

The Second 25 Years

By Jack Clary

(This is the second of three articles for COFFIN CORNER, by Jack Clary, current president of the Professional Football Researchers Association, that will commemorate the 75th Anniversary season of the National Football League. Each will cover a 25-year segment in the NFL's existence.)

The second trimester of the National Football League began only a few weeks after World War II ended in 1945. It couldn't have come at a better time because the end of the war also signalled the beginning of a new era in America, and the same signal went out to pro football.

During the next quarter century, the NFL regrouped and began a steady upward march in popularity. It was abetted by the new medium of television that for the first time brought the game into homes across the country, culminating with the Mother of All TV Games--the 1958 NFL overtime title game between the Baltimore Colts and New York Giants which showcased the great theatre of pro football. It not only launched the sport into the top echelon of America's sporting tastes but triggered the start of a new league -- the fourth American Football League -- that within the decade provided a massive expansion for pro football.

The second quarter century also showcased two great leaders in Bert Bell and Pete Rozelle and a new array of great teams--the Philadelphia Eagles, Cleveland Browns, Los Angeles Rams, Detroit Lions, New York Giants, Baltimore Colts and Green Bay Packers -- and the stars who accompanied them -- Steve Van Buren, Otto Graham, Marion Motley, Norm Van Brocklin, Tom Fears, Bobby Layne, Johnny Unitas, Jim Brown, Bart Starr . . . and a new cry that soon rang forth in many NFL stadiums: DEEEE-FENSE.

And it ended with two astounding victories by the American Football League when the brash Joe Namath helped the New York Jets win Super Bowl III and the powerful Kansas City Chiefs spoiled the NFL's golden anniversary celebration by winning Super Bowl IV, and positioned pro football for its last great realignment.

That second quarter century began when the Cleveland Rams found a wonderful tailback at UCLA named Bob Waterfield whose gorgeous movie star wife Jane Russell elicited more publicity than he did -- even on the sports pages. Waterfield not only was named NFL rookie of the year in 1945, but he led the Rams to the NFL championship on the margin of a fluke safety scored when a pass thrown by Washington's Sammy Baugh from his own end zone struck the cross bar of the goal posts and fell to the ground. Under the rules of the time, that was an automatic safety and brought the Rams a 15-14 victory.

Before the next summer rolled around, the Cleveland Rams were the Los Angeles Rams . . . and the face of pro football was changed forever because expansion had become a heady proposition and suddenly the Mississippi River "barrier" (there were no major league teams in any sport west of St. Louis in 1945) disappeared.

A NEW RIVAL:THE ALL-AMERICA FOOTBALL CONFERENCE

The NFL was not the first to place a major league team on the west coast because, before the war ended, already primed and ready to begin operations in 1946 was the All-America Football Conference, with a farseeing image that included two of its eight franchises in Los Angeles and San Francisco; and a shattering of the racial barriers that heretofore had made the sport an all white entity since 1933.

The AAFC lasted just four years, but it was a seminal influence on the post-war growth of pro football because it forced changes in the sport that prepared it for the up tempo era of sports in post-war America.

This new league was the brainchild of Arch Ward, the renowned sports editor of the Chicago Tribune and father of both baseball's All-Star Game and the Chicago College All-Star football game. He wanted a structure in pro football that matched that of major league baseball -- two separate leagues who decided a champion with a "world series." He mistakenly believed the two leagues would coexist without

problems, as major league baseball did. But it never happened because he underestimated the importance of the player draft and instead of peace and harmony, the two leagues fought each other with dollars for new players. More importantly, the AAFC also brought new minds and ideas that propelled the sport's popularity.

THE PAUL BROWN INFLUENCE

The Cleveland Browns ruled the AAFC all four years. They were meticulously put together without the restraints of a player draft by former Ohio State coach Paul Brown and became so dominant, they won every championship ... and then continued the dominance during the team's first six years in the NFL, winning three more titles.

Most importantly, Brown's entry into the pro game forever changed the way it was played and his style and ideas became the norm. His innovations are legion -- assistant coaches working on a year-round basis; he developed a sophisticated passing game that sent the ball to all parts of the field and that soon brought massive public approval of its exciting, distinctive wide-open style of play. He also transformed the game into a serious, pay attention pastime where the players produced and maintained playbooks which he often collected and graded; messenger guards shuttled plays into the game; and the drafting of players became more of an exact science rather than a random selection process from the pages of football annuals.

