

FOOTBALL IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

by Alan Needham

Which N.F.L. game would you consider the most important of the decade so far? The Rams-Oilers matchup in 1984, when Eric Dickerson broke O.J. Simpson's single-season rushing record? Maybe the Bears-Saints game of the same year, when Walter Payton topped Jim Brown to become the all-time rushing champ? How about the Dallas-Cowboys versus Pittsburgh game during week 1 of the 1982 season?

American sports fans may not consider the 36-28 Steelers' victory as a milestone in football history, but to a British counterpart the game is seen as a seed in the growth of the sport in the U.K. In September 1982, one of the true rarities of British society occurred -- a new TV station went on the air. Channel 4, the first new station to be set up for 25 years, was intended to cater for minority groups in the community -- Asians, Blacks, Irish, etc. At the time, football fans, or people who had the vaguest idea about quarterbacks, linebackers, etc. were definitely in a minority.

On September 7th, three days after the launch of C4, the first football program was aired. Called simply "American Football," the program featured the Cowboys-Steelers game, and a thorough check on the basic rules. The viewing figures for the program were a mere 750,000. Since then, football has taken off so rapidly in such a short space of time. Super Bowl XX is believed to have been seen by 10 million people at some time during the game, N.F.L. merchandise is sold all over the place, and most everyone in the U.K. know who William Perry, Dan Marino and Joe Montana are. Last season, N.F.L. transmissions became the top TV sport viewing-wise in the U.K., as there was a TV blackout of soccer matches. However, the most important result of that Dallas-Pittsburgh game was the birth of a new sport in a country which is usually reluctant to take a new sport to its heart.

The first ever football game played in England's green and pleasant land was as long ago as 1910. The game was held on a soccer pitch in Northfleet, Kent between crews of two U.S. battleships moored in the Thames. The teams, from USS Georgia and USS Rhode Island, played in front of 4,500 bemused Britons, with Georgia running out 11-0 winners. After that, there were probably games played by GIs based in the country during the two world wars, but football hardly caught on with the British.

It was no real surprise. After all, to people used to subdued sports such as cricket, football seemed, well, alien. A group of men running around with pads almost all over the body, then stopping to have a talk amongst themselves, then starting all over again. Then there's the jargon they use. How can they call it a "touchdown" when they don't even put the ball down when they score? To top it all, the Yanks even have the cheek to call it "football" when they hardly ever kick the ball. Most peculiar.

The N.F.L. was first noticed in this country in 1977, when ITV's "World of Sport" showed half an hour of the 11th Super Bowl between Oakland and Minnesota. This carried on yearly until '82, and was just a time filler for anyone curious enough. When C4 started screening games weekly, interest grew. At the time, soccer was losing popularity, and fast. In the past, teams in the lower divisions were guaranteed packed houses every time they played. Nowadays, there are only two teams in the country who can attract home attendances of over 40,000. Soccer violence is seen as one of the reasons for the decline of Britain's national sport, as is the fall from power we

have suffered on the field over the years. But for whatever reason, the stage was set for something new. Along came football.

It wasn't long before the sport took hold of people, and after watching the likes of Riggins, Plunkett, and Gastineau perform, there were a few people who started to wonder: "Why couldn't I do that?" In the late fall, a dozen or so members of Harrow Rugby Club clubbed together to buy a football and formed the London Ravens. A trial was held at Hyde Park, London, and thanks to a mention in the local paper, over 200 men turned up. This was whittled down to 50, and within six months the team was fully kitted up. At the time, the Ravens were the only team in the country with full kit, so for opposition they had to be thrown in at the deep end and play the teams from the U.S. air bases.

July 9, 1983 was the date for the Ravens' debut game, versus the Fighting Chicks of Chicksands USAF, held at the Chelsea soccer ground, Stamford Bridge. When the Ravens contacted the Americans for a game, they thought it was a practical joke. They couldn't believe that a team had been set up in the U.K. outside of the air bases. Chicksands accepted the challenge, expecting an easy game.

The Fighting Chicks scraped an 8-0 victory, with London hammering down to the Chicks' 10-yard line three times. The rematch saw the Fighting Chicks win 38-0, but the point had been made -- football was growing in the U.K. Later that year, the Ravens took on the Northwich (now Manchester) Spartans in the first game between two British teams, and won 48-0.

