

OTHER MINOR LEAGUES

By Bob Gill

With the publication of the latest edition of David Neft's Pro Football: The Early Years, the push for a full account of the NFL's formative years is nearing an end. As I see it, there are two frontiers still left in pro football research: the days before NFL (the Thorpe years, if you will), and--by far the bigger task--the minor leagues.

Minor leagues? In football?

Believe it or not, there have been quite a few really good minor leagues (including a couple generally considered "majors"). Over the past few years some of us have been making a lot of progress in compiling information on these leagues (plus alot of strong independent teams). At the same time, I've noticed an increasing number of PFRA members indicating an interest in minor leagues.

In fact, one member recently wrote me proposing to do some research on a league and asking whether anybody else had already done that. And as it happened, I'd just done it myself. It occurred to me then that there might be others who'd like to look into the minors, but didn't know where to start or what had already been done. And since I'd brashly volunteered to coordinate this sort of research, I thought I ought to do something about it.

So here's a roughly chronological outline of the better minor leagues from before 1950: What we have, what we're still looking for--and, if you're interested, what you can do to help. Asterisks indicate the top-notch leagues, comparable to AAA or AA baseball.

1924 Anthracite League

After the formation of the NFL in 1920, this is the first minor league I'm aware of. Operating in the coal region of Pennsylvania, it included the Pottsville Maroons, who joined the NFL a year later and became one of its top; teams. Joe Zagorski wrote an article about this league in last year's Annual, and he's the one to contact if you have questions or information to offer.

1926 Pacific Coast League

This league was the result of Red Grange's visit to Los Angeles in January, 1926. Like the Anthracite League, it folded after a single season. We have pretty complete information on this one, and to be honest, it wasn't terribly significant.

1932 Eastern League/1933 Interstate League

Featuring teams in the greater New York area, a fertile field for pro football, the EFL lasted one season. The IFL, its successor, had teams in both Pennsylvania and New Jersey. We have some details on these leagues, but not a lot; in particular, we're short on roster information--for most players we have only last names.

The EFL and the IFL featured a few recognizable players, like Warren Heller, Eddie Tryon and Hinkey Haines. Many of these guys, and their teams, kept playing as independents in 1934 and 1935, and again we don't have much on them. Anyone living in the New York area who's interested in digging up some details on teams like the Bayonne Vikings, the Clifton Wessingtons and the New Rochelle Bulldogs should get in touch with me or Tod Maher. We'll be happy to point you in the right direction.

***1936-41 American Association**

All this activity in greater New York led to the formation of one of the best minor leagues, the American Association, which appeared in 1936. For its first two seasons, the AA featured many of the teams from the 1932 and '33 leagues. But in 1938 it began to shift away from New Jersey "town teams" to cities that were better equipped for "big-time"

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minor league football--cities like Wilmington, Delaware, and Providence, Rhode Island. At the same time, AA teams began lining up working agreements with NFL teams, until by 1940 it had become in essence a "farm" league, much like its baseball namesake. But World War II forced the league to suspend operations after the 1941 season.

We have very complete information on the AA from 1939 on, but the first two years have a number of holes, and there are a couple of tidbits we could use in 1938.

***1936-47 Dixie League**

1936 was a great year for forming leagues. This one grew out of a regular circuit of teams in Virginia and Maryland, very much like the AA did in New Jersey and New York. Not quite up to the AA's level for much of its history, the Dixie League took a great step forward in 1941. Then, after a four-year layoff for World War II, it returned for its other best season in 1946. The league lasted one week into 1947.

We have real good information on this one, but at the moment we're missing the all-star team for 1939, plus a couple of other little items.

1937 Virginia-Carolina League

This league was the result of a strike by members of the 1936 Richmond Arrows in the Dixie League. As the Richmond rebels, they became the backbone of this competing circuit, which lasted only one year. We have only scores and standings for this one so far, but that's about to change.

***1936-39 Midwest League/AFL**

Yes, another one in 1936. Its background was the same as the others': A regular circuit in 1935 led to an official league a year later. The MWFL immediately began the process of weeding out the weaker teams and replacing them with better ones from bigger cities, resulting in a big improvement in 1937. For 1938 it changed its name to the AFL, since the 1936-37 major league of that name had folded. In 1939 the league got really good--so good that in 1940 the organizers of a new "major" AFL stole half their teams from the former MWFL, killing the older league in the process.

