

From Blaze to Ashes: A Brief History of the Chicago Fire of the World Football League

by David Yamada

The World Football League is generally regarded as one of pro football's tragicomedies, featuring undertalented, under financed teams playing before paltry (or papered) crowds. The Chicago Fire, which played during the WFL's maiden 1974 season, is probably best remembered for its catchy team nickname. However, for a few brief shining months, the Fire managed to capture the fancy of many Windy City football fans who were starved for a team that promised to play exciting, winning football.

To understand the enthusiastic embrace which welcomed the Fire and the WFL in Chicago, one must grasp the state of the Chicago Bears during the early 1970s. The Bears of that time were hardly the marquee team they are today. Walter Payton did not arrive until 1975; he was quietly piling up yardage for Jackson State during the Fire's first and only season. Gale Sayers had retired in 1972, and Dick Butkus had lasted only through 1973 before his battered knees also forced him to the sidelines. Bobby Douglass was the primary Bear Quarterback; in 1972, he managed to run for 968 yards while completing a comical

37.9 percent of his passes. In 1973, the Bears won only 3 of 14 games. As the Bears approached their 1974 summer training camp, a players' strike was looming and would soon become a reality.

Clearly then, there was a window of opportunity for a new professional football team in Chicago, and for a short while, the Chicago Fire took full advantage of that opportunity. Sadly, however, the Fire would not even manage to play a full season. Indeed, the story of the Fire can be divided into three acts: The Preseason Build-up, The Fast Start, and The Sudden Decline and End.

Act I: The Preseason Build-up

On October 3, 1973, the Chicago Tribune reported in an exclusive story that Gary Davidson, a co-founder of the American Basketball Association, was spearheading a new league that would be called the World Football League. Three weeks later, the fledgling WFL announced that Tom Origer, a 40 year old construction magnate, was awarded a franchise in Chicago.

At a December press conference, the Chicago Fire became a reality. In addition to unveiling the team name, Origer presented its new head coach in Jim Spavital. As a head coach in the Canadian Football League, Spavital built a reputation for leading strong offensive teams. The Fire would play a 20-game regular season schedule, commencing in the summer, with games to be played on weeknights instead of Sundays.

The Fire soon took the lead among WFL teams in signing players. It was the first to announce a signing in the person of wide receiver Jim Seymour, who had caught Terry Hanratty's passes at Notre Dame in the 1960s and then went on to play several years for the Bears before being cut in 1973.

But the most significant player signing, one which gave the Fire instant credibility with many Chicago fans, was that of former Bear quarterback Virgil Carter. Carter was exiled from the Bears after a famous incident during the 1969 season. Pulled from a game in which he had completed only two of 17 attempts during the first half, he blew up at the Bears' management and said he hoped they weren't so "chicken shit" that they would prevent him from playing out his option. Carter was traded to the Cincinnati Bengals, where he proceeded to lead the team to the play-offs in 1970 and paced the NFL in pass completion percentage the next year. (At the same time, the Bears were struggling along with likes of Douglass, Jack Concannon, and Kent Nix.) As one newspaper headline quipped after the Fire signed Carter, "One team in Chicago has a quarterback."

Carter was not the only key signing, however. Other players who would later play major roles included rookie fullback Mark Kellar, who led the nation rushing at Northern Illinois in 1973; former Houston Oiler center Guy Murdock; former Green Bay Packer guard Dave Bradley; and ex-Bears such as running back Cyril Pinder, tackle Steve Wright, and linebacker Rudy Kuechenberg.

The Fire did some of its best work in signing relatively anonymous free agents with little or no NFL experience. Two prime examples were wide receivers James Scott, who had bounced from Henderson

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 14, No. 6 (1992)

State Junior College to the Canadian Football League, and Jack Dolbin, who had played minor league ball.

In the spring of 1974, it seemed that the Fire was becoming one of the WFL's leading franchises at a time when other teams were still searching for homes. By March, the Fire had signed some 200 players; the rest of the WFL had signed only 450. The Florida Blazers had only 25 players under contract and were then slated to play in Washington, D.C. The Memphis Southmen, who later in the year would rock the pro football establishment by signing Miami Dolphin stars Larry Csonka, Paul Warfield, and Jim Kiick to "future" contracts to begin in 1975, had signed 27 players and were still known as the Toronto Northmen.

The Fire's aggressive efforts to assemble a winning team did not go unnoticed by the Chicago media. The Carter signing, in particular, got top billing in local sports sections. Headline writers had great fun with the team name: "Hot stuff on sports scene ...The Chicago Fire" and "It's official: Virgil Carter is Fireman" were among the clever examples. Chicago Tribune columnist Bob Markus wrote that the Fire could put itself "in the same position the Cleveland Browns enjoyed at the outset of the All-America Conference." Most importantly, the Fire managed to negotiate a television package with WGN, the station which also carried (and still carries) the Chicago Cubs.

