

WORLD BOWL I ... AND ONLY~

by Mark Speck

The World Bowl Championship Game was supposed to be the crown jewel of the W.F.L.'s inaugural season. But because of problems both on and off the field, that crown jewel began to take on the look of a dunce cap.

Originally scheduled to be played November 29, 1974 in Jacksonville's Gator Bowl, the World Bowl was to cap the first successful season of a league that founder and commissioner Gary Davidson said would one day "encompass the entire planet."

"We are pleased to be able to announce Jacksonville as the site of our first championship game," Davidson crowed proudly, "The response of the fans in the Jacksonville area to the W.F.L. has been tremendous and we are certain that they will do an outstanding job in hosting our first title game."

But as the season progressed, it became painfully obvious that most of the league's teams were concerned with making payroll than making the playoffs. Every team in the league experienced some sort of financial hardship. Two teams moved and two other franchises folded. One of the teams that folded was Jacksonville. The response of the fans in the Jacksonville area to the W.F.L. had been less than tremendous. In fact, they treated the league with the same distaste that they held for snow or dirt in the swimming pool. In short, they didn't like it, and by November wanted nothing to do with hosting any World Bowl game.

While many other W.F.L. teams experienced difficulties on the field and at the bank that season, several clubs rose to the challenge and showed themselves to be favorites for the World Bowl (wherever it would be played).

In the Western Division, the Southern California Sun captured the division crown by winning 13 games behind the league's top passer in Tony Adams (3,905 yards) and the running of Kermit Johnson (1,008 yards). N.F.L. vet Dave Roller (17 sacks) anchored the defense.

The Florida Blazers surprised quite a few people by claiming the Eastern Division championship. First-year head coach Jack Pardee assembled a group of solid if unspectacular veterans who meshed perfectly as a team. N.F.L. journeyman Bob Davis turned in a fine season at quarterback and rookie Tommy Reamon led the W.F.L. in rushing with 1,576 yards. The defense was tough, finishing second against the run and leading the W.F.L. with 58 sacks.

In the Central, Birmingham, supported by the league's most rabid fans, won 15 games. George Mira, a veteran of both the N.F.L. and C.F.L., had fun throwing to both Dennis Homan (61 catches for 930 yards) and Alfred Jenkins (60 catches for a league-high 1,326 yards and 12 TDs). The Americans didn't have one feature back, so they came at defenses in waves, led by Paul Robinson (599 yards), Jimmy Edwards (575 yards on only 99 carries), Art Cantrelle (504 yards), and Charlie Harraway (496). Rookie linebacker Warren Capone and veteran backer Ross Brupbacher, who was named to the All-W.F.L. team, led the defense.

But many said the W.F.L.'s best team played in Memphis. The Southmen won a league best 17 games as their offense moved like a proverbial well oiled machine, scoring 629 points and piling up 7,280 yards in total offense. J.J. Jennings (1,524 yards), John Harvey (945 yards) and Willie Spencer (788 yards and 15 touchdowns) led a ground assault that would have impressed the Marines. Wide receiver Ed Marshall led the league in scoring with 19 touchdown catches. On defense, the Southmen were the league's best against the run and also had the W.F.L.'s two top interceptors in Dave Thomas (10 picks) and Seth

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 20, No. 2 (1998)

Thomas (9). Memphis was so impressive that many around the league joked that the league championship should just be handed to the Southmen.

But at least one person took that suggestion seriously. On November 15, So. California G.M. Curly Morrison announced that the league championship should be awarded to Memphis because of their superior record, and that any playoff games would just lose money anyway. Calmer heads prevailed, and it was announced that playoff games would be held.

But how many? The league couldn't seem to decide. At first the playoff field included four teams, then six, then eight. When the league finally decided on the number of teams, the original schedule called for two "upper bracket" games -- Florida at Charlotte and Portland at Memphis -- and two "lower bracket" ones -- Philadelphia at Birmingham and the Hawaiians at So. California. On November 16, Memphis owner and W.F.L. Executive Committee Chairman John Bassett phoned Charlotte owner Upton Bell. Bassett told Bell that the Charlotte/Florida game would have to be scrubbed because less than 1,000 tickets had been sold and the players would be lucky to get \$100 for the game. Bassett then announced that Florida would play Birmingham and the winner would then play Memphis in the World Bowl game on November 29 in Memphis.