We have real good information on this one for 1937-39, but in 1936 there were a couple of teams from small towns in Ohio that we have very little on. Interested Ohio folks are welcome to contact me for details. Also, we have nothing--scoring, lineups, nothing--on one 1938 game: October 30, East Chicago 18, Dayton 7. It was played in East Chicago, Indiana--I think (some reports say Hammond, Indiana). And we're also missing lineups for a 1939 game (Louisville at East Chicago, November 12) in the same place.

And that leads us to--

***All those AFL's: 1934, 1936-37, 1940-41**

The 1934 AFL was a southern league growing out of a circuit that had existed since 1932. This was the best minor league until 1939, when the AA and the MWFL/AFL moved into the same class. We have this one pretty well covered.

The 1936-37 league was a major league, but I'm including it because its not in David Neft's book. PFRA has printed a "guide" on this league already, and we're working on an update right now. I don't know of any holes, but if you have something that we might have missed, now's the time to say.

The same goes for the 1940-41 league, which is being updated in the same book. Here we're missing lineups for one 1941 game, played in Cincinnati. Any takers?

Incidentally, the last AFL, while an excellent league, probably shouldn't be considered "major"--on the field, anyway. There are several reasons--for instance, its two best teams were stolen from the 1939 AFL, which nobody calls a major league. Still, as I said, this was another real good league, major or not.

1934 Pacific Coast League/1935 American Legion League

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The second burst of interest in pro football on the West Coast brought about these two leagues, which could be considered one and the same. The 1934 league had six teams, four from the LA area and two from SF. In 1935 the four LA teams returned for another go-round. We have these two covered pretty thoroughly.

1936-37 Northwest League

This one we have very little on, except game scores and standings. (In fact, I'm not entirely sure that it didn't start earlier than 1936.) The two best teams were in Des Moines and LaCrosse, Wisconsin. The Des Moines Comets continued as independents through 1940. This is a fertile field for anybody who's interested in doing research on minor league football.

1938 Eastern Pennsylvania League

The EPFL had teams in Wilkes-Barre, Reading, Scranton and Hazleton. Most interesting team was Hazleton, which won the championship. The team had a working agreement with the Washington Redskins, which was a fairly novel idea at the time. This league probably had a dozen or so players from the AA and the Dixie League. We don't have much on it yet, but work is under way.

1938 California League

This was similar to the 1934 and '35 leagues, but probably a slight improvement in that it featured teams from different cities, rather than just LA and SF. The Hollywood Stars, in particular, appear to have been pretty good; and the Salinas Packers had probably been better than that in '36 and '37. We have good information on this league, which was organized by Hollywood coach Paul Schissler, who also founded the...

***1940-48 Pacific Coast League**

This may well have been the best minor league of the pre- 1950 era, or any era. We're in real good shape on this one; the PFRA is about to issue a guide on it any moment. However, I've never been able to find a full account of the scoring for one game. It was played on October 31, 1948, in Oakland. The LA Bulldogs beat the SF Clippers 41-28. Anybody living in the bay area who wants to check Oakland and SF papers for that one is more than welcome.

1942 Northwest War Industries League

This included teams in Seattle, Portland, Spokane and Vancouver, Washington. We have pretty good information here, but lack a decent roster for Spokane (we have names, but no heights, weights, colleges, etc.), plus scoring information for a couple of games. If you're interested, get in touch with me.

The PCFL considered adding all the teams in this league as a northern division in 1943, but that plan fell through when only Seattle fielded a team that year. However, a year later Seattle and Portland made it into the...

***1944 AFL**

The other PCFL owners wanted to get rid of Bill Freelove, who owned the LA Mustangs. So Freelove, an accommodating sort, formed his own league in competition with the PCFL. Dutch Clark coached Seattle, Kenny Washington played for SF, and there were a lot of other top-notch players. After one season the warring leagues called a truce and became a single league again for the 1945 season. The story is told in the forthcoming PCFL guide. As far as I know, we don't have any holes here.

