

NFL CALLED ON BUFFALO IN 1940

By Joe Marren

The American Professional Football League Indians weren't the only football game in town in 1940. For the second time in three years, the Chicago Cardinals scheduled a game in Buffalo.

In 1938, the Cardinals and Green Bay Packers played an exhibition game here and in 1940 the Cardinals, thinking about moving, decided to audition Buffalo and so scheduled a regular game Sept. 15 against the Detroit Lions.

Courier-Express sports columnist Billy Kelly wrote in the paper August 25 that former NFL and college star Byron (Whizzer) White would play for the Lions that season as they opened their 1940 campaign in Buffalo. White played for Pittsburgh in 1938 and led the National Football League in rushing with 567 yards on 152 carries. A Rhodes scholar, he studied at Oxford in '39, returning to the U.S. when World War II broke out in Europe. White served in the Navy from 1942 to '46, writing the official medal commendation for Lt. (j.g.) John F. Kennedy after PT 109 was sunk and Kennedy helped rescue his crew. Kennedy later appointed White to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1962.

But all that awaited White in his future. His present in 1940 was focused on helping the Lions beat the Cardinals. And the Detroit fans supported him in his efforts.

The game, originally scheduled for Comiskey Park, was moved after a conference between Buffalo promoter Charles Murray and Cardinals owner Charles Bidwell, who arranged accommodations for 50 Chicago fans. Not to be outdone, Detroit booster A.L. (Tony) Owen bought 400 tickets on the 40-yard line and had a special train chartered for his entourage. According to a *Courier* article on Aug. 29, Owen's people would parade from a downtown hotel to Civic Stadium, marching to the tunes of their own band.

"We've got to give Whizzer White plenty of moral support," Owen told a *Courier* reporter. "The Cardinals have Marshall Goldberg, but we'll take Whizzer against Goldberg anytime, anyplace, under any conditions."

Kelly and other *Courier* reporters continued to say a crowd of anywhere from 20,000 to 30,000 was expected as tickets were requested from Rochester to Erie and other Pennsylvania cities.

Mother Nature, though, had other plans for the fans as what was called one of Buffalo's "worst electrical rainstorms" in years ruined the game. Only 18,000 turned out in the downpour and just 10,000 braved the weather to stay to the end of the 0-0 tie.

Courier reporter Ray Ryan wrote: "A genuine cloudburst, accompanied by jagged flashes of lightning, made a swamp of the gridiron.

"Rain fell heavily 30 minutes before gametime, then relented somewhat. After the teams had run off a few plays, the skies fairly opened, and for some time it was all but impossible to distinguish individual players, so hard did the rain beat down. To cap the climax, it was so dark at this juncture that the stadium lights were turned on, to remain on for the duration of the proceedings.

"The ball quickly became treacherously slippery, and the gridiron turf ... quickly was covered with puddles and torn up by the players' cleats. Passing was strictly a gamble. Fumbles were frequent. The vaunted aerial attacks of each time were rendered null and void."

The only real scoring chance of the game came late in the third quarter when the Cardinals punted poorly and the Lions took over on Chicago's 44. Churning out the yards through the mud for a first down on the Cardinals' 31, the Lions gambled with a pass. Lloyd Cardwell caught the ball on the 1 and appeared to slip into the end zone but referee Bill Halloran ruled he was tackled on the 1.

Detroit opened the fourth quarter with a first down on Chicago's 1. The Lions, though, lost 11 yards on two plays. Facing a third-and-goal from the 12, Detroit tried a pass that was intercepted in the end zone by Chicago.

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“Official NFL stats reveal that Goldberg, with 26 yards gained in eight tries, had a 3.25 yard average, highest of the game,” Ryan wrote.

“White had a bad day, winding up with a deficit of 50 yards in 15 attempts. In justice to the Whizzer, it must be pointed out that he was the victim of errant passes from Alex Wojciechowicz, who was flinging the ball all over the premises.”

After the scoreless battle in the rain, it would be a long time before the NFL trusted the weather in Buffalo again.