

RESEARCH NOTES

By Bob Gill

I got an interesting letter a few weeks ago from Pearce Johnson, who has been involved in pro football for about eight decades. It seems the former manager of the Providence Steamroller had finally come across a bit of gridiron history that he had no part in - mainly because it occurred when he was about four years old.

He included a couple of newspaper clippings from 1894 about a "new Professional Foot Ball League" that had teams in New York, Boston, Baltimore, Washington, Philadelphia and Brooklyn. For instance, this item of Oct. 15:

"Washington people who are partial to outdoor sports are wondering if the new Professional Foot Ball League will prove a success. The game is probably the most exciting sport of its kind which has ever been devised for the entertainment of any people." The article also observed that "the promoters of the Foot Ball League are content to lose money this fall in order to educate prospective regular patrons."

Since this league appeared only two years after the accepted date for the beginnings of pro football, and 26 years before the birth of the NFL, it's guaranteed to attract any researcher's attention. But the league's story didn't end as brightly as the previous quote would suggest. In fact, those very words came from an article headlined "THAT PROFESSIONAL LEAGUE - Doubts as to Its Success Entertained at Washington."

Another headline a few days later told the real story: "AS WAS EXPECTED - The American League of Professionals Forced to Give It up." The accompanying story explained:

"It was deemed for the best interest of all club members that the season be brought to a close on October 20. The late period at which the Association got under way, on account of the prolongation of the base ball season, and the difficulty of avoiding conflict with the regular college foot ball games proved a serious obstacle to carrying out a schedule of games, but the Association feels that with the experience it has gained it will be in good condition to reorganize in the opening of 1895."

Apparently, though, the promoters weren't quite as content to lose money as previously reported - anyway, the league never returned. Still, it should merit some interest as the first pro football league ever formed, right?

Wrong. As it turns out, this "Foot Ball League" was playing "under the Association rules" - and those rules apply to the game we now call soccer. I discovered that when I rushed down to the Library of Congress and cheeked out a Washington paper for some results from the 1894 season.

Several league games were played, and the press coverage was good; the Washington paper printed lineups and stories for games played in Brooklyn and Philadelphia. But it's clear from those accounts that they were playing soccer. Sample scores were 3-1 or 1-0, and the lineups included goalies and wings.

So it was just a false alarm. But for a minute there ...

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There's a terrific new book out called "The Biographical Encyclopedia of the Negro Baseball Leagues," by James A. Riley. It's not about football, but don't hold that against it. One of the thousands of players profiled is Everett (Sam) Marcell, son of the great black third baseman Oliver Marcelle. (Yes, they spelled their names differently.) Sam was an ordinary player, maybe even a marginal one. Mainly a catcher, he played for a half-dozen teams in the black majors from 1939-42 and 1947-48 with little distinction. So why did his name catch my eye?

Two reasons. First, Marcell also played two years in the Pacific Coast Football League. In 1944 the 6-foot-3, 190-pound end caught a touchdown pass and booted two extra points in a full season with the Los Angeles Bulldogs. In 1946 he returned to the Bulldogs, but played only a game or two.

Second, Marcell also played the 1946-47 season with a pretty high-caliber independent pro basketball team called the Los Angeles Red Devils. The Devils played two games with the Sheboygan Redskins of the National Basketball League and won them both; later they split a pair with George Mikan's Chicago Packers, the NBL champs.

The Red Devils apparently folded late in the season, but most of the players saw action in the NBL or the Basketball Association of America at one time or another. (Marcell wasn't one of them, though.) And three played major league baseball: Irv Noren, George Crowe and a fellow named Jackie Robinson.

I don't have records for all the Red Devils' games, but Marcell was one of their seven main players, starting most of the time at guard. In the ten of his games for which I have totals, he scored 36 points.

So here we have a man who played three sports - baseball, football and basketball - at a major league level or something near it. And nobody would know about him even today if not for us sports researchers.

And for the record, Robinson's stint with the Red Devils gives him a similar distinction - as if he needs another one. Besides his well-chronicled major league baseball career, he too played high-level pro basketball and pro football. In fact, he and Marcell were teammates on the 1944 Bulldogs before they got together with the Red Devils.