

# Nothing minor about it

## The American Association/AFL of 1936-50

By Bob Gill

Try as I might, I can't seem to mention the era before World War II without calling it "the heyday of pro football's minor leagues." But it's not just an idle comment. In the 1930s several flourishing regional "circuits" of independent teams coalesced into outstanding minor leagues. From today's perspective, one of the least likely locales for such a circuit was the New York-New Jersey area, where fans had the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers to satisfy their hunger for pro football. Despite that, the area produced the best of all the pre-war minor leagues: the American Association (soon to be immortalized in another best-selling PFRA publication).

The AA was formed in June 1936, in response to a proposal by Edwin (Piggy) Simandl, manager of the Orange Tornadoes. Charter members were Brooklyn, Mt. Vernon, New Rochelle, Orange, Passaic, Paterson, Staten Island and White Plains. Several of these cities had been represented in two earlier leagues, the 1932 Eastern League and the 1933 Interstate League, both of which failed after a single season.

However, those leagues didn't have Joe Rosentover as president. Despite the early demise of his own Passaic club, Rosentover remained at the helm of the league for its whole existence.

The AA's first season was somewhat like that of its main rival, the Dixie League, which also opened for business in 1936. No team established any clear superiority, and at the end of November Rosentover announced a playoff series matching the top four teams, two each from what the newspapers sometimes called the New York group and the New Jersey group.

Brooklyn topped New Rochelle 18-0 in the first round of the playoffs, while Paterson was beating Orange 10-0. The title game was set for a week later, but Paterson withdrew, citing four injured players and a couple more who had already gone home. Probably more important was the fact that the game with Orange had drawn only 3,500, the worst crowd of the season in Paterson.

It may be hard to understand the Panthers' position today, but in 1936 the championship of a fledgling minor league just didn't mean that much. Two victories in three games with arch-rival Passaic carried a lot more weight with Paterson fans. The Panthers weren't alone, either: Mt. Vernon, with the league's fourth-best record, was replaced by Orange in the playoffs after simply declining to participate. (And in the Dixie League, Portsmouth bypassed the playoffs to schedule another game with their arch rivals from Norfolk.)

Paterson's withdrawal gave the title to Brooklyn, and the Bay Parkways traveled to Richmond Jan. 1 to represent the AA against the Washington Pros, Dixie League champs, in a sort of minor league Super Bowl, which Washington won 13-6. Despite a number of exhibition games between the two leagues in succeeding years, it was the last time a Dixie League team ever beat a member of the AA.

The standings given here list the teams in their unofficial divisions, which became official in 1937. The two playoff games are included, as they ultimately were by the league.

<b>New York Division</b>	<b>W-L-T</b>	<b>Pct.</b>	<b>Pts</b>	<b>Opp</b>
Brooklyn Bay Parkways	4-2-2	.667	86	32
New Rochelle Bulldogs	3-2-1	.600	30	40
Mt. Vernon Cardinals	3-2-0	.600	37	42
White Plains Bears	2-4-0	.333	27	40
<b>New Jersey Division</b>	<b>W-L-T</b>	<b>Pct.</b>	<b>Pts</b>	<b>Opp</b>
Paterson Panthers	4-1-0	.800	59	13
Orange Tornadoes	4-4-0	.500	54	55
Passaic Red Devils	3-5-0	.375	33	76

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Stapleton Buffaloes

1-4-1 .200 26 54

Unable to line up a stadium, Passaic dropped out during the offseason, but the Red Devils were replaced by two teams: the Brooklyn Bushwicks and the Danbury Trojans. Danbury was one of the two best teams in Connecticut, along with the Bristol West Ends, who didn't join the league but did play several games with AA teams in 1937.

Technically, there was another new team in Brooklyn, where some behind-the-scenes maneuvering resulted in the Bay Parkways being replaced by the Brooklyn Eagles, though still under the direction of 1936 manager Harold Lippman and featuring most of the same players. In addition, the Orange Tornadoes moved down the road to Newark, and the Stapleton Buffaloes left Staten Island for Manhattan and became the New York Tigers, playing a schedule of only road games. Actually, that should read "only a road game," because the team disbanded in October with an 0-1 record.

