

# THE FIRST 25 YEARS

By Jack Clary

(This is the first of three articles for The Coffin Corner, by Jack Clary, current president of the Professional Football Researchers Association, that will commemorate the 75th Anniversary season of the National Football League. Each will cover 25-year segments in the NFL's existence.)

Professional football in the United States has, in the memory of most, been properly associated with the red, white and blue shield of the National Football League. There have been occasional interlopers posing as "major league," but they all withered and died outside the NFL umbrella; and those who survived in some form, such as the survivors of the All-America Football Conference of the late forties and the American Football League of the sixties, did so only after gaining NFL membership.

Certainly, for the past quarter century, NFL football has captured the American public more powerfully than any other spectator sport, giving it a No. 1 standing in every preference poll and unbridled popularity and prosperity.

That's not a bad record for a pastime that was born on the gritty, rock-strewn fields of the midwest and parts of the east whose citizens were framing the nation's growth from the contents spewing from coke ovens, or being excavated from beneath the earth's surface.

Such a hard-scrabble beginning couldn't have been more appropriate for a game in which the physical skills and courage of its participants are so necessary for success.

These attributes, spiced by the narcotic of competition, are what lures those who are "football people" and provides for them an endurance to make this game succeed. And that is as true in 1994 as it was in 1919.

The game itself, of course, had its roots in English rugby and soccer but was refined to a distinct American flavor in the nation's colleges during the last two decades of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century where it was nurtured from infancy by such as Walter Camp, Amos Alonzo Stagg, Glenn (Pop) Warner, Bob Zuppke, Fielding Yost and other early coaching giants. They produced mighty rivers of ideas and innovation, and those who they touched became an ever-increasing series of tributaries that promulgated the game's principles.

While the NFL is celebrating 75 seasons, beginning with 1920 when the league was first organized as the American Professional Football Association, the seeds had long since been planted several decades earlier.

The first vestiges of "playing for pay" occurred first around Pittsburgh's athletic clubs where victory was a means to build membership. The first known "pro" at this time was William (Pudge) Heffelfinger, one of Yale's greatest players in the late 19th century who had heard the purity of the sport -- i.e., play for fun, not for money -- preached during four years playing for Walter Camp and playing with Amos Alonzo Stagg. In a short time, players on teams from Cleveland south to Cincinnati -- Akron, Canton, Massillon, Youngstown, Shelby, Alliance, Columbus -- were being paid and from that group, came the first semblance of a pro league.

The best known player was Jim Thorpe, an All-America at the Carlisle Indian School from 1908-12, a 6-1, 195-pound son of Sac and Fox parents. No player in the first two decades of the century matched his feats, for which he was paid \$250 per game by the Canton Bulldogs when they signed him in 1915. In 1916, Canton won ten games and was acclaimed the world professional champion.

The game began to flourish in its own unregulated and out-of-the-hat style, but not without problems -- rising salaries, out-of-control player movement and the illegal use of collegians. Soon, many teams in the

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Ohio League and the Decatur Staley's and Racine Cardinals from Illinois, the Muncie Flyers from Indiana, and teams from Buffalo and Rochester, N.Y., sought relief.

Finally, on August 20, 1920, representatives from the Canton Bulldogs, the Akron Pros, Dayton Triangles and Cleveland Indians, met in the Hupmobile showroom of Ralph Hay in Canton. They had letters from teams in Buffalo, Rochester and Hammond, Indiana, all willing to form a league with the stated purpose of "raising the standard of professional football, eliminating bidding for players, cooperation in compiling schedules, refrain from signing collegians still in school or using money inducements to lure players from other teams."

A month later, ten teams--including the Cardinals, Staleys, Muncie, and Rock Island, Illinois--attended a second meeting. George Halas, representing the Staley's, always recalled a lack of chairs forced team reps to sit on the running boards and fenders of the showroom's cars, "drinking beer from buckets while we tried to plan the future of professional football."

What emerged was the American Professional Football Association, with Thorpe as president and a \$100 entry fee. Thorpe really did nothing in his job and no one ever paid a hundred bucks, but the NFL was born. Halas, player-coach of the Staleys, tried to claim the first title after handing Paddy Driscoll's Cardinals a defeat to revenge the Staleys' only loss of the season. But they played a scoreless tie the following week against unbeaten Akron and the latter is considered the first NFL champion. Oh yes, Halas also ignored the ban on player movement because he hired Driscoll, the Cards player-coach, for that game.

