

Remember the Cleveland Rams?

By Hal Lebovitz

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PROLOGUE – Dan Coughlin, our bubbling ex-baseball writer, was saying the other day, “The Rams are in the Super Bowl and I’ll bet Cleveland fans don’t even know the team started right here.”

He said he knows about the origin of the Rams only because he saw it mentioned in a book.

Dan is 41. He says he remembers nothing about the Rams’ days in Cleveland. “Probably nobody from my generation knows. I’d like to read about the team, how it came to be, how it did, why it was transferred to Los Angeles. I’ll bet everybody in town would. You ought to write it.”

Dan talked me into it. What follows is the story of the Cleveland Rams. If it bores you, blame Coughlin.

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Homer Marshman, a long-time Cleveland attorney, is the real father of the Rams. He is now 81, semi-retired, winters in his home on gold-lined Worth Avenue in Palm Beach, Fla., runs the annual American Cenrec Society Drive there. His name is still linked to a recognized law firm here – Marshman, Snyder and Corrigan – and he owns the Painesville harness meet that runs at Northfield each year.

The team was born in 1936 in exclusive Waite Hill, a suburb east of Cleveland. Marshman vividly recalls his plunge into pro football.

“A friend of mine, Paul Thurlow, who owned the Boston Shamrocks, called me. He said a new football league was being formed. It was to be called the American Football League. He said a fellow named Buzz Wetzal, an All-America back from Ohio State who had played for the Chicago Bears, was trying to put together a team for Cleveland and his effort was faltering. He needed financial support.

“I never had seen a pro game and was something less than enthusiastic. But I told Wetzal and Thurlow to visit me at my home. I asked some others from Waite Hill to be there too – Dan Hanna, who was publisher of the *Cleveland News*, John Hadden, the attorney, Ed Bruch and Bill Otis.

“The result was our formation of a group to back the team. We invited Bill Reynolds, Dave Inglis, Bob Gries, Dean Francis, John F. Patt, Burke Paterson and a few others, all prominent Clevelanders. Each put up \$1,000 and Hanna and I put up somewhat more. I can’t recall the exact amount.

“Buzz was to run the show, serve as coach and player, too. One day, Buzz said, ‘Now we’ve got to come up with a name.’ Reporters from the *Plain Dealer* and *Press* were there. I asked the newspapermen for their advice. They agreed it should be a short name, ‘One that would easily fit into a headline,’ they said.

“Fordham was a big football school at the time and its nickname was the Rams. One of the writers suggested we use Rams, too. I said to Buzz, ‘We can’t get one shorter than that.’ That settled it. We became the Rams.”

The Rams played seven games in its birth year and won five. Not bad. But nobody cared, even if the name was a joy for the headline writers. The Rams played to empty seats. The new American Football League made no impact on the local fans, or fans elsewhere for that matter. To them, there was only one pro league – the established National Football League.

“At the end of the season,” Marshman remembers, “Dan Hanna and I had lunch downtown at the Union Club. He talked about plans for the 1937 season for the Rams.

“‘Count me out,’ I said. ‘The American League is a failure.’

“Dan said, ‘Do you think we can get into the National Football League?’

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"We decided to call Joe Carr, the president of the NFL. Cleveland had been in the league some years earlier. He came to Cleveland and encouraged us to apply. He said the league was going to add one team.

"So in December, 1936, I went to the NFL meeting in Chicago and made my presentation. They told me to sit down and wait. Next, a man from Houston made his presentation. They thanked him and told him to leave. I thought that was very impolite since I was allowed to remain. Next, a man from Los Angeles made a pitch for Los Angeles. They excused him, too. I couldn't understand it, because their presentations were every bit as good as mine.

"As soon as the two others had left the room, George Preston Marshall (owner of the Washington Redskins) jumped up and said, 'I move we give it to Cleveland.' Everybody agreed. It was set up. They had decided on us in advance. They wanted to keep the teams in the east and midwest.

"They asked me, 'Are you prepared to pay for the franchise? You've got to pay right now if you want it.' The amount was \$10,000. This was on a Friday and I didn't have that much money. This was depression time, you know. I had \$7,000 in the bank.

"But I said, 'Sure,' and wrote out a check for \$10,000. I hurried back to Cleveland, got \$5,000 from Hanna, took \$5,000 from my savings and rushed to the bank Monday morning to cover the check."