Though at this time the NFL had an "unofficial" but strictly observed ban on black players, the AA employed three blacks in 1937. Clarence Lee, an end with Mt. Vernon in 1936, played only two games this time around; but he was joined by halfback George Burgwin, who split the season between the Bushwicks and Newark, and Ozzie Simmons, a great college star from Iowa who made the league's all-star second team as a halfback with Paterson.

On the administrative level, Rosentover awarded three forfeits in 1937, all in cases where one team refused to play even though there were already fans in the stands. Though it caused some hard feelings, this policy helped to end the practice of last-minute cancellations.

The league lined up officially in two divisions this season, with the winners to match up for the championship – an arrangement that almost had historic consequences.

Newark and White Plains took the division titles and fought to a 3-3 tie in the title game, at the end of which Newark offered to play an unprecedented fifth period. This was not to be sudden-death, just an extra 15 minutes – more like a tenth inning in baseball. Rosentover approved the idea, provided that White Plains agreed. But the underdog Bears refused, passing up a chance to make history 21 years before the so-called "Greatest Game Ever Played." Instead, White Plains and Newark were declared co-champions.

The season was over, but Rosentover's problems were just beginning.

The most serious dispute involved Paterson. The Panthers and the Tornadoes, clearly the league's two best teams, were both in the Southern Division. Their first meeting ended in a scoreless tie, but Newark took a 7-2 decision in the second game to win the division title. Paterson protested the game, arguing that an official's call had deprived them of a chance at a game-winning touchdown. The Panthers threatened to pull out of the league – and Paterson was the AA's best franchise, drawing such good crowds (nearly 8,000 per game) that they were allowed to play their entire 1936 and '37 schedules at home.

Rosentover turned the matter over to an impartial panel, which decided in favor of Paterson. That decision, some fast talking by Rosentover, and postseason exhibition wins over Newark and White Plains proved sufficient to smooth the Panthers' ruffled feathers – or uh, fur.

But New Rochelle coach Art Schiebel wasn't so easily put off (if you call the Paterson affair "easy," that is). He told reporters that the confusion resulting from Paterson's protest was a disgrace, that Rosentover was letting himself be manipulated by *those New Jersey teams*. He suggested that Mt. Vernon, New Rochelle and White Plains leave the AA and form their own Westchester County league. Since Schiebel had also coached in Mt. Vernon, he had many supporters there, too. And folks in White Plains were still stewing over Rosentover's refusal to make Newark replay the tie game for the championship – apparently forgetting that they had refused Newark's more practical offer of an overtime period.

It may have been the worst of times – but it was about to get better.

<b>Northern Division</b>	<b>W-L-T</b>	<b>Pct.</b>	<b>Pts</b>	<b>Opp</b>
White Plains Bears	3-2-1	.600	19	49
Danbury Trojans	3-1-0	.750	58	0
New Rochelle Bulldogs	3-6-0	.333	62	65

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Brooklyn Bushwicks	1-4-1	.200	17	74
Mt. Vernon Cardinals	1-6-1	.143	14	88

<b>Southern Division</b>	<b>W-L-T</b>	<b>Pct.</b>	<b>Pts</b>	<b>Opp</b>
Newark Tornadoes	6-1-3	.857	96	31
Paterson Panthers	4-1-1	.800	95	7
Brooklyn Eagles	4-3-1	.375	35	62
New York Tigers	0-1-0	.000	0	20

*(Final standings released by the league ranked teams by awarding two points for each win, one for a tie, like the National Hockey League does today. That's why White Plains is ahead of Danbury. These standings include Newark's 7-2 win over Paterson, which remained on the books despite the protest. Point totals – that is, scoring totals, not the league's "points" – don't include forfeits, which explains how Danbury had one loss. And no, the totals for White Plains are not misprints. No wonder the Bears didn't want to play another period with Newark.)*

Though the Westchester County league didn't materialize, Mt. Vernon, New Rochelle and White Plains all pulled out of the AA during the offseason. The first two operated as independents in 1938, but White Plains dropped out of football altogether. The Clifton Wessingtons, a team that had been in existence for years but disappeared when the AA was formed, obtained the rights to White Plains' 1937 players and joined the league in their place. Also, the Brooklyn Bushwicks franchise was transferred to Union City.

