

From One War to Another

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NFL Season of '46

by Stan Grosshandler

In January of 1946 the NFL found the global war was over; but they were now in a new one. The All-American Football Conference (AAFC) was for real, planned to field some teams in the fall, and had stolen about one hundred of their former players. A war that was to rage for four years was about to begin.

Both the NFL and AAFC met in Chicago on January 5th. George Halas lobbied to do away with unlimited substitution and as usual the Papa Bear got his wish, well almost. The league voted to limit subs to three at a time.

Over at the AAFC meeting Mal Stevens, the orthopedic surgeon turned football coach, announced the AAFC would hold a "Secret Draft" for only draft players who intended to join the pros.

One week later NFL Commissioner Elmer Layden dropped a bomb on the league by resigning. Bert Bell was his immediate replacement.

The next day the league approved the transfer of the champion Cleveland Rams to Los Angeles. The initial request for transfer had been denied; however when the league saw the AAFC was going to open shop in Los Angeles, they made a 180 degree turn and gave Dan Reeves permission to switch.

On a freezing December day the previous year, the Rams had won the title over the Redskins by the margin of two points. Early in the game Redskin immortal Sammy Baugh had attempted a pass which hit the goal posts and bounded back to him in the end zone. Sammy immediately fell on the ball but it was ruled a safety which turned out to become the margin of victory. The rule was changed the next season.

Now the leagues champions were on the road to a new home.

Two days later the NFL barred for life all jumpers to the AAFC.

On January 21 President Truman gave his state of the nation speech, asking to fight inflation, find employment (unemployment was only 4% most of whom were ex-soldiers who drew \$20 per week), and for extension of his war time powers.

All spring and summer the nation was racked with strikes. The coal miners struck twice; while steel, autos, and the railroads also struck. Truman had to take over the railroads and have the Army run the trains.

On July 1st a more powerful atomic bomb was exploded at Bikini Atoll in the Pacific.

The annual College All-star game was played August 23rd and the College boys shut out Bob Waterfield and the Rams 14-0. Elroy "Crazy Legs" Hirsch was a one man show on a 68-yard run and taking a 38-yard pass from Otto Graham. Both PAT's were by Pat Harder who had been a teammate of Hirsch's at Wisconsin.

Several years ago Harder, then an umpire in the NFL, recalled the training camp for the All-Star game:

"It was like there were two different camps," Pat recalled, "as you knew Arch Ward of the Chicago Tribune had organized the All-star games and was also the founder of the AAFC. Well the boys who had signed with the AAFC got preferential treatment. I had

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signed with the NFL and was afraid I was not even going to get to play.”

Three future Hall of Famers – Waterfield, Hirsch, and Graham played that day.

The only magazine covering the pro game available prior to the season was Pro Football Illustrated by Elbak, a 52 page magazine with a picture of Wilbur Moore of the Redskins hurdling three Packers to tackle Ted Fritsch on the cover.

There was some stories including one of plans to open a pro football Hall of Fame in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. There were photos of all clubs but neither rosters nor write ups.

An interesting section was on the six team Pacific Coast League that consisted of Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, Hollywood, Oakland, and San Jose.

The Hollywood Bears had won the 1945 season featuring Bosh Pritchard, Kenny Washington, and Woody Strode. Pritchard was to become an integral part of the great Eagle teams; while 1946 found Washington and Strode with the newly arrived Rams as the first black players in the NFL since Joe Lillard and Ray Kemp in 1933.

The Sporting News published a football book mostly dedicated to the career of AA. Stagg. It did have an interesting section diagramming the favorite plays of both college and pro coaches. The only pro mention was a section on NFL rules.

A 108 page comb bound NFL record book appeared with Bob Waterfield, last year's MVP, on the cover. The rosters were from the previous season; therefore unless you could get every team's press guide there was no way to know who would be on the 1946 teams.

The AAFC season began September 6th with Cleveland defeating Miami before the largest crowd to ever see a pro football game.

As the AAFC has been thoroughly covered in several COFFIN CORNERS there is no need to recapitulate their initial season.

On September 20th the NFL kicked off with the Cards at Pittsburgh. On the 29th the Eagles defeated the Rams in the first NFL game played on the West Coast; while the next night New York was at Boston in the only night game of the season.

