

PROS' WOES

By Phil Dietrich

The Akron Rubber Bowl's reputation as a graveyard of professional football teams aged in the turf for more than a decade. Then the Akron Pros were reborn -- that is, the Akron Professional Football Club, Inc. of the United Football League.

The team name was chosen in a contest open to the public over the objection of old-time professional fans who believed the Akron Pros of the 20's should be permitted to rest in peace.

George Gareff, a persuasive talker from Columbus, OH, started the ill-starred venture. Commissioner of the newly-formed United Football League, he sold Rubber Bowl Manager Tony Testa on the idea of an Akron entry in the professional venture.

Testa in turn interested Akron attorney and St. Vincent's High School basketball coach Ned Endress in the project, born officially March 1, 1961. Endress became agent of incorporation while George W. Brittain, executive vice-president of the Akron chamber of commerce, headed up the team's board of directors which included ex-Syracuse University football All-American Gifford Zimmerman, William A. Falor, Bill Williams, Jim Hilton, Len Price, Testa and Endress.

Selling the Pros at the box office proved no easier than selling 350 shares of stock at \$100 per share so the new club could meet a July 15 deadline for capitalization set by the UFL. The Akron Pros, in fact, were bailed out of 11th hour trouble in their stock subscription drive by James R. Armington.

Testa revealed that he and Endress, installed as head coach early in the venture, had failed to make the professional team a community venture by knocking on doors and trying to generate enthusiasm for the venture. That's when sportsman-businessman Armington came to the rescue by buying a substantial share of the \$35,000 stock subscription with the understanding that he play no part in running the club.

Armington had been just about everything but a professional football tycoon during a busy career. Former Kent State University student and World War II Air Force pilot, he had hunted big game and dabbled in other sports enough to lead him into his choice of business ventures -- sporting goods. His Buckeye Cycle Co. had just blossomed into the Route 8 development, the Buckeye Sports Center.

"Naturally the latter received the order for Akron Pros uniforms, burnt orange with white on the road and burnt orange with black at home.

Don Colo and Tony Adamle, both of whom had established pro football credentials as members of the Cleveland Browns, were announced as advisory coaches April 25 and Endress as head coach May 5 along with his staff which included ex-North, Garfield, Kenmore and Hower High School aide Joe Petracca as line coach.

One hundred and 20 prospects attended an organizational meeting July 16, the most impressive candidate being Ivan "The Terrible" Tonic of Pitt at quarterback.

From area schoolboy ranks by way of college campuses came Carl Hilling (Central), Northwestern; Tommy Dingle (East), Wooster College; Curby Smith (East), Heidelberg College; Mike Coburn (Hower), Ohio State University; Clay Hill (Hower), Michigan State University; Bill Offenbacher (Alliance), Illinois University; Ben Kimbrough (Copley), University of Akron; and Leo Bland (Central), Furman College.

Ike Grimsley had starred at Canton McKinley High as had Larry Boyer and Tyrone Powers at Akron South, Charley Lewis at Akron North, John Mihelich at St. Vincent's and Gene Cherry at Akron East.

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From the very beginning, it seemed, uncertainty traveled hand in hand with the Akron Pros. For example, on Aug. 1 Endress lost the core of his defensive unit by dictum of UFL Commissioner Gareff who decided that the league would honor the contracts of the Massillon Tigertown Stars of the American Football League, several of whom had since cast their lot with Akron.

Among the former Massillon signees were John L. Martin, Gary Hostetler and behemoths Vic Huffman (6-5,300), Tucson; Frank Howard (6-4 1/2, 260), Akron; and Larry Baker (260), Bowling Green. Three weeks later, after Endress had restructured his defensive line, Gareff added to the confusion by reinstating Baker and Hostetler as Akron players.

That was Aug. 24, four days into the Akron exhibition season which started auspiciously with a 20-6 victory over the Stamford, Conn., Bears at Dennison, OH. Endress singled out Kimbrough, Smith and Cherry for post-game offensive commendation and Wiley Wyman, John Coyne, John Mihelich and Bland for praise defensively.

