

PAPA BEAR'S NIGHTMARE

By Phil Dietrich

Akron's spanking new Rubber Bowl bore little resemblance to a graveyard in 1946 when professional football's sagest elder, George Halas, launched his Akron Bears of the American Football League.

Dedicated Aug. 10, 1949 before an overflowing crowd of 40,000 on the eve of the International Soapbox Derby, it already had played to a National Football League turnout of 23,720 Sept. 7, 1941 when the Cleveland Rams defeated the Pittsburgh Steelers, 17-14.

Now, one world war later, the Rams' NFL franchise had moved to Los Angeles, leaving the fertile northeastern Ohio territory without a professional team. Without, that is, until the birth of the All-America Conference with the Cleveland Browns as a key member.

Named for coach-general manager Paul Brown who previously had enjoyed considerable success at Masillon Washington High School, Ohio State University and Great Lakes Naval Training Station, the Cleveland team had more appeal in Brown's home state than it did in George Halas' Chicago.

There the competition from the All-America Conference wasn't taken too seriously, particularly by Halas, owner-coach of the defending NFL champion Bears. An opportunity presented itself to take advantage of the new league's inexperience. How? By staking territorial rights to metropolitan areas in which there were no NFL teams but where the AAC had franchises! Such territorial rights would become valuable when the AAC, in desperation, sued for peace, as it appeared in the summer of '46 the newcomers would have to do.

So Halas bought an American Football League franchise and located it in Akron, just 30 miles from where Brown was launching the Cleveland Browns to considerable fanfare. To someone less confident than Halas that probably would have served as a warning of trouble ahead. Papa Bear nevertheless gave his venture full throttle.

He didn't stint on the baby Bears. Gene Ronzani, a Marquette University graduate well versed in T-formation football as taught by the Monsters of the Midway, was installed as head coach with staff and personnel capable of winning the western division of the American Football League.

Charlie Burns, then Bowl manager, was a prime worker as were fellow Akronites and stockholders Bill Kuebler and Cecil Fischback. In fact, Kuebler was made general manager of the Akron Bears.

Key players introduced by Halas included Quarterback George Gulyanics of Mishawaka, Ind., declared by Ronzani to be further advanced than Sid Luckman at a comparable stage of his career, plus enough massive linemen to awe any opponent of the mid-40's -- Ed Ecker (280), Dave Wager (240), Bill Hempel (240), Steve Harris (240), Forrest Masterson (240), Tiny Tycocki (240), Bob Roberts (225) and Leonard Frketich (290), for example. Frketich wore 13 EE shoes and 48 pants.

Halas also dipped into his backlog of Chicago Bear talent for Floyd "Snoz" Wheeler, Tipp Mooney, Lloyd Reese, Ray Schumacher, Dick Wheeler, Herman Duhe, Paul Romano, Owen Goodnight, George Seith, Ed Karwales, Paul Berthold, Nick Kerasiotis and George Popovich.

From a personnel standpoint all looked healthy enough for the fledgling Bears who were thrown into AFL competition with the Jersey City Giants; Bethlehem, Pa., Bulldogs; Wilmington, Del., Clippers; Newark, N.J., Bombers; Scranton, Pa., Miners; Paterson, N.J., Panthers and Long Island, N.Y.

Everything was in readiness for Akron's home opener at the Bowl Sept. 17 against the world champion parent Bears. Then two events cast doubt on the caliber of professional football spectators would be seeing. The big Bears laid an egg while the Cleveland Browns hatched one by beating the Brooklyn

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Dodgers, 35-20! The All-America Conference exhibition, moreover, attracted a record 35,964 paid customers to the Rubber Bowl Aug. 30!

Fortunately, Akron watchers were spared the Chicago Bears' embarrassment at the hands of the College All-Stars, more particularly Buddy Young of Illinois University renown. That bomber was played at Soldier Field, Chicago.

