

BERT BELL: THE COMMISSIONER

Courtesy of The Pro Football Hall of Fame

It is not known whether the assembled owners of the National Football League really knew exactly the kind of man they were seeking when, at their January 11, 1946, meeting, they unanimously tapped a fellow owner, Bert Bell of the Pittsburgh Steelers, to replace Elmer Layden as commissioner.

But the NFL hierarchy could scarcely catch its collective breath before it became quite clear that they had signed on a fearless, tireless dynamo who would guide the NFL through some of its darkest days into the glamorous Golden Age of the 1950s, when pro football would zoom to new heights of popularity and prosperity.

Bell's first order of business as commissioner was to prepare the NFL for "war" with the All-America Football Conference which had been founded in this first post-World War II season armed with apparently plenty of money and a healthy share of the top players of the day.

The confrontation was costly to both leagues. Players salaries sky-rocketed. Losses on both sides reached into millions of dollars. In several cities, AAFC and NFL teams vied on common ground for fan support. In Los Angeles for example, the AAFC's Dons outdrew the NFL's Rams in three of the four years of the battle.

It soon became obvious that neither side could enjoy any real prosperity while the fighting continued so the AAFC several times made overtures to the older NFL for such things as a common draft, a dovetailing of schedules and an annual "World Series" of pro football between the two league champions.

While many fans and writers wholeheartedly endorsed the AAFC's ideas, Bell, in the face of heavy criticism, stood his ground. Without ever mentioning "the other league" by name, he would say time and time again: "We're not interested!"

Bell's tactics eventually paid off and, in December 1949, there came the sudden, startling announcement that the leagues had "merged" with Baltimore, Cleveland and San Francisco joining the NFL and the other AAFC teams disbanding. All NFL franchises, of course, remained intact. Regardless of the term "merger" in the official communique, the public regarded the settlement as total AAFC surrender masterminded by the master general, Bert Bell.

There were a few loose ends to be tied up such as the possible admittance of new members, the alignment of the expanded NFL- into divisions, the assignment of players who had belonged to defunct AAFC teams, and the fair handling of the 1950 college draft -- both leagues had held their separate drafts prior to the merger.

Even here, Bell reigned supreme for a peace stipulation stated that, if these issues could not be decided by the agreement of 11 of the 13 members, Bell would have the power to render an irrevocable decision. This he did to settle a couple of the stickier issues.

If anyone was surprised by this sudden emergence of Bell as the No. 1 power in pro football, he should not have been for Bell had already earned a couple of personal contract extensions by his handling of internal NFL matters.

Gambling, Scheduling, and the Tube

Perhaps his toughest action came in his first year as commissioner.

Just hours before the 1946 NFL title game between the New York Giants and the Chicago Bears, Bell was notified that two Giants stars, quarterback Frank Filchock and halfback Merle Hapes had been approached by gamblers about "fixing" the point spread in the championship contest.

Neither had accepted the overtures but both made the mistake of not reporting the bribe attempt to the proper authorities. Bell acted swiftly. He suspended Hapes before the game and, while Filchock was

allowed to play, he too was suspended when more evidence became available. The incident marked the start of tough anti-gambling measures that still stand as a highlight of the Bell regime.

In the late 1940s, it was common practice among NFL clubs for the strong teams to "load up" on the weaker opponents early in the season, thus assuring themselves of winning records when they met other strong teams later in the season. Bell thought this was the wrong approach.

"Weak teams should play other weak teams while the strong teams are playing other strong teams early in the year," he insisted. "It's the only way to keep more teams in contention longer into the season."

Bell's ideas prevailed and he had a chance to prove his point in the very first game of the 1950 season. Bell matched the champions of the defunct AAFC, the Cleveland Browns, against the defending NFL titlists, the Philadelphia Eagles. The result not only was a stunning 35-10 upset win for the Browns but a regular-season record crowd of 71,237 fans.

Perhaps Bert's most far-sighted action was his handling of the television situation. TV was comparatively new on the American scene at the time but Bell already had seen the damage TV could do if not handled properly.

"Television creates interest and this can benefit pro football," Bell explained. "But it's only good as long as you can protect your home gate. You can't give fans a game for free on television and also expect them to pay to go the ball park to see the same game."

So the formula whereby only road games were televised back to home cities was adopted. This policy served as the keystone of the NFL's television code throughout the 1950s and 1960s. It was a major factor in the league's continuous growth. Nevertheless, it was under constant attack.

First tested in the courts, the NFL policy was upheld in a 1953 decision by Federal Judge Alan K. Grim. Later in 1957, Bell resisted enormous pressure from state and federal officials to lift the Detroit blackout of the NFL championship game between the Lions and the Cleveland Browns. But he held fast.