The most important change came when Tim Mara, owner of the New York Giants, bought the Stapleton franchise, moved it to Jersey City and set up pro football's first full-fledged farm club. Bill Owen, brother of New York coach Steve, ran the Little Giants, as they were sometimes called. The team featured a number of former and future New York players, most prominent among them being fullback Ken Strong. Having jumped to the outlaw AFL in 1936, he was doing a year's penance with the minor league team before returning to New York in 1939.

Strong led the league in scoring and kicked 13 field goals in only eight games as Jersey City rolled to the title and shattered league attendance records in the process, averaging close to 14,000 fans for five home games. A 7-3 loss to Paterson was the only blot on their record. Originally the league planned to end the season with the champs playing an all-star team, but that idea fell by the wayside. Instead, the Giants took on Paterson in a rubber game and emerged with a 17-7 win before a record crowd of 17,643. (Earlier, a regular-season game with Brooklyn had drawn 15,657.)

Clarence Lee left the league with his Mt. Vernon team and Ozzie Simmons stayed home in Chicago, but the AA still employed two black players in 1938. George Burgwin returned with Newark, and the new Clifton team featured tailback Joe Lilliard, the last black NFL player before the inauguration of the color line.

Even more notable, from the vantage point of 1990, was Brooklyn guard Vince Lombardi, who came to the Eagles after a season with the independent Wilmington Clippers. And the second-place Danbury Trojans did their part to improve the league's image when they shut out the Brooklyn Dodgers 13-0 in their opening game – the first time an AA team had beaten an NFL club.

<b>1938 Standings</b>	<b>W-L-T</b>	<b>Pct.</b>	<b>Pts</b>	<b>Opp</b>
Jersey City Giants	7-1-0	.875	133	7
Danbury Trojans	4-1-1	.800	67	26
Paterson Panthers	6-3-0	.667	114	60
Brooklyn Eagles	3-5-1	.375	81	70
Union City Rams	2-5-1	.286	52	121
Newark Tornadoes	2-5-0	.286	28	119
Clifton Wessingtons	1-5-1	.167	27	99

For 1939 the league welcomed two new teams, the Wilmington Clippers and the Providence Steamroller (managed by PFRA member Pearce Johnson), both of whom had operated independently in 1937 and '38. And George Halas bought the Newark Tornadoes, renamed them the Bears and set up his own farm team as Tim Mara had done a year earlier. Former Chicago Bears Gene Ronzani and Joe Zeller were named to coach the team. No one missed the departed Clifton Wessingtons.

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The league returned to a two-division alignment, but the better teams were concentrated in the Southern Division, which included the three best teams: Newark, Wilmington and Jersey City. Paterson, boosted by the return of Ozzie Simmons, won the Northern Division easily with a 7-5 record that would have placed them fourth in the South.

Jersey City stumbled to a 1-3-1 start and wound up third in the Southern Division despite finishing with six straight wins. Though Strong was back in New York, the Little Giants added speedy halfback Marty Glickman, a future guru for TV sportscasters, to an already impressive squad. Even more impressive were Newark and Wilmington, who finished the regular season tied for the division lead. The Bears won a playoff 13-6, with a little help from Sid Luckman, sent by Halas to Newark for the occasion and allowed to play despite Wilmington's protests that he was ineligible since he'd been with Chicago all season.

Overshadowed by the Luckman controversy were other Newark stars like Rudy Choborda, the league's leading rusher; Johnny Long, who led in touchdown passes; and Ray Otlowski, who picked off 12 passes. Wilmington had a great line that included guard Ed Michaels and a pair of NFL-caliber ends, Jack Ferrante and Tod Goodwin. Ferrante really stood out, catching eight touchdown passes and leading the league in scoring.

A week later Newark met Paterson for the championship. The teams had split two earlier meetings, but this time Newark posted an easy 27-7 win. Luckman wasn't on hand, but no one in the Bears' camp missed him. Newark also topped the league in attendance, drawing just over 70,000 fans for seven home games, including 15,635 who turned out for the title game.

Not everyone enjoyed that kind of success, though. Brooklyn and Danbury, two of the league's better teams through 1938, found themselves unable to keep up with the improved caliber of play. Neither team won a single game in 1939, and both went belly-up before the next season began.

