

# **THE '40'S: NFL GOES TO WAR**

By Tony Barnhart

Reprinted by permission of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

The decade began with one of the NFL's most celebrated championship games. The Bears had won the Western Division in 1940 with an 8-3 record, with one of their losses being to the Redskins (7-3). Late in that game, the Bears complained of pass interference but didn't get the call. Marshall, the Redskins' owner, called the Bears "crybabies."

Appropriately inspired, Halas brought back one of his old assistant coaches, Clark Shaughnessy, who had had great success at Stanford with his sophisticated T-formation. After studying films of the Redskins defense, Shaughnessy made radical changes in the Bears' offense, employing man-in-motion and counter plays designed to confuse the Redskins.

The results were overwhelming. On the second play of the game Bears fullback Bill Osmanski ran 68 yards for a touchdown. With quarterback Sid Luckman running the T-formation and controlling the ball with deadly precision, Baugh and the Redskins offense were pinned to the bench for long periods of time.

When the smoke finally cleared the Bears had won 73-0, the most lopsided score in championship game history. Less than a year later professional football would be in a somber mood.

On Dec. 7, 1941, the NFL was in its last week of the regular season. The New York Giants had already clinched the Eastern Division championship and were playing the Brooklyn Dodgers in the Polo Grounds. Mel Hein, the Hall of Fame center of the Giants, remembers the day well.

"We knew something was going on because every few minutes during the game the PA announcer would call for some military person to report to his post," said Hein. "Then after the game the word came that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor."

Halfback George McAfee and the Bears were playing the Cardinals in Comiskey Park when the word came.

"We were in a strange frame of mind because we had to beat the Cardinals that day in order to tie for the conference title," said McAfee, whose most vivid memory of the day was spending the rest of the afternoon and that night in an opponent's apartment listening to news accounts on the radio.

The Bears beat the Cardinals, which set up a playoff with Green Bay for the Western title. The Bears had a full house of 43,325 for that game at Wrigley Field on Dec. 14 and beat the Packers 33-14.

The championship game against the Giants was the following week in Chicago, but by then the reality that the United States was going to war had set in. The crowd was significantly smaller than the week before.

"With everything going on, a lot of people had just lost interest," said McAfee. The Bears won easily, 37-9, but because of the smaller crowd the winners received a payday of only \$450.94. The year before each Bear had made \$606.25 for beating the Redskins.

The impact of the war on the NFL was swift and substantial. In 1942 scores of players enlisted in the armed services, leaving rosters filled with players too old to draft or pass the physical. At 47, Halas left the Bears and enlisted in the Navy, in which he had previously served in 1918-19.

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 9, No. 8 (1987)

---

Many players considered "essential" to the war effort found their duty limited to service teams around the world. The better players were considered valuable commodities.

"I remember in 1945 when I finally had enough points for discharge, I was in Hawaii and trying to find a way home," recalled Bill Dudley, a running back in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. "My CO comes to me and said I had two choices. I could get on a freighter right then and be in Fort Dix the following week, or I could play four football games for his major and get a flight straight home. So I played the four games, and after the last one they had a car waiting for me and took me straight to the airport."

But many players did see combat. When the war was over, 638 NFL players had served and 21 had died. Al Blozis, a tackle, played for the Giants in the 1944 championship game while on leave from the Army. One month later Blozis, an infantry lieutenant, was killed while fighting in France.

Because of the manpower shortage, the league was reduced from 10 to eight teams in 1943. The Philadelphia Eagles and Pittsburgh Steelers merged into one team called the "Steagles." The Cleveland Rams suspended operations because co-owner Dan Reeves was in the military.

The following year the Steelers ended their deal with the Eagles and merged with the Chicago Cardinals. The "Card- Pitt" team, as it was listed in the record books, became known as the "Carpets" because everyone walked all over them. They were 0-10 in 1944. Ted Doyle had the distinction of playing for both merged teams.

"It was a strange time," said Doyle, now 72 and living in his native Nebraska. "I was spending six days a week working for Westinghouse on war projects, and on Sunday I'd play. But it wasn't a lot of fun. In '44 we played in old Comiskey Park and sometimes only a couple hundred people would show up. We kept hoping the war would finally end because then all contracts would become void."

But the peace and prosperity that came with the end of the war also brought the NFL's most serious challenge to date. Taking advantage of the player glut, Chicago Tribune sports editor Arch Ward founded the All-America Football Conference (AAFC) with eight teams, three directly competing in NFL cities.

The new league earned credibility by luring over 100 NFL players. The subsequent bidding wars for talent drove up player salaries, much to the dismay of owners in both leagues. But the major contribution of the AAFC is that it brought Paul Brown to professional football. Brown, a highly successful coach at Ohio's Massillon High School and Ohio State University, was convinced to take over the Cleveland franchise in the new league. He did so under the condition that he receive total control. His Browns became one of the most dominant franchises in the history of the sport.

With a precision offense built around quarterback Otto Graham and fullback Marion Motley, the Browns won the AAFC in each of the four years of its existence.

Many words have been used to describe Brown, but the most common has been "innovator." He is given credit for organizing practices, using playbooks and game plans, plus calling plays from the sidelines.

By 1949, the effect of the Browns and the AAFC was acutely felt. Almost all NFL teams were in financial difficulty, including champion Philadelphia, which lost money. On Dec. 9 a merger agreement added three AAFC teams -- the Browns, the San Francisco 49ers and Baltimore Colts -- to the NFL.

With the turbulent '40s finally drawing to an end, pro football was looking forward to what it felt would be the fabulous '50s.