

THE BEST OF THE REST, PART 2

By Bob Gill

For the 1940 season, the American Association trimmed down to six teams and adopted a shaugnessy-style playoff (1st place vs. 4th, 2nd vs. 3rd, winners play for title) to determine a champion. This time Jersey City, armed by the addition of Ed Danowski and the return of Ken Strong, took the title. Again the coaches picked the all-star squad:

End Tod Goodwin, Wilmington
Tackle Bob Cook, Paterson
Guard Ed Michaels, Wilmington
Center Tex Coker, Wilmington
Guard Sam Aills, Jersey City
Tackle Win Pederson, Jersey City
End Jack Daly, Jersey City
QB Young Bussey, Newark
HB Emilio Daddario, Providence
HB Ed Danowski, Jersey City
FB Johnny Boyda, Paterson

There must have been a second team for this season, as usual, but I haven't located it yet. It may well have included another former Giant star, Dale Burnett, player-coach at Paterson. Danowski, incidentally, completed better than 60% of his passes in leading his club to the title. The league leader in passing yardage, Young Bussey of Newark, was destined to spend only one season as Sid Luckman's backup with the Bears before being killed in the war.

Despite its impressive list of all-stars, the American Association was not the strongest league in operation outside the NFL in 1940. That honor belonged to a new league, which stole three teams whole from the 1939 AFL and formed its own circuit, again called the AFL. As for its predecessor (the former Midwest League, remember), the loss of three top teams a couple of months before the season proved to be its mortal wound.

The new AFL, considered by many observers (again including the NFL's *Encyclopedic History*) another major league, was dominated by Columbus and Milwaukee, two teams pirated from the 1939 league, with Columbus winning the championship. The league's coaches named an all-star team.

1st Team

End Sherman Barnes, Milwaukee
Tackle Ed Karpowich, Buffalo
Guard Jim Karcher, Columbus
Center Joe Aleskus, Columbus
Guard Alex Drobnitch, Buffalo
Tackle Bob Eckl, Milwaukee
End Harlan Gustafson, New York
Back Andy Karpus, Boston
Back Bill Hutchinson, New York
Back Nelson Peterson, Columbus
Back Al Novakofski, Milwaukee

2nd Team

End Keith Ranspot, Boston
Tackle Ralph Niehaus, Columbus
Guard Vic Marino, Boston
Center Joe Ratica, Boston
Guard Len Akin, Milwaukee
Tackle Alec Shellogg, Buffalo

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 5, No. 12 (1983)

End Joel Mason, Boston
Back Bob Davis, Columbus
Back Ray Cole, Milwaukee
Back Lee Elkins, New York
Back Paul Shu, Cincinnati

Boston was the league's third-strongest team as you might guess from their representation on the squad. Andy Karpus, the league's leading passer, was a veteran of the 1937 AFL and had made the second all-APFA team in 1939. Drobitch was the only player to gain all-league recognition in two different AFL's of the period; his first appearance had been on the 1937 AFL team. Seven of the players above played in the 1939 AFL, including Bob Davis, who may have been that league's MVP, if there had been such an award. In 1940, he played about half the season at end, for some reason, but still found his way onto the all-star team as a back.

Another noteworthy league made its debut in 1940 -- the Pacific Coast League (PCPFL), which featured the Los Angeles Bulldogs and Kenny Washington's Hollywood Bears, arguably the descendents of the team Ernie Smith had played on two years earlier. These two clubs were on a par with Columbus and Milwaukee of the AFL, but the other teams, while certainly respectable, were not in the same class.

The Dixie League also made a comeback in 1940, after being on the downswing in 1938-39. For this year and the next, the Dixie circuit enjoyed its finest seasons to date. But though the league apparently named annual all-star teams, I haven't yet located one.

Moving on again, 1941 saw the AFL down to five teams, with New York replacing Milwaukee as runner-up behind Columbus. The big news was the mid-season signing of John Kimbrough and Tom Harmon, the nation's most famous college stars, to large contracts by the New York Americans. Harmon played in only one game, but Kimbrough finished out the year and was named to the first-team all-league squad. Once again the team was chosen by the league's coaches:

1st Team
End Earl Ohlgren, Milwaukee
Tackle Alec Shellogg, Buffalo
Guard Ted Livingston, Columbus
Center Paul Humphrey, Milwaukee
Guard Len Akin, Milwaukee
Tackle Bob Eckl, Milwaukee
End Joe Kruse, Cincinnati
QB Bob Davis, Columbus
HB Charley Armstrong, New York
HB Bill McGannon, Cincinnati
FB John Kimbrough, New York

2nd Team
End Wayland Becker, Columbus
Tackle Ralph Niehaus, Columbus
Guard Merle Larson, Milwaukee
Center Nick Padgen, Columbus
Guard Tom Byrd, New York
Tackle Nick Drahos, New York
End Len Thom, Columbus
QB Jack Hinkle, New York
HB Nelson Peterson, Columbus
HB Gene Tornquist, Cincinnati
FB Howie Weiss, Milwaukee

Notice that despite their drop in the standings -- evidently the result of problems in the backfield -- the Milwaukee Chiefs' line was still highly regarded throughout the league.