At the start of 1984, there were about twenty teams in training, most of which had no kit, no experience, and no coaches. At the time only one organisation was in business, the British American Football Federation. BAFF was set up in the fall of '83 by a London equipment supplier, Max Randell, with four charter member teams. There were quite a few unaligned teams who were wary of the league, and a meeting was arranged at Baden Powell House in London in order to unite the teams. It ended up with a split. BAFF, who at this time had increased its members to seven teams, liased with the European Football League, the federation which organises matches between teams in West Germany, France, Italy, Finland, Switzerland, Austria and Holland.

Two months later, a meeting at Chicksands air base in Bedfordshire led to the formation of the American Football League (UK), with 22 charter members.

The 1984 season was more or less a year full of friendly games, as neither league had set up any structure. That season saw a lot of barriers being broken, however, such as the first game played by a British team against a European team, when Poole Sharks were thrashed by the German Champs Dusseldorf Panthers. The Ilford Blackhawks took part in a tournament in Holland but came back winless. The Ravens became the first team to defeat the Europeans when they stomped all over Paris Spartacus 51-0 in September of that year.

The 1985 AFL (UK) season was dominated by the Ravens, who won all 13 games on their way to the Summer Bowl, the league's championship, and also managed to beat Chicksands USAF at the third attempt. The other finalists were the Streatham Olympians, another London-based team, who managed to upset the Birmingham Bulls, regarded as the second-best team in the country, 15-13 in the semi-finals. Summer Bowl I was held at Villa Park, Birmingham in September, with the Ravens winning 45-7.

The BAFF season, with 12 teams, ended in controversy. In the semi-finals, the Rockingham Rebels of Northampton upset the Brighton B52s 21-6, and the Croydon Coyotes beat the Cambridge County Cats 20-8. Both losing teams filed complaints that the winning teams had used unregistered players. Despite the fact that both teams had filed complaints immediately after the games, BAFF never held an inquiry either before the title game or after. The Rebels won the championship 13-0, but Brighton and Cambridge decided to stage their own version of the championship game, with the B52s winning 29-22 and proclaiming themselves champs.

Apart from the AFL and BAFF, there were also two smaller leagues, the UKAFA, who had the Slough Silverbacks as champions, and the Amateur American Football Conference, Locomotive Derby being this league's No.1 in '85. The year ended on a high note, with the AFL forming an all-star team (with 31 Ravens players out of 50) and beating the more experienced French international side 7-0.

So, the first full year of British football was over, and everything seemed okay, except the fact that there was no single structure. The two main leagues, AFL and BAFF, started talks about a possible merger, which ended up with both leagues becoming the British American Football League. Now, Britain had a definitive league, and the sport seemed to be in great shape. The fans could now sit back and wait for next season to come round with the satisfaction of knowing that there would be no doubt as to who the top teams were. The satisfaction lasted for just over a week.

The beer company, Budweiser, were interested in using the sport as a vehicle for selling beer almost right from the start. In '84, they tried to organise a tournament, but the plans fell through. In '85, they were hinting at sponsoring a league, which also fell through. In early '86, they revealed plans to start a league of their own. In a meeting before representatives of over 70 teams, Bud put forward their plans, which were very tempting. For a joining fee of roughly \$375, the teams wouldn't have to pay referees' fees, would get discounts on playing equipment, medical supplies, office equipment, the chance to have their games shown on cable TV, and the chance to attend training camps. For most teams who previously existed on a shoestring, the offers were appetising.

The catch was the league more or less owned the clubs, having a 51% interest. Seventy-two teams joined the league, including the AFL champion Ravens, beaten finalist Streatham Olympians, BAFF finalists Rockingham and Croydon, and other "name teams" such as the Northampton Stormbringers, Oxford Bulldogs, Greenwich Rams and Heathrow Jets. Most of the teams in the Budweiser League are based in the South of England, with BAFL teams ranging from the Midlands up to Scotland.

Since the formation of the Bud League, the two organizations have engaged in a war somewhat similar to the NFL-AFL squabbling of the '60s. The first blow was struck when the Streatham Olympians, then of the BAFL, fixed up a match against the Paris Jets of France. A few days before the game was due to take place, the Olympians switched to the Bud League. The BAFL is the sole member of the EFL in Britain, and the European body only allows teams within its organization to play each other. The Jets faced possible suspension and even ejection from the EFL, and so pulled out of the match.

