

# The College All-Star Football Classic

By Jon Grogan

## INTRODUCTION

In early 1934, Chicago mayor Edward Kelly asked the editor and publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*, Colonel Robert McCormick, to help stage a sports spectacle as an adjunct to the city's *Century of Progress* exposition. A year earlier, the *Tribune* hosted the first all-star baseball game at Comisky Park to help boost attendance at the exposition. The game was a financial and promotional success, and it catapulted its organizer, *Tribune* sports editor Arch Ward, to a preeminent position in the area of sports promotion. After speaking to the mayor, McCormick turned again to his thirty-seven year old sports editor for another idea. Ward subsequently met with his friend, Chicago Bear owner George Halas, and the two tossed around the idea for a football game between a team of the nation's best collegiate players and the defending National Football League champions. Each man saw benefits in staging such a contest.

Arch Ward joined the *Chicago Tribune* in January 1925, fresh from the campus of the University of Notre Dame where he had been Knute Rockne's press secretary. His primary job at Notre Dame lay in promoting Rockne and his "Rambler" (precursor to the "Fighting Irish") football team to eastern newspapers, particularly those in New York City. After stints as a copyreader and the assistant sports editor, Ward became the *Tribune's* sports editor in April 1930. Although he lacked the journalistic skills of sports reporters like Grantland Rice and Ring Lardner, Ward was an accomplished and indefatigable promoter. As a young journalist in Dubuque, Iowa, he became famous for promoting wrestling matches and the exploits of local sporting teams. After joining the *Tribune*, he promoted amateur boxing tournaments, college football, track and field events, and even Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) athletics, in addition to creating the baseball all-star game. Ward saw a gridiron clash between college and professional teams as a means to further enhance his prestige and that of the *Tribune*, which promised to donate its profits to local charities.

George Halas was one of the pioneers of professional football. In 1920, at the tender age of twenty-five, Halas and a dozen other men founded the National Football League in Canton, Ohio, and then over the next decade watched it struggle to attract fans to games in far-away places like Green Bay, Wisconsin and Pottsville, Pennsylvania. Halas' signing of Red Grange from Illinois to a professional contract in 1925 helped increase interest for a while, but the pros continued to lag far behind intercollegiate football in newspaper coverage and fan popularity. The early NFL was very unstable; there were thirty-six different franchises between 1921 and 1932, with as many as twenty-two in 1926. Typical home attendance for Bears games was only about 5,000, although general admission cost just fifty cents. All clubs had difficulty surviving especially those in small cities like Green Bay that had smaller potential audiences.<sup>1</sup> By the early thirties, Halas realized that something new was needed to rekindle interest in professional football. He believed that a game between teams of college and pro players would boost interest in the NFL by capitalizing on the popularity of college football.

The concept of a football game between college and professional players was intriguing. For years, people wondered how a team of collegians would fare against the pros. Intercollegiate football was extremely popular during the 1920s, and names like Knute Rockne from Notre Dame, Amos Alonzo Stagg from Chicago, and Fielding ("Hurry Up") Yost from Michigan were household names. Following the First World War, huge stadiums were constructed across the nation for college teams, and journalists like Walter Camp and Grantland Rice promoted football as a wholesome and worthwhile pursuit for young American men. In contrast to intercollegiate football, however, Camp, Rice, Rockne, Stagg, Yost, and others were openly hostile toward professional football and the concept of playing football for money.

With this as historical backdrop, Ward ran the following article in the *Tribune* on July 6, 1934, after months of negotiations with Halas and others:

This is an announcement of the most unusual football game ever scheduled. It will bring together the Chicago Bears, champions of the National Professional Football League, and the strongest team of last year's college seniors that can be recruited.

The game will be played at Soldier Field the evening of August 31. The football fans of America, and of Chicagoland in particular will have the say as to the personnel of the college team. The *Tribune* and 30 associated newspaper will invite the football fans of the nation to name the strongest available talent. The fans' vote will be final. When a squad of 27 players has been chosen, a nationwide contest to determine the coach for the all-star group will begin.

The *Tribune* promotes this game not with the idea that it serves as a test of the merits of college and professional football, but rather to provide a few hours of wholesome recreation for those who wish to see the best talent American football can present.<sup>2</sup>

After weeks of preparation and promotion, the first College All-Star Football Classic was played before a crowd of 79,432. Led by head coach Noble Kizer from Purdue, the College All-Stars held the Bears to a 0-0 tie. Although the game was described as "deadly dull", it captured the imaginations of football fans across the country. The size of the crowd was nearly three times larger than the one that watched the Bears defeat the New York Giants in the 1933 NFL Championship. Encouraged by the results, Halas and Ward staged a second All-Star Game on August 29, 1935, and this time the Bears won, 5-0, in front of 77,450 fans. The series continued for forty-one consecutive years, interrupted once by a strike in 1974. It generated over \$4 million for charity and millions more for Loop businesses, which benefited greatly from the influx of tourists to the city. The games also boosted interest in professional football. However, as the popularity of pro football increased, the All-Star Classic gradually diminished. When it was finally cancelled in 1976, few people noticed or seemed to care.

