

DAN REEVES MOVES WEST

Courtesy of The Pro Football Hall of Fame

We were chewing the fat with members of the pro football beat not long ago and the subject of sports news bombshells of the century came up.

Nominations were plentiful and discussion was prolonged, but, not surprisingly, no winner was declared.

But one nomination is worth recalling to pro football fans. That would be the move of the Cleveland Rams to Los Angeles on January 12, 1946. Owner Dan Reeves forced the move and it was a sports bombshell that has/had prolonged effect not only on professional football, but on the professional sports scene as a whole.

This was a shocker for a number of reasons: (1) The Rams less than a month earlier had won the NFL championship: (2) No major league franchise in any sport had ever called a West Coast city home before: (3) Air travel was still in its earlier stages and Los Angeles was 2000 long, hard land miles away from the nearest NFL city: (4) There was a strong tradition for college football in Los Angeles, but no tradition at all for pro football: (5) And most important, Reeves' fellow NFL owners were dead set against the move.

But Reeves, who became a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame -- his election to the pro grid shrine undoubtedly came in recognition of the later-proven genius of this move -- was just as determined that his team would not play in Cleveland again.

Attendance in the Ohio metropolis had been less than sensational -- Only 17,000 turned out to see the Rams play their final regular game after they had clinched the championship. A hardy 32,178 fans braved bitter winter weather to see the title game, but the city fathers had generously tripled the regular rental fee for the game. No matter the crowd or the outcome, Reeves was determined to leave Cleveland!

Reeves had assurances he could rent the huge Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum if his Rams came west and, to be safe, he had also secured an option for the use of the Cotton Bowl in Dallas.

But at league meeting time, other owners had protested such a move as "financial lunacy" and they voted down Reeves' request by a 6-4 margin.

"You call this a NATIONAL league?" Reeves fumed. "I suppose Texas doesn't interest you, either?" He was right. It didn't. So he stormed out of the room. "Consider the Cleveland Rams out of the National Football League," he announced.

Three owners, who like Reeves were destined to become members of the Pro Football Hall of Fame -- George Halas of the Chicago Bears, George Preston Marshall of the Washington Redskins and the Chicago Cardinals' Charley Bidwill -- followed quickly to take up the argument. But Reeves held firm: "It's either Los Angeles or Dallas or nothing!"

So the NFL gave in.

In a way, the Rams weren't really the first major pro grid team to set up housekeeping on the West Coast. Back in 1926, a team that called itself the Los Angeles Buccaneers had an NFL franchise, but it played strictly a road schedule. And eight days earlier, the Los Angeles Dons and the San Francisco 49ers had been firmed up as definite members of the new All-America Football Conference. But the Rams were the first PROVEN major league franchise to test the West Coast.

The early years in California were rough for Dan Reeves and the Rams. The Dons proved a formidable foe and, even as late as 1948, the third season of the football war in Los Angeles, the Dons were actually beating the Rams where it hurt most -- at the gate. But the AAFC collapsed a year later and then the

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Rams had the plush L. A. market to themselves. At the same time they gained a new Pacific Coast foe in the 49ers, who survived the "merger" and became a fellow NFL member.

At about the same time, the Rams blossomed again on the field and the big attendance years of the 1950s were a result. Those were the glory years of Rams football and some of the very best any team has ever known. But that is another chapter of the Reeves-Rams saga.

The milestone achievement will always be that first big move west, when it took a person with courage and convictions and the strength to see those convictions through. For the NFL, and in a greater sense for all professional sports, Dan Reeves was that man!