 1920, enjoyed only a semblance of order through its first five seasons. Teams moved in and out of the league with alarming regularity. The NFL's many teams were mostly from small cities where there just wasn't enough crowd support to keep operating. There was no widespread enthusiasm for pro football.

But in 1925, two events provided the sport with the impetus it needed to eventually become immensely successful. The better-known event – the signing of the fabled Red Grange to a Chicago Bears' contract in November, actually came second chronologically. The first, not-so-well remembered happening was the establishment of an NFL franchise in New York City in April, 1925. This event undoubtedly provided an even more profound long-range benefit for the game than the Grange signing. A New York franchise was something the league had desperately wanted though all of its early years for it was recognized that, without the vast publicity that could emanate from the New York press, there was little chance pro football would ever become a major attraction.

Tim Mara, a New York bookmaker, was the person who accepted NFL President Joe Carr's offer for an NFL franchise for just \$500. Carr had first offered the team to Billy Gibson, a local fight manager who had been part owner in a failed attempt to establish an NFL franchise in New York in 1921. Gibson, not willing to risk further capital on the sport, thought his good friend Mara might be interested.

Timothy James Mara was a self-made man. Born on New York's over East Side on July 29, 1887, he rose from poverty to success by dint of hard work, a genial personality, and a reputation for honesty. At age 13, he quit school to find work to support his widowed mother. At first he worked as an usher in a theater and sold newspapers on the streets. His newspaper work brought him into contact with many of New York's bookies, bookmaking being a perfectly legal business at the time. He soon found himself a runner for the bookies, earning five percent of the bets he collected and receiving tips from winners when he delivered their cash. At age 18, he began taking bets himself. Twenty years later, he was approached by Joe Carr.

Mara didn't hesitate when he heard Carr's asking price. "A New York franchise to operate anything ought to be worth \$500," he proclaimed. [Note: The price is often given as \$2,500, but that figure includes league fees and guarantees. So long as a franchise met its obligations, most guarantee money would be returned.]

A friend of Carr's, Dr. Harry March, was at the meeting between Carr and Mara. When Mara, who knew virtually nothing about football, found that March did, he immediately hired him as club secretary. March quickly went to work. He hired a name coach from the U.S. Naval Academy, Bob Folwell, and the two of them lined up several genuine All-America choices for their new team. They even enlisted the aging and over-the-hill Jim Thorpe on a half-game basis. March figured the fabulous Indian star would be a good drawing card for the new fans in New York.

He was wrong. Big-time college football – Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Columbia and all the rest – was flourishing in New York in the mid-1920s and it captured all the headlines the Giants had sought. Even though the Giants finished with an 8-4-0 record, fourth best in a 20-team league, attendance was so poor that, with one game left in the regular season, Mara's losses had reached the \$40,000 level.

Not about to surrender, Mara decided what he really needed was a super-star such as Grange to make pro football go in New York. It turned out he was right, but when Grange did make his debut in the Polo Grounds, it was in a Chicago Bears, not a New York Giants uniform. By the time Mara contacted Grange, the whirling dervish halfback had already signed with the Bears. So Mara did the next best thing – he quickly arranged a game in New York between the Grange-led Bears and his Giants.

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Grange's debut in New York was, as expected, a fantastic success. More than 70,000 fans stormed the Polo Grounds to watch Grange intercept one pass, score a touchdown, and lead his team to a 19-7 victory. But Mara profited immensely. The gate receipts totalled \$143,000. In just one day, he had recouped all his losses, added a fancy profit for the season, and had become forever convinced that pro football did indeed have a future in New York.

Mara's resolve, however, was severely tested the very next season by, of all people, the very person whose presence had turned around the 1925 season financially for the Giants. Grange and his agent, C.C. "Cash and Carry" Pyle obtained an option on Yankee Stadium and then asked the NFL for a second New York franchise. Although Mara liked Grange personally, he developed a strong anathema for Pyle. More important, he believed a league franchise was of little value if it didn't confer exclusive territorial rights.

Most of the league owners wanted Grange, but they were forced to agree with Mara's position. Blocked in the attempt to obtain an NFL franchise, Pyle threatened to form a new league.