He helped to shatter any color barriers in pro football by signing two black players -- fullback Marion Motley and lineman/linebacker Bill Willis -- now in the Hall of Fame -- who had played for him in the service and at Ohio State, respectively. "It was no big deal, believe me," he said later. "I just wanted to put together the best possible football team and I wanted the best players I could find. I knew them to be of that caliber. I wasn't trying to be a social scientist or a pioneer of any kind."

On the west coast, the NFL also became integrated when the Rams signed lineman Woody Strode and running back Kenny Washington, who had been a teammate at UCLA of Jackie Robinson. Thus pro football became the first major league to have black players because Robinson didn't reach the major leagues until a year later, in 1947.

Brown brought to the game future Hall of Fame quarterback Otto Graham, who had been an All-America tailback at Northwestern, and paid him -- and other players also in the military -- a monthly retainer until he joined the team in 1946. He teamed Graham with such receivers as Dante Lavelli, Mac Speedie and Dub Jones, and built great teams around them by coaching them, he said, "exactly as I did my teams at Massillon and Ohio State." The result: A record of 47-4-3, including the first perfect season (15-0) in history in 1948 and four championships.

BERT BELL: THE THE NFL'S GUIDING LIGHT

The war with the All-America Football Conference also engendered a change at the top of the NFL when Bert Bell, co-owner of the Pittsburgh Steelers, was named commissioner in 1946. He was the perfect choice for the job because he was a fiery, pepper-pot who girded his owners in battle to fight and ultimately win the war with the AAFC.

His tenure began with a gambling incident on the eve of the 1946 NFL title game between the New York Giants and Chicago Bears in New York when two Giants players, Merle Hapes and Frank Filchock, failed to report a bribe attempt. Hapes was suspended from the game and Filchock was allowed to play. The Giants lost but from that time on, Bell was fanatical about maintaining the integrity of the game, and each year he visited every training camp to personally warn the players about such matters. That vigilance continues to this day with an NFL security department and representatives in each NFL city.

Bell also was a visionary of sorts because he carefully guided his league through its first tip-toe into television and established the policies that have made it the quintessential sports marriage. He did not allow home games to be televised, thus preserving and enhancing the home gate at a time when sell-outs were rare; and he placed a signal origination limit of 75 miles from a stadium. That was modified in 1973, under Congressional prodding (there were many, many Washington Redskins fans on Capitol Hill) when teams which sell out within 72 hours of kickoff are allowed to televise their home games.

He affected a merger of the AAFC with the NFL in which three of its teams -- the Cleveland Browns, Baltimore Colts and San Francisco 49ers -- joined the senior circuit and the players from the other teams were placed in a special dispersal draft. In the meantime, two long dormant franchises, the Eagles and

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Chicago Cardinals, became the NFL's two strongest teams during the second half of the 40s, splitting a pair of title games against each other. The Cardinals won their only modern NFL title in 1947, led by the Dream Backfield of Pat Harder, Elmer Angsman, Paul Christman and Charlie Trippi. The NFL's best runner of that time, Steve Van Buren then led Philadelphia to back-to-back championships in 1948-49. The Eagles beat Chicago 7-0 for the '48 crown and splashed their way to a 14-0 victory over the Los Angeles Rams in sunny (?) California in 1949 when Van Buren ran a record 31 times for 196 yards.

THE NEW NFL

The merger of the NFL and AAFC in 1950 produced a truly "national" football league that had two West Coast teams in the Rams and 49ers, two in New York with the Giants and Yanks (a combination of the Bulldogs, and Yankees from the AAFC) and the original franchises in the middle. The AAFC's Colts lasted just one year; the Yanks were transferred to Dallas in 1952 but lasted only part of that season and then became the Baltimore Colts in 1953.

When the Browns entered the NFL, they were target No. 1 for all the old NFL teams, which had belittled their AAFC rivals as being less than worthy. So Bell matched the two league champions--Cleveland and the Eagles--against each other in the season opener and the Browns clobbered the proud NFL champions 35-10. The NFL's "old guard" was stunned but Bell was delighted.

The Browns then went on to win their first NFL championship with a thrilling 30-28 victory over the Los Angeles Rams which, had there been national television on the scale of today, would have been remembered as one of the greatest games in league history. The Browns came from behind in the final minute to win on Lou Groza's field goal after a magnificent "two minute" drill by Graham set up the winning score. Paul Brown called it the "most memorable" game of his career because it validated all that his team had accomplished, and because "so many of the game's greatest players competed on the same field."