Once training camp opened, the Fire received newspaper coverage approaching that reserved for an NFL

team. There were standard training camp stories about who looked good in practices, who were the underdog "long shots" to make the opening roster, and who stood out in pre-season scrimmages. As the team approached its July season opener, the Chicago Tribune Sunday magazine devoted a colorful cover story to the team, featuring profiles of Coach Spavital, the leading players, and even the team's new cheerleading squad.

All of this was not lost on Chicago football fans. Disgusted by the no-pass, no-win Bears, they were excited by the prospect of a high-octane offense led by Virgil Carter. Nearly 20,000 season tickets were sold prior to the start of the season.

Although the WFL had held a full collegiate draft and a separate "draft" of NFL veterans, the 12 charter teams failed to sign many prominent rookies or veterans for their maiden seasons. Thus, as training camps broke, most squads were filled with NFL retreads and anonymous free agents, some of whom had also played in the CFL or minor leagues.

The Fire was not much different. The offense sported a blend of NFL veterans and talented newcomers, but the defense was a big question mark. Carter, Kellar, and Pinder formed an excellent backfield, while Seymour, Scott, Dolbin, and ex-Saint Don Burchfield were the primary receivers. Kuechenberg and Ron Porter (Minnesota Vikings) led a solid linebacking corps, but the defensive line and secondary were very inexperienced. Rookie Chuck Ramsey, a top kicking prospect, was tabbed for both punting and place-kicking chores. Notwithstanding the uncertainties, optimism abounded that the Fire could compete not only within the four-team Central Division (which included Birmingham, Memphis, and Detroit), but also against the rest of the league, too.

Act II. Hot Start: The Season Begins

The Fire opened its season on July 10 at home in Soldier Field against the Houston Texans. The Texans' roster read like a tour through the American Football League, featuring running backs Jim Nance (Patriots) and Hoyle Granger (Oilers), quarterbacks Don Trull (Oilers) and Mike Taliaferro (Patriots), and tight end Willie Frazier (Chiefs). This veteran flavor led The Sporting News to predict a first-place finish in the Western Division for the Texans. (Chicago was picked fourth for the Central.)

Nevertheless, some 42,000 fans watched in delight as the Fire shut out the Texans, 17-0. Carter did not have his best day, completing 21 of 34 passes for 184 yards, with three interceptions and only one touchdown pass. However, Fire receivers James Scott (10 receptions, 84 yards, 1 touchdown) and Jack Dolbin (6 receptions, 60 yards) were constantly getting open, an indication of things to come. More importantly, the defense was outstanding, limiting the Texans to 90 net yards rushing and passing. Defensive co-captains Kuechenberg and Porter, as well as end Mick Heinrich and safety Harry Howard, led the defensive charge.

The Fire next traveled to the Gator Bowl to play the Jacksonville Sharks. Despite a strong Sharks' rushing attack led by rookies Tommy Durrance (104 yards) and Ricky Lake (two TDs), the Fire prevailed, 25-22.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 14, No. 6 (1992)

Carter was still getting untracked (12 of 28 for 187 yards), but Mark Kellar scored twice and the defense picked off two Kay Stephenson passes.

Undefeated at 2 and 0, the Fire then took a two-game western road trip, the results of which would establish them as an early league power. Their first opponent, the Portland Storm, was winless after its first two games, and it would remain so after its third. Storm quarterback Greg Barton, who once shared signal calling duties with Joe Theismann when they played with Toronto in the CFL, started things off with an 18-yard TD pass. But the Fire came back quickly on scoring passes to Kellar (50 yards) and Cyril Pinder, followed by a Pinder TD run. James Scott later scored on a 69-yard pass reception from Carter, who finished 10 of 18 for 206 yards and three TDs. The Fire won, 29-22.

Next up were the Hawaiians, with a 1 and 2 record. The Fire simply overpowered them, scoring the first four touchdowns of the game and winning 53-29. Mark Kellar scored five times (three rushing, two receiving) and staked his claim to being one of the WFL's first home-grown stars. Carter had his best game to date, completing 15 of 21 for 205 yards and three more TDs. Hawaiians' quarterback Norris Weese, a rookie from Ole Miss, put up a furious aerial assault in trying to bring his team back into the game, but his three TD passes were offset by three interceptions.