"I really don't think Pyle will carry through on his threat," the Giants owner said. "But I have already offered to bet Grange \$100,000 that if we have a go at each other, neither of us will make a nickle." But Pyle was convinced he could build an entire league around one super-star, and so he organized the American Football League, with the flagship Yankees franchise in New York with Grange as the much-publicized team leader.

The Giants were the principal target of the new league. Coach Folwell left to join the Philadelphia Quakers, as did their star tackle, Century Milstead. To keep more players from jumping, Mara upped the salaries of all his players by \$50 a game. He also signed many players to full-season contracts and then sat back to lose the money he knew he would. His losses for the season were estimated at \$60,000.

Mara's team was staggered by a poor start on the field and atrocious weather. However, the same bad weather also hurt the Yankees. Mara lost heavily, but AFL teams lost more. By season's end, all but four AFL teams had folded. With survival now assured, Mara challenged the Yankees to an on-the-field showdown. Pyle, who once coveted such a match, refused. So Mara turned his challenge to the AFL champion Philadelphia Quakers and they accepted. In the first inter-league post-season confrontation, the seventh-place Giants of the NFL handled the AFL's best with ease, 31-0.

For the good of the league, Mara was now willing to admit the Grange Yankees into the NFL as the only survivor of the defunct AFL. They could even play home games at Yankee Stadium. But Mara was able to dictate the schedule. When the Giants were in the Polo Grounds, the Yankees were on the road.

Mara could then turn his attention back to the playing field, and in 1927 he scored big. With an 11-1-1 season, the New Yorkers not only won their first of many divisional and league championships, but they allowed their 13 opponents only 20 points, a defensive record that still stands.

The Giants slipped the next season, but the C.C. Pyle's Yankees – Grangeless with Red on the shelf because of a knee injury – fell further. At the end of the 1928 season, Pyle turned his franchise over to Mara. In the meantime, Mara was looking for a drawing card who might approach Grange in fan appeal. The great passer Benny Friedman was such a player even though his play couldn't bestir many Detroit fans to come out to watch his Wolverines. When he couldn't make a deal for Friedman, Mara simply bought the entire Detroit franchise for \$10,000. For the next few years, Mara had ultimate ownership of three NFL franchises. To his credit, he never interfered with the running of any of the teams that operated under his leases such as the Staten Island Stapletons.

Mara had known hard times when he was a youngster. His sympathies were easily aroused by those in distress. After the stock market crash of 1929, those in distress outnumbered those who weren't. One day, the New York mayor, Jimmy Walker, phoned Mara to ask if he would be willing to schedule a charity game with the receipts going to the unemployment relief fund.

"You name the team and we'll play them, Mara unhesitantly responded. It was decided the best draw would be a team of former Notre Dame stars, including the legendary Four Horsemen. The well-conditioned, finely-tuned Giants easily outscored the Notre Dame stars 21-0. But the New York City Unemployment Fund was the big winner when Mara turned over a check for \$115,153 to Mayor Walker after the game.

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For the next several decades, there were many sterling accomplishments by Giants teams. There were league championships in 1934, 1938, and 1956 and divisional titles in 1933, 1939, 1941, 1944, 1946, 1958, 1959, 1961, 1962, and 1963.

Off the field, Mara had to fight three other inter-league wars. One, against AFL No. 2 in 1936 and 1937, was only a minor skirmish. A 1940-41 AFL hardly counted at all, but the third, the 1946-1949 confrontation with the All-America Football Conference, was an all-out, checkbooks wide open affair. Mara's Giants were faced with not one but two AAFC opponents in the New York City area – the New York Yankees and the Brooklyn Dodgers. Again Mara fought to the bitter end and eventually won. When the two leagues partially merged after the 1949 season, Mara demanded and got the best players from the combined New York-Brooklyn franchise that had operated in 1949.

Tim Mara died in 1959 and so did not experience the biggest inter-league struggle, the one that began with AFL No. 3 in 1960 and ended with merger and equality a decade later. But the Mara heritage had been firmly established. Tim's oldest son, Jack, took over in 1959 and his second son, Wellington, became the Giants president when Jack died in 1965. He remains in that position today.

Destiny has called on several key figures to provide the impetus for great progress for pro football, but no one played a more vital role than Tim Mara. His vast contributions to the NFL were appropriately recognized for posterity with his 1963 election to charter membership in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.