***1946-50 AFL**

Despite the name change, this is the same as the prewar American Association. When it re-formed after the war it changed its name. Like its "predecessor," this league established a lot of working agreements with NFL teams. We have this one really well-covered too. An odd note is that it failed in 1950, just when the NFL-AAFC merger should have made a lot of better players available for a top minor league.

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The conditions that caused the death of the AFL in 1950 must have continued for the next decade, because there was no top minor league football during the '50s. The golden era of the '30s and '40s was as dead as it could be.

I should add that the leagues listed above are not the only ones that existed before 1950; they're just the ones I find most interesting. I know of at least four or five more--and if you want to include semi-pro city leagues that number goes even higher.

Besides leagues per se, there were a lot of good independent teams around, mainly before World War II. The list of "Beginnings" that's been running in recent Coffin Corners will give you an idea of how many--and we're finding more all the time. Often these teams were clustered into quasi-circuits, like those that spawned the Dixie League, the AA and the MWFL in 1936. A couple of the better "circuits":

1933 South

This was the forerunner of the 1934 AFL. It included five solid teams in St. Louis, Memphis, Oklahoma City, Charlotte and Tulsa. We have pretty complete information on all of them.

1930s New York/New Jersey

These were the teams that made up the 1932 and '33 leagues, then formed the nucleus of the 1936-37 AA. Bayonne, Clifton, Newark, Passaic, Paterson...you name it. These were generally pretty good teams, and our information so far is pretty sketchy-- just what the New York Times has. A fertile field for someone to plow.

1940-42 Northeast

This included a bunch of teams in places like Springfield, Pittsfield, New Bedford and Worcester, Mass.; Hartford and New London, Conn.; and a few others. We have very good information on the Churchill Pros (of Springfield) and the Hartford Blues in 1941, plus Hartford, the Springfield Steamrollers, the New London Diesels, the Holoke (Mass.) Golden Bears and the Worcester Panthers in 1942. But we have little except in some cases scores for Hartford, Churchill, New London in 1941.

Besides, most of these teams were probably operating for years before that, too--as were the Danbury Trojans and the Bristol West Ends, who were the region's best teams in the mid- to late '30s. And at least New London and Springfield were operating in other war years. This is another area that's just waiting for somebody to investigate it.

After 1950 I have to defer to Steve Brainerd, who has compiled an amazing amount of information on minor leagues. In fact, I'd recommend that anybody who wants to look into any minor league since 1950--or any earlier one that's not mentioned above--should talk to Steve first. For now, there are a few tip-top minor leagues from the 1960s that I know about and want to mention here. The '60s were the second golden era of minor league football, even though it seems that with the advent of the 1960-69 AFL and expansion in the NFL, there should have been a scarcity of players in this period. Well, it's beyond me.

Anyway, the three best leagues from this period are:

***1962-71 Atlantic Coast League**

At least for part of its history, this league was run by Joe Rosentover, who was president of the AA/AFL for its entire history as well. Like his earlier league, the ACFL established a lot of working agreements with NFL teams. Top-notch players like Marv Hubbard and Bob Tucker were ACFL grads. Steve has this one pretty well covered, I think, and he's working on a guide. But maybe there's something you can add. If you're interested, talk to Steve.

***1965-69 Continental League**

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Same story as the ACFL, though this one was probably even better. Again, Steve is working on a guide. I don't know if he still needs anything or not, but I know he has almost everything, anyway.

***1974-75 World Football League**

Though it ranks as a major league, a whole lot of WFL players came from the ACFL and the Continental League, which is why I've mentioned it here. Tod Maher has virtually complete information on this one, and is working on a guide for it. If you have anything to add, talk to Tod.

There are other interesting leagues from the '60s, but again, I refer you to Steve Brainerd for anything further. I know he's mentioned the Texas League, the United Football League and a couple of others as worthy subjects for research--he's done a lot of it, too. He can tell you what's already known about them, what's left to be done, and so on.

The best part about researching minor league football is that you're constantly finding out things that nobody else knows anything about. It's particularly neat to come across an NFL star--or just an ordinary player--with some out-of-the-way team. "So," you say to yourself, "that's why Toothbrush Jones disappeared from the New York Giants for two years. He was playing with the Tucson Truckers."

At this point we've made real progress in the "final frontier" of pro football research, but despite that there's still a good bit to do. If you want to get in on the fun, here's your chance.