If the NFL and AFL used to fight over star college players, the British leagues try to top each other by signing up the best NFL stars for the board. Budweiser started it all by having Dan Marino as honorary President. Marino came over to London last April to hold a coaching clinic. The BAFL replied by getting Steve Grogan to hold a clinic in Glasgow, and then revealed plans

to appoint Eric Dickerson, William Perry and Mick Luckhurst as honorary Commissioners. (Mick Luckhurst is well known over here, as he was born in England.) The two leagues really don't like each other, and take every opportunity to sling mud at each other. The BAFL see the Bud League as a season-long beer advertisement, while Bud sees the BAFL as incompetent. As for the fans, they would sooner see the two get together.

Ask anyone with the gall to start up a football team in the U.K. how he went about it, and you'll probably get the same answer. The story will begin in someone's living room, while watching the Cowboys, Redskins, Dolphins, etc. go through the motions. He will get talking with a few of his friends in the local pub about forming a club, and then put a message in the local paper appealing for willing potential players. The first training sessions will be disorganised to say the least, with no padding, ball, blocking sleds, etc. Rugby balls are the same shape as footballs, but a little too big, so the ball would be deflated and taped up, maybe a bit awkward to throw, but that doesn't matter. As for padding, all sorts of objects were used at the beginning, because the only place you could get the real thing was on the other side of the Pond. Motorbike helmets would be used by some players, while hockey helmets were worn by others. As for the shoulder pads, books stuffed inside their shirts were the order of the day for some, while one club I know had a guy who would make you a set of shoulder pads using rubber foam and a cut-up plastic bucket, for beer money. Some teams didn't bother worrying about pads and went straight into full tackle football.

If it weren't for the American expatriates and servicemen, the sport would surely have died as fast as it had been born. It was they who managed to get the clubs organised, on and off the field. Most of the Americans who organised training sessions, set up the formations, and in some cases played for the team weren't ex-NFL players and coaches -- just guys who remember pulling on the pads at college, high school, or even little league level. To some clubs, it didn't really matter if you never played football in your life, if you had an American accent you were asked to coach the team! It seems that the more Yanks you have on your side, the better. Although there is a limit imposed on the number of Americans and Canadians a club can have (5 on a side, and no more than 3 on the field at anyone time), having a Yank on the coaching staff boosts the team morale so much that the story goes that one club without any Americans has its coaching staff put on a thick U.S. accent at the start of the game just to worry the opposition!

So, after the first few months, the team might think they're ready enough to get padded up. The problem is raising the money to get the stuff. It costs roughly \$500 to fully kit out a player. Multiply that by 40 and then consider that the team is full of amateurs, some of whom are unemployed, and you realise that a rather tricky problem emerged. The trouble with British sport is that we don't have people like Ted Turner and Steinbrenner, people with a bit of cash to give to sporting clubs, especially on such a risky venture as a new football club. The players had to pay for the kit off their own bat in most cases, and this was make or break time for the majority of teams, if they loved the game so much and wanted to play so badly that they were willing to lay out for the privilege of playing.

After the first few sessions with full kit, the team starts to think about getting into competition, but first they have to find a playing pitch. There are many different playing areas used around the country, the most basic being the local park, usually shared with the local park soccer team, with the pitch full of broken glass, stones, dog crap, etc., and usually with only a couple of football fans, a few defectees from a nearby cricket game, and a drunk with his pet dog watching.

One of the best known teams, the Milton Keynes Bucks, play in the Milton Keynes Bowl, which may sound impressive, but all it is is a grass-lined pit, with a ground which resembles a dirt track. The space between the 40-yard lines was just dirt and gravel.

The second, and most likely place to play is on someone else's turf, such as a rugby, soccer and athletics stadium. The trouble with this is that most stadiums don't have the size to accommodate a 120-yard long pitch, which means the majority of clubs have only 80 or 90 yards separating the end zones. Another problem is actually getting N.F.L. supporters out of their armchairs to see live football. The way most clubs try to pack 'em in is by promoting the sport as a family sport, which I guess is a little different from the promoting methods used by the early N.F.L. teams, but that's what the British have been looking for since soccer suffered from the hooligan element, so they must be on the right track. Most clubs try to attract fans by putting on "full American razzmatazz," such as marching bands, cheerleaders, etc. At the moment, Americana is in, and it's cool to tell people that you understand what a shotgun formation and a passing tree are, but as soon as this fad disappears the sport could find itself in big problems.