In 1921, the owners replaced Thorpe with Joe Carr, who owned the Columbus Panhandles, and he guided the league through its formative years until his death in 1939. He wrote a league constitution and by-laws, defended team's territorial rights; restricted player movement; tightened membership criteria; and had a league office in Columbus.

In 1921, 12 of the 14 original teams returned and were joined by the Green Bay Packers and New York Giants. The latter lasted just two games but returned four years later when Tim Mara purchased the rights for \$2500. The Staleys moved to Chicago, and became the Bears a year later.

While Carr's organizational skills kept the NFL in tact, Halas' promotional skills got it moving. In 1925, he signed Illinois All-America Red Grange, the nation's best known college star, a couple of days after his final college game. Two and a half months later, Grange and the Bears had criss-crossed the country in a body-numbing exhibition series that played to huge crowds -- more than 70,000 in games in New York and Los Angeles.

In 1926, after Grange bolted the NFL to help form the first of three American Football Leagues, Ernie Nevers and the Duluth Eskimos -- all 14 of them -- played 29 league and exhibition games on a national tour and Nevers played all but 29 minutes of the entire season. Grange's AFL lasted a year but he injured his knee and never again was the great player of his college days, though certainly good enough in eight more seasons to earn a spot in the Hall of Fame.

While this called attention to the NFL, the league did not shake out its struggling franchises until the Great Depression in 1929. Only the teams in the big urban areas, plus Green Bay, whose citizens owned the team, and Portsmouth, Ohio survived when the "new era" began in 1933 with an NFL of two divisions.

The previous season ended with the Bears and Portsmouth Spartans tied for first place. Carr ordered a playoff to decide the champion, thus introducing the NFL's first title game, won by Chicago 9-0. A brutal winter storm forced Halas to move the game indoors to Chicago Stadium, using as a field dirt left over from a just-departed circus. There was room only for an 80-yard field so once a team passed midfield, the ball was moved back 20 yards to compensate for the short field; it was spotted 15 yards from the sideline on every play because of the hockey rink dasher around the field; and the goal posts were placed on the goal line. The latter two innovations later became part of the NFL.

### **MEN MADE THE DIFFERENCE**

But the NFL at that time, and for the next decade, wasn't about teams. It was about the men who owned them and who joined Halas, Mara, Carr and Curly Lambeau in their struggles to make the league

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succeed . . . and in the 30s, Bert Bell, Art Rooney, George Preston Marshall, Charles Bidwill and Dan Reeves.

The newer group were Runyonesque characters but also interesting and challenging men in the tradition of true American pioneers. They were fiercely independent, fearless, unbridled by any norms, chance-takers, maybe even a bit zany. Mara and Rooney were gamblers (Rooney was the consummate gambler because he played the stock and commodity markets as avidly as he did the horses, though his biggest score was a \$350,000 payoff at Saratoga in upstate New York that sustained his team when it was about to fold.)

Bidwill was a wealthy Chicago tycoon and a vice president of the Bears. When he met David Jones, owner of the crosstown Cardinals, at a party and discovered that he wanted to sell his team for \$50,000, Bidwill pulled \$2000 from his pocket as a downpayment.

Marshall joined the NFL in 1932 when he established the Boston Braves (later the Redskins) and lost \$46,000 his first year though he had the league's rushing titlist, rookie Cliff Battles. But he also convinced the owners to split the league into two divisions and have the winners play each other for the championship. He stayed in Boston until 1936 when he was pilloried for raising ticket prices for the next-to-last game of the year. Only 5,000 turned up for the finale that clinched the division title but Marshall was so incensed that he played host to the NFL championship game against Green Bay in New York; and then kept going south till he established the team in 1937 in Washington.

Marshall did more. He convinced the owners to keep the goal posts on the goal line, to mark their game from college football, and they stayed there until 1974. He also understood the sport's entertainment value and his team was the first to have its own band, dressed as it is today, in lavish Indian garb, complete with feathered headdress. He co-opted the melody from an old revival song, Yes, Jesus Loves Me, and it became Hail to the Redskins, with words written by his wife, Corrine Griffith, a former silent movie queen, and Barnee Breeskin, a Washington orchestra leader.

In Pittsburgh, Rooney's Pittsburgh Pirates (they became the Steelers in 1940) were a roller-coaster operation that depended as much upon his success in his gambling ventures as on gate receipts. "There were times when the game on Sunday was incidental to making the payroll on Monday," he once said, "and when we started making the payroll, the suspense went out of the game."

