

## **SCRIMMAGE !**

### **THE USFL WAS A MAJOR LEAGUE**

#### **OFFENSE**

By Paul Reeths

The United States Football League was truly a unique venture. For three seasons, the league played professional football in the spring and summer during the NFL offseason. Though it drowned in a sea of debt and litigation, the USFL proved itself to be a major league in an incredibly short time.

League franchises played in top-level stadiums in the country's largest cities, many of which were also inhabited by NFL teams. USFL squads set up shop in such NFL venues as the Pontiac Silverdome, Three Rivers Stadium, Veterans Stadium, the Astrodome, Mile High Stadium, the Superdome, Soldier Field, the Los Angeles Coliseum, Giants Stadium, Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum, Tampa Stadium and RFK Stadium, plus top college stadiums like Legion Field, the Citrus Bowl, Sun Devil Stadium and the Gator Bowl.

In addition, USFL teams featured many of the best coaches in the country. George Allen (Chicago Blitz/Arizona Wranglers), Marv Levy (Blitz), Red Miller (Denver Gold), Jack Pardee (Houston Gamblers), Chuck Fairbanks (New Jersey Generals), Walt Michaels (Generals), Lindy Infante (Jacksonville Bulls) and Jim Mora (Philadelphia/Baltimore Stars) have all taken NFL teams to the playoffs. Steve Spurrier (Tampa Bay Bandits) has since led Florida to college football's national championship, and two of the top CFL coaches of the time in Ray Jauch (Washington Federals) and Hugh Campbell (Los Angeles Express) both spent time in the league.

The circuit was also consistent in scheduling and playing its games. Unlike other rival professional sports leagues such as the American Basketball Association, World Hockey Association and World Football League, the USFL never had a team fold during the season and never had to cancel a game. Much of that was due to its ownership, which was much better than any semi-pro or minor league could ever hope for, including a few owners like Donald Trump (Generals) and Alfred Taubman (Michigan Panthers) who cracked the Forbes 400 list.

More than 10 million fans attended USFL games, an average of about 25,000 per contest. Millions more watched league action on ABC and ESPN. In fact, the USFL quickly became the fledgling sports network's highest rated programming, which helped pave the way for the network's incredible success. USA Today and other newspapers across the country proved by their consistent coverage that they believed that the USFL was a major league.

But perhaps the area where the USFL shone brightest was in its players. By one count, 159 former USFL players moved on to NFL teams. More than the quantity, though, the players showed the strength of the USFL in their quality. Record-setting quarterbacks Jim Kelly (Gamblers) and Steve Young (Express) began their careers in the league as did NFL Defensive Players of the Year Reggie White (Memphis Showboats) and Keith Millard (Bulls). Three straight Heisman Trophy winners signed on with the league in Herschel Walker (Generals), Mike Rozier (Pittsburgh Maulers, Jacksonville Bulls) and Doug Flutie (Generals) as did future stars like tackle Gary Zimmerman (Express), receivers Gary Clark (Bulls) and Anthony Carter (Panthers, Oakland Invaders) and linebackers Sam Mills (Stars) and Gary Plummer (Invaders).

Admittedly, to say that the USFL was a major league is not to imply that it was as strong as the National Football League. The NFL after all had more than a sixty year head start. To judge any league on the same standards would be ridiculous. Despite tremendous obstacles, though, the USFL somehow held its own for three seasons in the sun. From its stadiums to its coaches to its players to national fan interest, the USFL was a major league in every sense of the words.

#### **DEFENSE**

By Bob Carroll

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

---

The USFL was a nice little football league in the 1980s. Its fans – and there still are many around – seem hellbent on insisting that the football they watched was major league. Had it been the ONLY football around at the time, it would have qualified. Unfortunately for USFLers, there WAS another league around. It was called the NFL and comparing the summer league to the real McCoy is like comparing a bicycle to a Rolls-Royce.

Make no mistake, when a USFLer like Paul Reeths above claims major status for his favorites, he's saying that in some way USFL equals NFL. Unless he's a real fanatic, he'll admit the NFL was a tad stronger. But in baseball, he might say, there are years when the American League is stronger than the National, but they are both "major." That sounds okay until you realize that, considering the quality of play, a better baseball comparison would be the American League and the American Association. To be generous, the USFL occupied a place somewhat similar to baseball's Pacific Coast League in the 1950s – a little better than a minor league but not quite a major league.

What arguments convince USFLers like Paul that their league deserves a higher rating?

**The USFL played in major league stadiums.** So do tractor pulls. But seriously, where else could they have played? High school stadiums – even sold out – couldn't put enough fannies in the seats to meet a team's payroll. They had to go for the big parks with all those empty seats. The stadium owners were happy to take the money. If you're willing to pay, you can rent Yankee Stadium for your kazoo recital.

**The USFL employed major league coaches.** Nice that they skipped over that guy at West Side Tech to give some unemployed people work. Did any coach turn down a head coaching position in the NFL to go with the USFL? When you hear of one, let me know. When you hear of three, I'll concede the point.

**The USFL fulfilled its schedule.** That's nice, but hardly unique. Lots of minor leagues do it every year.

**The league averaged 25,000 and millions watched on TV.** That's about half of what the NFL averaged in the stands. Does the USFL claim "half-major" status? As for TV, it was summer re-run time, folks. Football beats *My Little Margie*! But how did it do against wrasslin'?

**Newspapers and other media gave it ink.** Yeah, but not much unless it was the only game in town. In Pittsburgh, the Maulers were well-documented until they were consistently mauled. Then the stories got shorter and fewer. I think their last game was reported in the classifieds. Besides, anyone who judges the importance of an event by how much the media write about it will regard the O.J. Trial as the landmark happening of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

**No fewer than 159 USFL players moved on to the NFL.** I don't know why this impresses USFLers. It's true some USFL players could have played in the NFL at the time. And, no doubt, the experience of playing in the USFL helped some others to improve to NFL quality. Such things are true of any high minor league. But more than 400 USFL players from the league's final season could not get jobs in the NFL. When more than 70 percent of your players are minor leaguers, you're a minor league.