The Browns ran their consecutive title game appearances to ten through 1955 and once again threatened to dull a league, even with three consecutive title game losses to the Rams on Van Brocklin's 75-yard touchdown pass to Tom Fears midway through the fourth quarter of the 1951 game, and to the Lions in 1952-53 (the latter on Bobby Layne's late, game-winning pass to Jim Doran). They snapped the losing streak by pounding the Lions 56-10 for the 1954 title after which Graham retired. When Brown was unable to find a suitable replacement, he induced Otto to come back for one final year, and they combined to win one last title, defeating the Rams 38-14.

THE FABULOUS FIFTIES

Rams football was a perfect fit for its Hollywood surroundings. Picture-perfect Sunday afternoons before huge crowds in the 100,000-seat Coliseum were a perfect backdrop to the Rams' exciting and dazzling offense, led by quarterbacks Waterfield and Norm Van Brocklin, and three great receivers: Tom Fears, Elroy (Crazylegs) Hirsch and Bob Boyd. They had two different backfields -- the "Elephant Backfield" consisting of 225-pound Deacon Dan Towler, 220-pound Paul (Tank) Younger and Dick Hoerner; and the their "Pony Backfield" of former Army Heisman Trophy winner Glenn Davis, Tom Kalminir and V.T. Smith. So great was Rams Fever that the Hollywood set was as anxious to rub elbows with the players as they were to be seen with the movie stars. The Rams enjoyed a seven-season run from 1949-55 during which they won the 1951 NFL championship, and played in three other title games and a 1952 playoff for the Western Division title against the eventual NFL champion Detroit.

That playoff win started the Lions on the road to back-to-back title victories over the Browns with a blue collar team that reflected its surroundings as much as the Rams had relected theirs. They were led by quarterback Bobby Layne, who never met a late night party he didn't like -- even if the late night collided with the day of the game; and whose passes were never pretty but usually accurate when a game was on the line. Coach Buddy Parker came up with the NFL's first defensive star of the 50s in 320-pound middle guard Les Bingaman; a great linebacker in Joe Schmidt; and the best secondary in football in "Chris' Crew", so named for its leader Jack Christensen, and which included at one time or another Yale Lary, Jim David, Bill Stits, Jim Smith, Carl Karilivacz and one of the greatest defensive backs ever, Dick (Night Train) Lane, who had starred with the Rams great teams earlier in the decade. Lane, Christensen and Lary are in the Hall of Fame.

DEEEF-ENSE LEADS THE WAY ... AND SO DOES JIM BROWN

One great change was occurring in the NFL at that time -- an equalization of emphasis on the defense. Cleveland's great offense had forced teams to come up with new defensive schemes and the New York

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Giants were the first to succeed in 1950 when coach Steve Owen developed an "Umbrella Defense" to try and counter the Browns' great passing offense. He put the concept on the blackboard and then told a young player-coach named Tom Landry to fill in the blanks. Landry did, and seven years later, faced with another threat in Cleveland named Jim Brown, he did it again by winnowing a 43 defensive concept to counter the game's greatest running back of all time.

Soon historic Yankee Stadium shook with thunderous cries of DEEEE-FENSE as the Giants brought a new dimension to pro football that keyed their own dynasty run from 1956-63; and because all of this happened in New York City, the nation's media capitol, the Giants defense became renowned and so did many of its principals, including middle linebacker Sam Huff who made the cover of Time Magazine and was the subject of a prime time CBS documentary, *The Violent World of Sam Huff*, which for the first time, took viewers right into the melee on the field.

This became part of a three-way equation. Part Two occurred in Cleveland where Paul Brown drafted running back Jim Brown from Syracuse in 1957. He was a six-foot, 230-pound physical marvel who really was a halfback in a fullback's body because he was more powerful than any of the game's bigger fullbacks yet he possessed world-class speed with great open field running ability. So many of his runs were incredible that even his great performances became commonplace and Paul Brown, with whom he feuded during some of their time together, said he was the greatest back he had ever seen.

He played for Cleveland for nine seasons and finished as the NFL's all-time rusher with 12,312 yards (he now ranks No. 4), a figure that stood until Walter Payton broke it in the 80s. However, Brown's most enduring statistic is his still No. 1 5.2 yards per carry average.