This paper presents a brief history of the Classic. It begins by describing the waning moments of the final game played in 1976, followed by a historiographical analysis. The forty-two game series is then examined by dividing it into four eras or periods corresponding to the significant phases in the development of professional football. Sandwiched between the second and third periods is a study of the All-Star game's most famous alumnus, Otto Graham. In the final two sections, we return to the 1976 game, and then conclude by commenting on the decision for canceling the All-Star Classic.

### **THE FINAL GAME – PART ONE**

With 1:22 remaining in the third quarter of the forty-third College All-Star Football game, the collegians had possession of the football at the 34-yard line of the Pittsburgh Steelers. This was their best field position of the game, and they hoped to overcome the loss of several key players and score their first points against the defending National Football League champions. In contrast, the Steelers had experienced more trouble with the inclement weather and wet artificial turf of Soldier Field than with the All-Stars, a team of All-American players from the 1975 season. Coached by Chuck Noll, who had played against All-Star teams in the fifties as a member of the Cleveland Browns, the Steelers led 9-0 at halftime on three field goals by kicker Roy Gerela. They increased their lead to 11-0 when center Ray Pinney (ironically a Steeler draftee), snapping a pass to punter Rick Eagles, orbited the ball over the head of the kicker and out of the end zone for a two-point safety. Shortly thereafter, fullback Franco Harris raced 21 yards for the Steelers' first touchdown. After the All-Star offensive unit stalled again against Pittsburgh's *Steel-Curtain* defense, the Steelers punched through another touchdown on a two-yard run by rookie Tommy Reamon. Gerela's extra point failed, and the score stood at 24-0 when an interception of a Steeler pass near the end of the third quarter gave the All-Stars their current field position. As All-Star, third-string quarterback Jeb Blount of Tulsa attempted to call a play, however, a heavy north wind accompanied by sweeping rain forced All-Star head coach Ara Parseghian to call for a time out.

Up to this point, Parseghian was extremely disappointed by the lackluster play of his team. "I'm not afraid to stick my neck out," Parseghian proclaimed before the game, "When the whistle blows, the All-Americans will be ready for the Steelers." The *Chicago Tribune Charities, Inc.*, the game's sponsor since its inception in 1934, invited Parseghian to be the twenty-fourth head coach of the College All-Stars. He succeeded coaching legends like Bernie Bierman (1936) from Minnesota, Bob Zuppke (1942) from Illinois, Bud Wilkinson (1949) from Oklahoma, Curly Lambeau (1956-7), the first professional coach to lead the All-Stars, from the Green Bay Packers, and Bob Devaney (1972) from Nebraska who brought along his entire coaching staff.

The intense Parseghian, who retired in 1974 after achieving spectacular success at Miami of Ohio, Northwestern, and Notre Dame, succeeded John McKay from the University of Southern California who had led the 1973 and 1975 squads. The 1974 game was cancelled because of the National Football League Players Association strike. Parseghian dismissed as irrelevant the overwhelming lead (thirty wins, nine losses, and two ties) held by the pro teams in the series, and ignored the fact that Las Vegas

bookmakers had picked the Steelers by seventeen points to win the 1976 contest. The former head coach of the Fighting Irish said, "The last two All-Star squads may have been losers, but were in the game both times. The Steelers got a scare in 1975, and so did the Dolphins winning by the score of 14-3 in 1973."

In the months before the game against Pittsburgh, Parseghian prepared diligently for his return to major coaching. He began by assembling an experienced coaching staff that included the legendary Sid Gillman who had played for the All-Stars in the inaugural game of the series. Next, he carefully screened players, adding to the squad double Heisman Trophy winner Archie Griffin. Additionally, Parseghian became the most visible and vocal cheerleader for the Classic. "The player's own pride, the fact that they all had to earn this right to oppose one of the great professional units of all time," Parseghian stressed, "are the things that have us all emotionally involved." "Give me six games with this squad," boasted Parseghian, "and I'd be ready to beat anybody." Despite the bravado, however, Parseghian and officials at the *Chicago Tribune Charities* knew they were fighting uphill battles against growing fan and player apathy.

