

BLUE SHIRT CHARLIE'S BIG RED DREAM

By Bob Braunwart & Bob Carroll

After nearly thirty seasons, fans with long memories still occasionally slip and call the Big Red the Chicago Cardinals. Younger fans, some of whom were not born when the Cards deserted the Windy City for the Mound City, may not even realize that the present Phoenix entry in the NFL Sweepstakes -- transplanted from St. Louis -- spent the first three quarters of its existence on the shore of Lake Michigan rather than along the Mississippi.

The Cardinals -- Chicago variety -- were a football fixture from 1899 to 1959, but the gridiron seldom venerates age and most of those seasons saw the club awash in ink redder than their jerseys. Their failures at the turnstiles were usually matched by ineptitude on the field.

The founder of the team, Chris O'Brien, died broke. He hung on until 1929, gave Chicago "Paddy" Driscoll and one disputed championship in 1925, but a lethal combination of grid losses, apathetic fans, and the popularity of the northside Bears finally did him in. Dr. David Jones took the team off O'Brien's hands but soon found that not even the great Ernie Nevers could bring success to the Big Red.

One night in 1932, Dr. Jones and his wife were guests at an informal didder party aboard the Ren-Mar, wealthy lawyer Charles W. Bidwill's luxurious power-cruising yacht. Also guests were Mr. and Mrs. Arch Ward. Ward was sports editor of the Chicago *Tribune*, and Bidwill was owner of a racing stable, president of the Chicago Stadium Operating Co., and of a printing company. He was also vice-president of the Chicago Bears. Inevitably, conversation turned to pro football, with Jones bemoaning his team's sad state.

Suddenly, half in jest, Mrs. Bidwill asked Jones, "Why don't you sell the Cardinals to Charley?"

Jones replied that he would sell anything he owned if the price was right.

"Are you serious?" When Jones insisted he was, further discussion ensued. They finally settled on \$50,000 as a price. Bidwill handed Jones \$2,000 to seal the deal and the two men shook hands. Although the sale would not be announced until the next year to allow Bidwill to dispose of his Bear stock, as casually as that the Big Red passed into the hands of perhaps the one man in Illinois who possessed both the will and the wherewithal to take the team to a championship.

A friendly man, "Blue-Shirt Charlie" Bidwill had a free-wheeling way with money, a life-long love of sports, and a reasonable fanaticism toward football. Most of all, he was a winner, and he was determined that his team would be the same. But it was several years before the Cardinals replaced the Bears in his heart. It was well known that he would have much preferred to buy the Bears, but his friend George Halas refused to sell. Once the "hapless Cardinals," as they were usually known, nearly beat the Bears in a game that could have cost the Bruins a championship. In the dressing room afterward, Bidwill walked up to the Cardinal Coach. "Whew!" he exclaimed. "That was too close for comfort!"

In 1935 the Cards seemed on their way. A 6-4-2 record tied them with the Bears in the standings. But high hopes for 1936 went down the drain when the team dslipped to 3-8-1. By 1939, they could win only one game. Again and again, the Cardinals appeared to be headed in the right direction, only to founder on a key injury, a disappointing deal, a flop draft choice.

One authentic star joined the team in 1939. Marshall "Biggie" Goldberg had twice been a consensus All-America at Pitt. Over the next few seasons, he was virtually the only offense the Cards had. He was also generally regarded as the best defensive back in the NFL, a factor that would eventually put an ironic cap on his career.

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Bidwill had become discouraged by 1940. He made a try at buying the Detroit Lions, but when that fell through, he redoubled his efforts to build the Big red. One move was to hire Jimmy Conzelman as coach.

The NFL's version of the Renaissance Man, Conzelman had been a star halfback, team owner, championship coach (with Providence in 1928), and an all-around good guy since the league opened twenty years before. In addition, he was an actor, lecturer, minor league baseball player and manager, editor, piano and ukelele player, middleweight boxing champion at Great Lakes during World War I, and syndicated columnist. He also wrote songs. Prior to the 1942 season, he penned a ditty called "It's in the Cards to Win." It should have been a blues. For all his accomplishments, Jimmy was no soothsayer. The Cards continued to lose, and Conzelman quit as coach to go into the front office of baseball's St. Louis Browns.

Undoubtedly, the low point came in 1944. Because so many players were in the service, the Cardinals combined with Pittsburgh for the season. Card-Pitt was quickly changed to the "Carpets" as they lost ten straight.

All those low finishes meant high draft choices. In 1945, those players began drifting back from the war. Phil Handler, the slow-talking Texan who had taken over when Conzelman left, installed the T-formation, with former Missouri tailback Paul Christman at the throttle. Christman was a volatile, high-strung leader and an excellent passer. Ironically, he had failed a baseball tryout because of a weak throwing arm, a failing that never seemed to bother him on a football field. After a season of getting used to the T, he was being compared by some with the Bears' great Sid Luckman.

In 1946, Conzelman returned as coach. Joining Christman and Goldberg in the backfield were Pat Harder, a hard-charging fullback, and unheralded Elmer Angsman, who had gone unnoticed at Notre Dame but quickly developed into one of the NFL's premier runners.

The line had plenty of depth and included three of the best the Cardinals ever had. Guard Buster Ramsey became a consistent all-pro. Tackle Stan Mauldin was so good that a rival coach once showed his team an hour's film of Mauldin in action so that they could view perfect tackle-play. Fellow Texan Mal Kutner was a breakaway pass catcher who doubled as a defensive back.

Despite the talent on hand, the '46 Cardinals were inconsistent, winning and losing on alternate weekends. They set a team record for fumbles. It took a 35-28 victory in the finale against the Bears to give them only their second winning season since Bidwell bought the team.

