

California Dreamin'

West Coast Pros in the 1930s

By Bob Gill, in association with Tod Maher

Back in the days when major-league football did not exist west of the Mississippi, the Pacific Coast Pro Football League of the 1940s paved the way for the coming West Coast franchises in the NFL and AAFC. But even before that, all through the 1930s a series of abortive leagues and independent teams laid the foundation in California for the ultimately successful Pacific Coast league.

Most notable, of course, were the achievements of the Los Angeles Bulldogs, who from 1936-38 fielded a team capable of competing with NFL clubs. But even on a slightly lower level, California pro football in the '30s was, if not thriving, at least hanging in there, keeping the doors open until the public was ready to welcome its product.

For the first few years of that decade, pro football on the West Coast consisted solely of post-season barnstorming by NFL teams like Ernie Nevers' Chicago Cardinals. But 1934 saw the appearance of the fledgling Pacific Coast Pro Football league; and though the circuit didn't last long, at least its choice of a name proved ultimately enduring.

The league featured six teams, four clustered around Los Angeles, the other two from the San Francisco area. Its original ambitious schedule called for a ten-game season beginning Sept. 23 and ending Dec. 30. Most notable may have been the financial arrangements, with players receiving no salaries; instead, after each game, members of the winning team were to receive \$75 apiece, those on the losing club \$50.

If nothing else, the system seemed to promise some hotly contested games.

On the field, the league's best players included back Don Moses and tackle Ernie Smith of the Southern California Maroons, as well as backs Joe Lillard and Joe Keeble of the Westwood Cubs. Lillard, of course, had played in the NFL a year earlier, but 1934 was the first year of the unofficial ban on black players in that league – a policy that continued until the end of World War II, and indirectly aided pro football entrepreneurs on the West Coast, who weren't as "principled" about hiring blacks, and as a result benefited from the presence of Lillard and later stars like Kenny Washington.

Those two teams played one of the season's most exciting games on Armistice Day, the Maroons taking a 17-14 decision. But the "championship," if you can call it that, went to another club – the Berkely Giants, one of the two northern teams. The Giants won all of their three games (a far cry, you'll notice, from the projected ten), including a 17-14 thriller over the Maroons in San Francisco's Seals Stadium that proved the season's decisive game. The standings for the drastically abbreviated season:

Team	W-L-T	PF	PA
Berkely Giants	3-0-0	41	28
Southern Cal Maroons	3-1-1	69	47
Westwood Cubs	2-2-1	68	58
Stanford Braves	2-2-1	37	33
Del Rey Shamrocks	0-3-1	33	68
Moraga Wolves	0-2-0	14	28

The circuit had trouble from the start at the gate, with crowds for the first few games averaging little more than 5,000. Within a month, the \$75-\$50 distribution was replaced by a percentage-of-the-gate arrangement, since gate receipts weren't providing enough money to make the other system work. Then, on Nov. 4, before a game between the Maroons and Braves, a new agreement was announced whereby the winning team would take all the gate receipts, the losers going home empty-handed. That ploy drew the season's largest crowd to date – 17,000 – but the two teams conveniently battled to a 14-14 tie, thus assuring everybody of one good paycheck, anyway.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 6, Nos. 7 & 8 (1984)

From that point on, despite the winner-take-all system's demise, crowds were always over 10,000, at least as reported in the papers. But even though all those games were played in Los Angeles, where attendance had been better than in San Francisco, there is no real explanation for the sudden jump in popularity, and those figures have to be taken with a grain of salt – maybe two or three grains, or half a teaspoon, even.

In December, after the season had come to an indefinite conclusion, the Chicago Cardinals came west and played four games with various PCPFL teams, winning the first two easily, then finding the last two a bit more difficult. The finale was a 21-0 verdict over the Berkely Giants, who held up the contest by refusing to play unless they were paid in advance – a good indication of the value of their “championship,” and a fitting end to the 1934 season.

Despite its problems that year, the league returned in 1935 – sort of. At least, the four southern teams were back, the two San Francisco clubs disappearing and no one looking very hard to find them. The league's organization had changed, too, with the American Legion taking over its administration; hence the new name, the American Legion Pro Football League.

The Westwood Cubs, with Lillard gone but Keeble returning, took the title with a 5-2-1 mark, beating the Los Angeles (nee Southern California) Maroons in the season's final game to finish a half-game in front. The Maroons, too, had lost one of their top players, Ernie Smith moving on to the Green Bay Packers, but Moses stayed around and finished second to Keeble in scoring. In fact, Moses had kept his club in the lead all season, with two earlier wins over Westwood before the finale.

The Hollywood (nee Stanford) Braves won only two games, but featured two notable players in Harry Mattos, later a star back in the AFL and the American Association, and 5'6" Gil Lefebvre, who still holds the NFL record for longest punt return at 98 yards. The final standings:

Westwood Cubs	5-2-1	94	51
Los Angeles Maroons	4-2-1	74	68
Hollywood Braves	2-3-0	48	50
California Shamrocks	0-4-0	3	50

As a reward for winning the championship, the Cubs had the privilege of playing the NFL champion Detroit Lions on Jan. 12 and absorbing a 67-14 beating. A week later, the Lions beat a team of ALPFL all-stars by a more modest 42-7 score.