In the pre-Super Bowl era, the College All-Star Football Classic was one of the most anticipated sporting events in the country. At the peak of its popularity in 1947, the Classic attracted a record 105,000 fan to Soldier Field to watch the All-Stars shut out the hometown Bears, 16-0. During the fifties, however, average attendance dropped to 80,000 per game; it slipped to 68,500 in the sixties; and bottomed out at 56,300 in the early seventies. Part of the decline can be attributed to the reconfiguration of Soldier Field in 1971 that eliminated 30,000 seats at the north end of the horseshoe-shaped stadium. Nonetheless, it was apparent to Cooper Rollow, Arch Ward's successor as sports editor at the *Chicago Tribune* and president of *Chicago Tribune Charities* that the game was not as popular as it had been. Compounding the problem of slumping attendance at the gate was the fact that national television ratings had dropped also (the game had been blacked out for years in the Chicago metropolitan area). In addition to fans, the professionals were deserting the game, too. As the pro teams dominated the series in the sixties and seventies, NFL owners and head coaches became more vocal in their concern about allowing their high draft choices to play in the All-Star Classic. The mercurial rise in pro football's popularity coupled with skyrocketing operating costs (especially insurance premiums and player salaries) compelled NFL officials to begin reevaluating their support for a game that, more than anything else, helped nurture and sustain their sport during its formative period.

By 1976, all of these factors weighed heavily on Cooper Rollow and his associates, and they hoped Ara Parseghian would be able to infuse the game with the same spirit that had created it during the darkest days of the Depression.

### **HISTORIOGRAPHY**

There has been relatively little written about the College All-Star Football Classic. Before 1990, most general works on college and professional football made passing reference to it. Classen briefly mentions the first game in 1934, and claims that playing the professional champion Chicago Bears did not awe the All-Stars. Whittingham provides a general overview of the forty-three year series, and quotes Edward (Dutch) Sternaman, George Halas' former partner, as saying the game was one of the four essential developments in the early years of professional football. According to Sternaman, "The College All-Star game made people aware of just how good pro football and the men who played it really were. After that, no one could ever look on it as something less than the game played by the college boys."<sup>3</sup> Brock's only reference in his book to the All-Star Classic is a small photograph taken at the 1976 game showing All-Star players huddled during a heavy downpour. A short caption beginning with the phrase, ". . . turn out the lights," accompanies the photograph.

After 1990, several sports historians offered opinions for the cancellation of the Classic. Riffenburgh believes "scheduling difficulties" caused its termination. Peterson opines that the game was cancelled because, in the end, "pro football players were more skillful and, on average, bigger than college players, and pro teams were too much for even the best college teams to handle."<sup>4</sup> To prove his thesis, he quotes Ken Kavanaugh who played for the College All-Stars in 1940. "The pros were so much bigger and better," Kavanaugh claims, "There was no comparison. They were just so much better than what you run into in college."<sup>5</sup> Clary writes that the game helped professional football in the early years by capitalizing on the popularity of the college game. He believes the game was cancelled because it had become too one-sided in favor of the pros, and because NFL coaches were unwilling to risk injury to their high draft picks chosen to play in the game.

Additionally, the All-Star Classic is mentioned in the autobiographies and biographies of former participants. Former President Gerald Ford from the University of Michigan played for the All-Stars against the Chicago Bears in 1935, the only year the defending National Football League champions did not play the college eleven. He writes that although his team lost 5-0, he considers it a "moral victory and a gratifying windup to (his) college career."<sup>6</sup> The game had other benefits; Ford used the \$100 game fee to pay for his transportation to Yale Law School. In 1938, Byron (Whizzer) White from the University of Colorado was the most famous football player in the United States. Although he desired to play in the 1938 game against the Washington Redskins, he did not want to jeopardize his amateur standing. White had earned a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford, and, according to Hutchinson, he did not want to arrive at that prestigious university stigmatized as a professional in a world that adored amateurs.<sup>7</sup> The biography of University of Pennsylvania star Chuck Bednarik notes the horrific 38-0 beating given his 1949 All-Star team by the Philadelphia Eagles. Bednarik went on to play professional football with Philadelphia where he earned the distinction of being the NFL's last true, two-way player.

