

Joe Carr

By Joe Horrigan

The newspaper dateline was December 5, 1931. The newsboys at the corner of Broad and High Streets in Columbus, Ohio, were shouting the morning's sports headline, "Joe Carr Promoted!" Meanwhile, a few doors down in his 11th floor office, Carr, though repeatedly interrupted by friends extending congratulations, conducted business as usual.

Carr's "Promotion," the paper reported was being named to represent the class AA baseball leagues on the "Big Five" committee which was to direct the National Professional Baseball Leagues.

This was not the first time the people of Columbus had heard of Joe Carr's accomplishments in sports.

As early as 1900, at the age of 20, Carr organized a baseball team from among the employees of the Pennsylvania Railroad's Panhandle Division. Known as the "Famous Panhandle White Sox," the team gained national attention as one of the country's best semi-pro teams. At about the same time Joe became the assistant sports editor of the *Ohio State Journal* where he was best known for his boxing stories. He held the position for six years.

Several years later, in 1925, with the encouragement of "New York men interested in basketball," he organized and served as the first president of the American Basketball Association, although he had witnessed only two basketball games in his life. Carr, however, returned to baseball two years later as president of the Columbus minor league club.

Probably his most successful undertaking in professional baseball began in 1933, when he was named director of the National Baseball Association's promotional department. Professional baseball in that year had only 12 minor leagues and many of them were in serious financial trouble. Given the order to "do something about it," Carr took baseball's faltering minor league system and transformed it into a healthy 41-league operation by 1939.

So how does a baseball executive, basketball executive and a sports writer specializing in boxing become a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame? Well, its just another chapter in the Horatio Alger-like story of Joseph F. Carr.

Born in Columbus in 1880, Carr's formal education consisted of five years at St. Dominic's Elementary School. At the age of 13, he went to work at a local machine shop to help support his struggling family. Seven years later he was hired as a journeyman machinist at the Panhandle Division of the Pennsylvania Railroad where he organized and managed the successful semi-pro baseball team.

In 1904 while working not only for the railroad but as assistant sports editor of the *Ohio State Journal*, Carr somehow found time to organize a pro football team. Again using employees of the Panhandle shops, he organized the "Columbus Panhandles". Unlike its baseball counterpart, the Panhandles gridiron entry was not an instant success and folded after just two games.

Disappointed but not discouraged, Carr reorganized the team in 1907. The new Panhandles entry not only survived but operated as an integral part of the pro football family for the next 20 years.

The nucleus of the team consisted of possibly pro football's most notable family, the Nesser Brothers. Of the 11 starting positions on the 1907 Panhandles' squad, five were filled by Nessers. The five, Fred, Frank, Phil, John and Ted, gained a starting lineup majority when a sixth brother, Al, joined the squad in 1910. In 1921, Ted's son Charles joined the act, making them pro football's only father and son combo to appear in a lineup together. During that same season, but for only one game, a seventh brother, Raymond, appeared on the Panhandles' roster.

While the Panhandles' overall record is only mediocre, Carr's promotional skills made them one of the best known earlyday teams in the country. A feature story on the unusual team was even carried in the London *Times*.

During the second decade of the 1900's, pro football enthusiasm continued to grow, particularly in the northeastern and Midwestern United States. However, the sport lacked direction and operated in a free-for-all manner that virtually guaranteed pro football's ultimate demise. There was no standard set of rules for the pros and players would jump from team to team even during the same season. Scheduling was on a haphazard week-by-week basis and college stars were frequently lured to the play-for-pay game under assumed names. Clearly the sport was in need of a structured organization to end the chaos.

On August 20 and September 17, 1920, representatives of interested pro football teams met in Canton, Ohio, and formed the American Professional Football Association. Jim Thorpe, the best known athlete of the day, was elected president of the infant loop. With no administrative background, Thorpe was never more than a figurehead.

The A.P.F.A.'s inaugural season ended without any real accomplishments and the team owners openly expressed concern for the future of their organization. The insightful Carr however, was convinced the A.P.F.A. could survive and prosper. He lectured vociferously about the merits and need for a pro football league.

Apparently influenced by Carr's sincerity and convincing rhetoric, the A.P.F.A. owners met in April 1921 and agreed to reorganize. This time the struggling entrepreneurs elected Carr president of the Association.

Though claiming he was elect, "much against my will while I was out of the room," he assumed his new position with energetic readiness.

Wasting no time establishing his authority, Carr declared that players under contract from the previous season could not be approached by another team unless first declared a free agent. Next he introduced a standard player's contract, fashioned after the one being used by baseball, and also appointed a committee to draft a new constitution and by-laws to govern the association.

