

THE 1937 VIRGINIA-CAROLINA FOOTBALL LEAGUE

By Jim Sumner and Bob Gill

In the 1930's college football maintained a clear edge in popularity over its professional cousins. Nowhere was this superiority more clearly manifested than in the South, where several professional minor leagues tried to compete against the colleges in the years just before World War II. The Virginia- Carolina Football League was one of the less auspicious of these, lasting but a single, troubled season.

From its inception the VCFL was plagued by a variety of problems. Among these was its haphazard organization. The league had its roots in rebellion -- a 1936 walkout by almost the entire roster of the Richmond Arrows of the South Atlantic League (also known as the Dixie League). Left out in the cold when the Arrows managed to assemble a new cast and go on without them, some of the rebellious players formed a new team, which they aptly named the Rebels, and attempted to put together a rival league.

At first, an all Virginia association was planned, which would contain teams in Norfolk, South Norfolk, Portsmouth, Lynchburg, and Roanoke. However, in the summer of 1937 the Virginia cities of Lynchburg and Roanoke dropped their plans, although Roanoke elected to participate as an unofficial entry. Durham, North Carolina, was then invited to join. The league wasn't finalized until September 19, leaving scant time to acquire players, set up schedules, secure playing sites, and perform the myriad administrative tasks necessary for the smooth running of any professional league. The scheduling difficulties were aggravated by the awkward five team set-up, which frequently resulted in Roanoke playing an exhibition game against the odd team in a given week.

These hastily organized teams faced serious competition for the football fan's dollar from the entrenched college football programs of Virginia and North Carolina. The Durham Bobcats faced the most serious problem. Not only did they have to share the city with Wallace Wade's Duke Blue Devils, then at the pinnacle of their success, but also the programs of the University of North Carolina and North Carolina State University were within easy driving distance of Durham. Graphic evidence of this dilemma comes from the Durham Morning Herald of October 14: "We don't know how well professional football will go in Durham. Personally we doubt that it can become a paying proposition here due to the great competition afforded by college varsity and freshman teams and high school clubs." Playing second fiddle to high school elevens was hardly an auspicious sign for the league. Likewise, the Virginia teams faced competition from the University of Virginia, Richmond College, William and Mary, Virginia Tech and other Old Dominion colleges.

The teams stocked their rosters through a variety of sources, mostly local college and high school players. In these days of sixty-minute players, rosters were small, but turnover was high. Although financial details are not known, it seems fair to assume that no one got rich from the league. The Richmond Rebels were coached by Marcel (Mush) DeLotto, formerly of Randolph-Macon. At least five Rebels had played at Richmond College, with Washington and Lee, North Carolina State, William and Mary, Wake Forest, and Virginia Tech among the other colleges represented.

Not surprisingly, Durham's roster had a strong North Carolina flavor. Jim Hutchins, a former UNC Tar Heel, coached players with experience at Duke, Wake Forest, South Carolina, Georgia Tech, and Lenoir-Rhyne. The latter school's representative was back Clarence Stasavich, who in 1960 would coach his alma mater to an NAIA championship, before becoming head coach at East Carolina. The Bobcats roster also included tackle Murray O'Flynn, a Kentuckian who had spent the previous summer pitching for the Piedmont League's Durham Bulls.

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The most eclectic roster was that of the Portsmouth Sewanee Athletic Club, which supplemented college players from William and Mary, Virginia Tech, and Alabama, with sailors and Marines from nearby bases. Not much is known of the origins of the South Norfolk Aces and the Norfolk Tars, although the latter did feature perhaps the league's largest player, 265 pound Ace Baldwin. The semi-official Roanoke Rassler-Dazzlers acquired their distinctive nickname by employing several professional wrestlers.

Another problem for the league became apparent when competition began. The more experienced and better organized Richmond team simply outclassed its competition. Particularly effective was the Richmond defense, which was virtually impenetrable. On September 29 the Rebels defeated South Norfolk 7-0 in an exhibition game. The next week, in the only game played, Richmond opened the regular season with a 28-0 thumping of Portsmouth Sewanee. Playing coach DeLotto helped his cause with three touchdowns from his fullback position. A modest crowd of some 1,500 viewed the game at Richmond's Tate Field.

On October 10 Richmond remained unscored upon with a 27-0 home win over Norfolk. DeLotto added to his scoring total with two more touchdowns. The same day the homestanding South Norfolk Aces were handed a 13-6 defeat by the Durham Bobcats. Future coach Stasavich scored on a 20 yard run to give Durham an early lead, which it never relinquished. In an exhibition game the Roanoke Rassler-Dazzlers defeated Portsmouth Sewanee 29-6.

