

A HISTORY OF THE DIXIE LEAGUE

by Bob Gill

The NFL hasn't always had a monopoly on the interest of pro football fans as it does today. In fact, in the 1930s and '40s, during the heyday of football's minor leagues, a number of competitors enjoyed success in areas of the country outside the NFL's sphere of influence. One of the most successful -- though today one of the least-remembered -- was the Dixie League.

Formed in 1936 as the South Atlantic Football Association, the league originally included teams in Washington, Baltimore, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Richmond, and Alexandria, Va. All had played in 1935, when the top two teams were probably the Richmond Arrows and the Maryland A.C., which became the 1936 Washington Pros.

Besides being one of its best teams and an annual favorite to win the championship, Richmond began as the financial backbone of the league. The Arrows drew crowds twice as large as any other team, and as a result played all their games at home, paying visiting teams a guarantee 5 percent larger than normal in return for the permanent home-field advantage.

Though it made good economic sense for the league as a whole, that arrangement almost led to the team's demise in 1936.

After an exhibition game Nov. 15, coach Dave Miller and his players rebelled against the system and demanded more money for their share. A day later Miller was fired, and most of the players walked out in protest. They formed their own team, the Richmond Rebels, and offered to take the field Nov. 22, "replacing" the Arrows. But manager Blair Meanley Jr. quickly put together a new team (including five players who stayed on), hired a new coach, Bob Burdette, and finished the season.

At the end of the season the league arranged a four-team playoff for the title. Oddly enough, it included the first-, second-, third- and fifth-place teams. Fourth-place Portsmouth opted instead to play a final game against sixth-place Norfolk, its near neighbor and arch rival. This seems strange today, but at the time a crosstown rivalry meant more at the gate than the championship of a fledgling league. (Similar conditions were in effect in the NFL of the early 1920s.)

In the first round of the playoffs, Washington upset Richmond and Baltimore beat Alexandria. A week later, Washington squeaked by Baltimore 3-0 on Willis Benner's field goal with 13 seconds left. Then, on Jan. 1, 1937, the Pros topped the Brooklyn Bay Parkways, nominal champions of the American Association (another league born in 1936), for the East Coast minor league championship.

The final standings released by the league included results of the playoff games:

1936 Standings	W L T	Pct	PF	PA
Washington Pros	6-3-2	.667	66	47
Richmond Arrows	4-3-3	.571	61	43
Baltimore Orioles	4-4-2	.500	97	85
Portsmouth Cubs	4-5-2	.444	71	82
Norfolk Clancys	3-4-2	.429	56	69
Alexandria Celtics	3-5-1	.375	41	66

For 1937 the circuit officially changed its name to the Dixie League, bowing to the preferences of the press, which had used that name almost from the beginning. But new name or not, one thing remained constant: Once again, there was trouble in Richmond.

Despite the failure of their 1936 revolt, the Richmond Rebels weren't about to give up. In 1937 they rounded up a few semi-pro teams already in existence in the area and formed the Virginia-Carolina Football League. But the new league suffered from two problems -- bad weather and the fact that Richmond was head and shoulders above the other teams. Led by back Mush DeLotto, one of those who had walked out in 1936, the Rebels swept through the season undefeated and almost unscored-on to win a

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championship that few seemed to care about. The VCFL folded after the season, and no one missed it very much.

Bad weather also plagued the Dixie League in 1937, with no team playing as many games as in 1936. Once again Richmond was the favorite, but once again Washington took the title, clinching it in Baltimore with a 3-3 tie in the final game. Baltimore also finished ahead of Richmond, registering a 13-0 win over the Arrows.

Actually, all three of the league's best teams were probably improved over 1936. Washington (now known as the Presidents) placed five players on the all-league team, including breakaway runner Tom Oliver and player-coach Gene Augusterfer in the backfield. Baltimore featured the league's top passer, Leroy "Sunshine" Campbell, and Ted Wright, the leading scorer for the second year in a row. (Somehow Wright failed to make even the second all-league team. In 1936 he had been a first-team selection, along with teammate Walt Masters, who had not returned to Baltimore in '37.) Richmond placed three linemen on the all-star team, including the league's most valuable player, center Lyle Graham.

