

WHEN HALAS CORNERED THE DRAFT

By Bob Carroll

When it came time to hold the National Football League's annual draft for the 1941 season, the system was still in flux. Previously, five annual drafts had come and gone, starting with the 1936 season when each NFL club chose nine potential stars from that year's crop of graduating collegians. For 1941, each of the ten teams would choose 20 players.

At the time, the draft was not nearly the Must-See-TV National Event it has become in this age, but it was more than an afterthought. An account of the draft usually made the first page of the sports section in those cities with league teams.

And, despite all those stories about club owners walking into the meeting armed only with dog-eared copies of *Street and Smith* magazines, scouting wasn't quite that primitive. At least not for the better teams. Throughout the 1940 season, the names of college stars had been submitted to the league until there was a roster of about 400 young football players to be picked from. Some of those names came from news accounts of college games in the Sunday papers, but teams like the New York Giants and Green Bay Packers very likely had sent someone to actually look at most of the better players in their geographical areas. Moreover, as well-established, longtime winners, they had former players all over the country who tipped them to superior college players in out-of-the-way nooks.

No team had more loyal -- or discerning -- alumni than the Chicago Bears. Beginning with that first draft in 1936 when he picked two future Hall of Famers in Joe Stydahar and Danny Fortmann, George Halas -- with a little help from his friends -- had made the draft work for him.

USING THE SYSTEM

At a distance, Halas seems to have been almost schizophrenic about the draft.

When Philadelphia owner Bert Bell first proposed the draft in the early '30s, it seemed a pie-in-the-sky idea. While having only one team bid for the services of a player was a good way to keep salaries under control, an idea that Halas could embrace wholeheartedly, the ultimate result -- if all went according to the script -- would eventually be to cycle chronic losers like Bell's Eagles to the top of the standings and push annual winners like Halas's Bears to the bottom. Asking Papa Bear to willingly put his team at a disadvantage was like asking Patton to give up his tanks.

And nothing was likely to get done in the NFL in those days unless Halas agreed to it.

But, on the other hand, no one was more a booster of the league and few were more farsighted than Halas. Bell came up with the idea, but Halas let it happen. Possibly, he simply knew that the draft idea was good for the league and any idea good for the NFL would be good for the Bears in the long run. Or maybe he just knew he was smart enough to turn the system -- any system -- to his advantage. He'd really show his stuff in the '41 draft.

Halas tried his first end run with that first draft in 1936. Bell's pathetic Eagles led off the choosing in the worst-drafts- first manner we have all come to know and love. He chose the University of Chicago's Jay Berwanger, the first Heisman Trophy winner and certainly the 1935 season's Golden Boy. Everyone knew that Bell had as much chance of signing Berwanger as he did of signing Eddie Cantor to play linebacker. Then, lo and behold, Bell traded the right to sign Berwanger to the Bears. In effect, for a couple of players he didn't really need, Halas had the first pick of the draft.

It didn't work out the way Halas had planned. Berwanger decided to skip pro football altogether. Still with Stydahar and Fortmann captured, the Papa Bear couldn't complain.

In the '37 draft, Halas did it with Bell again. The bottom-dwelling Eagles drafted Nebraska's All-America fullback Sam Francis first. Sure enough, Francis opened the '37 season wearing Bears colors. This one

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cost, however. The Eagles got Hall of Fame end Bill Hewitt who played great for several seasons. Hewitt had told Halas he was retiring, so George didn't think he was really giving up anything.

After skipping a year, Halas hit a home run in the 1939 draft. On August 16, 1938, he sent Edgar "Eggs" Manske, a first-rate end, to Pittsburgh. For this act of kindness to his buddy Art Rooney, Halas received Pittsburgh's first draft choice in the '39 pickums. And who did that turn out to be? None other than Columbia's Sid Luckman, who went on to become the world's best quarterback in the early 1940s. Because Pittsburgh actually made the selection -- that was how they did it then -- Luckman was for many years listed in the Steelers' column as *their* draft choice even though they never really held rights to him. It made a heartbreaking footnote for Pittsburghers mourning the losses of Johnny Unitas and Len Dawson.

The Bears' 1940 draft was one of the best any team ever had. They chose center Clyde "Bulldog" Turner, ends Ken Kavanaugh and Hamp Pool, tackles Ed Kolman and Lee Artoe, and running back Harry Clark. All of them would gain all-pro recognition in their careers and Turner would wind up in the Hall of Fame.

But the biggest blast of all came from one of those patented Halas-Bell deals. The Eagles tabbed breakaway wonder George McAfee out of Duke and immediately packed him off to the Bears for a couple of long-forgotten tackles. For the next two seasons, McAfee would be arguably the greatest runner the NFL had ever seen. They called him "One-Play" because that's all it took to get him from anywhere on the field into the end zone.

Amazingly, Bell later explained, "We had [passing star] Davey O'Brien then and couldn't have used McAfee anyway." Like a skydiver couldn't use a parachute!

THE BIG STEAL OF '41

Up to this point, the other league owners weren't exactly thrilled with Halas's drafting machinations. But, after all, his deals had sometimes stung him, as in the case of Berwanger. In the Francis deal, he gave up more than he got in return. So, why worry?

But then

In the 1940 championship game on December 8, Halas's Bears destroyed the Washington Redskins 73-0. It still stands as the most one-sided NFL blow-out ever. In those days, the draft was held a day or two after the championship game in the same city, so, on December 10, it was goodies day for 1941.