Attendances can vary from the aforementioned cricket defectees to the top attendance so far, 13,500 for the Surrey Thunderbolts friendly versus the Paris Blue Angels last April. One thousand seems to be the average, and if you can get over 2,000 fans per match, you must be doing something right. One club which has only the bravest fans at its home games is the Windsor Monarchs, who play home games at the Windsor Safari Park. The only thing which separates the game from the wild animals is a wire fence. No doubt they send their most expendable players out when a field goal attempt goes astray!

So, what of the playing standard? At the moment, the star players are Americans. Probably the best player in the country at the moment is Clifton Stroughter, RB and Coach of my local team the Nottingham Hoods. Stroughter, a graduate of Illinois University and former roommate of Tony Eason, has scored 46 TDs so far this season, only 11 games old. Other names that come to mind are Gladstone McKensie, English-born RB for Milton Keynes, Joe St. Louis of the Ravens, Birmingham Bulls QB Dave Stanton, and Bulls LB Dave Chambers.

Any decent U.S. college player could step into any British team and become a star, but until recently the Ravens (who have lost only four times in their short life and all to U.S. teams) were an all-British squad. This year, semi-pro teams and small college teams have ventured over to England to play, the first such game being between the Brighton B52s and City College, O.J. Simpson's alma mater. Over 12,000 fans saw the San Francisco side win 72-0, but the first true links with the Yanks had been made, and the B52s will be in the Bay this fall when the two teams meet at Candlestick Park.

The next visit was made by the Chicago Metropolitan Football League, in May. They had an all-star team play the Leeds Cougars and Manchester Spartans. Both games ended up with the MFL team running up basketball scores. Admittedly, the B52s, Spartans and Cougars aren't the best in the country, and teams such as the Ravens, Bulls, Leicester Panthers and Nottingham Hoods haven't played American opposition outside of the air bases, but the result will probably be a large victory to the U.S.A.

However, visiting coaches from the States all have a good word for the ever improving Brits, and a few of our players are being offered scholarships at a few small colleges. It has been predicted that the next generation of British players will be good enough to play in the N.F.L. in 20 or so years' time, but at the moment, the gap is enormous. For example, in the July 7th edition of Sports Illustrated, there were three articles on football. One was about the death of

Browns free safety Don Rogers through a cocaine overdose, and the drugs problem rife in the N.F.L. and all American sport. Another was concerned with the N.F.L.-U.S.F.L. court battle. The third article was about the Mansfield Express, a team of people who didn't play football for financial gain, just for the love of the sport.

Like every other team in the U.K., they have to pay out of their own pockets for the equipment, ground hire, advertising, traveling fees, etc. You can go to any game in Britain, and I assure you that the only people who are paid are the referees. (The imported American players and coaches have their travel and accommodations fees taken care of, and the clubs do their best to find them jobs.) As yet, only one club has tried to pay players (the Poole Sharks), but after a short while the Sharks folded, running debts of roughly \$8000.

Using the Minor Leagues Classification table in Coffin Corner Vol. VII, nos. 9-10, I'd say the main two leagues are rated in between classes A and B on the business side, in Class AA on the PR side, and in class C playing-wise. Some believe that if football in the U.K. doesn't turn out to be another fad, we could soon be having a league system as good as the N.F.L.'s in the future. Some people in the know tell of rumors that London could have an N.F.L. franchise in the future. Despite this, some people would actually prefer to keep the sport as it is -- an amateur and sportsmanlike diversion during the summer months. While the N.F.L. is rife with scandal after scandal, do you know what the most controversial event in the British football scene was? It was when the Orpington Owls were kicked out of the Bud League when two of their representatives attended a banquet held in honor of Dan Marino heavily under the influence of alcohol, and one of them threw up on the floor!

So, if you are in the country between May and September, why not spend a Sunday afternoon at a game? There is a team in almost every main city in the country, and even though you won't see many players of professional standard, you will witness the sport of football being played the way it was intended -- just for the fun of it.

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