Frank Gifford from the University of Southern California played against the Los Angeles Rams in the 1952 game. Gifford decided that he "liked the game of football" after intercepting a pass at the All-Star ten-yard line and returning it to midfield.<sup>8</sup> West Virginia tackle Sam Huff played against the Cleveland Browns in the 1956 game. Huff believes that the game was cancelled because, "It really was no contest. You can't expect a bunch of twenty-two-year-old kids to be able to hold their own against seasoned professionals, especially a team that won the world championship."<sup>9</sup> Still, Huff thought playing in the game was a "big deal," and his greatest thrill was being introduced with the starting lineup.<sup>10</sup> In their autobiographies, Alex Karras, who played for Detroit Lions, and Johnny Sample, who played for the Baltimore Colts and New York Jets, reflected on their participation in the 1958 game against the Detroit Lions. Both Karras and Sample are quick to mention that they had problems playing for All-Star head coach Otto Graham. Neither started the game, although Karras had been selected as the team's defensive captain. When he finally got in, he played "mad, crazy mad", and "used abusive language on all the Lions."<sup>11</sup> Sample did not play until the final minute of the fourth quarter and was angry for years with Graham. "Keep your hand in your pocket," snapped Sample when the All-Star coach attempted to congratulate him after the team's stunning 35-19 victory against the Lions.

Players were not the only participants to write about the Classic. Former Cleveland Brown head coach Paul Brown mentions the game in his autobiography. In his book, Brown writes that he was not going to lose to a team of college players. After toiling in relative obscurity for five years in the All-American Football Conference, his Cleveland team won the respect of all professional football by defeating the Los Angeles Rams in the 1950 NFL Championship Game. "I didn't want to lose or even look anything less than professional champions," writes Brown, "In front of more than 92,000 people at Soldier Field, we never gave the All-Stars a chance and won, 33-0."<sup>12</sup> The game was so one-sided that Arch Ward approached Brown at halftime and pleaded with him, "Young man, don't ever hurt this game of ours."<sup>13</sup> Although his Browns would later lose the 1955 game, Paul Brown claimed that his Cleveland team, "destroyed the popular belief that a good team of college players always had a chance to beat an established professional team."<sup>14</sup>

Several men who played in the All-Star Classic during the sixties went on to have great professional careers. In describing a scrimmage during the preparations for the 1961 game, Mike Ditka writes, "As we scrimmaged, I found out they (the Chicago Bears) were just people. They beat you, and you beat them sometimes."<sup>15</sup> Dick Butkus devotes nearly three pages in his book to the Classic. The former star from the University of Illinois remembers the game fondly, and, playing with other All-Americans like Roger Staubach and Gale Sayers, considers the 1965 game against Jim Brown and the Cleveland as his "first trial against the best players in the land."<sup>16</sup> In his autobiography, Michigan State All-American Charles "Bubba" Smith describes butting heads with future Hall-of-Fame tackle Forrest Gregg in the 1967 game against Vince Lombardi's Green Bay Packers. After being taunted by Gregg, Smith warns him, "You gonna have to welcome me every play."<sup>17</sup>

During the seventies, some players still thought that being selected for the game was special. Jack Tatum from Ohio State, who earned the nickname of "Assassin" for his vicious play in college, played on the 1972 team against the Baltimore Colts. "I don't think that any of the All-Stars seriously believed that we could win the game," Tatum writes, "We just wanted to go out, play a good game, and earn the respect of the best team in professional football."<sup>18</sup> The late John Matuszak wrote that he loved playing in the All-Star game, and considered it an honor to be on the 1973 squad that

played the Miami Dolphins. In his autobiography, two-time Heisman trophy winner Archie Griffin describes a confrontation with Steeler All-Pro defensive end L.C. Greenwood during the 1976 game. Writes Griffin, "I came there expecting the Steelers to be terrific, and they didn't disappoint me."<sup>19</sup>

The most comprehensive account of the All-Star Classic is found in Thomas B. Littlewood's biography of Arch Ward entitled *Arch: A Promoter not a Poet*. In the chapter entitled, "The People's Team", Littlewood describes how the game was sustained up to Ward's death in 1955. The author provides a fascinating, behind-the-scenes glimpse into the backrooms at the *Chicago Tribune* where arrangements and deals were made that guaranteed Arch Ward's control over all facets of the game including the colors and design for the All-Star uniforms. However, Littlewood does not examine how the Classic evolved as part of the general history of American football, and he is rather cynical in his analysis, choosing to downplay the genuine enthusiasm and excitement for the game exhibited by coaches, fans, and players.

### **THE FORMATIVE YEARS (1934-1945)**

At the beginning of this period, college football was more popular than its professional counterpart. However, pro football gained ground rapidly as league officials made changes to attract more fans. In the early forties, professional teams began replacing the single wing formation designed by "Pop" Warner with the "Modern T" developed by George Halas and Clark Shaughnessey of Stanford University. This revolutionized football by making the quarterback the most important player on the team. Halas and the Chicago Bears represented the NFL in the 1934, 1935, 1941, 1942, and 1944 All-Star games, although they were not NFL Champions in 1934. After receiving numerous complaints from the other owners who wanted a chance to reap a financial windfall, Joe Carr, the first president of the National Football League, decided in 1936 that only the league champion would play in the All-Star Classic. Similar to the way it affected American industry, The Second World War decimated both college and professional rosters. Because of personnel shortages, some college graduates played in more than one All-Star game. For example, Tulsa All-American Glenn Dobbs played in the 1943 and 1944 games, and Charles Trippi from the University of Georgia played in 1943, 1944, and 1945.