But without a doubt, the winless Portsmouth Cubs had the league's best player in their player-coach, Hall-of-Famer Ace Parker. Actually Parker was mainly a bench coach, playing in only one game before signing with the NFL Brooklyn Dodgers on Nov. 2.

1937 Standings	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Washington Presidents	5	0	2	1.000	53	20
Baltimore Blue Birds	5	1	1	.833	89	18
Richmond Arrows	6	2	1	.750	90	28
Alexandria Celtics	2	5	0	.286	30	63
Norfolk Clancys	1	5	1	.167	34	112
Portsmouth Cubs	0	6	1	.000	20	75

After two fairly stable seasons, the Dixie League was in for some changes in 1938. For one, William Nickels Jr. was named league president, succeeding Charles Hamilton, who resigned after two years at the helm.

Nickels was to hold the position through 1946, but his administration got off to a rocky start when the Baltimore franchise folded. Unable to find a replacement, the league was forced to go on with only five teams. Moreover, the Washington Presidents, finding themselves completely overshadowed by the NFL champion Redskins, left their hometown for good and became exclusively a road team. Since Alexandria had never had a home field, that left the league with only three places to play.

As usual, Richmond was favored to win the championship, but the story of 1938 took place in Norfolk. A.E. Stutz, founder of the Norfolk Clancys, died late in 1937, but new owner Harry Howren put together the strongest team in the city's history. The rechristened Shamrocks rolled to the title with a 5-1-1 record, including two key wins over Richmond. Veteran tackle Vernon "Buck" Miles, the league's MVP, led the way for Norfolk, with lots of help from backs Mush DeLotto (back from his year in exile), A.B. Conner and Charlie Gadd.

In one sense, though, DeLotto's return to the Dixie League came a year too late. If only he'd come back in 1937, when Maurice "Mush" Dubofsky was playing for the Baltimore Blue Birds, the league would surely have set a record by having the most players named "Mush." However, history, like football, is often a game of inches.

1938 Standings	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Norfolk Shamrocks	5	1	1	.833	59	30
Richmond Arrows	5	3	0	.625	81	38
Portsmouth Cubs	4	4	0	.500	96	86
Washington Presidents	1	3	1	.250	27	50
Alexandria Celtics	1	5	0	.167	42	101

After the season, Norfolk took on the Hazleton (Pa.) Redskins, champions of the Eastern Football League, but dropped a 16-14 decision. Making the defeat more palatable for Dixie League backers was the fact that Sunshine Campbell and Johnny

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Spirida, two stars from the 1937 Baltimore team, did in the Shamrocks, with Spirida scoring 10 points and Campbell throwing for two touchdowns.

Another franchise bit the dust in the off season when the weak-sister Alexandria Celtics dropped out. This time the league was able to plug the hole left by their departure. The new team, the Newport News Builders, didn't do much better, but they did have a home field -- even though it was in nearby Hampton. And they did finish ahead of last year's champs, the Norfolk Shamrocks, who fell to the cellar and failed to win a game.

The team of destiny in 1939 was Norfolk's arch rival, Portsmouth. After a winless 1937 season, the Cubs had improved to .500 in 1938, largely because of one new player, all-star quarterback Larry Weldon, who led the league in scoring. In 1939 he did it again, leading the team to a 6-1-1 record and winning honors as the league's MVP. The Cubs finished tied for first with 6-1 Richmond (remember, ties didn't count in those days), then won a playoff for the championship, leaving the Arrows as bridesmaids again.

Actually, though, this time Richmond was robbed -- sort of.

The Arrows started the season with five straight wins, including a 14-0 decision over Portsmouth. But the Cubs got even Nov. 26 with a 14-11 win that left the two teams deadlocked. Needing a win in their final game, Portsmouth added none other than NFL all-pro Ace Parker, who scored the only touchdown in a 7-0 win over Washington. Richmond kept pace by beating Newport News to force a playoff, which Portsmouth won 7-0. Again, the lone touchdown was scored by Parker.

If ever a team had a right to cry "ringer," it was Richmond.