And so, the Cleveland Rams were born again – officially in the National Football League for the first time. The Rams had a few holdover players from 1936 and 10 from the college draft. The league had made the selections for the "new team" before the franchise had been awarded. The first choice was a fullback from Purdue, Johnny Drake.

"We signed our No. 1 draft choice for \$275 a game," recalls Marshman. "He turned out to be Rookie of the Year and people later said to me, 'You're a smart man, Homer. You sure know football talent.' I had nothing to do with the draft. But I smiled and looked wise."

Wetzel remained as general manager and Hugo Bezdek was hired as coach on the recommendation of Bert Bell (owner of the Philadelphia team, who later became president of the NFL). Bob Snyder, an established pro, was signed. (The trouble with mentioning some names is that those readers with sharp memories might ask, "Why didn't you mention so-and-so?" Since all can't be listed, the rest of that first Rams' team in the NFL shall remain nameless. And perhaps it's for the best.)

The squad began workouts at Lake Erie College in Painesville. The Rams had an 11-game schedule, opening with the Detroit Lions at the Stadium the night of Sept. 10. Their remaining four home games were played at League Park.

Here is how John Dietrich, the *Plain Dealer* sports writer, began his story of the opening game:

"From the murky depths of the Stadium (the lights were poor at the time), a drizzling rain glistening from their shiny new uniforms, the Cleveland Rams, newcomers to the National Football League, took a good, long look at what lies ahead. The outlook is somewhat fearful. Before 20,000 ... the Rams went down before the Detroit Lions, 28-0."

The following week, Gordon Cobbledick, a writer from Philadelphia, had a brighter report:

"The doleful guessers who predicted that the Cleveland Rams would be lucky to win one game this year were thoroughly confounded tonight when the grizzled Hugo Bezdek's pupils charged to a 21-3 victory over the Philadelphia Eagles before a crowd of 11,376 in the great Philadelphia Municipal Stadium.

"Uncovering a sensational aerial battery in Bob Snyder, former Ohio University flash, and Johnny Drake, Purdue's foremost gift to Cleveland professional football, the Rams took charge of the game in the second period and never relinquished their command for a minute."

But the "doleful guessers" proved to be right. That was the only game the Rams won. The Rams' home attendance averaged 8,900 for the season. Top ticket price was \$2.20, including tax.

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"A local charity took over our last game of the year," Marshman recalls. "We were to play Sammy Baugh and his Redskins at League Park. There was a big snow and almost nobody showed up except the players."

For 1938 the Rams scheduled their early games at Shaw Stadium and the remaining ones at League Park. The Stadium was too big and the rent too high. When the season started with three successive losses, Marshman and his fellow partners met at the Union Club. Something had to be done. First, Wetzel was fired. Then Bezdek. Art (Pappy) Lewis, the regular guard who also served as Bezdek's assistant, was elevated to "temporary" head coach. Under Lewis the Rams won their next game, beating the Lions at Shaw Field and finishing 4-7 for the season for a fourth-place slot in the five-team Western Division. Attendance remained low.

Despite the improvement under Pappy Lewis, it was decided a "name" coach was needed. Earl (Dutch) Clark, an experienced coach who had been a fine pro quarterback, was named to run the team in 1939. More importantly, the Rams began to acquire better players. Parker Hall was signed as quarterback and Jim Benton as an end. Benton, although slow, had great moves and even better hands. Hall and Benton became an outstanding passing combination.

With the better players the optimistic owners moved the games to the Stadium. The team finished 5-5 and attendance improved somewhat. The owners were so delighted they made Clark a vice president and director of the club as well as coach. Next season the team dropped to 4-6.

In 1941, Dan Reeves, 29, a former athlete who had been associated with his father in a successful New York grocery chain, offered to buy the club. Marshman got his partners together. There were about 23, as he recalls. "We had been paying 'Irish dividends' each year," says Marshman. "That's an expression meaning we lost money. Not much, but a few thousand every season. We had to keep adding partners at \$1,000 each and Hanna and I would loan the club \$1,000 every so often, just to keep afloat. When Reeves offered us \$135,000 for the franchise, everybody said 'grab it.' It meant a small profit for each of us." Now Dan Reeves had the Rams.

The youthful owner immediately made a headline move. He hired Bill Evans as his general manager. Evans had been an outstanding umpire in the American League. Then he became general manager of the Cleveland Indians. The Rams won their first two -- the opener was played at the Akron Rubber Bowl -- lost their next nine and finished in the cellar. Soon Evans was back in baseball.

