

THE WAY IT WAS

By Tony Barnhart

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On Jan. 25, 1987, just over 100,000 people paid \$75 each to watch the New York Giants play the Denver Broncos for the championship of professional football. According to the CBS network, another 123 million people saw the game on television.

In addition to the live gate receipts of \$7.6 million, CBS generated another \$31.2 million by selling 30-second commercial spots for a mere \$600,000 each. Each member of the winning New York Giants received a check for \$36,000.

To a generation raised on televised sports, such numbers have become commonplace. To Mel Hein they were staggering.

Hein 77, was in Chicago's Wrigley Field on Dec. 17, 1933 when his New York Giants played the Chicago Bears in what is recognized as the NFL's first championship game. The pertinent numbers that day were a bit different: Approximately 26,000 fans, the largest crowd the Bears had drawn in eight years, paid about \$4 each to see the game. There was no radio, no television and as a member of the losing team, Hein earned exactly \$140.22 for his day's work.

"I still love football," said Hein, the Hall of Fame center who now lives in San Clemente, California. "But sometimes it boggles my mind to see what it has become."

Hein is one of 130 pro football old-timers who responded to a recent survey on a variety of topics by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. These men are all bonded by the fact that they played professional football prior to 1959, the year most football experts agree marks the transition into the game's modern era.

Through their memories, these "Pre-59ers," paint a picture of a game played by rugged men who never would have dreamed that someday others would grow wealthy from it. While today's highly-paid players travel in luxury, these men tell of long train rides, low pay, and playing with pain. They tell of their love for the game and question if today's players share that feeling.

The former players who responded to the survey range in age from 60 to 82. Some are beset by physical and financial problems, some of which are directly related to having played professional football. Their stories are different, but the common thread is that while many wished they had made more money, none regrets having played the game.

The only regret expressed among those surveyed is the belief that the approximately 900 living players of their era – from the beginning of the National Football League in 1920 to the dawn of the modern age in 1959 – are not given sufficient credit for serving as caretakers of the game during its developmental years.

It is these men, said Hein and many others interviewed, who kept the game alive through a depression and a world war while playing for little money and no security under conditions that were less than ideal.

Until this year, in fact, no professional football player who retired prior to 1959 received a penny of pension from the NFL. That situation has now been corrected but these Pre-59ers, some of them in the Hall of Fame, sometimes feel like little more than shadowy figures in pro football's forgotten four decades.

"Money is not really the issue," said Al Wistert, a tackle for the Philadelphia Eagles from 1943-51. "Most of us would like a little recognition for what we contributed to keep the game going. After all, it won't be that long before we're all gone."

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The history of the NFL is rich and colorful and these aging but proud men now argue that it never would have been so without them.

Pro football historians disagree on many things but they do agree on this: The nationally televised NFL championship game of 1958 and the hiring of Pete Rozelle as commissioner in 1960 launched professional football into its modern era and were instrumental in creating the tremendous popular and financial success the game now enjoys.

But pro football prospers today, it can be argued, because men were willing to take risks when the times suggested caution. They persisted when economics and common sense said they should quit. They were willing to make history instead of letting it pass them by.

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HERE ARE SOME PLAYERS WHO ARE UNFORGETTABLE

When interviewing 130 former players who played in professional football's golden age, a number of individuals constantly are referred to as "the most memorable players of the game." They are:

RED GRANGE: 6-0, 185, Halfback, Illinois. Gave the NFL instant respectability when he signed with the Bears immediately after his final college game in 1925. The Bears took Grange on a nationwide barnstorming tour which proved the pro game had a future. Born Forksville, Pa., June 13, 1903.

JIM THORPE: 6-1, 235, Halfback, Carlisle. Hero of the 1912 Olympics, joined the Canton Bulldogs in 1920 and played for eight teams in his career. Was first president of American Professional Football Association. Born, Prague, Okla., 1888. Died 1953.

SAMMY BAUGH: 6-2, 180, Quarterback, Texas Christian. Won six NFL passing titles during 15-year career with Washington Redskins. One of only three players to win an NFL triple crown in 1943 as he led the league in passing, punting, and pass interceptions. Born March 7, 1914 in Temple, Texas.

BOBBY LAYNE: 6-2, 190, Quarterback, Texas. Among the most colorful and competitive players ever. Led the Detroit Lions to the 1953 NFL title with a touchdown pass in the closing seconds. Played for four teams from 1948-62. Born Dec. 19, 1926 in Santa Anna, Texas. Died 1986

DON HUTSON: 6-1, 180, End, Alabama. Considered one of the NFL's best receivers of all time. Led the league in receiving eight times in 11-year career spent with the Green Bay Packers. Was the leading scorer five times. Known for incredible moves and sticky hands. Born Jan. 31, 1913 in Pine Bluff, Ark.

STEVE VAN BUREN: 6-1, 200 LSU: Led the league in rushing 1947, '48 and '49 and led the Philadelphia Eagles to conference championships each year and the NFL championship in '48 and '49. Played with Eagles 1944-51. Career cut short by a knee injury. Born Dec. 28, 1920 in La Ceiba, Honduras.