As it had the year before, attendance in 1935 stayed generally low, averaging a bit over 8,000; but it was an improvement, if you accept the theory that the later 1934 figures were padded. Add that improvement, though slight, to the fact that the 1935 league managed to complete its season as scheduled, and you can begin to understand why the American Legion, though disbanding its league, re-entered the pro football wars in 1936 with the establishment of the Los Angeles Bulldogs, soon to be the pride of the West Coast.

That team, though, is really another story. A more direct offshoot of the 1935 league, in terms of personnel, was another new team for 1936, the Hollywood Stars. Backed by movie mogul Vic McLagen and featuring former NFL all-pro Nate Barrager, the Stars fielded a pretty good team, including a number of players from the vanished ALPFL.

After winning their first three games, two over the San Diego Dons and one over the Salinas Packers, the Stars met the Bulldogs on Oct. 25, in their rivals' inaugural game. Unfortunately, it proved the Stars' undoing, as the Bulldogs rolled over them for an easy 36-0 win. Two weeks later, Hollywood returned to Salinas for a rematch with the Packers and lost that one almost as decisively, 33-0. And with that the team closed out its season.

The Salinas club, though, had a more successful year. Another new team, coached by former NFLer Ed Storm, the Packers were strong enough to actually beat the Bulldogs 21-17 in late November. Three straight losses (to the Brooklyn Dodgers, the Green Bay Packers and a team of “National League All-Stars”) to end the season left Salinas with a 4-4-1 record when it was all over, but the team had made a strong showing, and promised better things for the future.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 6, Nos. 7 & 8 (1984)

In 1937 that prophecy came true, as the Packers finished 7-3-0, losing only to the Bulldogs – three times in a row. Salinas, in fact, managed to become sort of an unofficial AFL member that year. The Bulldogs, newly entered in that league, rolled through an undefeated season to claim the championship; meanwhile, Salinas took advantage of the eastern clubs' visits to L.A. to schedule seven games with NFL teams (including the three with the Bulldogs). Other than the L.A. games, the Packers won them all, with one against Pittsburgh cancelled when that team disbanded. With the lone exception of the Bulldogs, Salinas may have been better than any team in the 1937 AFL.

The Bulldogs continued their success story in 1936, carrying on as an independent after the demise of the AFL. But other big news on the West Coast that year involved the Hollywood Stars, reborn after an abortive 1937 season in which they existed only long enough to lose twice to Salinas. Former NFL coach Paul Schissler arrived in town and quickly re-formed the Stars, his most notable acquisition being USC's Ernie Smith, who left Green Bay to return for another season of pro ball in California. And while he was at it, Schissler provided the impetus for the formation of a whole new league, to be known as the California Pro Football League.

A similar circuit had been planned for 1936, to include teams in Salinas, Hollywood and San Diego, but for some reason it never got off the ground. The 1938 league, though, did indeed come about, with teams in Stockton, Fresno and Oakland, in addition to the mainstays in Hollywood and Salinas. But either there were very few games played, or else several went unreported – at least they've gone undiscovered so far. Anyway, the standings for 1938, such as they are:

Stockton Shippers	2-0-0	39	7
Hollywood Stars	4-1-0	103	39
Salinas Packers	2-2-0	86	71
Fresno Crushers	2-5-0	51	90
Oakland Cardinals	0-2-0	6	78

Kermit Schmidt, a lineman with the Stars, was playing in his third California league in five years – a unique achievement that has no doubt gone largely unrecognized to this day.

The “championship” of this league may well have gone to Stockton, if in fact such a determination was ever made at all. But the Stars seem to have replaced Salinas as the best team in the West that year – other than the Bulldogs, that is. L.A. beat the Stars twice, Salinas three times, to make it clear that no one was yet in a class with that team.

And that, in a nutshell, was probably the biggest problem with the 1938 California circuit: Everybody knew that the Bulldogs were tops on the Coast, and that gave the league a definitely second-rate aura, though in fact it featured some good football. The Stars that year, for instance, were comparable to the Salinas team of 1937, though probably not quite as good.

Anyway, after that one inconclusive season (and maybe unconcluded, as well), the league faded quietly away, along with all its teams. In 1939 the Bulldogs had the West Coast all to themselves. Their only opponents from that locale were “all-star” teams, put together quickly and then disbanded, though one of them did happen to use the name Hollywood Stars, with Schissler as coach. Another, the Oakland All-Stars, closely resembled the now-disbanded Salinas Packers, down to its coach, Ed Storm.

The final “all-star” opponent for the Bulldogs in 1939 was the important one, in that it featured Kenny Washington, the UCLA All-American who was barred from the NFL since he happened to be black. People in Los Angeles may have been more open-minded about such things, and when the game pitting Washington, the Coast's best player, against the Bulldogs, its best team, drew 15,000 – easily the biggest crowd of the season – it didn't take long for Schissler and Jerry Corcoran, the Bulldogs' owner, to get to work on a plan that would continue that rivalry. Before the summer was out, they had created the Pacific Coast Pro Football League, which proved a solid success, enduring through 1948 and featuring players like Washington, Kink Richards, Steve Bagarus, Bosh Pritchard and Frankie Albert.

After a decade of struggling to keep its foot in the door on the West Coast, pro football was finally ready to come inside.