Now it was 1942 and the world was at war. Pearl Harbor had been bombed. Dan Reeves became a lieutenant in the Army. Many of the athletes were called to service. Some had to work in war plants while they played football to stay out of the draft. The Rams, still coached by Dutch Clark, finished 5-6. At the end of the season Reeves asked the National Football League for permission to suspend operations in 1943 because of the wartime problems. It was granted. The league continued without the Cleveland Rams.

The Rams returned to business in 1944. Charles F. (Chili) Walsh was named general manager. Walsh was an old hand at pro football. He promptly named Aldo (Buff) Donelli as head coach. The problem was to find players. Some had been loaned to other clubs in 1943. Others had left the game or had been called to the service.

Walsh offered a finder's fee of \$100 to anyone recommending a player who made the club. Lou Zontini, the Notre Dame star and an experienced pro, signed as a halfback. He still lives in Cleveland. Tom Corbo, now athletic director at East High, was a guard. A find was Riley (Rattlesnake) Matheson, so called because he had twice been bitten by rattlesnakes. He survived. They say the snakes died. Zontini, to this day, calls him the quickest, toughest guard he ever saw. The "pickup" team finished 4-6.

Stories began to appear that Arthur B. McBride, Cleveland's taxicab magnate, was planning to put a Cleveland team into a brand new football league, the All America Football Conference, with Paul Brown as head coach.

And now we come to historic 1945. Tom Corbo missed it because of an injury. Zontini missed it, too. He was called into the Army. But those who were around never will forget it. It was the Year of the Ram. Walsh had put together a winner. He started by firing Donelli as coach and hiring his brother, Adam Walsh, who had been one of the "seven mules" to the famous Notre Dame Four Horsemen. Let Nate

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Wallack tell you about that season. Nate is now vice president in charge of public relations for the Browns. Walsh hired him to handle the Rams' public relations in 1945. At the time, Nate was a social worker who moonlighted at various P.R. jobs, among other things.

"I put out the first press book the Rams ever had," said Wallack. "Here's a copy, probably the only one left." The roster revealed some of the names: Steve Nemeth, Matheson, Benton, Fred Gehrke, Ralph Ruthstrom, Jim Gillette, Albie Reisz, Milan Lazetich, Steve Pritko, Bill Rieth, Tom Colella, Floyd Konetsky, Mike Scarry, Eberle Schultz, Gil Bouley, Ray Hamilton, Pat West, Rudy Sikich, Howard (Red) Hickey, Rudy Mucha and Don Greenwood. Few of them made more than \$250 a game. And there was one more name, Bob Waterfield, a rookie, the quarterback from UCLA, who had spent two years in the Army.

"We trained at Bowling Green that year," remembers Wallack. "Nobody expected the Rams to be more than ordinary. They didn't know about Waterfield. I must name him as the finest all-around player I have ever known. He was an excellent passer and a fine runner. There was nobody better than Bob on the bootleg keeper.

"In those days most of the men played both ways and he was an excellent defensive back. He also was a fine punter and an outstanding place kicker. And besides, he was married to movie star Jane Russell, his high school sweetheart. She had just made a film "The Outlaw," for Howard Hughes that was getting a lot of publicity. She and Bob lived at the St. Regis Hotel in Cleveland.

"We played our home games at League Park that year. We won our first two, beating the Chicago Cardinals, 21-0, and the Chicago Bears, 17-0.

"As soon as we beat the Bears, I got a call from Life Magazine. They wanted to do a cover story on Jane Russell and Waterfield. I called the movie studio in Hollywood. The studio did not want to publicize the fact that she was married. I went to the St. Regis Hotel to talk with Jane. That was an experience. She was gorgeous – and built. I told her my problem with the studio. I'll never forget what she said: 'I'll cooperate with you on anything that's good for Robert and Rams.' She was a living doll.

"We beat Green Bay and the Bears again and finally lost to the Eagles. It proved to be our only loss of the season. Our biggest division rivals that season were the Lions and the Packers. I remember when we beat the Giants in the Polo Grounds, right after the loss to the Eagles. We had a ticker in the press box. I waited to get the Green Bay score. As soon as I saw the Packers lost, I ran all the way to the clubhouse in center field – I was a little thinner then – and yelled, 'The Packers have lost. The Packers have lost.' One of the New York writers made that the lead on his story. He said it typified the youthful exuberance of the Rams.