During this twelve-year period, the All-Stars won three games, lost seven, and tied two. They won back-to-back games in 1937 and 1938, and beat the Washington Redskins twice in 1938 and 1943. Average attendance during this period was 79,371, but two games (the only ones in the series) were not played in Soldier Field. In 1943, the Park District raised the rent at Soldier Field, a move that infuriated Arch Ward. He relocated the All-Star game in 1943 and 1944 to Dyche Stadium on the Evanston campus of Northwestern University. The average attendance at Dyche Stadium for the two games was only 48,842. Between 1934 and 1943, the starting lineup for the College All-Stars was selected in a nation-wide fan poll conducted by newspapers of the country. In 1944, however, college coaches began selecting the starting lineups. Finally, beginning in 1938, a Most Valuable Player trophy was awarded to the outstanding college player in the All-Star game. The first recipient was Cecil Isbell from Purdue, who later starred in the NFL with the Green Bay Packers.

### **THE GAME TAKES HOLD (1946-1959)**

The postwar period was a prosperous time for the nation, and it witnessed a meteoric rise in the popularity of professional football, climaxed by the 1958 NFL title game between the New York Giants and Baltimore Colts. Average attendance at professional games went from 25,353 in 1950 to 40,106 in 1960.

Three factors contributed to the growth. One, the game changed from a grueling (and frequently boring) contest of brute strength into a game of deception, finesse, and speed. Use of the forward pass became popular, and terms like "the bomb" and "the blitz" became part of football's lexicon. Two, the emergence of a new league in 1946, the All-American Football Conference also created by Arch Ward, introduced professional football into areas outside of the NFL cities that were located primarily in the northeast and mid-west. Finally, television increased interest by introducing the game to many people who could not attend in person. Additionally, the NFL adopted the free-substitution rule, thus paving the way for specialization and two-platoon football.

College athletics, on the other hand, were rocked in the early fifties by cheating scandals at West Point and the City College of New York (CCNY). Suddenly, the squeaky-clean image that intercollegiate sports had promoted since the 1920s was in disarray. Playing for money no longer seemed as evil as Camp, Rockne, Stagg, and Yost had warned.

The second period was the golden age of the College All-Star Classic. In this fourteen-year span, the All-Stars won five and lost nine games. Average attendance during this period was 87,135, and all games were played at Soldier Field. The 1951 game pitted the All-Stars against Paul Brown's Cleveland Brown team. Littlewood describes this game as the turning point of the series; the game that proved that a group of green collegians were no match against a team of seasoned professionals. The Browns demolished the All-Stars, 33-0, before 92,180 fans. Four years later, however, the All-Stars turned the tables and defeated the Browns, 30-27. In 1958, the All-Stars won again, 35-19, against the Detroit Lions. In 1955, Arch Ward, the creator of the baseball all-star game, the College All-Star Football Classic, and All-American Football Conference, died of a heart attack.

The year after Ward's death, the NFL players organized into an association. The initial aims of the association were modest; a minimum salary, protection of salaries in the case of injury, weekly payment of training camp expenses, and a retirement plan. In January 1957, at the annual league meeting, the owners turned down the players' request – many feeling that the benefits individual clubs had instituted made such an association unnecessary. Although no one suspected it at the time, the formation of the players association would contribute to the demise of the College All-Star Football Classic.

### **OTTO GRAHAM**

Otto Graham from Northwestern University was the greatest quarterback of his era and arguably the best of all time. Although as a young player Graham favored basketball over football – in fact, he played one year of professional basketball -- Paul Brown picked him to be the quarterback in his new T-formation scheme in Cleveland. According to Brown, Graham possessed the poise, ball-handling skills, and leadership ability required to be an outstanding professional quarterback. When he retired in 1955, Graham had led his team to appearances in ten consecutive title games. No other quarterback has matched his record. Although he was highest paid player of his time, Graham's values were similar to those of other men who played professional football in the years immediately following the Second World War. "We cared about our teammates," Graham said, "Nobody was selfish. There was none of this, 'Well, I gained a hundred years so it was a great game and too bad we lost.'"<sup>20</sup>