<b>Northern Division</b>	<b>W-L-T</b>	<b>Pct.</b>	<b>Pts</b>	<b>Opp</b>
Paterson Panthers	7-5-0	.583	145	115
Providence Steamroller	3-4-0	.429	53	89
Danbury Trojans	0-5-1	.000	26	114
Brooklyn Eagles	0-7-1	.000	26	140

  

<b>Southern Division</b>	<b>W-L-T</b>	<b>Pct.</b>	<b>Pts</b>	<b>Opp</b>
Newark Bears	6-2-1	.750	122	71
Wilmington Clippers	9-3-1	.750	158	66
Jersey City Giants	7-3-1	.700	148	52
Union City Rams	2-5-2	.286	82	113

Union City also dropped out during the offseason, and was replaced by a Long Island franchise headed by William Shea, the man for whom the stadium was named. The new team, called the Indians, picked up several of the 1939 Rams' top players. Unfortunately, the team lost four starters to the newly formed AFL before September was out and dropped from contention.

Though Long Island was hit hardest, all AA teams were subject to raids from AFL teams in Boston, Buffalo and New York. Boston, the worst offender, got nearly half its starting team from Long Island and Providence.

Jersey City struggled out of the gate again, but came to life with the addition of former New York stars Ed Danowski and Ken Strong. The latter was mainly a kicker by this time, but Danowski made a big difference, completing 62 percent of his passes as the Giants stormed to the finish line, slipping into first place on the last weekend of the season, just ahead of Paterson. The Panthers were led by player-coach Dale Burnett, another ex-New York Giant. Wilmington dropped its last three games and finished third, but the Clippers had one bright spot during the losing streak: a 16-14 win over the Philadelphia Eagles.

For 1940 the AA had instituted a four-team "Shaughnessy" playoff to determine its champion. Newark and Long Island wound up tied for the final playoff spot, then played a scoreless tie Dec. 1 in a futile effort to break the deadlock. Snow forced the cancellation of a rematch four days later, and in desperation the league resorted to a best-three-of-five *coin toss!* Newark made the playoffs by winning the first three.

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The Bears had the league's leading rusher, Rudy Choborda (again), and its most prolific passer, Young Bussey, and they gave Jersey City a battle in the first round before falling by a 7-6 score. Meanwhile, Wilmington edged Paterson 11-8 in an unusual game that included safeties by both teams. A week later the Giants won their second championship with a workmanlike 17-7 verdict over the Clippers before a throng of 15,245.

All things considered, 1940 may have been the AA's finest season. Jersey City had another stellar year at the gate, averaging well over 10,000 fans per home game. In fact, the Giants played to crowds of more than 10,000 in their last seven league games, home *and* away. The only negative note involved the Providence team, which dropped out of the league Nov. 12, forfeiting its last two games. (Oddly enough, the forfeit winners were Newark and Long Island, the two coin-toss participants.) But the move had been approved by the other owners, and Providence was expected back in 1941.

1940 Standings	W-L-T	Pct.	Pts	Opp
Jersey City Giants	6-3-1	.667	104	46
Paterson Panthers	6-4-0	.600	106	133
Wilmington Clippers	5-4-1	.556	139	64
Newark Bears	5-5-1	.500	136	121
Long Island Indians	5-5-1	.500	88	123
Providence Steamroller	2-8-0	.200	41	127

*(Point totals don't include forfeits.)*

In the offseason Tim Mara sold the Jersey City franchise to a group that included Dan Reeves and Fred Levy Jr., owners of the Cleveland Rams. Rather than buy another farm team, Mara set up a working agreement with Paterson, where former Giant Dale Burnett was still the player-coach.

Also under new management were the Long Island Indians, with William Shea bringing in a new partner, Ted Collins, future owner of the Boston Yanks in the NFL. When the smoke had cleared, five of the six AA teams (all but Providence) had working relationships with NFL clubs:

**Jersey City** – Brooklyn, Cleveland, Detroit.

**Long Island** – Green Bay, Washington.

**Newark** – Chicago Bears.

**Paterson** – New York.

**Wilmington** – Philadelphia.

Looking at it from the reverse angle, Pittsburgh and the Chicago Cardinals were the only NFL teams that had no official ties to the AA. But NFL ties offered little protection from AFL raids. Wilmington, for instance, lost three players, including 1940 all-star Tex Tolliver. Still, the Clippers' losses paled in comparison to Providence, where the Steamroller lost seven players to the upstart league.