Richmond and Durham maintained their winning ways in week three. Richmond posted its third straight shutout, 33-0 over South Norfolk. DeLotto, with a touchdown run and two TD passes; former Vanderbilt end Sam Ford, with two touchdown catches; and Raleigh Daniel (Wake Forest), with a touchdown catch and two touchdown passes, combined for a devastating offensive show. Durham's 14-0 win over Portsmouth Sewanee was less impressive but did leave the Bobcats undefeated after two games. Roanoke again won an exhibition match, 6-3 over Norfolk.

Only one game was played during the league's fourth week, a lackluster scoreless tie between Norfolk and Durham. For reasons unknown at this writing Portsmouth Sewanee was awarded a forfeit victory over South Norfolk. Defense continued to dominate the league during the fifth week games, all played on Halloween. South Norfolk edged Roanoke in a 6-0 exhibition, while Norfolk and Portsmouth Sewanee played another scoreless game.

The highlight of the week, indeed of the season was the match-up between Richmond and Durham, the league's last two undefeated teams. The game was played at Tate Field before a crowd estimated at 2,000. The Rebels took a first quarter lead when a short touchdown run by DeLotto capped a 40 yard drive. The extra point made the score 7-0. The two defenses controlled the remainder of the game, which ended 7-0.

The Durham game would be the closest contest of Richmond's 1937 campaign. They were finally scored on the next week, although the points were scored against the offense not the defense. An interception return for a touchdown by Sewanee end (and former Alabama player) Jack Coppedge livened up an otherwise one-sided 28-7 Richmond victory. In the other regular season game of November 7 South Norfolk used an early safety to help beat Norfolk 8-7. Durham easily handled Roanoke 21-0 in an exhibition.

Norfolk and South Norfolk squared off again on November 14. After a scoreless first half, South Norfolk's Billy Morgan ran for one touchdown and threw for another in a 13-6 win. Durham and Sewanee were idle while Richmond and Portsmouth played a 0-0 tie. Since this was an exhibition game it didn't affect Richmond's league leading status.

The Richmond Rebels finished their championship season on November 21 with a decisive 21-0 thumping of South Norfolk. Coach DeLotto tallied another touchdown, his ninth in six games. In Durham, Clarence Stasavich scored two TDs, one on an

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interception return, to lead Durham past Sewanee 20-0. Norfolk and Roanoke played a 0-0 exhibition, the fourth scoreless tie (counting exhibitions) in the short season.

With interest in the league dissolving and several late season cancellations, these games basically finished the season. On December 4 Roanoke defeated Norfolk 19-12 in an exhibition. The season officially ended the next day with a 13-6 Sewanee triumph over South Norfolk. A projected game between the first- half and second-half champions was never played, largely because of Richmond's demonstrated superiority.

The final standings vividly showed the extent of Richmond's dominance. Not only did they finish 6-0 but they scored 144 points and gave up only the 7 points scored on an interception return. Durham finished second at 3-1-1, followed by Portsmouth Sewanee 2-4-1 and South Norfolk 2-5-0. Norfolk brought up the rear with a record of 0-3-2 and a dismal 13 points scored in 5 games. The uneven number of games played is an indication of the scheduling difficulties of the hastily organized league. The league apparently made no attempt to compile statistics or pick an all-star team, although DeLotto, the league's leading scorer by a wide margin, appears to have been the obvious choice for Most Valuable Player.

The Virginia-Carolina Football League died after this one season, apparently unmourned. The Richmond and Durham teams folded for good, while the Norfolk Tars, the South Norfolk Aces, and the Portsmouth Sewanee A.C. managed to continue for a few more seasons. Several VCFL players eventually caught on with teams in the more successful Dixie League. Three VCFL alumni-- DeLotto and his Richmond teammate quarterback Charlie Gadd, and Durham lineman Ed Rodgers-made that league's 1938 all-star team.

As far as can be ascertained from scanty records VCFL attendance was quite modest, generally in the range of 1,000 to 2,000 fans per game (about half of what the Dixie League drew), at admission prices of less than one dollar per game. Media attention was equally restrained. Although more newspaper coverage might have helped attendance it seems safe to assume that this lack of media attention reflected a more general disinterest on the part of area football fans. The league clearly lacked the organization, the players, and the money to mount a successful challenge to the popular college programs of Virginia and North Carolina.