Graham also appeared in more All-Star games than any other individual in history. He played on the 1943 team that defeated Sammy Baugh's Washington Redskins, 27-7. In that game, Graham intercepted one of Baugh's passes and returned it an All-Star game record ninety-seven yards for a touchdown. He played again for the All-Stars in their 16-0 victory over the Los Angeles Rams. After his pro career was over, Graham returned to the All-Star game in 1957 as an assistant coach under Curly Lambeau. Beginning in 1958, he began a string of eight consecutive years as head coach by defeating the Detroit Lions, 35-19, with the help of four field goals by Bobby Joe Conrad of Texas A&M. In one of football's greatest upsets, Graham's 1963 team defeated Vince Lombardi's Green Bay Packers, 20-17, on a 74-yard pass from Ron Vanderkelen to Pat Richter, former teammates at the University of Wisconsin. After a brief tour as the head coach of the Washington Redskins, Graham returned to coach the All-Stars in 1969 and 1970. His 1969 squad lost to the New York Jets on a misinterpretation of a rule that cost the All-Stars a touchdown. Counting his appearances as a player (twice), assistant coach (once), and head coach (ten times), Otto Graham participated in thirteen All-Stars contests, or about one-third of all games played in the forty-three year series.

Similar to Paul Brown, his coach in Cleveland, Otto Graham was a no-nonsense and by-the-book kind of person. Predictably, his methods were frequently misunderstood and resented by his young players. Jim Brown from Syracuse University claims that Graham was a racist, an odd comment considering that Graham interacted well with black stars like Marion Motley on the great Brown teams of the forties and fifties. John Sample from Maryland State College devotes an entire chapter in his biography to the All-Star Game and his relationship with Otto Graham. Sample accuses Graham of being stubborn and vindictive. The two men tangled at the 1959 game when Sample was a member of the Baltimore Colts; they exchanged punches in front of a national television audience. Alex Karras, a teammate of Sample on the 1958 team, accuses Graham of being "humorless, intense, and consumed with football and very little else."<sup>21</sup> Like Sample, Karras feuded with his head coach. After a difficult practice, Karras told Graham, "You can take your hundred and fifty dollars (the fee at that time for playing in the game), your All-Star jersey, your blanket with the All-Star emblem on it, and your f\*\*\*\*\* whistle, and jam them all up your a\*\*!"<sup>22</sup> After the resounding victory over the Lions, Karras, still fuming about being benched at the beginning of game, joined his teammates in shouting "f\*\*\* you!" to Graham when the head coach attempted to congratulate them.

Reflecting on his All-Star experiences, Graham is unapologetic about his methods and practices. "There was a span of thirteen years," according to Graham, "when I coached the College All-Stars, and it was an upward scale – every year there were more prima donnas than there were the year before. All talking about the money they had. Money wasn't the primary factor when we played. We played mostly because we like to play."<sup>23</sup> It is imagined that other, former All-Stars would disagree with Jim Brown, Sam-ple, and Karras. Unfortunately for Graham, they have not written any books.

### ***THE ALL-STAR GAME IN DECLINE (1960-69)***

By the mid-sixties, professional football had become America's most popular spectator sport. Attendance at pro games doubled during this period, increasing from 4.2 million in 1960 to 8.9 million in 1969. Millions more watched on television. In response to the demand for more professional football, Texas millionaire Lamar Hunt, and seven other business executives founded the American Football League in 1960.

Television provided the catalyst for the surge in popularity, and football executives were quick to cash-in on the new medium. In 1962, NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle engineered a two-year, \$10 million television package with the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) that guaranteed \$320,000 a year for each of the league's fourteen clubs. This was more money than George Halas had earned in the thirties and forties, combined. Rozelle followed this deal in 1964 with another two-year agreement for nearly \$37 million. Not to be outdone, the AFL signed its first five-year contract worth over \$10 million in 1960 and a second one in 1964 for \$36 million with the National Broadcasting Company (NBC).

The decade of the sixties was both profitable and traumatic for professional football – much like American society during the same period. In thirty years, it had transformed itself from a regional sport with a small following into a national phenomenon watched by millions. Additionally, it had become big business. Team owners became sports tycoons as the values of their teams increased by as much as fifteen-fold. Players, too, reaped the fruits of success, and for the first time hired agents to negotiate salary demands on their behalf. The average player salary in 1968 was \$22,500, and some superstars like Baltimore quarterback John Unitas earned over \$100,000 a year. High-draft choices like O.J. Simpson and Joe Namath signed contracts worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. To protect their investments, team owners restricted the movement of players to other teams through a legal device known as the "reserve clause."

Seeking protection from the owners, the players associations of the NFL and AFL announced plans in late 1968 to register with the National Labor Relations Board as bona fide unions. During the sixties, the seeds of future conflicts were planted between owners and players, and the All-Star Classic would be one of their unintended victims.

