

& IRON WORDS

By Joe Horrigan

From its birth in 1920 till the present, the National Football League has survived the challenges of many a substantial foe. In its sixty-year history, the league has endured the Great Depression, rival leagues, scandal, player strikes, and more. Perhaps the greatest challenge came in the years 1939-45 when the whole world was at war.

World War II caused severe manpower shortages throughout the country and the NFL was no exception. With players being called to duty by the military draft, most NFL teams found themselves with little more than "skeleton teams." Survival, rather than prosperity, became the order of business. Teams loaded up with draft-deferred (ands in many cases far less than All-America calibre) players to insure completion of regular season schedules. In some cases, entire teams merged for a whole season.

Throughout their struggle, league executives maintained that the NFL had a role to play in the war effort. In 1942, when asked to define this role, Elmer Layden, Curly Lambeau, and Jim Conzelman each offered a different point of view.

Layden, who was serving only his second year as the NFL's first commissioner (the title of president was discontinued in 1941), gave a typically "official" statement predicting that the military draft would make no appreciable difference in the calibre of play in the upcoming season. He went on to say, "From Aristotle's time on down we have been told, and it has been demonstrated, that sports and entertainment are necessary for the relaxation of the people in the times of stress and worry. The National League will strive to help meet this need with the men the government has not yet called for combat service, either because of dependents, disabilities, or luck of the draw in the army draft."

Green Bay Packer coach Curly Lambeau responded to the same question in a way that would have made Vince Lombardi proud. "For professional sports the easiest method would be to call the whole thing off," he began. "But what kind of example would that be for the youngster who looks to the stars for guidance and inspiration? Only one course is open to sports. That is -- carry on without regard to the sacrifice. This is no time for sports to look for a profit!"

Layden's vision of football as an entertaining relief and Lambeau's conception of sports as inspirations and guidance, reflected the more traditional attitudes concerning football and sports in general. However, when the same question of football's war effort role was asked of then Chicago Cardinal coach Jimmy Conzelman, a more pointed opinion was presented.

"Football coaches have always been apologists for their profession. For years we've been on the defensive against attacks from reformers who regard us as muscle-bound mentalities exploiting kids for an easy living. Football has been under fire because it involves body contact and it teaches violence. It was considered useless, even dangerous.

"But that's all over now. The bleeding hearts haven't the courtesy to apologize to us, but they're coming around and asking our help in the national emergency. Why?

"Why because the college commencement classes this month find the customary challenges of life a pale prelude to the demands of a world at war. Instead of job seekers, or home makers, the graduates suddenly have become defenders of a familiar way of life, of an ideology, a religion and of a nation. They have been taught to build. Now they must learn to destroy.

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"It may seem reprehensible to inculcate a will to destroy in these amiable young men; but war is reprehensible -- and its basic motive is to destroy."

Concluding his considered judgment, Gonzelman stated, "The transition will not be an easy one. Democracy makes us a pacific people. The young man must be toughened not only physically, but mentally. He must become accustomed to violence. Football is the no. 1 medium for attuning a man to body-contact and violent physical shock. It teaches that after all there isn't anything so terrifying about a punch in the puss."