

Origins of the WLAF

By Tod Maher

When the World League of American Football began its inaugural season last March, it marked the culmination of years of planning by the NFL.

If you ask NFL people when they got the idea of putting football teams in Europe (or look in last year's WLAF media guide for the answer), they'll probably say 1983. That, of course, is when the Minnesota Vikings and the St. Louis Cardinals played the first NFL exhibition game in London.

However, the NFL had planned to place professional teams in Europe as far back as June 5, 1974. That was the day the NFL announced that "it would attempt to introduce pro football to Europe."

The Intercontinental Football League

The NFL planned a "satellite" league that would start play in the spring of 1975 and would be called the Intercontinental Football League. The NFL even had nicknames for the six teams. They were the Istanbul Conquerors, the Rome Gladiators, the Munich Lions, the Berlin Bears, the Vienna Lippizzaners (no kidding!) and the Barcelona Almogeres (ditto).

The NFL also had pre-selected four expansion teams – the Paris Lafayettes, the Copenhagen Vikings, the Rotterdam Flying Dutchmen and the Milan Centurions.

The financing and stocking of the teams was to be handled virtually the same as today's WLAF. The NFL owners were to provide the initial funding, and the league would employ "second-line athletes and rookies from established NFL teams." Heading the NFL committee that was to put the league together were Al Davis and Tex Schramm.

The IFL, of course, did not materialize. There are four obvious reasons:

- Europe just wasn't ready for American football.
- Competition with the World Football League, which had planned to expand internationally to such cities as Tokyo and Mexico City.
- The NFL players' strike that summer.
- The economic recession that was gripping the nation.

Al Davis and the USFL

It was six years later, at the 1980 annual NFL meeting in Palm Springs, that Al Davis started talking about forming a spring league.

Davis at the time was trying to move the Oakland Raiders to Los Angeles. While the owners were voting on his proposed move, he said his league would have eight teams and play in the spring and summer.

While most thought Davis was just talking, former Redskin coach and general manager George Allen did not.

Allen contacted Davis and asked him about budgets and television rights. Allen, it turned out, was working with David Dixon on the formation of the United States Football League.

In the spring of 1982 the USFL officially announced its existence. The league played three spring-summer seasons (1983-85) with mixed results. Though some teams drew good crowds and put respectable clubs on the field, constant harping (led, ironically, by the NFL) about spring and football not going together took its toll.

It was New Jersey Generals owner Donald Trump's plan for the USFL to move to the fall in 1986 (thus

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competing directly with the NFL) and the subsequent anti-trust lawsuit (the USFL won, but was awarded only \$1 in damages) that killed the league.

The American Bowls

Meanwhile, the NFL began to play exhibition games overseas – first in London, then in Berlin, Sweden, Montreal and Tokyo. The reason for these games was the surprising and growing popularity of American football in Europe. Europeans began discovering American football around 1980, without any outside prodding from the NFL.

The success of the games, especially the sold-out London contests, apparently rekindled Pete Rozelle's interest in placing franchises in Europe and forming an international league.

The World League of American Football

When the NFL announced its plans for an international spring league in 1989 it ran into several problems. First, the original name for the league, the International Football League, was already taken. Allegedly, Donald Trump and former Oakland A's owner Charlie Finley owned the rights to the name and were in the process of forming their own league.

The NFL wavered between several alternate choices, including the World American Football League and the Worldwide League of American Football. The league finally settled on a combination of the two – the World League of American Football.

The reasoning behind the somewhat odd name is simple. The NFL didn't want to choose the World Football League (conjuring up images of its 1974-75 rival that died in a sea of red ink), and the league needed the term "American football" to avoid confusing people in Europe, where "football" means the game we call soccer.

The WLAF also suffered from a bias against spring football in the sports media and a "minor league" image among fans in the U.S. The latter was an image that the WLAF/NFL tried to downplay. Officials still won't admit that the WLAF is a farm league for the NFL.

The NFL then had to replace Tex Schramm, the man it had hand-picked to run the WLAF. Schramm, it turned out, was telling prospective team owners that the WLAF would be the stepping stone from which future NFL expansion teams would be chosen. He was also telling the media that the WLAF would one day be just as good as the NFL. As a result of these heresies, Schramm was replaced by Mike Lynn, former general manager of the Minnesota Vikings.

The WLAF soon lost one of its original franchises when Memphis (whose owner and GM both had boasted about making the WLAF a stepping stone to an NFL expansion franchise) dropped out. Next Milan was dropped by the league, and thus the twelve-team league played its first season with only ten teams. Here's how they finished:

European Division	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
London Monarchs	9	1	0	900	310	121
Barcelona Dragons	8	2	0	800	206	126
Frankfurt Galaxy	7	3	0	700	155	139

North American East	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
New York-New Jersey Knights	5	5	0	.500	257	155
Orlando Thunder	5	5	0	.500	242	286
Montreal Machine	4	6	0	.400	145	244
Raleigh-Durham Skyhawks	0	10	0	.000	123	300

North American West	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Birmingham Fire	5	5	0	.500	140	140
San Antonio Riders	4	6	0	.400	176	196
Sacramento Surge	3	7	0	.300	179	226

Playoffs (Semi-Finals)

Barcelona 10, Birmingham 3 (at Birmingham)

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London 42, New York-New Jersey 26 (at East Rutherford)

World Bowl

London 21, Barcelona 0 (at London)

The WLAF continues this season with its worst team, the Raleigh-Durham Skyhawks, replaced by the Ohio Glory of Columbus.

Competition for the WLAF – almost

The WLAF wasn't supposed to be the only professional league operating this spring. It was to be joined by the Professional Spring Football League, which has been in the planning stages for the last couple of years. The PSFL was scheduled to open March 10, with teams playing a 16-game schedule. But it suspended operations in February.

If the league is really gone for good, it's too bad, because what little we had heard about it was pretty interesting.

Before that we had seen reports of seven of the league's ten teams: Tampa Bay Outlaws, Arkansas Miners, New Mexico Rattlesnakes, Oregon Lightning Bolts, Washington (D.C.) Marauders, Miami Tribe, Carolina Cougars, and another team in Nevada.

Head coaches were to include Darryl Rogers, with Arkansas; long-time CFL assistant Al Bruno, with New Mexico; former New England Patriot assistant Guy Morris, with Washington; and former Cowboy and Bronco QB Craig Morton, with Oregon.

It's still possible that the PSFL will resurface next year. So if you run across any information about this league, please send it to Steve Brainerd, P.O. Box 77923, Tucson, AZ 85703.

P.S.: The Universal Football League

Yet another attempt to form a "major" professional football league was announced on Oct. 5, 1973.

Two men from Dayton, Ohio – Tony Rizzano and Louis S. Goldman – announced that they were forming the Universal Football League. They planned to place one team in Canada (Toronto) and one team in Mexico (Mexico City), in addition to the following eight American cities: New York, Chicago, Phoenix, Seattle, Tampa, Birmingham, Memphis and Anaheim.

Play was to begin in the fall of 1974. But apparently this abortive league was eclipsed by the appearance of the WFL, because it never made it past the planning stages.