Brown's running made Cleveland an instant contender (had they a quarterback of Graham's caliber, they would have begun another long dynasty run) and that brought them into immediate conflict with the Giants for supremacy in the Eastern Division. The Giants had smothered the Bears for the 1956 NFL title and won division titles in 1958 and '59.

The 1958 title was decided in a playoff game that followed a season-ending 13-10 victory over Cleveland when Pat Summerall kicked a 49-yard field goal through the swirling snow and darkness in Yankee Stadium to snatch the win. A week later, the Giants defense shut out Brown and his team 10-0 and set up the title clash with Baltimore.

That was the third part of the equation. Baltimore's football fortunes were resuscitated when Carroll Rosenbloom purchased the Dallas Texans franchise after the 1952 season. Two years later, he hired Browns' assistant Weeb Ewbank to coach his team, and a year later, stumbled into a young quarterback named Johnny Unitas who had played sandlot football the previous year for five dollars a game. Unitas sported a crew cut, a baby face and the toughness of a Marine drill sergeant. He didn't have the strongest arm, he wasn't a nifty runner but he had the daring of a riverboat gambler and the great attribute of turning apparently lost games into last-minute wins. It didn't take long for an aura of invincibility to build around him and rub off on talented teammates such as Lenny Moore, Alan (The Horse) Ameche, Raymond Berry, and a defense led by Gino Marchetti. All of this worked to produce the Western Division championship and a match against the Giants in Yankee Stadium for the 1958 title.

THE GREATEST GAME EVER PLAYED

The game, long hailed as "the greatest game ever played," because of its impact on the sport, was televised nationally but the Giants-Browns rivalry the previous two weeks had drawn such national attention, thanks to its New York City connection, that millions of viewers tuned in to see what would happen -- and they saw the game of the NFL's life. The game had every element of football drama -- great catches, unbelievable runs, goal line stands, even a cable break that cut off transmission for several minutes and caused near-hysteria in millions of homes around the nation. The magnificent theatre of pro football was then topped with the first sudden death overtime game in league history after Unitas drove his team down the field to tie the score on Steve Myrha's field goal in the final seven seconds. When he got the ball in the extra quarter, he did it again, finally sending Ameche tumbling into the end zone at 8:15 of overtime for a 23-17 victory.

There is no doubt that the game opened the way to a wonderful marriage with television and the unimagined prosperity that the marriage produced. It wasn't long before the entire nation couldn't get enough of the sport. It was as if the two had been invented for each other.

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In 1960, the new American Football League signed a historic contract with the American Broadcasting Company, allowing the network to televise all of its games and dividing the revenues equally with all eight teams. In 1962, CBS acquired rights to all the NFL games, and in 1965, NBC had those of the AFL, and soon revenues were being totalled in millions of dollars ... \$15.9 million from CBS for the 1964 NFL season and title game, \$18.8 million for playoffs and regular season games the following year ... and finally \$2 million for the 1966 NFL title game. Television contracts now exceed a billion dollars.

PETE ROZELLE -- THE RIGHT MAN AT THE RIGHT TIME

In 1960, Pete Rozelle, general manager of the Los Angeles Rams, succeeded Bell, who died suddenly in 1959--and probably the way he wished because he was stricken by a heart attack while watching his "teams," the Eagles vs the Steelers in Philadelphia. It took over two dozen ballots to make the decision but like the 1958 title game, it was a seminal event in NFL history because Rozelle's leadership and foresight brought the NFL great popularity and prosperity.

He guided the league through a costly war with the American Football League during the 60s; expanded it to Dallas, Minnesota, Atlanta and New Orleans; implemented the merger with the AFL in 1970 that not only grew the league to 26 teams (it reached 28 with the addition of Tampa Bay and Seattle in 1976) but also sired the Super Bowl, the single, most popular one-day sporting event in the nation; secured congressional legislation that allowed the aforementioned single network television coverage; and while still protecting the league's integrity and growth, developed the NFL into a huge marketing force, using the game as a backdrop to form a special NFL Properties division that has churned out millions of dollars in profits for its members with the sales of licensed merchandise; and an NFL Films division whose slick productions brought the game more exposure on television.