Events there no doubt had an adverse effect on attendance two weeks later at Rubber Bowl when George McAfee, Bulldog Turner, Hugh Gallerneau, Joe Stydahar, Bill Osmanski, Luckman and company atoned in part for their All-Star slips with 38-13 pasting of Akron, scoring three touchdowns in the first quarter. Crowd figures were not announced!

The Akron Bears starters -- Wager and Tycocki at ends, Masterson and Hempel at tackles, Vic Marino and Roberts at guards, Harris at center and Gulyanics, Schumacher, Reese and Dick Wheeler in the backfield -- held their own after the opening period.

After losing their first two AFL starts the Akron Bears swept their next eight to win the western division championship. By that time, however, home attendance had dwindled and few spectators were on hand to see the team become a smooth, cohesive unit. Furthermore the playoff with eastern division titlist Jersey City was played in the East.

Akron won the statistical duel, 307 yards to 139, but Jersey City took the scoring duel, 14-13. A fumbled pass from center on the attempted conversion kick by Kerasiotis cost Akron a tie and another chance in overtime.

Commendable as Akron's performance had been, compared to the Cleveland Browns it was second-rate. Otto Graham, Marion Motley, Dante Lavelli, Mac Speedie, Lou Groza and supporting cast had established a solid beach-head in northeastern Ohio with gate receipts to prove it.

On the other hand the Akron Bears won on the field but lost at the box office. The deficit was caused by the long jump to eastern cities, five of the eight AFL members being in New Jersey, New York and Delaware. Final figures showed it cost \$116,000 to operate the Bears for 100 days. Gross receipts were only \$64,000!

Papa Bear Halas suffered \$40,000 of the loss. The remaining \$12,000 came out of the pockets of Akronites Kuebler, Fischback and Burns. The latter nevertheless preached fortitude.

"Last season was naturally the most expensive year of operation," the Bowl manager argued. "Salaries totalled \$56,000, transportation \$14,000, new equipment more than \$3,000. Promotional costs were high. We carried 28 players but the league since has set a new player limit of 25. We paid \$4,800 a week in salaries but the league now plans to enforce a weekly salary limit of \$3,000."

"In only one game last year, that at Bethlehem, did we collect more than the \$3,000 per game base guarantee. If and when the two major leagues are merged, Akron and the Rubber Bowl may become the pivotal spot in the revamped league. I think it is important to Akron to retain the franchise and keep it operating."

Bear stockholders had buoyed up their spirits during the attendance-poor season by imagining what a plump melon they would divide when the All-America Conference in desperation had to sue for peace with the rival National League and Akron territorial right became a thing of value.

In September the NFL clubs appeared in an impregnable position compared to the upstart All-America Conference. Three months later the clubs, particularly the Cleveland Browns, looked robustly healthy. The NFL's firm resolve to hang on like grim death until Cleveland folded began to weaken.

Plans for a more compact western division of the AFL, one that would have cut the Akron Bears' travel expenses, fell through. They faced the dismal prospect of 390 to 500-mile treks for road games in 1947. The shortest hop would remain that to Bethlehem, Pa. and the longest to Vally Stream, Long Island.

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The final straw was the ultimatum from Halas: find financial backing entirely in your own backyard or suspend operations! Claiming to have furnished franchise, players, equipment and most of the salaries, the Chicago Bear owner declared that now it was up to Akron to prove it wanted pro football.

The Akron Bears suspended operations in June of 1947 following a meeting of the AFL executive board in New York City. Burns made the announcement in the absence of general manager Kuebler.

In December of the same year the professional club reappeared in the news briefly. The State of Ohio sued the Akron Bears for \$1,542 under the unemployment compensation act for the period Sept. 1 to Dec. 31, 1946.

A scant four months earlier Papa Bear Halas, in what amounted to a farewell appearance, coached the parent Chicago Bears to a 37-20 victory over the Boston Yanks in the Bowl. The sparse attendance of 6,730 didn't encourage any revival of the defunct American Football League.