The road trip left the Fire undefeated after four games and in a first-place tie with Birmingham in the WFL's Central Division. However, the Fire would return home to play its toughest opponent to date, the Florida Blazers, who had given up only 31 points en route to a 3 and 1 record. The Blazers were coached by Jack Pardee, who would join the Bears as their head coach in 1975. Among the players who would eventually join him in Chicago were center Dan Peiffer, tight end Greg Latta, and linebacker Larry Ely. The Blazers also sported rookie running back Tommy Reamon, who would share league MVP honors at the end of the season.

Against the Fire, Florida showed the stuff of championship contenders. In front of 31,000 fans in Soldier Field, the Blazers took an early lead and never relinquished it, winning by a wide 46 to 21 margin. The Fire gave up two TDs on special teams and another on a pass interception return.

Fortunately, the Fire rebounded the next week against the Philadelphia Bell, winning 32-29 on a fourth quarter TD pass from Carter to Jack Dolbin. Philadelphia was a virtual reincarnation of Dolbin's old minor-league team, the Pottstown Firebirds. In fact, the Bell's starting backfield of quarterback Jim "King" Corcoran and running backs Claude Watts and John Land was the same troika which had led the Firebirds to the Atlantic Coast Football League championship in 1971.

The Fire next traveled north to play the winless Detroit Wheels, perhaps the worst team of the modern era. (The Wheels were the most cash-strapped of all the WFL teams; during the pre-season, one of the team's owners suggested putting up the players in tents during training camp to save money.) The Fire won 35-23, with 15 Detroit points coming in the fourth quarter.

The Fire's next game, a divisional contest against the undefeated Birmingham Americans, was billed as a match between WFL titans. Although the Americans lacked flashy stars, they had a core of steady NFL veterans like quarterback George Mira (Dolphins), fullback Charlie Haraway (Redskins), and linebacker Ross Brupbacher (Bears). Birmingham used a strong ground game (212 yards rushing) to turn back the Fire 22-8. Virgil Carter was intercepted three times in front of a disappointed home crowd of nearly 45,000.

Once again, the Fire followed a loss with a victory, enjoying a solid 32-22 win over the Southern California Sun in Anaheim. The Sun featured two prized rookie running backs in Kermit Johnson and James McAlister (both of UCLA), but the Fire defense held the duo to a combined 35 yards rushing. Carter made the most of 16 pass attempts completing 10 for 185 yards and four TDs.

The win over the Sun left the Fire in a second-place tie with Memphis in the powerful Central Division; the two teams also shared the second-best records in the WFL (7-2), behind the still undefeated division leader, Birmingham (9-0). Statistically, the Fire was dominant, boasting the league leaders in yards passing and TD passes (Carter), scoring and yards rushing (Kellar), receptions (Scott), interceptions (safety Joe Womack), and kickoff return average (Walter Rhone). Dolbin, Cyril Pinder, Harry Howard, and punter Chuck Ramsey were also among the leaders in various categories. To be sure, there was reason to be excited about Chicago's new pro football team.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 14, No. 6 (1992)

But the Fire would not win another game.

Act III. The Sudden Decline: Flicker and Die

The demise of the Chicago Fire started with a September 7 rematch against Birmingham. In many ways, this was a dream matchup for the WFL, featuring top teams and 55,000 fans in Legion Field. The game itself lived up to its promise, at least from a competitive standpoint. After the teams traded pairs of TDs, Birmingham pulled out front, leading at the half, 23-16. The home team built a 38-19 lead by the end of the third quarter. But then the Fire roared back with three unanswered TDs and led 40-38. James Scott was playing brilliantly; he caught three TD passes and played an outstanding game in defeat (7 carries for 77 yards, 8 catches for 42 yards).

Next, the Fire traveled to the Tangerine Bowl for another game against the Florida Blazers. During pregame warm ups, it became evident that Carter could not play because of the injury he suffered against Memphis. Recently signed Leo Hart, a little-used reserve while in the NFL, substituted for Carter and completed only 9 of 32 passes. The Fire was shut out for the first time, 29-0. Leroy Kelly provided the only offense, with 17 carries for 87 yards.

A few days after the game, the Fire announced that Virgil Carter would be lost for the season with a broken finger.

Meanwhile, the rest of the World was falling apart, too. It was becoming quite apparent that Gary Davidson's new league was built on a foundation of hot air and little capital. Earlier in the season, the league was forced to admit that some of its early huge crowds were built on freebie tickets. (This was not the case with Chicago.) Poor attendance compelled two teams to move in mid-season: the Houston Texans became the Shreveport Steamer, and the New York Stars became the Charlotte Hornets. Jacksonville and Detroit would fold after each playing 17 games; the pathetic Wheels managed but one win during their aborted season. To top it off, the NFL was back in full swing now, the players' strike having been settled before the regular season started. No longer could the WFL take advantage of the absence of regular NFL football.