"The next week we were to play the Packers at League Park. There was a tremendous ticket demand. It was suggested we move the game to the Stadium, but Chili Walsh refused. He had a lease with League Park. Besides, he was stubborn. He got the idea to put up temporary bleachers along the right field wall. I mean temporary, strictly lumber. We built a small press box behind it. I was standing in the press box when the game started. All of a sudden it looked as though the whole ball park was moving. The temporary seats were breaking and people were falling down. Luckily there was only one serious accident, a broken leg. After the seats collapsed the fans stood on the sideline for the rest of the game. We won, 20-7.

"We still had to beat the Lions in our second to last game to be sure of the division title. It was a Thanksgiving morning game in Deroit. The team went to Detroit by train – on the Mercury. We took trains to all our games. None of this Pullman car stuff, either. The guys sat in coaches."

Konetsky recalls that Waterfield had badly bruised ribs going into that Detroit game. "Adam Walsh told us we had to protect Bob. Nobody laid a hand on him that day." The Rams won, 28-21, and had the division title. "Dan Reeves threw a nice dinner for the team at the Statler in Detroit and then we came home on the Mercury, recalls Wallack.

And now the Rams were to play Slinging Sammy Baugh and his Redskins for the National Football League championship. It was announced the game would be played at the Stadium, Sunday, Dec. 16. Walsh wasn't THAT stubborn.

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"Our season ticket sale was nothing those days," says Wallack. "Maybe 200 at the most. We put the championship seats on sale and immediately we sold 30,000 and we had another week to go before the game. The weather was beautiful. It looked as though we'd sell out the Stadium. Then a blizzard. I mean an awful one. It ended our sale. Now Bill Johns, our business manager, was worried about the field. He wanted to keep it from freezing. He got in his car and set out toward Sandusky, stopping at every farm to buy hay. He wanted to cover the field with it. He bought over 1,000 bales.

"The day of the game the temperature dropped to zero. I sat in the press box and the windows got so steamed we couldn't see. All the writers had to get out into the stands and freeze. Me, too. A water pipe broke in the upper deck and cascading water turned to ice immediately – a frozen waterfall. The fans burned the hay and even the wooden bleacher seats to keep warm. One fan froze his feet and didn't realize it until he started to walk home after the game. An ambulance had to be called. The game was so exciting, though, the fans stayed to the end. We sold about 35,000 tickets and 29,000 showed."

Konetsky, a defensive end, didn't think he would start. "I put on every piece of clothes I could find," he remembers. "Then when Walsh told me I was starting, I had to strip off the layers so I could move. I'll never forget that cold."

In the first quarter Sammy Baugh, back in his own end zone, tried to pull a surprise. He threw a pass. Konetsky, rushing in, managed to tip the ball. It hit the cross bar and bounced back into the end zone for a safety, giving the Rams two points. (Because of this play the rule was changed. Now a pass that hits any part of the goal posts is incomplete.) It turned out those two points made the difference. The Rams won, 15-14. They were the champions of the football world.

The next day Johns loaded what was left of the hay and put it in a truck. He tried to sell it back to the farmers without success. The Rams' players each received \$1,469.74 as their share of what then was football's Super Bowl.

Meanwhile, Arthur McBride not only had hired Paul Brown to coach his entry, the Cleveland Browns, in the new All-America Conference, he also had obtained a long-term lease on the Stadium. The rival Rams, world champions, would have to play at League Park. Reeves wanted no part of that kind of competition.

On Jan. 11, 1946, Reeves asked for permission to move to Los Angeles. He threatened to disband his franchise when opposition developed. The other National Football League owners gave in. The Cleveland Rams moved west and became the Los Angeles Rams. Today they are in the Super Bowl.

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EPILOGUE – In 1953 Homer Marshman and his wife were in New York for a brief vacation. He had just remarried. "I was telling her what fun we had with the Rams," he recalls. "She said, 'Then why don't you buy into football again?' "Why not,' I thought. I knew McBride was having trouble with Paul Brown and wanted to sell. I called him. We set up a meeting and made a deal in 15 minutes. I bought the Browns for \$600,000 and I got five Clevelanders to go in with me.

"All we had to do was pay \$300,000 down and \$100,000 a year for the next three years. We paid that out of profits. We sold out to Art Modell in 1961 for \$4.3 million. It was an offer my partners couldn't refuse. I didn't want to sell, but I had to go along or it wouldn't be a deal. The club is worth more than \$15 million today. So are the Rams."

Art Modell now lives in Waite Hill.