On Aug. 26, Indianapolis raised questions about Akron's defense by outgunning the Pros, 34-22, at Niles, OH.

Then, on Sept. 2, Stamford rekindled hopes for Akron success by yielding seven touchdowns in a second straight loss to the Pros. The margin of victory -- 41 points -- must have misled everyone, including the Pros themselves. Sept. 11 they were shellshocked victims of the Cleveland Bulldogs at Canton, 43-6, in their last exhibition game.

On that discouraging note Akron opened its UFL season at the Rubber Bowl Sept. 16 against the Columbus Colts. The Pros lost, 40-0, with Endress blaming shoddy tackling for the one-sided defeat.

At Louisville Sept. 22 Akron lost both the game (13-7) and Quarterback Toncic. The latter suffered a broken hand that was to shelf him for the remainder of the season. Boyer, another budding star, also was sidelined with an ankle injury.

There was no respite against Cleveland Sept. 29 with the Bulldogs treating their home fans to a 66-14 blowout of Akron. Curby Smith scored on touchdown runs of 100 and 37 yards, the first on a kickoff return. Otherwise the Pros had little to brag about.

After Grand Rapids mauled Akron, 36-8, at the Rubber Bowl, major stockholder Armington began to have misgivings that weren't lessened at Indianapolis the following weekend when the Pros suffered their fifth straight United Football League defeat.

That was Armington's cue to take immediate action. Endress resigned, pleading the press of his law practice, and on Oct. 16 William and Mary College graduate Otis Douglas was named head coach to succeed him.

Douglas had enjoyed a long and colorful career as a college and professional coach, starting at Akron U. in 1939 as aide to Tommy Dowler and in 1941 and 1942 as head coach of the Zips. World War II interrupted what promised to be a most successful stint on the hilltop highlighted by 1941 victories over Muskingum (10-0), Bowling Green (3-0), Ohio Wesleyan (28-6), Kent State (41-13) and John Carroll (21-13) and a scoreless tie with Ohio University.

After wartime service in the U.S. Navy (1942-45) Douglas served the Philadelphia Eagles of the National Football League as assistant coach and trainer from 1946 through 1948, Drexel Institute as coach in 1949, University of Arkansas as coach 1950 through 1952, the NFL Baltimore Colts as assistant coach in 1953, Villanova University as coach in 1954 and Calgary of the Canadian Football League as coach from 1955 through 1957.

While his credentials were rock solid, Douglas was no miracle man. Under his direction the Akron Pros improved markedly, actually extending Louisville and Cleveland at Rubber Bowl and Columbus at the Capital City in 13-7, 17-15 and 17-13 defeats, respectively, and making a much better showing against Indianapolis (28-10) than they had in a previous game between the two.

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Final UFL statistics published Nov. 28 showed Akron last among the six league teams in victories, rushing yardage, passing yardage, points scored, defense against rushing, total defense and points allowed. The Pros' 0-10 record was reflected in Rubber Bowl attendance for their games. Five home appearances attracted slightly over 18,000 paid spectators!

Of slight consolation was the fact that Curby Smith was named an all-UPL halfback Dec. 3. The Pros had lost approximately \$50,000, the bulk of it coming out of Armington's pocket or Rubber Bowl operating funds inasmuch as the Pros paid only \$5,000 for use of the City of Akron-owned stadium.

The UFL planned to expand to eight teams in 1962. While Testa made a token effort toward finding financial backing for another Akron team, Armington sounded the doomsday call for the Pros May 6 by saying, "I am not in a financial position to continue another season as I did last. In short, I'm not going to bail the Pros out another year. Not alone, anyway."

By June the team had lost its UFL franchise. It was awarded to Toledo which had compiled a 13-2 record for second place in the American Football League the previous season.

The Akron Pros faded into the sunset like their namesakes of the '20s to be forgotten quickly among the sports ventures which have failed in a stadium built around such high hopes.