Then in early October the AA lost a whole team when Providence dropped out. Rather than forfeit the Steamroller's remaining games, the league looked around for a replacement team, finally settling on an aggregation called the New York Yankees. Their owner, Douglas G. Hertz, had bought the AFL New York Yankees after the 1940 season, but had his franchise revoked by the league in August as a result of some questionable financial dealings. Retaining the Yankees name and four players from the 1940 roster, Hertz formed a new touring team and scheduled games against independent clubs in the Northeast.

Unfortunately, the Yankees quickly proved to be out of their element in the AA, losing six straight games, some by embarrassing scores.

Among the AA's reputable teams, Long Island and Paterson were at the head of the class for most of the season. The Indians' most recognizable name was rookie quarterback Dick Poillon, who led the league in touchdown passes. End Bill (Dolly) King, a black player, may have been better known, but not on the

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gridiron: He was a college basketball star from Long Island University. Paterson had the AA's leading passer, Harry Mattos, and leading rusher, Bob Trocolor.

After a bad start, Wilmington came on strong to finish third, thanks to the efforts of Les Dodson, the league's top scorer, and guard Ed Michaels, who made the all-star team for the third year in a row. In the first round of the playoffs the Clippers shocked Paterson 33-0 while Long Island was edging Jersey City 7-6. A week later Jack Ferrante hauled in two touchdown passes from Ben Starrett as the Clippers beat the Indians 21-13 for the championship.

The title game was played Dec. 21 – two weeks after Pearl Harbor.

<b>1941 Standings</b>	<b>W.L-T</b>	<b>Pct.</b>	<b>Pts</b>	<b>Opp</b>
Long Island Indians	8-2-0	.800	176	45
Paterson Panthers	6-2-2	.750	142	72
Wilmington Clippers	4-3-2	.571	120	77
Jersey City Giants	4-4-2	.500	47	99
Newark Bears	3-6-0	.333	62	105
Providence Steamroller	0-2-0	.000	7	24
New York Yankees	0-6-0	.000	13	145

Before leaving 1941, we need to return to the Providence Steamroller. Despite leaving the AA and losing several players to the AFL, manager Pearce Johnson kept his team together through mid-October, but with little success. In fact, the Steamroller by that time was no better than the third-best team in New England.

The top spots belonged to the Churchill Pros of Springfield, Mass., and the Hartford Blues, both of whom played a mixed bag of AA and independent teams – plus, in Churchill's case, two games with NFL clubs. Hartford got off to a much better start in 1941, including a win over the Pros in their first meeting. Springfield wanted a better team, and found one – in Providence.

On Oct. 25 more than a dozen Steamroller players, plus coach Joe McGee and manager Johnson, moved to Springfield just in time for a rematch with Hartford. Only four original members of the Pros remained – including a reserve guard and former AA player named Vince Lombardi.

The new Churchill team lost to the Blues again; but then the ex-Providence players got it together for the first time all season and finished with five straight wins, including a 17-0 decision in a third game with Hartford.

That final loss notwithstanding, Hartford had an outstanding season, and the Blues were expected to join the AA in 1942, replacing the New York Yankees. But in August Rosentover announced that the league was suspending operations because of the war. Hartford's application was tabled for the time being – permanently, as it turned out.

Still, the Blues were ready to field a team in 1942, as were Wilmington, Paterson and the Springfield Steamroller, the renamed amalgamation that had finished 1941 as the Churchill Pros. In fact, despite the absence of the AA, there was an unofficial league operating in the Northeast that year. The other teams involved were the Holyoke (Mass.) Golden Bears, the Long Island Clippers, the New London (Conn.) Diesels and the Worcester (Mass.) Panthers.

Holyoke had a good team led by quarterback Ronnie Cahill of Holy Cross; New London had a more impressive star in Clarke Hinkle, fresh from a Hall of Fame career with the Green Bay Packers; Long Island, despite the presence of Ken Strong, had a weak club. Still, the Clippers were better than Hartford, which failed to win a single game before folding in early November.

But the best of the eight teams on the circuit was the Wilmington Clippers, defending AA champs. They went undefeated in eight games, with only a tie against the Philadelphia Eagles to mar their record. Even that game was a moral victory, as the Clippers battled back from a 21-0 deficit to tie on the strength of three touchdown passes to Jack Ferrante.

