

THE FIRE BURNED BRIGHT BEFORE IT WENT OUT

by Mark Speck

Like their namesake, the Chicago Fire of the World Football League burned bright and red hot, and left a lot of damage in its wake. But also like their namesake, the Fire eventually died out, until it was nothing but smoking embers and charred remains.

Over the first half of the '74 season, the Fire burned its way through the opposition, blazing a path to the top of the WFL's Central Division. But a rash of injuries, bad luck and bad breaks extinguished the Fire during the second half of the season, and the year ended in the smoldering ashes of mediocrity.

The Chicago franchise flickered to life along with the rest of the WFL in October of 1973. Cleveland sports entrepreneur Nick Mileti originally owned the franchise rights for a team in Tampa, Florida, but he sold those to a 40-year-old commercial builder named Tom Origer for \$400,000. Origer wanted a WFL team in his hometown of Chicago, so the Fire was born.

Origer quickly set up shop, wooing Jim Spavital down from Canada to coach his club. On January 8, 1974, Origer was the first owner to sign a player, wide receiver Jim Seymour of the soon-to-be rival Bears. Unlike other league owners, Origer wanted to make sure that his club would play in a major-league facility, and obtained a lease to play 10 home games in Soldier Field. He also inked a deal with WGN-TV to broadcast the team's 10 road contests.

But what kind of team would Chicago fans tune in to watch? Origer was finding it hard to find and sign top notch talent. A free agent try out on March 18 at Maryville Academy attracted 168 hopefuls, but only six were good enough to sign. The Fire persuaded veteran quarterback Virgil Carter to jump to the Wiffle, but Carter had missed the '73 season with a broken collarbone and there were questions about his health. Running back Cyril Pinder had rushed for only 15 yards on 12 carries in limited action with Dallas in '73. Center Guy Murdock had spent the '73 season teaching high school math. Offensive lineman Mike Botts had played for the Chambersburg Cardinals of the Seaboard League. Safety Harry Howard had failed tryouts with the Rams and 49ers. Tight end Mickey McCarty had retired in 1971 to coach high school basketball.

Rookie Mark Kellar had led the nation in rushing his senior year at Northern Illinois, but Spavital had doubts about the rookie and didn't plan on using him much. Wide receiver Jack Dolbin had bounced around the minors for a couple years. Another receiver, James Scott, was a virtual unknown from Henderson Junior College. Veteran tackle Steve Wright was becoming more famous as an author -- he had written his biography -- than as a football player.

Origer had shown a willingness to spend money, but people wondered what he was buying. The Chicago roster was a patchwork of unknowns, old-timers and youngsters. Charlie Vincent, the WFL columnist for The Sporting Mews, picked the Fire to finish dead last in the Central Division.

Training camp opened on June 3 at Lake Forest College, and there was probably one doubt about the team for every one of the 150 players in camp.

As Spavital worked on building the Fire into a team, the players came and went, but the doubts started to disappear. A strict disciplinarian, Spavital worked his charges hard, molding them into a unit, weeding out the ones who couldn't meet the demands Spavital knew it took to play pro ball.

The ones who did started to show their mettle as camp wore on. Carter proved his arm was sound by zipping crisp passes to his receivers. Dolbin showed he was quite a find, impressing everyone with his toughness, dedication and great hands. Pinder was running hard, and Kellar had already won over Origer, who urged Spavital to put him in the lineup. The offensive line was also beginning to jell.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 19, No. 6 (1997)

There were some concerns about the team's lack of depth and its defense. In the end, unfortunately, these two factors would help put the Fire out.

But the Fire confounded their skeptics and surprised quite a few people -- including themselves -- by winning their first four games and seven of their first nine contests. They did it with one of the league's most potent offenses, one that scored 252 points in nine games, second only to Memphis. When the league stat sheets rolled off the mimeograph machine after nine weeks, it found a Fire player on top of four offensive categories. Chicago boasted the league's top scorer (Kellar with 86 points), top rusher (Kellar again with 638 yards), top passer (Carter with 1801 yards), and top receiver (Scott, with 39 receptions). Not only that, Walter Rhone was the WFL's top kickoff returner and Joe Womack led the league in interceptions.

The Fire had opened the season July 10 by pounding the Houston Texans, 17-0 before 42,000 fans at Soldier Field. Rookie Chuck Ramsey's 26-yard field goal with six seconds left nipped Jacksonville, 25-22. Carter fired three touchdown passes and the Fire piled up 372 yards in total offense to whip the Portland Storm, 29-22. Four days later, Kellar set a league record -- okay that's not much considering the league was four weeks old -- with five touchdowns as the Fire burned the Hawaiians, 53-29. After that game, even the once skeptical Spavital had to admit, "Mark is a lot better than I expected."

So it seemed was the whole squad. On August 14, Carter hit on 5 straight passes for 80 yards and then connected with Dolbin for an 11-yard touchdown with 1:34 left to subdue Philadelphia, 32-29. In that game against the Bell, the Fire running game was smokin', rolling up 275 yards, 151 by Pinder and 112 by Kellar.

A week later, Chicago exploded for 28 second quarter points to pound Detroit, 35-23. On Labor Day, Kellar rushed for 118 yards and Carter threw for 237 yards and four touchdowns to pace the Fire over Southern California, 32-22.

The Fire seemed to be burning bright, tied for second place in the Central Division behind Birmingham. But weaknesses had been exposed by several teams. Both Florida and Birmingham had shredded the Chicago defense for over 200 yards rushing. The Fire had turned the ball over seven times against Florida. Only their lethal offense had saved them.