This period was a terrible one for the All-Star Classic. The collegians won only one game, a 20-17 victory in the 1963 game over the heavily favored Green Bay Packers. They lost a close one, 26-24, in 1969 to Joe

Namath and New York Jets in Otto Graham's return to the Classic. However, the rest of the games were unmitigated disasters. During the ten-year period, The All-Stars scored just 135 points (forty-four of them in the 1963 and 1969 games) against 296 for the pros. Three of the losses were to the Packers by the combined score of 141-37. There were other blowouts, too: 32-7 to Baltimore in the 1960 game, and 28-14 to the Philadelphia Eagles in the 1961.

More troubling to game organizers than the lopsided scores was the growing fan and player apathy for the Classic. Average game attendance during the sixties declined by about 15,000 from the previous decade, and television ratings were also flat. Additionally, playing in the Classic was losing favor with many All-Stars as the pressure increased to make their respective pro squads and justify the millions of dollars in bonuses and salaries paid to them.

This attitude was expressed by Glen Ray Hines, an All-American tackle from Arkansas, who played in the 1966 game: "It's a thrill to be here, I don't mean to say it isn't a thrill, but you sure do wish you were in camp most of the time." Hines' sentiments were echoed by his teammate, Illinois fullback Jim Grabowski: "If this were the only all-star game, like it used to be, I guess you'd feel differently about it. I know for myself, I keep feeling I ought to be in Green Bay (the team that drafted him) learning their plays. We're all going to be there three weeks behind when we finally get to camp."<sup>24</sup>

### **THE END OF THE LINE (1970-76)**

In 1970, professional football was more popular than ever, and owners and players continued to reap the benefits. The National and American Football Leagues merged, and the Super Bowl game, first played in 1967, had by now eclipsed the College All-Star Classic as the greatest spectacle in football. A players' strike was narrowly averted in 1970, and the All-Star Classic was played on July 31 -- the first time the game was scheduled during the month of July so that it would not conflict with preseason professional football. The Kansas City Chiefs defeated the All-Stars, 24-3, in Otto Graham's last game as head coach.

Things were no different in 1971, 1972, and 1973, but the All-Stars showed considerable pluck in the losing causes. Blanton Collier who was Paul Brown's successor as head coach in Cleveland coached the 1971 team. The 52,289 people that turned out to watch the 1971 game was the smallest crowd to watch an All-Star Classic at Soldier Field. Bob Devaney and John McKay followed Collier as the head coach of the College All-Stars. Devaney brought his University of Nebraska coaching staff with him to Chicago. John McKay from the University of Southern California followed Devaney as head coach for the 1973 and 1975 teams. Like Devaney, he brought his college coaching staff with him to the game. Both of McKay's teams played well against the Dolphins and Steelers, and gave organizers of the Classic renewed hope for continuing the series.

### **THE FINAL GAME – PART TWO**

As the rain and wind continued to pound Soldier Field in the forty-third All-Star Classic, Referee Cal Lepore attempted to regain control of the situation. By this time, hundreds of unruly fans had invaded the south end of the field and began sliding and belly flopping on the wet artificial turf. Security personnel were not in sight. Fearing for the safety of the players, Lepore sent both teams to their locker rooms in the hope that the fans and the weather would cooperate and allow the game to resume. However, the fans disregarded calls for order and continued their antics. Eventually, they ripped down both goalposts.

It was decided at this point to cancel the game. Following a brief meeting with NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle, Cooper Rollow issued the following statement:

The forty-third annual All-Star game was terminated in the third quarter following a meeting between Commissioner Pete Rozelle and officials of *Chicago Tribune Charities, Inc.* The decision was made because of the weather, dangerous field conditions, and the risk of injury to both players and fans. The decision was reached at 11:01 p.m., Central Daylight Time (July 23, 1976)

In addition to canceling the game, Rollow and game organizers decided not to name a Most Valuable Player for the first time since 1938. In the Steeler locker room, quarterback Terry Bradshaw said, "these All-Stars (lacked) the gung-ho spirit of last year's team. They weren't fired up." All-Star coach Ara Parseghian attempted to explain his team's failure: "We had poor field position from the start and Pittsburgh is a great defensive team. We just couldn't dig ourselves out of the hole."

In his commentary in the Sunday, July 25, 1976 edition of the *Chicago Tribune*, Rollow blamed the cancellation on the "bush-league, infantile, and scatter-brained" conduct of unruly fans, and on the failure of the Chicago Police to control them. A week later, *Sports Illustrated* magazine, which had covered the game in detail since the early sixties, issued a twenty-word statement that the game was "mercifully called by rain with 1:22 left in the third period." Although no one knew it at the time, the College All-Star Football Classic would never be played again.