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Though a couple of the teams kept playing, the Northeast circuit didn't return in 1943. The AA itself considered reorganizing for a while, and even held a meeting in the summer to discuss the possibility; but in the end the league reaffirmed its earlier decision to stay on the sidelines until the war was over.

Three years later, like General MacArthur in the Philippines, the AA returned. But there was a catch. It was reborn with a new name: the American Football League.

Despite the name change, the league seemed bent on a return to normalcy in 1946. President Joe Rosentover was back, as were all five cities that finished the 1941 season in good standing: Jersey City, Long Island, Newark, Paterson and Wilmington. Hartford had faded from the picture, but new teams in Akron, Bethlehem (Pa.) and Scranton made possible a realignment into two four-team divisions, with a championship playoff at the end of the season.

Six of the eight clubs had at least working agreements with NFL teams, and that doesn't include Newark, which was still partially owned by the Chicago Bears but no longer a farm team. For 1946 Akron carried the Bears' banner in the AFL. Meanwhile, in Jersey City, the New York Giants had once again taken over as the parent club.

On the field, the AFL in 1946 was a mirror image of the NFL, with the (Jersey City) Giants and the (Akron) Bears winning the division titles and meeting in the title game. Jersey City had the league's best defense, plus Gordon Paschka, the leading rusher. Akron had the most potent ground game, with six rushers among the leaders, including Floyd Wheeler, who also paced the league in scoring. The Giants picked off three Akron passes in the championship game and sent the crowd of 15,080 home happy with a 14-13 win.

Besides Jersey City, the other returning AA clubs didn't have much luck, though Long Island managed to win five games and Newark had the league's top receiver, Jack Rosenthal. Paterson and Wilmington, perennial contenders before the war, finished as division tail-enders.

Meanwhile, the new teams in Scranton and Bethlehem started out well. Though he somehow failed to make the all-star team, Scranton's John Ksionzyk shattered all league records for passing with 1,439 yards and 12 touchdowns. And in Bethlehem, John Rogalla, a Jersey City veteran from 1940-41, emerged as the league's top kicker.

<b>Eastern Division</b>	<b>W-L-T</b>	<b>Pct.</b>	<b>Pts</b>	<b>Opp</b>
Jersey City Giants	9-1-0	.900	204	86
Long Island Indians	5-5-0	.500	104	124
Newark Bombers	2-7-1	.222	99	166
Paterson Panthers	2-8-0	.200	102	195
<b>Western Division</b>	<b>W-L-T</b>	<b>Pct.</b>	<b>Pts</b>	<b>Opp</b>
Akron Bears	8-2-0	.800	263	122
Scranton Miners	5-3-2	.625	160	143
Bethlehem Bulldogs	5-4-1	.556	203	172
Wilmington Clippers	1-7-2	.125	57	184

The league also did well at the turnstiles. Attendance had fallen off in 1941 as the approach of war dampened people's enthusiasm for sports, but it came roaring back in 1946. Jersey City averaged more than 11,000 fans per home game, and Bethlehem was close behind – the first time two teams had topped the 10,000 mark in the same season.

Taken all around, it had been a triumphant return.

Akron dropped out of the league during the summer, a move that benefited the Newark franchise, which became George Halas' number one farm team again and improved dramatically in the process. ("We're number one!" they shouted after hearing the news.) The team changed more than its affiliation, moving down the road to Bloomfield and changing its name to the Cardinals. Also on the move were the Scranton Miners, who returned for 1947 as the Wilkes-Barre Barons.

On the field, though, everyone had to take a back seat to the Bethlehem Bulldogs, who cruised to the Western Division title with an 8-1 record, outscoring their opponents by an amazing 264-73. Left-handed

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quarterback Warren Harris threw for 16 touchdowns and 918 yards in only 91 attempts; in a 46-0 rout of Wilkes-Barre he tossed a record 7 TD passes. But Harris was *not* the Bulldogs' best player.

That honor belonged to halfback Elliott (Buzz) Ormsbee, who turned in probably the best all-around season in the league's history. He led the AFL in rushing, averaging 7 yards per carry in the process; he scored a record 96 points; he caught 15 passes for 7 touchdowns and an average gain of almost 35 yards; he finished among the leaders in punting and interceptions; and in his spare time he completed 7 of 12 passes for 176 yards.