All of those goodies helped him keep control of the game and maneuver it to new heights. The key to his success lay in his ability to bend the league's owners to his will, by persuasion where possible; by stern action if necessary. He also dealt successfully with thorny problems such as suspending for a year Paul Hornung, a star for the Green Bay Packers, and Alex Karras, a fine defensive lineman for Detroit, after they admitted betting on NFL games. He conquered all the challenges of an ever-expanding sports marketplace that finally accorded pro football No. 1 status where it still reigns today.

WELCOME TO THE AFL

Rozelle also was at the helm when the American Football League was born, in part because of the slow-footed pace the NFL followed in expanding to other cities in the late 50s. Helped by the riches of Lamar Hunt and Bud Adams, the new league established franchises in Boston, New York, Buffalo, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, Denver and at first Minnesota. But when the NFL offered a franchise to the latter city, it left the AFL and a franchise was then placed in Oakland.

Dubbing themselves the "Foolish Eight, the new league's owners appointed World War II flying ace Joe Foss its commissioner. It scored an immediate coup by signing Heisman Trophy winner Billy Cannon to a Houston contract, and then tabbed several other high-profile collegians; added ex-NFL players and collegians; and helped by ABC's TV money, started the rocky road to survival. But it wasn't until the league signed Alabama quarterback Joe Namath to a then unprecedented \$437,000 contract in 1965 that the league really made a splash. It was good enough to lure a five-year, \$40 million contract from NBC that sustained it through the intense battle for players with the NFL.

Finally, in 1966, the leagues agreed to merge for the 1970 season but most importantly, also agreed to an immediate common draft; to play exhibition games against each other; and the biggest coup of all -- stage a championship game between the two league champions, later to be dubbed Super Bowl.

The AFL, always fiesty while trying to survive in the shadow of the NFL, made its own memories, including a double overtime title game between Houston and the Dallas Texans in 1961; some franchise movement--Los Angeles to San Diego and Dallas to Kansas City; and solid franchises in Buffalo and New York City where the woeful Titans became the prosperous Jets and solidified the league's image.

LOMBARDI & THE PACKERS POWER SWEEP THE NFL

While the AFL was struggling to survive in the early 60s, the Green Bay Packers, under coach Vince Lombardi, staged an eight-year run as the NFL's best team, winning NFL championships in 1961-62 and 1965, and the first two Super Bowl titles. The Packers came along just when television had become the NFL's best friend and for the first time ever, an entire nation followed this team.

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Lombardi was portrayed as a bullying, petty tyrant who may have been just that, but whose players out of fear, love and respect, did all he demanded and became very successful. His football was like himself -- strong, forceful with few frills. He adopted the power of the single wing that he had learned as a member of Fordham's famed Seven Blocks of Granite line to his Pro-T system, and drilled his team to the point of perfection so that it would pound an opponent into submission with a crunching ground game, abetted with a solid passing game. In Bart Starr, he had the perfect quarterback to run his offense. In Jim Taylor, who, in 1962, was the only running back to interrupt Jim Brown's run of NFL annual rushing titles, he had the perfect runner to provide the power.

The Packers dynasty got off to a rocky start in 1960 when the Philadelphia Eagles, behind the ageless Norm Van Brocklin and the last of the NFL's two-way players, Chuck Bednarik, won the NFL title. Green Bay defeated the Giants the next two seasons, aided by brutal winter weather in Green Bay and New York to help negate a high-powered offense run by Y.A. Tittle; and after the Bears won the 1963 championship and the Browns beat the Colts in 1964, they picked up another title at Green Bay over Cleveland.

The Packers represented the NFL against the AFL champion Kansas City Chiefs in Super Bowl I and easily won the game 35-10; and then did it again in Super Bowl II, beating the Oakland Raiders after they had survived -52 wind chill temperatures to defeat the Dallas Cowboys in the final seconds for the NFL title in a game rightly dubbed the "Ice Bowl."

But the AFL got its revenge in memorable style in 1968 when Joe Namath brashly guaranteed his New York Jets would beat the heavily-favored NFL champion Baltimore Colts -- and they did, though Namath, an icon of the popular counter culture of that time, played a very solid though unspectacular role in the victory. Yet, he got all the credit and immortality for that "guarantee."

When the NFL celebrated its 50th anniversary the following year, it was dealt another blow when the Chiefs defeated the favored Minnesota Vikings in Super Bowl IV -- the last game the AFL ever played but one that set in place the new look NFL that emerged when this new marriage of leagues was consummated in 1970.