

SNAGS, CLIPPERS, AND LOMBARDI

The Minors just before World War II

By Bob Gill

It was a publicist's dream.

What with the Redskins' move to Washington, the well-chronicled professional debut of All-American Sammy Baugh, the 'Skins' 49-14 win over the Giants to clinch the Eastern Division title, and Baugh's amazing performance in beating the Bears for the NFL title, 1937 provided NFL fans with plenty of excitement.

But a couple of the year's most interesting football stories took place not in the NFL, but in the netherworld of football's minor leagues. As a result, they were quickly consigned to oblivion, the common fate of most chapters of non-NFL pro football history.

It was a fate they didn't deserve.

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A year earlier, 1936 had seen the births of three noteworthy minor leagues: the Midwest Football League, the Dixie League, and the American Association. In those days, the crucial season for any new league was its second – many failed even to start it, much less finish it. But each of these new leagues avoided the sophomore jinx and went on to a relatively lengthy and healthy existence.

In the MWFL, the 1937 season went very smoothly, with the weeding out of a few poorer teams, a resulting improvement in the quality of play, and the promise of better things to come in 1938. The Dixie League survived, but encountered some problems that would continue to plague it for the next two seasons, until in 1940 the league managed to turn itself around. The American Association took the middle road, with generally improved play but a couple of snags cropping up along the way. Looking back from this date, though, those snags stand out as the most interesting features of the season.

For one thing, the AA in 1937 staged the first overtime game in pro football history -- almost.

The league was divided into Northern and Southern divisions, with the winners matched up for the title at the end of the season. In the championship playoff, the Newark Tornadoes and White Plains Bears fought to a 3-3 tie. But at the end of the game, Newark offered to continue with an unprecedented fifth period – NOT sudden-death, just an extra 15 minutes of play. League President Joe Rosentover, in attendance at the game, approved of the idea, provided that White Plains also agreed. Poised nervously on the threshold of history, the Bears turned down the offer, passing up a chance to play an overtime championship game 21 years before the so-called "Greatest Game Ever." White Plains and Newark were declared co-champions, and everybody went home happy – sort of.

The problem still remained for Rosentover. The AA's two best teams that season were Newark and the Paterson Panthers, both in the Southern Division. Their meeting ended in a scoreless tie, and the division title came down to the regular-season finale, with Paterson (4-0-1) needing only another tie to finish ahead of Newark (5-1-3). Newark squeaked out a 7-2 win, setting up the almost-historic game with White Plains two weeks later.

But in Paterson they were telling a different version of the story.

Late in the crucial game, with the Panthers driving for a possible winning score, the officials had turned the ball over to Newark when a Paterson pass fell incomplete in the end zone. Unfortunately, the rule they cited in making the call was no longer on the books. At one time, any incomplete pass in the end zone resulted in a touchback for the defensive team, but the rule had been changed a few years earlier, and in 1937 it applied only on FOURTH down. The disputed call had not come on a fourth down play.

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Paterson lodged an official protest, and the league handled it exactly as the NFL would in similar situations more than 40 years later: Rosentover admitted that the ruling had been in error, apologized to the Panthers and their fans, but declined to do anything more.

That wasn't good enough in Paterson, and furious Panther officials threatened to withdraw from the league – a serious threat because Paterson was the AA's best franchise. Not only were the Panthers a strong team, but they drew the biggest crowds as well. Considering that, Rosentover turned the matter over to an impartial panel of New York Giants coach Steve Owen, well-known official Tom Thorp, and Dan Parker of the New York MIRROR. They ruled unanimously in favor of Paterson.

Following that decision, a replay of the Paterson-Newark game was scheduled for Dec. 12. The Panthers won easily this time, 27-7, and the following week beat White Plains in similar fashion, 20-0.

Justice had triumphed.

There was only one problem. The Newark-White Plains "championship" game had already been played Dec. 5, before the resolution of Paterson's protest. The league couldn't very well tell the people who had attended that game that, well, it really wasn't for the title after all, and in fact amounted to no more than an exhibition.

How to resolve the problem? Someone in the league office conveniently noticed that Paterson, with only six regular-season games, had failed to play the "required" seven league games, and so was ineligible for the championship. That sounded good, and may even have been true (that is, the AA may have had a seven-game requirement on its books); but the argument loses much of its force when you notice White Plains, a certified participant in the official title game, also played only six league games.

Apparently, though, that explanation and the chance to play "exhibitions" with Newark and White Plains proved sufficient to mollify Panther management. Paterson remained in the league, and everyone lived happily ever after.

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Meanwhile, in Wilmington, Del., a team called the Wilmington Clippers was playing its first season in 1937. Playing teams from the AA, the Dixie League and the NFL, the Clippers compiled a 7-4 record (0-3 against the NFL). A year later they improved that mark to 9-3, then joined the AA for the 1939 season. They tied for the Southern Division title that year, losing to the Newark Bears in a playoff game; reached the championship game in 1940 before bowing to the Jersey City Giants; and finally won the title in 1941 with a 21-13 decision over the Long Island Indians.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

One of the Clippers' top players in their first year of existence was a 5'11", 192-pound guard from Fordham, making his debut in the professional ranks. In evaluating his performance that season, a brief sketch in a Wilmington program had this to say:

"It is quite possible that better guards have played the game than Vince Lombardi, but you'll never convince anyone who has seen him in action of that likelihood."

And yes – it's THAT Vince Lombardi.

Surprisingly enough, considering all that's been written about Lombardi, the fact that he played pro football for four years seems to have gone completely unreported. But play he did.

After starring with Wilmington in 1937, Lombardi moved to the AA Brooklyn Eagles for the following season. He started all but two games – missing one late-season game and playing only as a substitute in the next, indicating a probable injury. In 1939 he played a single game with Brooklyn, starting the league opener at guard and then disappearing for the rest of the season.

Lombardi continued his invisible act in 1940 (though its possible that he may eventually turn up with one of the many teams in operation in the New York-New Jersey area at that time). Then in 1941 he returned to the pro ranks with the Churchill Pros, a strong team based in Springfield, Mass. The Pros played a tough schedule of NFL and AA teams, but their arch rivals were the Hartford Blues, another strong

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independent club. Both teams applied for membership in the AA for 1942, but their applications were ignored when the war put the league in mothballs for the duration.

The Churchills got off to a poor start in 1941, losing four of their first five games. But in late October team officials announced that they had arranged a merger with the Providence Steam Roller, which had dropped out of the AA a few weeks earlier. The Providence players, their coach and their business manager (none other than PFRA member Pearce Johnson) moved en masse to Springfield and set up shop under the flag of the Churchill Pros. The new team finished the season with five straight wins, including one over Hartford.

Only four original members of the Pros remained with the club after the massive reorganization, but Lombardi was one of them – an indication that he was still playing good football.

By all accounts, it seems that Lombardi was no slouch as a player. His main problem was probably his lack of size. In many ways he was the quintessential minor league player of the pre-war era: a solid player from a big-time Eastern school who was excluded from the NFL mainly, if not entirely, because of his lack of size. The AA in those days was full of 190-pound linemen from schools like Fordham and Columbia, and though they were physically unable to stand up against 240-pound NFL giants, they generally knew how to play football.

Lombardi, in particular, would later get the chance to show everyone just how much he did know the game. He may have lacked size as a player, but as a coach he still casts a giant shadow.