Bethlehem topped off the season with a 23-7 win in the championship game over the revitalized Paterson Panthers, who returned to their pre-war position as a top team and clinched the Eastern Division title with a 14-13 win over Bloomfield in the last game of the regular season.

In the long run, though, the season's most important event came in early October when the financially troubled Long Island Indians dropped out of the AFL. As it had in 1941, the league sought a replacement team – and found a good one. The Richmond Rebels, second-best team in the Dixie League, jumped to the AFL to finish Long Island's schedule. The Dixie League, left with only three members, folded before the week was out.

The AFL was in no danger of folding; still, attendance took a bit of a dive in 1947. No team averaged as much as 10,000 per home game, and unlike 1941, there was no threat of war to blame it on. Bethlehem led with a little over 9,000 per game, a drop from their 1946 figures. Though it may not have been clear at the time, the AFL had begun a four-year downward spiral that would end with the league's dissolution.

<b>Eastern Division</b>	<b>W-L-T</b>	<b>Pct.</b>	<b>Pts</b>	<b>Opp</b>
Paterson Panthers	8-2-0	.800	152	111
Bloomfield Cardinals	6-4-0	.600	184	134
Jersey City Giants	5-5-0	.500	139	128
Richmond Rebels	3-3-1	.500	112	105
Long Island Indians	0-3-0	.000	19	72

  

<b>Western Division</b>	<b>W-L-T</b>	<b>Pct.</b>	<b>Pts</b>	<b>Opp</b>
Bethlehem Bulldogs	8-1-0	.889	264	73
Wilmington Clippers	2-5-1	.286	74	147
Wilkes-Barre Barons	0-9-0	.000	77	251

Bloomfield was an offseason casualty this time around, and the two-division alignment was replaced by a single division including all six remaining teams. To decide the championship, the league revived the Shaughnessy playoff system that had been in effect in 1940 and '41.

Another important change came when the Philadelphia Eagles ended their two-year-old working agreement with Bethlehem and joined forces with Paterson instead. As part of the deal the Panthers got Allie Sherman, who took over at quarterback and head coach and led the team through the regular season with a single loss. Paterson placed six players on the all-star team, including the league's leading passer, Sherman; the leading rusher, Bill Pugh; the leading receiver, Flip McDonald; and the top kicker, lineman Augie Lio.

In Bethlehem, the defending champs had nothing but trouble. The Bulldogs, whose payroll had averaged a reported \$5,500 a week in 1947, were the victims of a new rule limiting salaries to \$2,000 a game per team. After an 0-4 start, owner Bob Sell cleaned house, blaming dissension over pay cuts for the team's poor showing. Seven players were released, most notably Buzz Ormsbee, the league's top player a year before. The Bulldogs regrouped, but still failed to make the playoffs despite a strong finish.

Finishing behind Paterson were the Richmond Rebels, Dixie League secessionists of the previous year. The Rebels were led by versatile back Jim Reynolds, who led the league in scoring and interceptions while placing second in punt returns and third in rushing. But Wilmington upset Richmond in the first round of the playoffs while Paterson was routing Jersey City. Then, in a nostalgic matchup of pre-war AA powers, the Panthers topped the Clippers 24-14 to win their first championship in nine years of trying.

<b>1948 Standings</b>	<b>W-L-T</b>	<b>Pct.</b>	<b>Pts</b>	<b>Opp</b>
Paterson Panthers	7-1-2	.875	224	103
Richmond Rebels	6-4-0	.600	164	142

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Wilmington Clippers	5-4-1	.556	148	137
Jersey City Giants	5-5-0	.500	154	168
Bethlehem Bulldogs	4-5-1	.444	158	155
Wilkes-Barre Bullets	1-9-0	.100	57	200

For the first time since the war there were no franchise shifts in the offseason. In 1949 the changes came *during* the season.

The trouble spot was Wilkes-Barre. After two seasons as doormats, the Bullets were much improved, registering three wins in their first four games. But they were hit by a rash of injuries in lopsided losses to Richmond and Paterson in late October. Club president Bob Edgerton informed Wilmington that the injuries had forced him to cancel the following week's game with the Clippers. Two days later Joe Rosentover revoked the Wilkes-Barre franchise.

As it had in two previous cases, the league tried to get a replacement for the ousted Bullets. Rosentover asked the Erie Vets, a strong independent team that had played several games with AFL teams already. But the Vets had just disbanded for the season. With that option closed, Wilkes-Barre's four remaining games were declared forfeit. (Apparently no one thought to ask the Charlotte Clippers.)