His dearest friend was Bell, a total contrast to the hamhanded Irishman from Pittsburgh. Bell was patrician in lineage, but every bit the common man as Rooney. He was born on Philadelphia's elite Main Line, named deBenneville Bell, which he quickly changed to Bert. He shunned the rich man's life (the Bell family has vast hotel and real estate interests in Philadelphia, and were very active in state politics) and yearned only to play and coach football.

He married beautiful Ziegfield Follies stage star Frances Upton, and then borrowed \$2500 in 1932 and formed a partnership to purchase the disbanded Frankford Yellow Jackets' franchise and established the Philadelphia Eagles. Bell became the coach and later the sole owner and he did everything imagineable to keep his team intact.

Finally, he and Rooney, in a similar dilemma, hatched a survival plan. Rooney sold the Pirates to Alexis Thompson, a local millionaire, and joined Bell as a partner in the Eagles before convincing Thompson to swap franchises. Bell and Rooney took control of the Pittsburgh club and Thompson owned the Eagles and oversaw some of that team's greatest seasons during the 40s.

One of Bell's greatest accomplishments occurred in 1935 when he convinced the owners to initiate a draft of college players, a move generated because his team wasn't getting any top flight collegians. He convinced them that the teams with the worst records should get first call on the top players to build better competition, a key to everyone's survival.

A tribute to that group of owners was agreeing to the plan, particularly teams like Chicago, Green Bay and New York which were attracting great players and were consistent championship game performers. The first draft of nine rounds was held in Philadelphia on February 8, 1936, and Bell had the first pick. He selected Heisman Trophy winner Jay Berwanger, and then traded his rights to the Bears. Berwanger never played pro football.

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It didn't matter to the Bears because they always had enough talent. Halas always claimed that naming Ralph Jones as head coach in 1930 was a giant step in giving NFL football more appeal because he altered the T-formation by splitting the ends and halfbacks, and adding a man in motion. This gave birth to the Bears T as the preeminent offense of the modern era. and Halas used it to great success when he succeeded Jones in 1933.

Halas, who retired from coaching in 1967 with 324 victories--the all-time mark till it was broken by Don Shula in 1993--was a force unto himself. No one could be more cantankerous, either as an executive or as a coach. He bullied officials and tried to intimidate opponents and his own players. Yet for all of his stubbornness and rigidity, he never strayed from an avowed purpose of making pro football as exciting and entertaining as possible. He did it by winning back-to-back titles in 1932-33; from 1938-46 with four NFL titles and six division crowns; and finally in 1963 when he coached the Bears to another NFL title.

### **. . .AND SO DID THE PLAYERS**

Of course, players had much to do with the NFL's first quarter century of success. Grange and Nevers highlighted the 20s, and in 1930, Halas signed Bronko Nagurski, another legendary All-America who had played at the University of Minnesota. Grantland Rice picked only ten players on his 1929 All-America team because he put Nagurski at fullback and tackle.

That only reinforced his legend as being larger than life with his size 20 collar and ring fingers, and a perfectly proportioned 234 pounds on a 6-2 frame. He played nearly 60 minutes in every Bears game at fullback, tackle and linebacker, and in eight seasons from 1930-37, he averaged 4.4 yards on every carry. No one wanted to take him on. Clark Hinkle, a great player for Green Bay, suffered a five-stitch gash after tackling Nagurski the first time. "My biggest thrill in football was the day he announced his retirement," he said later.

Nagurski, who also played with Grange on those 30s Bears teams, was the forerunner of a pantheon of great Chicago players. The most famous was Sid Luckman, who became the pioneer of the game's primary position -- the T quarterback. Like all potential NFL quarterbacks during this time, Luckman had been a single wing tailback at Columbia but Halas had no qualms that he couldn't learn the new position.

Halas turned Luckman over to Clark Shaughnessy, who had just finished coaching the University of Chicago and was soon to take the job at Stanford. Shaughnessy, whose mind overflowed with football ideas, also was helping Halas add a level of sophistication to the T-formation that put it ahead of the rest of the NFL.

Luckman learned the T quarterback nuances during the 1939 season, and armed with future Hall of Famers such as Clyde (Bulldog) Turner, Joe Stydahar, George Musso, Dan Fortman and George McAfee, he and the Bears broke out in 1940 and won the NFL title with a rollicking 73-0 victory over the Washington Redskins in the title game.