These stabilizing moves by Carr served as organized pro football's cornerstone.

As the A.P.F.A.'s new leader, Carr's philosophy remained simple. He believed that the sport should always strive for the highest possible standards and that the public should be considered first, last and always.

The first major challenge to Carr's authority came at the end of the 1921 season. The Green Bay Packers, new members of the Association that season, admitted to having used college players under assumed names. Carr proclaimed the act not only a violation of association rules but a breach of the public's trust. The Packers were forced to resign from the league.

A few months later, a group headed by future Hall of Famer Curly Lambeau applied for and was granted the Green Bay franchise.

Attempting to disassociate themselves from the earlier scandal, the new management named the team the "Blues". However, the press and fans ignored the name change and continued to refer to the team as the "Packers".

A more successful name change that year was the A.P.F.A.'s to the National Football League.

While the Green Bay situation provided Carr with his first real leadership challenge, three events near the end of the 1925 season challenged not only Carr's authority but the NFL's ability to withstand the wrath of the amateur sports fraternity.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 6, Nos. 5 & 6 (1984)

First, Red Grange, immediately after his final college football game with the University of Illinois, turned pro by joining the Chicago Bears. Leaving the University before completing his final year of school drew criticism from college officials everywhere.

A few weeks later, the Pottsville Maroons, a first year NFL team, played an exhibition game against a team of former Notre Dame stars including the famous "Four Horsemen". The game was played at Philadelphia's Shibe Park which was within the protected territory of the Frankford Yellow Jackets, who were playing a league game just a few miles away at Legion Field. On three occasions prior to the game, Carr warned the Pottsville management not to play the game, "under all penalties that the league could inflict". Ignoring Carr's warnings, the game was played as scheduled.

Meanwhile, it was revealed that the Milwaukee Badgers in a hastily arranged game with the Chicago Cardinals had used four high school boys.

The Cardinals management had arranged the game in hopes of capturing first place in the league standings. The league lead would surely induce the Grange-led Bears to a lucrative season ending game in Chicago.

However, the Badgers, who had already disbanded for the season arrived in Chicago short four players. With a helping hand from Cardinals player Art Foltz, the four high school boys were recruited to play.

Carr's response was swift and decisive. The Milwaukee club was fined \$500 and given 90 days to dispose of its assets and retire from the league. Though finding no evidence to suggest the Cardinals management was aware of the status of the four youths before the game, Carr nonetheless fined the club \$1000 for participating in the game. Art Foltz, the Cardinals player who confessed to having made the "introductions", was banned from play in the NFL for life.

For ignoring the territorial rights of another club and ignoring Carr's repeated warnings, the Pottsville Maroons were fined \$500 and had their franchise forfeited.

In the case of Grange, Carr reported, "Much discussion followed the entry of this most talked of athlete of modern times into our league, but I am firmly convinced that the net result has been all in favor of our organization." Carr also pointed out that thousands had witnessed their first pro game, "through a curiosity to see Grange in action, and many of those newcomers became profound advocates of the professional game."

Understanding the fears that other collegians might prematurely leave college to pursue a pro career, Carr proposed a resolution that stated: "We believe that there is a public demand for professional football... and to the end that this league may not jeopardize the amateur standing of any college player, it is the unanimous decision that every member of the NFL be positively prohibited from inducing or attempting to induce any college player to engage in professional football until his class at college shall have graduated."

Carr's strict enforcement of the rules and Solomon-like decision in the Grange case did much to improve the league credibility and image.

Though pro football began in small towns, Carr realized that to survive it must make the transition to the big city. From almost the day he took office, Carr worked towards this goal.

With stars like Grange and the placement of franchises in major cities such as New York in 1925, pro football was rapidly approaching the major league status Carr had envisioned.

By 1927, Carr had reduced the NFL membership roll from 22 to 12. Gone were many of the small town teams that just a few years earlier were the very heart of pro football. In 1934, when the Portsmouth Spartans relocated from their small Ohio community to Detroit, Michigan and became the Detroit Lions, Joe Carr's goal was achieved. With the exception of the Green Bay Packers, the NFL was truly a big-city, major league operation.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 6, Nos. 5 & 6 (1984)

A man of vision, Joe Carr in 1933, told a Minneapolis sports writer, upon learning of a proposed new municipal fieldhouse, "If they only knew how near our football league is to moving indoors and what a smashing success we are going to make of the pro game under cover they would not hesitate to spend the additional money needed to size the building up to the requirements of this game."

Joe Carr died in 1939. He never saw the Astrodome or Minneapolis' Metrodome, except perhaps in his dreams.