Having already played two games with Wilkes-Barre, the Richmond Rebels didn't benefit from any forfeits. But they didn't need any charity. Led by fullback Fred (Cannonball) Cooper, the first black player in the team's history, the Rebels ran up an 8-1-1 record, slaughtered Wilmington 66-0 in the first round of the playoffs, then finished with a 35-14 decision over Paterson in the championship game. Richmond was also a success at the gate, drawing almost 9,000 fans per home game, better than any team had done in 1948. The biggest crowds turned out when Paterson came to town: 14,777 for a regular-season visit and 12,000 for the title game.

Before the season was even over, Richmond started looking for new worlds to conquer. Owner Harry Seibold applied for 1950 membership in the All-American Football Conference (a.k.a. "the Cleveland Browns league"), which had only seven teams in 1949. There's a good chance the Rebels would have been accepted, but the AAFC/NFL merger ended that dream.

For the AFL as a whole, though, the merger looked like a blessing. First, the league would keep Richmond; second, with the number of major league teams cut from 17 to 13, there would be more quality players available for the AFL in 1950. Rosentover even had hopes of luring the AAFC's Buffalo Bills into his league as a unit.

It looked great on paper.

1949 Standings	W-L-T	Pct.	Pts	Opp
Richmond Rebels	8-1-1	.889	285	99
Paterson Panthers	6-3-1	.667	192	141
Bethlehem Bulldogs	6-4-0	.600	154	138
Wilmington Clippers	5-5-0	.500	93	155
Wilkes-Barre Bullets	3-7-0	.300	81	112
Jersey City Giants	1-9-0	.100	68	228

*(Point totals don't include forfeits.)*

Though the Buffalo Bills maneuver didn't pan out, the league did take in two new members in the offseason. The Erie Vets replaced Wilkes-Barre, as expected; and in a surprise move, the Wilmington Clippers dropped out and were replaced by a new team called the Brooklyn Football Brooks.

The league also decided to do away with its four-team playoff system in favor of a matchup between the first- and second-place teams to decide the championship. As it turned out, only two teams even survived the season.

The Bethlehem Bulldogs were first to fall by the wayside, dropping out in early October after two losses, one of them a forfeit. Less than a week later Rosentover revoked the Brooklyn franchise for failure to post the required fees. Rosentover ruled that all games involving the two failed teams would be dropped from the standings, thus depriving Richmond of two wins, Erie and Paterson of one apiece.

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The league drew up a new schedule and tried to go on as usual. For a few weeks this approach seemed to be working, but more trouble arrived in early November when the Paterson Panthers, the only team remaining from the original American Association, withdrew as a result of a financial dispute involving Jersey City and Richmond.

With only three teams left, the AFL made a gallant effort to complete the season. Jersey City played only two more games, being routed by Erie and Richmond before giving up. Thus the season came down to a final meeting between the Vets and the Rebels, the only survivors of the demolition derby.

Both teams had experienced trouble at the quarterback position. After opening the season with three straight wins, Erie had struggled after an injury sidelined QB Ed Songin (later a standout in the Canadian Football League, and even later a star with the Boston Patriots in the 1960 AFL.)

In Richmond the story was reversed. The Rebels lost three of their first five before coach Keith Molesworth suspended star passer Bobby Thomason for insubordination. With 1949 starter Paul Richards replacing Thomason, Richmond finally started to click. Going into the climactic game Erie had a record of 5-2, and Richmond was 5-3 (including games with Bethlehem and Brooklyn). The Rebels scored an easy 35-7 win for their second straight title – the last AFL championship.

<b>1950 Standings</b>	<b>W-L-T</b>	<b>Pct.</b>	<b>Pts</b>	<b>Opp</b>
Richmond Rebels	6-3-0	.667	239	145
Erie Vets	5-3-0	.625	154	142
Paterson Panthers	4-4-0	.500	94	76
Jersey City Giants	3-4-0	.429	83	137
Brooklyn Brooks	0-2-0	.000	21	63
Bethlehem Bulldogs	0-2-0	.000	7	35

*(Though games involving Bethlehem and Brooklyn were officially stricken from the league records, they've been restored here. Point totals don't include forfeits.)*