The only explanation of why the game was such a rout gives credit to the Bears great precision football, beginning with the game's second play when Bill Osanski ran 68 yards for a touchdown. The Redskins would have tied the score had Charley Malone not dropped a sure TD pass from Sammy Baugh. Asked how that might have affected the outcome, Baugh snapped: "It would have made the score 73-7."

The Bears, aptly nicknamed Monsters of the Midway, dominated the NFL for the next three seasons, winning titles in 1941 and 1943. The latter season was notable because Chicago brought Nagurski out of retirement after World War II had sapped their personnel. Nagurski had retired in 1938 when Halas refused to give him a \$1000 raise to \$6000. But at 34, he capped his career in a 41-21 NFL title game victory over Washington when Luckman passed for five touchdowns.

It was no accident that Washington and Chicago were the NFL's best teams from 1937-43. The Redskins answer to Luckman was Sammy Baugh, who had led TCU's famed "aerial circus" and reincarnated it for the Redskins. A lean, raw-boned Texan, he led the NFL in passing six times, starting with his rookie season when he and Cliff Battles, who won his second rushing title, led Washington to the NFL title; and he also helped Washington win the 1942 title and five division crowns.

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Unlike Luckman, Baugh was a single wing tailback for much of his Redskins career but he was a better thrower than runner; and a superb punter and defensive back. He holds the NFL season punting average of 51.4 per yards.

Aptly named Slingin' Sam, Baugh was the best passer of his day. He had uncanny accuracy at every range, believing a belief that he was just a big, gangling cowboy who had lived most of his life atop a horse. In fact, he grew up in a traditional house in Sweetwater, Texas, and in his backyard, he hung an old tire and achieved his great accuracy by throwing a ball through it day-after-day, from every possible distance, with that tire swinging back and forth.

The passing game distinguished the NFL from college football, though the public had not yet caught on to its nuances because the game still was limited to being played in just a few stadiums (two decades later, television brought the excitement of long throws and leaping catches into living rooms and so electrified the nation).

Like the Bears and Redskins, the Green Bay Packers also were in the forefront of the passing game, thanks to a spindly end named Don Hutson, who like Baugh also was a superb athlete who kicked and played defensive back with great skill. Curly Lambeau, who had nourished the Packers from their birth in 1921, had won three straight titles in 1929-31. As a player, Lambeau was a fine passer and he always believed in its importance. He picked players to give him that dimension, beginning with Arnie Herber in 1930, Clark Hinkle in 1932, Cecil Isbell in 1938 and Tony Canadeo in 1941.

Herber led the Packers to four titles in the early 30s; won the first passing title in 1932; and added two more in the next three years. Hinkle led the NFL in rushing with 3,519 yards from 1933-41; Isbell added a pair of passing titles in 1941-42; and Canadeo was the best all-around player of the group.

And then there was Hutson. For 11 seasons, he set every NFL pass receiving and scoring record, the most celebrated being 99 career touchdown passes at a time when the passing game simply was not prolific. But this 6-1, 180-pound former University of Alabama star was virtually impossible to cover. A mastery of using head fakes and changes of pace helped him lead the NFL receivers in eight seasons, five in a row while catching 488 balls for 7,961 yards. He led the NFL in TD passes eight times, four consecutively; and in scoring, five consecutive seasons.

In New York City, the Giants became a contender during the 30s under coach Steve Owen when they won seven division titles and two NFL crowns during 14-seasons from 1933-46. One of their most important was the famed "sneaker game" in which the Giants, playing Chicago on an ice-slicked Polo Grounds field, dispatched their trainer to nearby Manhattan College where he also worked, to bring every rubber-soled sneaker he could find to the park. The Giants, trailing 10-3 at the half, changed to the sneakers and roared to a 30-13 victory.

The Giants of that time established their great defensive tradition that lasts to this day. They were led by Mel Hein, who from 1931-45 was a 60-minute linebacker and center, and still is considered the best all-around player in the team's history. He was the NFL's MVP in 1938.

While players like Baugh, Luckman, Hutson, Tuffy Leemans and Herber were bringing more attention to pro football with their title game feats, others stars were coming into the league. In 1938, Art Rooney signed All-America back Byron (Whizzer) White from Colorado, after many teams believed he'd bypass pro football to pursue his Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford. When Pittsburgh coach Johnny Blood McNally, one of the game's real characters, visited with him, White changed his mind and signed a contract -- "not because Mr Rooney offered me \$15,000," he said later, "but because Johnny was such a fascinating man, I just had to know more about him."