Most of the pre-war Monsters of the Midway returned to the Bears with the notable exception Norm Standlee having defected to the AAFC. They won three and tied one before a loss to the Cards and ended up winning the Western Division 8-2-1.

Sid Luckman continued as one of the best quarterbacks in the game, backed up by vets Hugh Gallarneau, Dante Magnani, Bill Osanski, Scooter McLean, Ken Kavanaugh, Jim Keane, Bull Dog Turner, Ray Bray, and Joe Stydahr.

The defending champion Rams finished second behind Bob Waterfield, runners Fred Gehrke and Tommy Harmon, and the great receiver Jim Benton.

Curly Lambeau's Packers, without Don Hutson and clinging to the Notre Dame box, were third. Tony Canadeo was the tailback and Ted Fritsch, a top place kicker, was at fullback.

The Card's Jimmy Conzelman was in the process of assembling his great teams. He had put together two thirds of the Dream Backfield in Paul Christman, Pat Harder, Marshall Goldberg, and Elmer Angsman. (Charlie Trippi completed the Dream the following season.) The Cards had great ends in Billy Dewell and Mal Kutner and excellent linemen in Stan Mauldin and Buster Ramsey.

On the last play of the last game against the Bears, Christman disobeyed his coach and passed to Mal Kutner to win the game. No doubt a prophecy of things to come.

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The Lions, another singlewing team, under Gus Dorais had few quality players and a 1-10 record.

In the East, Steve Owen's Giants still using the A-formation had acquired Frankie Filchock, whose passing along with the running of Bill Paschal, Frank Reagen, and George Franck gave them a perfectly balanced attack. Great linemen as Jim White, Tex Coulter, Frank Cope, Orville Tuttle, and Chet Gladchuck also helped. The future Hall of Famer, Ken Strong, remained to do the place kicking.

At Philadelphia Greasy Neale was building his future Green Machine. He had obtained Alex Wojciechowicz and had linemen as Bucko Kilory, Vic Sears, Al Wistert, Cliff Patton, and Augie Lio in front of Tommy Thompson, Steve Van Buren, and Bosh Pritchard.

The Redskins still had Baugh and Dick Todd; while the Steelers had brought in the great college coach Jock Sutherland. It was felt his presence and the return of Bill Dudley would guarantee a championship. Unfortunately neither the coach nor star tailback got along and by the end of the season Dudley retired only to later sign with the Lions and end up in the Hall of Fame.

Many years later the highly successful Dudley when talking to this author tended to down play his problem with Sutherland. He acknowledged he was a great coach, yes they had had some differences, but he did not wish to elaborate. He was most proud of the fact he led the league in rushing with 604 yards, in pass interceptions with ten, and in punt returns with 385 yards. He was careful to point out this was in both an offensive and defensive category.

The Boston Yanks, Ted Collin's tax writeoff, finished last in spite of a good showing by passer Paul Governali.

The college season featured undefeated Army, Notre Dame, and Georgia. The Cadets still had the great war time Blanchard-Davis team; while the Irish were the beneficiary of returning vets as Johnny Lujack and many young high-school stars. On November 10th before 74,000 at Yankee Stadium they played a scoreless tie.

Illinois won the Big Ten and was the first team to represent the conference in the new Rose Bowl agreement; while Michigan was the first team to exploit the two platoon system. At first they had offensive and defensive lines; but eventually changed whole teams.

The first season back from the wars finished on a sour note. Prior to the title game it was found a bribe attempt to influence the score had been made to Frankie Filchock and Merle Hapes of the Giants. Hapes, though not accepting the bribe, was banned from the game for not reporting it. Filchock who knew of the attempt through Hapes was allowed to play but later banned from the league.

Frankie Filchock played 50 brilliant minutes in the title game even though his nose had been broken. He threw TD passes to Frank Liebel and Steve Filipowicz, but the Bears won 24 to 10 on a Luckman to Kavanaugh pass, Magnani pass interception, a rare run by Luckman, and field goal by Maznicki.

Oddly enough the fix was to have the Bears win by ten!

This season was memorable in the NFL only for the fact many of the pre-war greats had returned, the only time a scandal issue had surfaced in the NFL, and the first time another league had seriously challenged the pro giant.