As for the American Association, 1941 was another successful season, though one team -- Providence -- dropped out after two games. The Steam Roller was replaced by a road team, nominally from New York,

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 5, No. 12 (1983)

named the Yankees. However, between them the two clubs failed to win a single game. Their lack of talent is reflected in the fact that neither placed anyone on the all-league team, again picked by the coaches:

1st Team
End Dick Horne, Paterson
Tackle Schibanoff, Jersey City
Guard Chuck Avedisian, Long Island
Center Gangemi, Jersey city
Guard Ed Michaels, Wilmington
Tackle Hershel Giddens, Wilmington
End Sam Goldman, Long Island
QB Les Dodson, Wilmington
HB Scrapper Farrell, Wilmington
HB Pat Fehley, Long Island
FB Harry Mattos, Paterson

2nd Team
End Jack Ferrante, Wilmington
Tackle Al Hoptowit, Newark
Guard Art Jocher, Paterson
Center Pat Martinelli, Wilmington
Guard Mike Kochel, Newark
Tackle Pete Dobrus, Long Island
End Walt Nowak, Wilmington
QB Irving Hall, Jersey City
HB Dick Poillon, Long Island
HB Johnny Rogalla, Jersey City
FB Muggs Miskinis, Newark

Wilmington, which won the championship playoffs, and Long Island, which posted the best overall record, dominated the coaches' selections. Ed Michaels of Wilmington deserves particular mention, as this was his third straight appearance on the all-APFA first team.

Meanwhile, out West, the Pacific Coast League named its first all-league team in 1941, although it could almost have been called the LA All-Stars:

1st Team
End Ray Wehba, Los Angeles
Tackle John Stonebraker, Hollywood
Guard John Frawley, Los Angeles
Center Amy McPherson, Los Angeles
Guard Byron Gentry, Hollywood
Tackle Nick Katzmeyer, San Francisco
End Woody Strode, Hollywood
Back Kenny Washington, Hollywood
Back Kink Richards, Hollywood
Back Lefty Goodhue, Hollywood
Back Steve Bagarus, San Diego

2nd Team
End Jim Grove, Los Angeles
Tackle Bob Fisher, Hollywood
Guard Floyd Phillips, Hollywood
Center Ed Dempsey, Hollywood
Guard Max Cowsart, San Diego
Tackle Jack Sommers, Los Angeles
End Wayne Clark, Hollywood
Back Norm Lehnert, Los Angeles
Back Bill Murray, Los Angeles

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 5, No. 12 (1983)

Back Dick Schweidler, San Diego
Back Elvin Hutchinson, Los Angeles

It doesn't take a genius to realize that this league was still essentially a two-team affair. One notable exception, however, was San Diego's Steve Bagarus; his presence, along with that of Kenny Washington and Kink Richards, not to mention Woody Strode, makes this a team worth mentioning. And by the way, notice that Dick Schweidler had earlier been a member of the 1939 APFA all-stars.

1942 brought full-scale U.S. involvement in the war, and the AFL, APFA, and Dixie League all suspended operations for the duration. For the next four seasons, the PCPFL was the only significant minor league to operate -- with one exception -- as the draft took its toll on, among other things, the available pool of football talent. There was a lot of good football played out West during the period, though, and even a rival league (another AFL) in 1944. But that's all been covered elsewhere. The PCPFL apparently didn't name any more all-star teams during the war, but in 1945 a new one appeared. With the addition of several returning servicemen, the league had shed its earlier image as a two-club circuit. The better distribution of talent was evident in the all-league selections.

1st Team

End Bill Fisk, Hollywood
Tackle Dale Byers, Oakland
Guard Byron Gentry, Hollywood
Center Joe Dixon, Hollywood
Guard Lavine Bettencourt, San Francisco
Tackle Ray George, Los Angeles
End Bob Fisher, Oakland
Back Kenny Washington, Hollywood
Back Bosh Pritchard, San Diego
Back Mel Reid, Oakland
Back John Petrovich, Hollywood

2nd Team

End Mike Moser, Oakland
Tackle Don McNeill, San Diego
Guard Jack Thatcher, Hollywood
Center Jerry Dowd, San Francisco
Guard Charles Kremesac, Oakland
Tackle Marsh Axcell, Hollywood
End Clem Hooks, Los Angeles
Back Earl Elsey, Los Angeles
Back Earl Parsons, Los Angeles
Back Jack Sullivan, San Diego
Back Harry Clark, San Diego

Byron Gentry, Bob Fisher, and of course Kenny Washington were repeaters from the 1941 team. Even with the loss of Steve Bagarus to the Washington Redskins, the league was better stocked with top-notch players in 1945 than any year before or after, so much so that Frankie Albert, who finished the year with the Bulldogs, couldn't make even the second team. Incidentally, Mel Reid, another black star, was named the league's MVP.

But despite the war's conclusion, 1946 proved to be the beginning of the end for football's minor leagues. With the birth of the AAFC, suddenly there were twice as many major-league positions open, and the resulting drop in available players had to lower the caliber of play in the lesser circuits. The PCPFL lasted until 1948, its importance drastically cut by the coming of three big-league clubs to the West Coast; the American Association and the Dixie League both reorganized after the war, as promised, and the APFA (known after the war as -- what else? -- the AFL) managed to hang on until 1950. All of these leagues still played some good football and featured a few good players -- Augie Lio in the Dixie and Bobby Thomason in the Association, for example -- but it was no use. The era of the minor leagues was over.

The various all-league teams listed here, though, help to give us an idea of some of the top players of the era who were not distinguished in the NFL, for one reason or another. But with or without official

recognition, these players, along with their leagues, constituted a chapter in football history that deserves to be remembered for its own sake.