MEL HEIN: 6-2, 225, Center, Washington State. Played 15 years with the New York Giants (1931-45). Played both offense and defense and unofficial records suggest he may have played more minutes than anyone in pro history. Was the league's player of the year in 1938. Born Aug. 22, 1909 in Redding, Calif.

OTTO GRAHAM: 6-1, 195, Quarterback, Northwestern. Played with Cleveland Browns for 10 years (1946-55) and in that time the Browns lost only 13 games. Won four league titles in the All-America Football Conference and three NFL titles after the merger. An extremely accurate passer. Born Dec. 6, 1921 in Waukegan, Ill.

SID LUCKMAN: 6-0, 195, Quarterback, Columbia. Hand-picked by George Halas to direct the T-formation offense of the Chicago Bears in 1939. In 1940 led Bears to famous 73-0 championship win over the Redskins. All-Pro five times and Player of the Year in 1943. Born Nov. 21, 1916 in Brooklyn, N.Y.

MARION MOTLEY: 6-1, 238, Fullback, South Carolina St., Nevada. Gave the Cleveland Browns (1946-53) a fullback with sprinter's speed and a solid blocker for Graham. Despite limited use, was the NFL's leading rusher in 1950. Finished career in 1955 with Pittsburgh. Born June 5, 1920 in Leesburg, Ga.

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Other unforgettable personalities often mentioned by former players:

JOHNNY "BLOOD" McNALLY: One of the more complex personalities in the history of the game. Known mostly for his after-hours adventures away from the field, he was also one of the most learned men in the game, thoroughly versed in Shakespeare. Got the nickname "Blood" from movie "Blood and Sand" and used it as a fake name in order to play pro football while still in college.

ART DONOVAN: A round, gregarious defensive tackle for the Baltimore Colts during their championship seasons of 1958 and 1959. Was All-Pro four times, but was better known for his sense of humor. Donovan once gave up beer for Lent, to him the ultimate sacrifice. Thus wife Dotty was surprised when Donovan came weaving up the walkway one night. "I thought you gave up beer for Lent," she said. "I drank wine," Donovan said. Donovan spent the night in his bathtub.

C.C. "CASH & CARRY" PYLE: The agent for Red Grange, he was a trendsetter by making an agreement to represent Grange weeks before Grange played his final college game. Set up nationwide tour featuring Grange and the Chicago Bears that netted him hundreds of thousands of dollars. After parting with Grange went on to promote such things as the "Bunion Derby," a walking race from California to New York.

CURLY LAMBEAU: Coached the Green Bay Packers from 1919 to 1949 and gave the NFL its first dynasty with championships in 1929-30-31. A strict disciplinarian, he was also one of football's most excitable coaches. "I think better when I get excited," he said. A player once threatened to kill Lambeau after being fined \$500 for missing practice. "That wouldn't do you any good," said Lambeau. "I'd just hit you with another \$500 fine."

JIMMY CONZELMAN: Versatility should have been his middle name. Became head coach of the Rock Island Independents in 1921 at the age of 23 but his football accomplishments paled in comparison to those outside the game. He was a middleweight boxing champion in the service, a songwriter, actor, syndicated columnist, and advertising executive. His commencement address to the University of Dayton Class of 1943 became standard reading for all West Point cadets.

GEORGE PRESTON MARSHALL: Colorful owner of the Washington Redskins known as a promotional and entertainment genius. Obtained an NFL franchise in Boston in 1932, calling it the Braves. Renamed it Redskins when team switched home games to Fenway Park. Moved the team to Washington in 1937. Was the first to use a marching band as halftime entertainment. Was in and out of controversy because he did not have a black player on his team until 1962.

ART "TARZAN" WHITE: At 5-8, 225, was considered one of the strongest men in football in the late '30s and early '40s. Supplemented his income as a professional wrestler in the off-season. Suffered a double fracture of the spine in a game in 1945 and left hospital 10 days later to wrestle in Florida.

EARLE "GREASY" NEALE: Was known as an egotistical competitor with an incredible desire to win. "He was a foul-mouthed, cussing, drinking jackass," said Tommy Thompson, who quarterbacked the Philadelphia Eagles when they were a power in the late '40s. "But he was the best coach I ever knew."

WEE WILLIE WILKIN: Drafted in 1938 by the Washington Redskins, this tackle from St. Mary's of California was best known for his after-hours festivities. When Redskins played the NFL All-Stars in an exhibition game, Wilkin went on a binge and finally showed up the morning of the game. After a tongue-lashing by coach Ray Flaherty, Wilkin responded: "Coach, just when I'm getting ready to play you a helluva football game you have to go and talk to me like that."

GEORGE HALAS: Known as the father of pro football, the man was not without his idiosyncracies. Among his many obsessions, say former players, was the belief that someone was always spying on him. "One time he threw a painter out of our meeting room because he was convinced the guy was a spy," said George McAfee. The Halas temper was legendary. Once an official called a penalty on Halas for "coaching from the sidelines" and marked off five yards. "Hey dummy, that's a 15-yard penalty," Halas said. "I know, George," said the official, "but the way you're coaching it's only worth five."