According to the customs of the time, though, there was nothing unusual about Portsmouth's use of an NFL star in two crucial games. Once the NFL season had ended, its players were fair game, and Parker, a Portsmouth native, was available and willing. A year earlier he had joined the team under similar circumstances for the season's final game, again against Richmond. (Incidentally, Richmond won that one, and Parker wasn't very effective.) The only difference this time was that his presence had a direct bearing on the championship.

1939 Standings	W L T	Pct	PF	PA
Richmond Arrows	6-1-0	.857	77	31
Portsmouth Cubs	6-1-1	.857	79	42
Newport News Builders	2-4-1	.333	45	47
Washington Presidents	2-4-1	.333	43	62
Norfolk Shamrocks	0-6-1	.000	34	96

Playoff: Portsmouth 7, Richmond 0

In 1940 the Dixie League added a team in Roanoke -- a welcome addition, since it meant the end of the clumsy scheduling required with a five-team league. The new team had mixed success, compiling a fine 4-2 record but losing several games to bad weather.

Another team with a "good news, bad news" season was Richmond, which started out in contention but disappointed its fans again with two losses in the last three games and a third-place finish. On the good side, though, the Arrows set a league record for scoring, led by left-handed passer Sunshine Campbell (back in the Dixie League after a year each in the EFL and the American Association) and MVP A.B. Conner, who set a scoring record of his own with 49 points.

Despite Conner's fine season, it was generally conceded that Portsmouth's Larry Weldon was still the Dixie League's best player. He did nothing in 1940 to dispel that notion, making the all-league team for the third time in a row, throwing a league-record seven touchdown passes and leading his team to another championship. Only an early-season loss to Richmond marred the Cubs' record as they marched to their second straight title.

1940 Standings	W L T	Pct	PF	PA
Portsmouth Cubs	8-1-1	.889	101	51
Roanoke Travelers	4-2-0	.667	55	58
Richmond Arrows	5-4-0	.556	155	69
Washington Presidents	2-3-2	.400	47	99

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Norfolk Shamrocks	3-6-1	.333	73	105
Newport News Builders	1-7-0	.222	43	92

Coming off its most successful season yet, the Dixie League made another big leap forward in 1941. First came the addition of a new team in Charlotte, N.C, replacing Washington, which had fallen on hard times since being forced to leave its hometown in 1938. This move gave the league six teams with their own home fields for the first time in its history.

On top of that, the league actually benefited from the fact that an increasing number of able-bodied men were being called into the military service as the country prepared for a war that appeared inevitable. Dixie League teams added a number of top-notch players who were stationed at military bases in the southern coastal states, and the result was easily the highest caliber of play the league had seen.

Two of those players, George Cafego and Ken Fryer, were instrumental in turning the Newport News Builders, 1940 tailenders, into one of the league's best teams. Cafego tied for the league lead with eight touchdown passes, and Fryer shattered A.B. Conner's 1940 scoring record with 61 points -- the highest total registered in any minor league before World War II.

The new Charlotte team proved very strong as well, but had to settle for second place behind the revitalized Norfolk Shamrocks, led by triple-threat back "Pistol Pete" Sachon, who earned his nickname (and MVP honors) years before Pete Maravich ever picked up a basketball. As a sign of the improved play in the league, Charlotte, Newport News and Norfolk all broke the scoring record set by Richmond a year earlier.

But 1941 was a down season in Richmond, where the Arrows fielded their worst team since the Dixie League was formed. Even so, they got off to a 3-1-1 start, including a win over Charlotte and a tie with Norfolk, before letting down their fans one more time by falling apart in the second half. Of greater significance, for the first time Richmond played a home-and-home series with each of the other teams -- a clear indication that the league was no longer dependent on any one member for its well-being.

Without a doubt, 1941 was the Dixie League's finest season to date. And then the war came.

1941 Standings	W L T	Pct	PF	PA
Norfolk Shamrocks	7-1-2	.875	156	58
Charlotte Clippers	7-3-0	.700	184	76
Newport News Builders	6-3-1	.667	158	87
Richmond Arrows	4-5-1	.444	63	132
Portsmouth Cubs	3-7-0	.300	60	163
Roanoke Travelers	1-9-0	.100	42	147

In 1942 the league suspended operations for the duration of World War II, as did two other excellent leagues from 1941, the AFL and the American Association. But Norfolk owner Harry Howren wasn't satisfied with that arrangement. He went ahead with plans for the season, and eventually talked Richmond, Portsmouth and Newport News into joining him in what was dubbed the Virginia Football League. Unfortunately, the projected league died a quick death. Newport News never did get a team together, and the other three teams played each other in only a few games before the almost total lack of interest forced them to call it quits. Real football would have to wait until after the war.