The Fire had been built around its offense. Its defense, a question mark at the beginning of the season, had given up at least 22 points in every game since the opening day shutout of Houston. Now, without its leading passer, runner, and receiver, the floodgates opened on the Fire. The team started the post-Carter era with a home loss against Charlotte, 41-30. New quarterback Bill Cappelman, formerly a third-stringer for the Lions, completed 9 of 23 passes. Next came a 45-17 loss against Florida in which Cappelman was intercepted five times.

The Fire was shut out for a second time against Charlotte, 27-0. Former Raider Don Highsmith gained 90 yards and scored twice against the porous Fire defense. Two recent acquisitions played well for the Fire; former Detroit Wheels quarterback Bubba Wyche (8 of 14 for 137 yards) and ex-Blazer receiver Lonnie Crittendon (9 catches for 113 yards).

Things bottomed out with a 60-17 loss against the Hawaiians. Ex-Giant Randy Johnson threw for 304 yards and 3 TDs, and Tim Delaney (the eventual league leader in pass receptions) and ex-49er John Isenbarger each gained over 100 yards receiving. Wyche completed only 8 of 26 passes for the Fire before giving way to Cappelman. Only 20,000 fans were at Soldier Field to watch the Fire play what would be its final home game.

The Fire lost its ninth game in a row against the Philadelphia Bell, 37-31. Wyche had a solid game, passing for 258 yards and a TD, and scoring twice on short runs. But the Bell's King Corcoran (349 yards, 3 TDs passing) led his team to 22 points in the final quarter. The losing streak would reach 10 against Memphis, who beat the Fire 49-22. The Fire managed two long scoring plays, a 54-yard pass from Cappelman to Crittendon, and a 59-yard run by Pinder.

The loss to Memphis was the Fire's final game on the field. Although the Fire remained technically eligible for the WFL's expanded play-off format, owner Tom Origer announced that his team would neither play its final game against Philadelphia nor participate in the play-offs. Origer, who had become increasingly fed up with the league's management and frustrated over his team's losing streak, simply decided to fold up his cards and go home.

The Fire's final scheduled game was recorded as a 2-0 forfeit to Philadelphia. The team finished with a

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 14, No. 6 (1992)

record of 7 wins and 13 losses.

Epilogue

Fire or no Fire, the WFL finished its first season and held its play-offs. In the first and only World Bowl, the Birmingham Americans beat the Florida Blazers 22-21.

Fire offensive guard Dave Bradley and linebacker Rudy Kuechenberg made The Sporting News' WFL All-Star Team.

In hopes that the WFL would reorganize itself to his liking, Origer kept a skeleton staff on the payroll until January, 1975. However, he concluded that the league's prospects were dim and formally closed down his franchise.

The WFL did return for a second season. Chicago was given a new team, the Winds. Mark Kellar was the only big-name returnee from the Fire. The head coach was Abe Bigron, recently fired by the Bears. The Winds went 1 and 4 before folding. They drew less than 4,000 fans to their only regular season home game. The rest of the WFL would fold after 12 weeks of the season had been played.

The overall talent level in the WFL was not very high, so relatively few players had jobs waiting for them in the NFL. However, of the over 80 players who suited up for the Fire, some managed to find their way to the NFL:

Virgil Carter signed with the San Diego Chargers for the 1975 season, where he sat on the bench with ex-Bear Bobby Douglass. Carter returned to the Bears for the 1976 season and completed 3 of 5 passes as a backup to Bob Avellini.

Mark Kellar signed with the Minnesota Vikings, where he played three seasons as a reserve fullback.

James Scott signed with the Bears and became their leading deep receiver. In 1977, he caught 50 passes for 809 yards and 3 TDs, as the Bears made their first play-off appearance since the 1963 NFL championship season.

Jack Dolbin signed with the Denver Broncos; his best season was also in 1977 (26 receptions, 443 yards, 3 TDs). Dolbin was a Bronco starter in Super Bowl XII, making him one of a select group of players to start league championship games at both the NFL and minor league levels.

Offensive lineman Glenn Hyde went on to have a long career as a utility player in the NFL and USFL. He, too, would spend his best years with the Broncos.

Kicker Chuck Ramsey, defensive end Glenn Robinson, and defensive backs Greg Stemrick and Harry Howard also saw NFL action after their Fire stints.

Probably the last public appearance of the Chicago Fire came at a sports collectors' convention held in a Chicago suburb late in the spring of 1975. Staffing a large table full of memorabilia was former team secretary Mary Ann Calabresi, and available for purchase was everything that was left of the team. On display with the usual press guides, programs, and bumper stickers were two tattered jerseys once worn by Virgil Carter. It was a sad ending to such an exciting beginning.