This format was totally unacceptable to Morrison, among others. "If you're going to have three teams, at least have the three division winners," Morrison complained, "Florida, Memphis, and us (So. California). I mean, why have division in the first place?"

One day later, the league officially announced that Bassett basically didn't know what he was talking about. The playoff schedule would include two first round games, Philadelphia at Florida and the Hawaiians at So. California. The winners would play Memphis and Birmingham, respectively, in the second round, and the World Bowl would then be played December 5 at a site to be determined.

Only in the Wiffle could a third place team -- Philadelphia -- qualify for the playoffs over a second place team -- Charlotte. Maybe Joe Marshall of *Sports Illustrated* put it best. "It was suggested that the playoff teams had been chosen by placing collect calls to all the clubs," Marshall wrote, "and admitting those that accepted them."

In the first round, Florida stopped Philadelphia 18-3 and the Hawaiians upset So. California 32-14. The next week, Birmingham, as expected, whipped the Hawaiians, 22-19. That seemed to set up what many felt would be a "dream matchup" of Birmingham and Memphis. But Florida spoiled the party plans. Memphis jumped out to a 15-0 lead, but Florida stormed back in a cold driving rain to win, 18-15.

Finally, the World Bowl was set -- Florida at Birmingham. The Americans were favored, but the Blazers were the sentimental favorites because of what Joe Marshall in *Sports Illustrated* called "greater deprivation." The week before the game could hardly be confused with "Super Bowl Week." The Birmingham players threatened to strike if they didn't get their back pay, and it took a plea from Owner Bill Putnam -- and a promise of championship rings -- to get the players back to the practice field.

Florida hadn't been paid in weeks and the coaches were forced to provide toilet paper for the team's locker room. Rumors circulated that the pre-game meal consisted of water and biscuits.

When the players took the field, the 72,000-seat Legion Field wasn't even half full. Attendance was announced as 32,376 fans, but it was later revealed that the figure was actually 22,918 with only 20,985 of those having paid to get in. What was worse, most of those sat up in the cheaper seats.

The evening was clear and chilly with temperatures around 40 degrees. Florida won the toss and elected to receive. The Blazers promptly drove 51 yards, all of it on the ground, as Jim Strong and Tommy Reamon took turns hammering away at the Birmingham defense. Reamon ripped off a run of 24 yards to the Americans' 29 yard line. Finally, on a second down and one from the Birmingham five, Reamon started around right end and dove for the end zone. The ball popped loose and rolled out of the end zone for a touchback. Florida argued that Reamon had crossed the goalline before fumbling and it should have been a touchdown. But the officials ruled that he had fumbled before crossing the goalline and it was a touchback. Replays later revealed that Reamon had indeed scored.

"The officiating is worse than not getting paid", snarled Blazer linebacker Billy Hobbs."

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 20, No. 2 (1998)

That was the closest either team came to scoring in the first quarter. But near the end of the quarter, a Bob Davis pass intended for tight end Greg Latta was intercepted by Willie Smith. The Americans then moved 58 yards in 15 plays. Mira hit Homan for 17 yards, Jenkins for 18 and tight end Bob Brown for 17 more, and Joe Profit scored from the one to cap the drive. Mira's pass for the action point fell incomplete, but Birmingham still led, 7-0.

Florida took the kickoff and the running of Reamon and Richard James moved the Blazers into Americans' territory. But on third down Davis was sacked by Larry Estes and Bob Tatarek to kill that drive.

Birmingham got the ball back and a 30-yard run by Art Cantrelle set the Americans in business again. Joe Profit gained 15 yards on two straight carries, and two offsides penalties on Florida moved the ball in close enough for Cantrelle to finish off the 66 yard march with a 4-yard run. Back-up quarterback Matthew Reed kept the ball on the action point try and scored to make it 15-0.