It was a long wait. But in early 1946, the Dixie League announced plans to reorganize for the fall. At the same time the American Association was making similar plans; and on March 25, these two leagues joined the Pacific Coast Football League in forming an association of minor leagues recognized by the NFL. One feature of the new arrangement was the chance to establish working agreements between NFL teams and those in the minors' "big three." This was important for the Dixie League, which hadn't had any such provisions before. And it brought a good number of quality players into the league.

For its comeback season, the Dixie League lined up much as it had in 1941, with only Roanoke missing, replaced by a team in Greensboro, N.C. And despite a layoff of four years, the league picked up right where it had left off. The caliber of play had never been better (though it may have been just as good in 1941).

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The Charlotte Clippers, led by backs Casey Jones and Butch Butler and end Rocci Spadaccini, battled the renamed Richmond Rebels neck-and-neck until Richmond lost its final two games to give Charlotte the title and end the season on a sour note again. Still, the Rebels had the league's leading passer in Glenn Knox, its second-leading rusher in Tony Gallovich, and Morgan Tiller, who tied for the scoring lead and set a league mark by catching eight touchdown passes. Butler set another record by throwing for 11 touchdowns.

It was a great season -- and it was the Dixie League's last.

1946 Standings	W L T	Pct	PF	PA
Charlotte Clippers	9-1-0	.900	196	63
Richmond Rebels	7-3-0	.700	177	73
Norfolk Shamrocks	5-5-0	.500	131	155
Portsmouth Pirates	4-6-0	.400	109	102
Greensboro Patriots	4-6-0	.400	124	178
Newport News Builders	1-9-0	.100	53	219

For 1947 the league had a new president, Tom Hanes, and two new teams. The Greensboro franchise was shifted to Winston-Salem, and Roanoke was readmitted, replacing Newport News, the weak sister of 1946. But both new teams dropped out before the start of the season, leaving only four clubs in operation. Still, with the prospect of expansion in 1948 to Knoxville, Jacksonville, Atlanta and Birmingham, the league was determined to continue.

Charlotte and Richmond were expected to battle for the title again, and in the season opener Oct. 5 the Clippers got the best of the Rebels, 21-13, to take the league lead along with Norfolk, which edged Portsmouth 7-3.

Three days later there was no league at all.

Here's how it happened:

First, Portsmouth owner Charles Aberson announced Oct. 7 that his health wouldn't allow him to operate his team. He transferred the franchise to a Charlottesville group for the rest of the season, with the stipulation that it would revert to Portsmouth in 1948.

A day later Richmond stunned the league with the announcement that it had bought the failing Long Island franchise in the AFL (the re-formed American Association) and was jumping ship.

President Hanes protested to NFL commissioner Bert Bell, who agreed that he hadn't approved the shift, but added something to the effect that it wasn't really any of his business. It was clear that he wasn't going to be much help.

That left the Dixie League with little choice but to close up shop -- and though there was talk of reorganizing for 1948, it never panned out. Players from the Norfolk and Portsmouth teams combined to play out the season as independents, and in fact did well, but it was no use. Charlotte kept going through 1949, fielding good teams each year and hoping for a berth in the AFL, but never getting one.

As for Richmond, the perpetual disappointments finally won that elusive championship in 1949, beating the Paterson Panthers in the AFL title game. Buoyed by their success, the Rebels applied for membership in the AAFC; but this time their attempt at league-jumping was foiled when the AAFC ended hostilities with the NFL and ceased to exist in the bargain. Back in the AFL again, Richmond ran afoul of the same sort of troubles that had killed the Dixie League: Three teams dropped out during the season, and though the Rebels took their second straight title, they never had a chance to win another one.

It's just a guess, but they probably got little sympathy in Charlotte, Norfolk and Portsmouth.