The Cards remained in the red. Bidwill had spent lavishly, and to add to the problem, they were faced with a new rival in Chicago in addition to the Bears. The Rockets, the new All-America Football Conference team, never got a one-third share of Chicago fans. But, as they fizzled along through four years, they lured enough folks away from Cardinal games to be annoying. "Blue-Shirt Charlie" was less than fond of the AAFC.

Early in 1947 he got a chance to twit the rival league. The Cardinals had drafted Georgia's All-America halfback Charley Trippi. He and Bidwill were friends, "Blue-Shirt Charlie" having previously handled some legal work for the star. The AAFC's New York Yankees had also drafted Trippi and made him a better offer than the Cards, but he had decided to sign with Chicago. However, on Bidwill's urging, he announced that he was heading for New York to discuss his future. That made headlines in the Big Apple. On the day the Yankees made preparation to welcome Trippi, he was in Chicago signing a three-year contract for a reported \$100,000 to play with the Cardinals. As Vice President Ray Bennigsen handed Trippi a pen, Bidwill asked, "Aren't you going to have your lawyer look at the contract?"

"You are my lawyer," Trippi replied.

Bidwill shot back, "I'll have to have a retainer."

Trippi was the capstone to what was quickly labeled "The Dream Backfield." Christman, Trippi, Goldberg, and Harder had all been legitimate All-Americans in college. But, before the season began, a substitution

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was made. Conzelman asked Marshall Goldberg to become a defensive back and leave the running to Angsman. After his years of labor with second-rate Cardinal teams, to forgo the pleasure of working behind the powerhouse line the Big Red possessed in '47, had to be a great personal sacrifice for Goldberg. But he didn't hesitate. Cardinal victories were more important to Goldberg than making personal headlines. It was only because the wire services had not yet begun naming both offensive and defensive teams that Biggie Goldberg was denied all-league recognition in 1947. One critic called him the most valuable "member" of the Dream Backfield because he got the other four the ball.

The substitution of Angsman made for an odd coincidence. Christman wore uniform number 44, Trippi number 62, Harder 34, and Angsman seven. Added together, the numbers totalled 147, or as Cardinal fans proclaimed hopefully, number one (in) '47.

With Christman throwing and the others running, the attack sprung for 45 points in the opener against Detroit and then topped the Bears, 31-7, in the second game.

After a third straight win, the Cards went sour in Los Angeles, as the Rams dumped them, 27-7. A more tragic incident occurred a few days later. Rookie halfback Jeff Burkett, at the time leading the NFL in punting, underwent an emergency appendectomy in Los Angeles which kept him from returning to Chicago with the team. A few days later, while he was returning by a commercial flight, the plane crashed and Burkett was killed.

The team recovered to win four straight before Sammy Baugh and his Washington Redskins outscored them, 45-21. The loss left the Cards and the Bears tied for first in the NFL's Western Division.

On Thanksgiving Day, the Bears won in Detroit. The following Sunday, headed for last place in the East, upset the Big Red at New York, 35-31.

The Cardinals were a game behind the Bears with two games left. Those two scheduled encounters were with the powerful Philadelphia Eagles and a return match against the Bears, both in the rivals' ballparks. It was beginning to look like still another year of frustration for the Cards.

But at Philadelphia, the Cards exploded for a 45-21 win, while the Bears lost at Wrigley Field to the Los Angeles Rams. The Western Division title came down to the finale between the Cards and the Bears.

Conzelman thought he'd spotted a flaw in the Bear defense. He'd noticed that Bruin defensive back Mike Holovak invariably covered the opponent's right end on pass plays. This, Conzelman reasoned, would lay Holovak open to a quick pass to the right halfback coming out of the backfield. The problem for the Cardinal coach was to find the "right" right halfback. Because of poor eyesight, Angsman was seldom used as a pass receiver. Goldberg lacked the necessary speed. Finally, Conzelman settled on seldom-used scatback Babe Dimancheff.

But Dimancheff hadn't lined up at right halfback all season. Moreover, he was unable to practice all week because he was keeping a 24-hour "storck watch" at the hospital where his wife was expecting.

Happily, the baby girl was born in time to allow Babe to get to the game on Sunday. The Bears kicked off into the end zone and the ball was brought out to the twenty. Conzelman called for the pass play immediately. For the first time in 1947, Dimancheff lined up at right halfback.

The ball was snapped and Holovak as expected followed the right end to the sideline. Dimancheff streaked into the vacated spot as Christman lofted him the ball. Babe took it at the midfield stripe and didn't stop until he was in the end zone.

The Bears never recovered. The 30-21 win put the Cardinals into the championship game against the Eagles.

Comiskey Park was frozen into a skating rink and the Cardinals wore sneakers to play in their first official NFL Championship Game. The Eagles put on sneakers too, but not until they had fallen behind by two touchdowns.

The key to the game was the Dream Backfield. Against an eight-man defensive line, Christman passed sparingly under pressure and completed only three, but he made the right calls when they were needed. Harder blocked brilliantly. Angsman and Trippi were the stars. Angsman split the eight-man Eagle line on two delayed traps, each good for 70 yards and a touchdown. Trippi also scored twice, once on a brilliant 75-yard punt return that saw at least five Eagles have shots at him.

In the dressing room following the 28-21 win, Conzelman danced around, hugged every player, and reminded all that it was HIS second championship.

Sadly, Charlie Bidwill wasn't there to join the celebration. On April 19 of that year, only a few months after he had signed Trippi, Bidwill died of pneumonia in a Chicago hospital. He never had a chance to see his Dream Backfield in action. "It's just too bad that Charles couldn't have seen this," Mrs. Bidwill sobbed.