"It's not honest to sell tickets to thousands of people on the premise of no television," he reasoned, "and then after all the tickets are gone, to give the game away on television."

When at last in 1973 Congress adopted legislation requiring any NFL game that had been declared a sellout 72 hours prior to kickoff to be made available to local TV, the league's situation had changed. Sellouts were the norm, rather than the exception. Bell's careful and courageous policy had been a success in making the NFL America's most popular sport.

Bell exhibited this same kind of fortitude when he first recognized the NFL Players' Association, in spite of the known objections of NFL owners. When confronted by his angry associates, Bell pointed to a clause in the NFL's constitution which permitted him to act on any matter "in the best interests of pro football."

In a similar maneuver, the commissioner, when questioned in Congress about the possibility that the NFL's bonus draft choice system might constitute a lottery, unilaterally abandoned the practice.

"If you think it's a lottery," Bell told House Subcommittee Chairman Emmanuel Celler, "then we'll eliminate it!"

Early Failure

Paradoxically, the huge successes Bell enjoyed as commissioner were almost totally missing during the early days of his pro football career when he was first a part-owner and later a sole owner of the struggling Philadelphia Eagles club during the depression days of the 1930s.

A member of a mainline Philadelphia family and captain and quarterback of Penn in 1919, De Benneville "Bert" Bell took the pro football plunge in 1933 by acquiring, with co-owner Lud Wray, a Philadelphia franchise to replace the Frankford Yellowjackets who had folded in 1931. The franchise agreement required Bell's team to pay off a percentage of the debts left by the Yellowjackets. Joining the league at the same time was Art Rooney with a franchise in Pittsburgh. Bell and Rooney became close friends.

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Bell named the team "Eagles" after the blue eagle symbol of the National Recovery Administration that had been created in 1933 as part of Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" to lift America out of the Depression.

The NRA was soon declared unconstitutional and Bell must have wished that his Eagles franchise could also be similarly eradicated. Almost totally unsuccessful both on the field and at the gate¹ the Eagles were put up for auction in their third year. But Bell was the only bidder and he obtained sole rights to the team for \$4,500. He then took on the coaching chores to add to the general manager, ticket manager and press agent jobs he already held.

Even during these rough early years, Bell made his first lasting contribution to the National Football League by proposing the annual college draft as the only way the league could create continuing competitive equality.

The revolutionary new plan was adopted in time for the 1936 draft. Ironically, the team that benefitted least from Bell's idea was the Eagles. Bell was unable to sign a single one of his drafted players in that first year.

In 1939, Bell had better success when he drafted and signed Davey O'Brien, the Heisman Trophy-winning passer from Texas Christian. For two seasons before he quit pro football to join the FBI, O'Brien gave Philadelphia fans something to cheer about with his brilliant tosses. But although he could bring the fans to their feet, he seldom could bring victory to the sad sack Eagles.

At the end of the 1940 season, Art Rooney, who had enjoyed no more success in Pittsburgh than Bell had in Philadelphia, sold his team to young millionaire Alexis Thompson and became Bell's partner with the Eagles. Thompson wanted to move his new team to Boston, but the league owners refused him permission. Thompson was unhappy in Pittsburgh and Rooney wasn't overjoyed to be out of his hometown. The problem was solved by a franchise switch, with Thompson's Steelers moving to Philadelphia to become the Eagles and the Bell-Rooney Eagles going to Pittsburgh as the new Steelers.

During World War II, the Eagles became a winning team under coach Earl "Greasy" Neale. The Steelers continued to flounder. When Bell was elected commissioner, he gave up his Steelers partnership.

A New Challenge

With the formation of the American Football League in August 1959, it appeared that Bell would soon be leading his league in another football war. Interestingly, the AFL's founder, Lamar Hunt, kept Bell fully informed as to the new league's plans and progress.

"I always thought Bert would give us a fair shake," Hunt explained.

But the great commissioner wasn't destined to fight this new battle. On October 11, 1959, while watching a spirited game between his two old teams, the Steelers and the Eagles, in his familiar haunt, Philadelphia's Franklin Field, Bell suffered a heart attack and died.

In a way, it was appropriate that Bell would succumb at the time and in the place that he did. Pro football had been his whole life and he had contributed to his sport in a way few men ever had done. Even his death seemed a lasting tribute to the greatness of Bert Bell.

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DE BENNEVILLE "BERT" BELL
University of Pennsylvania
Born: 02/25/95, Philadelphia, PA
Died: 10/11/59, Philadelphia, PA (64)