The end came quietly. On Tuesday, December 21, 1976, Robert M. Hunt, the president of The *Chicago Tribune* and the president, *Chicago Tribune Charities, Inc.*, issued the following statement:

We regret the end of a traditional sports classic which has contributed substantial assistance to the needy in Chicagoland. Unfortunately, problems which make continuation impossible have been created by uncertainties in recruiting player personnel and increasing expenses reflected in insurance costs that doubled last year alone because of high player salaries.

NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle said, "The College All-Star game played a major role in promoting the growth of the National Football League. I regret it is no longer practical economically for *Chicago Tribune Charities* to sponsor it." In his *Tribune* column, *In the Wake of the News*,

David Condon began his obituary for the game with the opening line, "The College All-Star game (1934-1976) was Chicago's own and football's finest."

### CONCLUSION

The College All-Star Football Classic was conceived originally as a way to encourage more people to visit Mayor Kelly's fair and George Halas' football games. At the same time, Arch Ward was attempting to establish himself as the mid-west's answer to Grantland Rice. The fortunes of the three men, and in a larger sense those of Chicago, the National Football League, and the *Chicago Tribune*, converged on the turf of Soldier Field. The Classic was introduced at roughly the same time as the Cotton and Orange Bowls, but it was different than those games, or, for that matter, any other intercollegiate contest. It was truly "the most unusual game ever scheduled."

The Classic weathered the effects of depression, war, McCarthyism, and political assassination. It introduced Sammy Baugh, Whizzer White, Otto Graham, and the city of Chicago to a national audience. Long before the Chicago Bulls, Super Bowl, and Michael Jordan, the College All-Star Classic focused national attention on Chicago for a major sporting event. During its forty-three year existence, it raised millions of dollars for charity and millions more for local businesses, helped to establish professional football as a major spectator sport, and, at least for one evening, established Chicago as the football capital of the nation. When the series ended in 1976, amateur and professional sports were a far cry from what they had been in the thirties.

It is interesting to note that there are differing opinions on why the game was cancelled. Should we believe that "scheduling difficulties" killed it? Or, perhaps, it was cancelled simply because the pros were too good? Clary's opinion has merit that the game was terminated because coaches were unwilling to risk high draft picks.

All of these opinions, however, fail to acknowledge the continuing success of all-star contests in football and other sports, and the cyclical dominance of one team or league over another. An excellent example of the latter is the recent supremacy of the National Conference over the American Conference in the Super Bowl. Yet, no one is clamoring for cancellation of the Super Bowl!

In fact, the All-Star Classic was cancelled because it had lost its popular support. Fans were no longer interested in watching it. The evidence is declining gate attendance and television ratings. Could it be revived? It is unlikely, but, in an era dominated by made-for-television events, anything is possible.

---

<sup>1</sup> Steven A Reiss. *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 233.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas B. Littlewood. *Arch: A Promoter, Not a Poet: The Story of Arch Ward*. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1990, 90.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Whittingham. *The Chicago Bears: From George Halas to Super Bowl XX*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979; reprint, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986, 90.

<sup>4</sup> Robert W. Peterson. *Pigskin: The Early years of Pro Football*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 127.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 128.

<sup>6</sup> Gerald R. Ford. *A Time to Heal: The Autobiography of Gerald R. Ford*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 55.

<sup>7</sup> Dennis J. Hutchinson. *The Man Who Once Was Whizzer White*. (New York: Free Press, 1998), 87.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Gifford. *The Whole Ten Yards*. (New York: Random House, 1994), 65.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Lee (Sam) Huff. *Tough Stuff: The Man in the Middle*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 39.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Alex Karras. *Even Big Guys Cry*. (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1977), 121.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Brown. *PB: The Paul Brown Story*. (New York: Athenem, 1979), 216.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> Mike Ditka. *Ditka*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 74.

<sup>16</sup> Dick Butkus. *Butkus: Flesh and Blood*. (New York, Doubleday, 1988). 124.

<sup>17</sup> Charles (Bubba) Smith. *Kill, Bubba, Kill!* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 111.

<sup>18</sup> Jack Tatum. *They Call Me Assassin*. (New York: Everest House, 1979), 9.

<sup>19</sup> Archie Griffin. *The Archie Griffin Story*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 158.

<sup>20</sup> Mickey Herskowitz. *The Golden Age of Pro Football*. (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 30.

<sup>21</sup> Karras, 119.

<sup>22</sup> Karras, 120.

<sup>23</sup> Herskowitz, 30.

<sup>24</sup> Dan Jenkins. "A Poor Show by the New Rich." *Sports Illustrated*, 12 August 1966, 21.