The Fire flew into Birmingham for Week Ten and arrived just about the same time as Hurricane Carmen. The game turned out to be a microcosm of the Fire season. The Americans punctured Chicago's shaky defense often to build a 38-19 lead after three quarters. Then Carter, ignoring torrential rains caused by Carmen, went ballistic, throwing three touchdown passes to put Chicago up, 40-38. But the Fire defense once again yielded to the Americans, who drove to the 17-yard-line. From there, Earl Sark, traded by the Fire to Birmingham right before the season for defensive end Joe Brunson (who never played in Chicago) rubbed salt in the wound by nailing a 34-yard field goal with 47 seconds left to win it. Carter had completed 23 of 43 passes for 309 yards and five touchdowns, but had been undermined by the Chicago defense, which had been more or less helpless in the face of the Birmingham offense. While the Fire did have the league's second best offense, only two teams had defenses that were worse than the Fire. And it wasn't going to get better.

A week later, that defense was given 14-0, 21-8 and 28-15 leads to hold. It couldn't, and the Fire lost to Southern California, 31-28. The Sun scored with 20 seconds left and Chicago surrendered 443 yards passing. To make matters worse, Chicago lost not only the game but Kellar and Scott to injuries. Both would miss the rest of the season. With their defensive weaknesses already exposed, another Fire liability -- lack of depth -- was about to be bared.

Chicago hurriedly signed Leroy Kelly, cut by the Oakland Raiders, who rushed just once for three yards as the Fire was buried by Memphis, 25-7. The Southmen rushed for a total of 252 yards.

Desperately, the Fire was still trying out players like it was the middle of training camp. "Our locker room looked like a bus station," said Steve Wright. Wright was soon heading for the bus station himself. Fed up with the team's situation, he retired on September 21, three days after the Memphis debacle.

"I got a million dollar contract from the WFL," Wright quipped as he headed for the door, "One dollar a year for a million years."

To help their defense, the club signed linebacker Charles Battle from Detroit, defensive backs Charlie Reamon and Drane Scrivener from Birmingham, linebacker Tom Roussel from Memphis, and defensive linemen Andy Rice, Dave Hale and Willie Holman on waivers from the NFL. The Fire shuffled personnel in their defensive backfield, moving a new player into each position. But nothing seemed to work. Florida passed for 338 yards and had 482 yards in total offense in bombing the Fire, 29-0. Carter joined the injured list, breaking his hand early against the Blazers. The quarterbacking chores were now up to rookie Maurie Daigneau, so the team quickly signed NFL castoffs Bill Cappelman and Leo Hart.

Charlotte scored 22 second quarter points to whip the Fire, 41-30 and Florida lit up the scoreboard for 30 fourth quarter points to pummel Chicago, 45-17. The Fire by now had the league's -- and possibly pro football's all-time -- worst defense, having surrendered 427 points in 15 games.

The front office was performing just as ineptly as the defense. The Charlotte game, originally scheduled for Wednesday, October 2nd, was switched at the last minute to Thursday the 3rd. The team, however, forgot to inform the public. On Wednesday, 5,000 fans showed up at the gate.

"Come back tomorrow night," a security guard said.

"I hope the teams show up," a fan responded.

More and more, it looked like the Fire wasn't showing up. Hart, Daigneau, Cappelman nor ex-Detroit Wheel Bubba Wyche could get the Fire offense going, and Chicago fell to the Hornets, 27-0. A week later, the Hawaiians, still smarting from their earlier 53-29 loss to Chicago, scored 45 unanswered points at one point and embarrassed the Fire, 60-17. Chicago gave up 509 yards in total offense and turned the ball over five times. Another ex-Fire player, Clayton Heath, rushed for two touchdowns.

Their 7 and 2 "Dream Season" start had now turned into a 7 and 10 nightmare, an eight game losing streak that would scare Freddy Krueger. The Fire were staging their own "Nightmare on Lakeshore Drive." But even Hollywood couldn't concoct a script with such a downbeat ending. Philadelphia scored 22 points in the fourth quarter, King Corcoran passed for 349 yards and the Bell amassed 507 yards in total offense to rip Chicago, 37-31. A week later, Memphis moved up and down the field, piling up 406 yards in total offense and 49 points to crush the Fire, 49-24.

Chicago was 7- and -12, with one game remaining. But Origer had seen enough. He said he had lost \$750,000 so far, and had to borrow \$150,000 from his fellow owners in Philadelphia, Memphis and Hawaii. Origer finally threw his hands up and announced he was refusing to play the final game of the season against Philadelphia. The game was forfeited to the Bell, who made the playoffs as a result. The idea may have lacked class, but showed Origer was no masochist.

"Sure we could get in the playoffs," said Origer, "but with our quarterback (Carter) out, we couldn't beat anybody."

They sure couldn't. They ended the season losing their last ten games in a row and 11 of their last 12. When the stats came out, the evidence was in -- the Chicago Fire owned what may have been the worst defense in the history of professional football. They had given up 600 points, 78 touchdowns, 4011 yards passing, and 6.557 yards in total offense.

It was definitely a "Tale of Two Seasons" that fall of 1974. In their first 10 games, the Fire outscored their opponents 292 points to 256. Over their last nine games, Chicago was outscored, 344 points to 154. The team's lack of success was evident in attendance at Soldier Field. The first five home games, three of which were wins, drew an average of 35,008 fans. The last five home dates, all losses, drew an average of 23,472 people, a drop of 33%.

But when this team burned, it burned bright, just like its namesake. The Fire raged white hot during the summer of 1974, scorching a path through the WFL. But injuries and incompetence, poor defense and poor decisions, bad trades and bad breaks, doomed the Fire to the ashes of mediocrity.