At halftime, the league announced that three players -- Tony Adams of So. California, J.J. Jennings of Memphis, and Tommy Reamon of Florida -- had been named W.F.L. co-M.V.P.s. They would split the \$10,000 prize money. But instead of a giant Ed McMahon sized check, an armored car drove right onto Legion Field and armed guards presented each player with a bag containing \$3,333 in cold cash. What with the rubbery consistency of many Wiffle checks, the players were probably relieved to receive their awards this way.

Birmingham received the second half kickoff and started flexing their muscles. Joe Profit gained 24 yards and George Mira 19, and then Mira ended the 74-yard march with a 26-yard scoring pass to Bob Brown. Reed's action point pass for Jenkins fell incomplete, but the Americans now led, 22-0, with 9:11 left in the third quarter.

Right then and there, the Blazers could have packed it in. They trailed by 22 points with only a quarter and a half left in the game. Their quarterback had yet to complete a single pass. As Joe Marshall wrote in *Sports Illustrated*, "If the Blazers had accepted their fate, had quickly run out the last 15 minutes of a three-month nightmare, and had gone off in search of gainful employment, who could have blamed them?"

Who indeed? But these Blazers never seemed too willing to accept their fate.

After one drive was ended by a pair of sacks and another was killed by an interception, the Blazers took over on their own 12-yard line with 1:52 left in the third quarter. Who knows what thoughts were going through the minds of those 11 men as they stood 88 yards from the end zone on a cold night in Birmingham. Whatever those thoughts were, they didn't include surrender.

On first down, Bob Davis dropped back and completed his first pass, a 13-yard gain to Hubie Bryant. Two plays later, a screen pass to Jim Strong ate up 21 more yards. Another toss to Strong advanced the ball 15 more. On the first play of the last quarter, Davis passed to Reamon, who carried it all the way to the end zone. The action point pass from Davis to Matt Maslowski was incomplete, but Florida had cut the deficit to 22-7.

Florida held Birmingham, but the Blazers next drive ended when Davis threw four straight incompletions. Birmingham went "three and out", and Florida took over on its own 27. On third and nine, Davis scrambled for 12 yards and a first down. A Davis to Eddie Richardson pass was broken up by Gerard Williams, and then Florida was penalized for holding. Reamon could only manage a yard. But on 2nd and 19, Davis whipped a pass to Bryant for 28 yards and a first down at the Birmingham 40. On the very next play, Davis whistled a touchdown pass to Greg Latta. Clifford McClain was stopped on the action point try, but with 5:40 left in the game, the Birmingham lead was down to 22-14.

Dave Strock kicked the ball deep and the Florida defense stopped the Americans on three straight plays. Earl Sark got off a good punt, but Rod Foster gathered it in at his own 24 and stunned the Americans and the crowd on hand by racing 76 yards for an electrifying 76-yard return for a touchdown. With 4:14 still left in the game, Florida had drawn to within one point, 22-21.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 20, No. 2 (1998)

The action point would tie it, and the Blazers went to the one man they had gone to all year. Davis gave it to Tommy Reamon, who tried to go around right end. But Larry Estes, Warren Capone, and Randy Lee broke through and smothered Reamon. Florida still trailed by one.

Strock tried an on-sides kick, but the ball bounced out of bounds. The second try went right to Birmingham's Jimmy Edwards, who held on. The Americans got one first down, then faced a third and 9 at the two minute warning. Matthew Reed, in for Mira at quarterback because of his mobility, dropped back, avoided the rush and rumbled 12 yards for a first down.

Birmingham had another third and long with a minute and a half left, but Charlie Harraway drove around right end for 10 yards and a first down to the Florida 12. The frustrated Blazers, out of time outs, could only watch as the clock ticked off the final seconds.

Then, when the gun sounded, Florida's Billie Hayes grabbed the football and headed toward the Blazer locker room. A group of Americans, led by tackle Paul Costa, chased Hayes and a fight ensued under the stands. It was a sad, but fitting, end to the World Football League season.