Elsewhere, the Portsmouth, Ohio franchise was moved to Detroit in 1934. Late that season, the team had two games scheduled against the Bears, and played one on Thanksgiving Day. Every ticket was sold and for the first time in NFL history, the game was broadcast nationwide by 94 stations. That game in Detroit became an annual event in the NFL.

League president Joe Carr died in 1939 and was replaced on an interim basis by Carl Storck until the league designated its first commissioner -- Elmer Layden, a member of Notre Dame's famed Four Horsemen backfield. He had also been a college coach and the owners believed someone with a football

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background and high visibility would elevate their game to the same major league standing enjoyed by baseball.

In Carr's last season, the NFL attracted a million spectators for the first time; and in 1943, individual winner's shares in the NFL title game passed the \$1000 mark.

It was a momentous first quarter century . . . but the best still lay ahead.

### SIDEBARS

#### NFL Champions 1920-44

Year	Team	W	L	T	Pct.
1920	Akron Pros	8	0	3	1.000
1921	Chicago Staleys	9	1	1	.900
1922	Canton Bulldogs	10	0	2	1.000
1923	Canton Bulldogs	11	0	1	1.000
1924	Cleveland Bulldogs	7	1	1	.875
1925	Chicago Cardinals	11	2	1	.846
1926	Frankford Yellow Jackets	14	1	1	.933
1927	New York Giants	11	1	1	.917
1928	Providence Steam Roller	8	1	2	.889
1929	Green Bay Packers	12	0	1	1.000
1930	Green Bay Packers	10	3	1	.769
1931	Green Bay Packers	12	2	0	.857
1932	Chicago Bears	7	1	6	.875
	Chicago defeated Portsmouth 9-0 in title playoff				
1933*	Chicago Bears	10	2	1	.833
	NFL Championship: Chicago 23, New York Giants 21				
1934	New York Giants	8	5	0	.615
	NFL Championship: New York 30, Chicago Bears 13				
1935	Detroit Lions	7	3	2	.700
	NFL Championship: Detroit 26, New York 7				
1936	Green Bay Packers	10	1	1	.909
	NFL Championship: Green Bay 21, Boston 6				
1937	Washington Redskins	8	3	0	.727
	NFL Championship: Washington 28, Chi. Bears 21				
1938	New York Giants	8	2	1	.800
	NFL Championship: New York 23, Green Bay 17				
1939	Green Bay Packers	9	2	0	.818
	NFL Championship: Green Bay 27, New York 0				
1940	Chicago Bears	8	3	0	.727
	NFL Championship: Chicago 73, Washington 0				
1941	Chicago Bears	10	0	0	.909
	NFL Championship: Chicago 37, New York 9				
1942	Washington Redskins	10	1	0	.909
	NFL Championship: Washington 14, Chicago Bears 6				
1943	Chicago Bears	8	1	1	.889
	NFL Championship: Chicago 41, Washington 21				
1944	Green Bay Packers	8	2	0	.800
	NFL Championship: Green Bay 14, New York 7				

\*Divisional Play Began

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## NFL ATTENDANCE (Official Since 1934)

Year	Games	No.	Avg.	Post Season
1934	60	492,684	8,211	35,059
1935	53	638,178	12,041	15,000
1936	54	816,007	15,111	29,545
1937	55	963,039	17,510	15,878
1938	55	937,197	17,040	48,120
1939	55	1,071,200	19,476	32,279
1940	55	1,063,025	19,328	36,034
1941	55	1,108,615	20,157	55,870
1942	55	887,920	16,144	36,006
1943	40	969,128	24,228	71,375
1944	50	1,019,649	20,393	46,016

## No 1 Draft Picks

Year	Team	Player	College
1936	Philadelphia	Jay Berwanger	Chicago
1937	Philadelphia	Sam Francis	Nebraska
1938	Cleveland	Corbett Davis	Indiana
1939	Chi. Cards	Ki Aldrich	TCU
1940	Chi. Cards	George Cafego	Tennessee
1941	Chicago Bears	Tom Harmon	Michigan
1942	Pittsburgh	Bill Dudley	Virginia
1943	Detroit	Frank Sinkwich	Georgia
1944	Boston	Angelo Bertelli	Notre Dame