

Are You Ready for Even More Football?

Welcome the PIFL and the RFL

By Stuart Kantor

When Ted Turner and NBC announced, or rather, teased us with information regarding their plans to initiate a new football league as a directed challenge to the obelisk NFL, a thought raced through my head: Why?

Surely the precedent had been set. The NFL has met all comers, from a plethora of AFLs to the WFL and the USFL. In fact, the NFL just folded one of its own farm teams of NFL Europe (formerly the WLAF), the England Monarchs, winners of the first WLAF championship, due to poor attendance.

So what would cause people in their right mind to want to start a new league? And who would invest in such a thing?

Well, 12 years ago, the Arena Football League, the brainchild of James F. Foster, got off the ground, and the *50-Yard Indoor War*, as it's billed, is enjoying tremendous success.

Thus, with success comes imitation. Say hello to the Professional Indoor Football League, the PIFL.

Headquartered in Las Vegas, the PIFL started play on April 11, 1998 with eight franchises and a 14-game schedule culminating in the PIFL Championship game August 15, 1998 at the Maravich Center on the LSU campus. The original eight under the guise of Commissioner Dick Suess are: the Green Bay Bombers, the Madison (WI) Mad Dogs, the Louisiana Bayou Beast (Baton Rouge), the Honolulu Hufficanes, the Colorado Wildcats (Denver), the Texas Bullets (Belton), the Utah Catzz (Salt Lake City), and the Minnesota Monsters (Twin Cities). The Monsters folded shortly into the season due to financial difficulties, thus awarding their opponents a forfeited victory. The Texas Bullets folded recently due to lack of money, but under new ownership are due back next season.

Already looking toward expansion, teams to be added in 1999 include the Austin (TX) Terminators, the Syracuse Blitz, the Tucson Mirage and the Idaho Stallions. Eventually, the league would like to become a 12-16-team league occupying the hearts of Americans yearning for live, professional football in the smaller US markets where a suitable fan base can keep a franchise alive.

Whereas the Arena Football League's average attendance was 10,928 for 1997, the first-year PIFL is averaging around 2,500 fans. According to Jeff Viergutz, Director of Public Relations, the league's major problem has been the natural growing pains associated with trying to establish a major spectator sport, mainly marketing and stability. With the Arena Football League already firmly entrenched as the No. 1 indoor football game, decisions must be made with ultimate efficiency.

Here, the PIFL believes it has an edge. And its main decision has been budget.

The PIFL believes it is more "fiscally responsible", with budgets running about one-third of the AFL's. This is vitally necessary to sustain a long life, especially when some of the teams -- the Wildcats, the Catzz -- have made the jump from the semi-pro ranks. The game differs from the AFL slightly; no rebound nets behind the goal posts, and the majority of players are not asked to play both ways, yet for survival, only one thing matters: fans. At the league meeting during championship week in Baton Rouge, the future of the league will be discussed; budgets, expansion and marketing will be some of the main issues of contention.

This brings us to the RFL, due to kick off in March of 1999. As it stands right now, there are the following nine franchises: the Shreveport Southern Knights, the Los Angeles Quake, the Texas Matadors, the San

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Jose Scorpions, the Toledo Tornadoes, the Mobile Admirals, the New Orleans Big Dogs, the New England Cannon and a team from Raleigh without a nickname.

According to its literature, the "RFL has been formed as the 'MAJOR LEAGUE OF SPRING FOOTBALL.'" The schedule will "consist of 14 regular-season games, preceded by a three-week training camp and a preseason game." Of the current nine franchises, four will qualify for post-season play. "Rosters will be limited to 37 active players and five taxi-squad members with salaries in the range of \$30,000 to \$65,000 per player with team caps of \$1,500,000."

So let's ask ourselves the question once again: Why another football league?

The RFL website provides four reasons:

1. There is a demand for professional sports as an entertainment product in the top 75 US markets. Meanwhile the NFL only operates in 30 of these cities, with expected expansion to only 2 or 4 more cities by the year 2000.
2. There is an oversupply of NFL-quality players, coaches, front office executives, and support personnel available.
3. Many markets have under-utilized stadiums in metropolitan areas and on college campuses that lose money each year for their taxpayer-owners.
4. FOOTBALL is the top spectator team sport in America.

The RFL brass believe that Spring ball can make it contrary to history. In fact, they are quite adamant that "fan acceptance *was not* the reason behind the demise of prior spring leagues. The WFL in the 1970's, the USFL in the 1980's, and the WLAF in the 1990's *all consistently drew the number of paid attendees sufficient for success according to our financial model.*"

The reason, according to Ron Florida at the league office in Framingham, MA, lay in the owners' greed themselves, particularly one New Yorker named Trump. Simply stated, the owners "didn't stick to the original business plan and stick to salary caps." To combat this problem, the RFL is investigating its owners and making sure the stability of the league is, to borrow a slogan, Priority Job 1.

The "Game Plan" is as follows:

1. A sound financial model.
2. Local ownership.
3. A solid business plan.
4. Learn from the lessons of the past.
5. Avoid "gimmicks" and "trends."
6. Work for "real" growth.
7. Work within local revenues.
8. Don't try to "buy" success or credibility.

Founder and Commissioner Gus Bell, President of Pro-Motion Sports, a top player-rep firm, is hoping to attract 25,000 fans, thus satisfying "the demand for professional football as an entertainment vehicle among sports fans during the NFL's 'off-season.'" Hmmm ... Are there ambitions of perhaps taking on the NFL, ala Ted Turner and NBC?

"Not at all!" Mr. Florida said. "We are a Fall league."

He also stated that discussions are active with both Fox and ESPN to televise an as-of-yet undetermined number of games. Yet, the RIFL did take step No.1 toward credibility: The teams drafted players to, as Mr. Florida said, "create a stir."

Among some of the more notables drafted are: Josh Booty (QB, LSU, Shreveport), Dameyone Craig (QB, Auburn, Mobile), Thad Busby (QB, FSU, Mobile), Rock Preston (RB, FSU, Mobile), Todd Marinovich (*yes, the same one!*, QB, USC, Los Angeles), Sean LaChappelle (WR, UCLA, Los Angeles), Andre Ware

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(QB, Houston, Texas), Chris Keldorf (QB, NC, Raleigh), Corey Flemming (WR, Tennessee, New Orleans), Ron Powlus (QB, Notre Dame, Toledo), and Darren Flutie (WR, Boston College, New England).

Perhaps neither the PIFL nor the RFL will last long enough to make an impression on the American football landscape. Or – perhaps someday the PIFL forces a merger with the Arena Football League and the RFL steals the audience out from under the powerful Turner / NBC partnership. Or – perhaps the CFL and NFL Europe merge while the once-mentioned AAFL becomes a reality and merges with the NAFL, the North American Football League, a never-before-till-now mentioned league, of which I'm the commissioner.

Nonetheless, it's apparent American's appetite for football is mammoth; witness the never-ending search for a true NCAA champion and the number of semi-pro teams dotting the American terrain. Still, will fans turn out to watch players who didn't make it to the NFL when the concept of the RFL differs little from the game we know?

Once again, the answer to the main question remains to be seen, yet starting in March of '99, the RFL will take the field in hopes of earning its place on the American sports scene. And check your local listings for the August 15th PIFL Championship Game. Its future depends on it.