In the locker room, the Americans celebrated their championship. While they did, their uniforms were confiscated to help pay off outstanding bills. Team President Carol Stallworth hugged players dressed only in their jockstraps.

"I've waited eleven years to be a starter on a championship team," said Mira, who was named M.V.P. of the game.

"I don't know what happens tomorrow," exclaimed head coach Jack Gotta, "but tonight is the greatest night of my life."

"Things have been hectic all year with all the problems we've been having," added linebacker Ross Brupbacher, "But if they announce tomorrow that the World Football League is folding, they still couldn't take away our championship. The game ball goes to the people of Birmingham. I hope they bring us back here next year to play with it."

They did, but when the W.F.L. folded less than halfway through the '75 season, it made certain that the 1974 World Bowl would be World Bowl I and only.

WORLD BOWL I

December 5, 1974

Legion Field, Birmingham, Alabama

Florida	0	0	0	21	- 21
Birmingham	0	15	7	0	- 22

Birm- Profit, 1-yard run (pass failed)

Birm- Cantrelle, 4-yard run (Reed run)

Birm- B. Brown, 26-yard pass from Davis
(pass failed)

Fla- Reamon, 39-yard pass from Davis (pass
failed)

Fla- Latta, 40-yard pass from Davis (run
failed)

Fla- Foster, 76-yard punt return (run failed)

TEAM STATISTICS	FLA	BIRM
First Downs	16	20
Rushes-Yards	29-141	57-211
Passing Yards	184	90
Passes	8-21-2	5-15-0
Punts	3-39.6	8-39.1
Fumbles-Lost	2-2	0-0
Penalties-Penalized	8-54	8-60

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

RUSHING

Florida, Reamon 13-83, Gatti 4-26, Strong 6-11, James 3-11, Davis 3-10.

Birmingham, Profit 21-58, P. Robinson 14-44, Mira 4-27, Harraway 7-25, Cantrelle 5-42, Reed 5-18, Edwards 1-3.

PASSING

Florida, Davis 8-21-2-84, Palazzo 0-0-0-0.

Birmingham, Mira 5-14-0-90, Reed 0-1-0-0.

RECEIVING

Florida, H. Bryan 3-50, Latta 2-59, Strong 2-36, Reamon 1-39.

Birmingham, B. Brown 3-55, Jenkins 1-18, Homan 1-17.

PUNTING

Florida, Strock 3-39.6.

Birmingham, Sark 8-39.1.

INTERCEPTIONS

Florida, None.

Birmingham, W. Smith 1-0, Williams 1-4.

PUNT RETURNS

Florida, Foster 3-82, Bryant 3-20, Harris 1-11.

Birmingham, Smith 1-6.

KICKOFF RETURNS

Florida, James 3-77, Foster 1-15.

Birmingham, Williams 2-22, Smith 1-22, Edwards 1-5.

SACKS

Florida, Sheats 1-6.

Birmingham, Tatarek 1 1/2-16, Wolf 1-13, Estes 1/2-3.

FUMBLES

Florida, Reamon (2 Lost).

Birmingham, Brupbacher (1 Opp. rec.).

TACKLES

Florida, Sheats 11/2, Anderson 10/2, Ely 7/2, Ricca 6/4, McBath 4/7, Ross 4/2, Beatty 4/1, Hayes 4/0, Hobbs 3/5, Rush 3/0, Amman 2/1, Harris 2/1, Foster 2/0, Bryant 1/0, Farr 1/0, Grantham 1/0, Latta 1/0, Palmer 0/3, Kaczmarek 0/2, E. Richardson 0/1.

Birmingham, Brupbacher 6/2, Capone 5/3, Manstedt 5/2, Wolf 4/3, Estes 4/2, Tatarek 4/2, Baker 4/1, Bishop 3/1, Williams 2/2, Haynes 2/2, Lee 1/2, Willingham 1/2, Foxx 1/1, Champagne 1/1, Arnold 1/0, Brezina 1/0, Smith 1/0, Chandler 0/2.