And, in between, on December 9, came word that Halas would not only have his regular pick -- ninth in the first round -- but also enjoy the first pick *and* either the second or third! The mind boggled.

Here was a team that had just shown itself to be the most irresistible force since God went after Sodom and Gomorrah. Now they were to be allowed to add to their overflowing arsenal Michigan's great Tom Harmon, the back of the year, and possibly Texas A & M's mighty fullback, "Jarrin' John" Kimbrough, a line-smasher whose name could be reasonably coupled in the same sentence with Nagurski. Plus, they'd get yet another choice a few picks later!

The other owners asked themselves, "Is this the end of pro football competition in our time?"

Here's what Halas had done.

In the 1940 draft, Philadelphia picked Santa Clara center John Schiechl as their next selection after George McAfee. But Schiechl refused to report. Considering the state of the Eagles, who could blame him? In April, Bert Bell's good friend George opened his heart and sent the Eagles end Les McDonald and guard Dick Bassi for the missing Schiechl. Oh, and by the way, if Schiechl still didn't report, the Bears would get an Eagles '41 draft choice. The first one, as a matter of fact.

Well, surprise, surprise! The Bears couldn't sign Schiechl either. One wonders how hard they tried. When the Eagles finished predictably dead last, there was Halas drawing a bead on Tommy Harmon.

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Then, just to wrap things up with a big bow, Halas went to Art Rooney and offered him Billy Patterson, a useful halfback due to be unemployed when Halas signed McAfee. The price was Pittsburgh's first pick in '41. Figuring a Patterson in hand was worth more than a draft choice he probably couldn't afford to sign, Rooney agreed. As expected, the Steelers (1940 was the former "Pirates" first year under that name) crumbled beneath the weight of playing real football teams and finished just ahead of the Eagles. However, the Chicago Cardinals had an equally awful record so the draft position -- second or third -- was to be determined by a coin flip between the two.

When they learned on the eve of the draft what Halas had wrought, the league owners marshalled a small counterattack. There wasn't anything they could do about 1941, but they passed a rule that starting in 1942 no team could trade its first or second draft choice until the player had put in a full season with the team. That certainly slammed the door on an empty barn. Eventually, the rule would be expanded to apply to any draft choice before sanity regained control.

On Draft Day, most of the team owners filed into the meeting room with trepidation. Halas was probably smiling -- at least on the inside.

CIVILIZATION SAVED!

All told, things worked out better than the other owners had any right to expect.

First off, Pittsburgh lost the coin flip to the Cardinals. Halas would have to content himself with the first and *third* picks.

Then, Tommy Harmon telegraphed NFL President Carl Storck that he wouldn't play for the Bears. "Pish tosh," said Halas figuratively, and nodded to Bert Bell who chose Harmon.

The Cardinals drafted Kimbrough to no one's surprise. Up stepped the Steelers drafting for the Bears. The choice was Stanford fullback Norm Standlee. Next to Kimbrough, Standlee was the most coveted fullback in the draft and had the additional benefit of having played in the T-formation, the Bears' offensive scheme. In fact, since Standlee had performed wonders at Stanford under Halas's friend Clark Shaughnessy, it's altogether possible that the Bears would have opted for him over Kimbrough anyway.

Cleveland took University of Washington center Rudy Mucha; Detroit grabbed Texas A & M triple-threat Jim Thomason; the Giants opted for Minnesota halfback George Franck; Green Bay nabbed Wisconsin fullback George Paskvan; Brooklyn named Washington's star back Dean McAdams; and the Bears expended their own pick on Ohio State All-America runner Don Scott. The Redskins rounded off the first round by choosing Forest Evashevski, the guy who had been Harmon's blocking back at Michigan.

Washington drafted last even though the Bears were league champs because the draft slots were based on teams' win-lost records and the 'Skins had one more regular season win than Chicago.

Another oddity of the draft was that only the bottom five teams were allowed to draft in the second and fourth rounds. Furthermore, each team was allowed 20 choices no matter what. In effect, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia gave the Bears their positions but no players. The same thing happened in the eighth round; both Philadelphia and Pittsburgh had traded *those* choices to the Bears. As the rounds neared the end, the Cardinals, Rams, and Lions dropped out as they reached 20 players, but the Eagles and Steelers kept drafting (along with the top five teams) until they too had selected 20 players. Somehow, no one had noticed, but by then the Bears had 24 choices so their last four picks were disallowed, and those players, none of whom made a mark in the NFL, went technically undrafted.

All the worry about the Bears cornering the draft with three first round picks turned out to be unnecessary. Harmon didn't play in the NFL until after World War II and then only after he'd been traded to the Rams. Kimbrough also refused to sign with the Cards but had a couple of decent seasons with the Los Angeles Dons of the All-America Football Conference after the war. Standlee gave the Bears a great year in 1941 but then went into the service. When he emerged it was with the 49ers of the AAFC. Scott, the Bears' third first-round pick, was another who ignored the enticements of the NFL. Of the other first round picks, Evashevski went into coaching, Mucha, Thomason, Franck, and McAdams had short and generally uneventful pro careers.

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The Bears didn't draft again until the third and fifth rounds but they came up with Hugh Gallarneau, a terrific halfback from Stanford, and Charley O'Rourke, Boston College's great passer.

In truth, the Bears had rounded up so much talent by 1941 that they were virtually a lock on winning the championship well into the foreseeable future. But, of course, the future is never really foreseeable.

The other owners couldn't thwart Halas's plans.

World War II did.