

One division, no playoffs, no championship game. Was there ANY organization to pro football before 1933? Forget the official history for a moment, put on your leather thinking cap, and consider the possibilities of

NFL 1926 in Theory and Practice

By Mark L. Ford

1926 and 2001

The year 1926 makes an interesting study. For one thing, it was 75 years earlier than the just completed season. More importantly, 1926, like 2001, saw thirty-one pro football teams in competition. The NFL had a record 22 clubs, and Red Grange's manager had organized the new 9 team American Football League. Besides the Chicago Bears, Green Bay Packers and New York Giants, and the Cardinals (who would not move from Chicago until 1959), there were other team names that would be familiar today – Buccaneers (Los Angeles), Lions (Brooklyn), Cowboys (Kansas City) and Panthers (Detroit). The AFL created rivals in major cities, with American League Yankees to match the National League Giants, a pre-NBA Chicago Bulls to match the Bears, Philadelphia Quakers against the Philly-suburb Frankford Yellowjackets, a Brooklyn rival formed around the two of the Four Horsemen turned pro, and another “Los Angeles” team.

The official summary of 1926 might look chaotic and unorganized – 22 teams grouped in one division in a hodgepodge of large cities and small towns, and is summarized as “Frankford, Chicago Bears, Pottsville, Kansas City, Green Bay, Los Angeles, New York, Duluth, Buffalo, Chicago Cardinals, Providence, Detroit, Hartford, Brooklyn, Milwaukee, Akron, Dayton, Racine, Columbus, Canton, Hammond, Louisville”.

The presumption of a free-for-all is suggested also by the differing number of league games played by the teams – 16 by Frankford and the Chicago Bears, 13 by Green Bay, New York, Duluth, Canton, and Pottsville, and as few as 4,5, or 6 by other teams. Finally, the casual observer might assume that the competition was somehow unexciting because there was no playoff system. In place of a championship game, we see Frankford, with a .933 record, slightly edging out the Chicago Bears at .923 in the standings. Yet an inspection of the schedule shows that golden age pro ball had a “de facto”, if not “de jure”, structure.

To many football buffs, the idea of divining “de facto divisions” from scheduling patterns in the 1926 NFL might be heresy. True, there was no official division of teams until 1933. The individual clubs worked out their own schedules, and formed unofficial alliances, further split between rich and poor clubs.

De Facto Divisions

“De jure” divisions and playoffs did not come about until the 1933 season, when the NFL adopted George Preston Marshall's suggestion to divide into Eastern and Western divisions and arrange a championship game between the top finisher on each side.

Before 1933, however, there were unofficial, yet identifiable, conferences within the league. The owners arranged their own schedules, and these contracts to face each other created the roots for divisional play. The more powerful teams – Bears, Packers and Cardinals in the midwest, for instance, or New York, Frankford and Pottsville in the east – generally travelled only to play other powerhouses. An agreement to travel often depended on the other party reciprocating. For example, the Chicago Bears would go to Green Bay, with the Packers to pay a return visit to Wrigley Field. George Halas would not go to nearby Hammond, Indiana, or Racine, Wisconsin.

Thus, by 1926, we can observe (from the scheduling practices) four divisions of teams. Geography divided the teams east and west. Economics further divided the eastern and western teams, with each section of the country featuring its “haves” (teams that regularly hosted) and the “have nots” (frequent visitors). The “haves” - teams that seldom travelled except as part of a two game series or to play another contender – existed in the east and the west. The “have nots”, who could make more money from the “visitors' share” of gate receipts than from playing home games, seldom played a series and seldom hosted, and did not compete for the championship of the league (except for the 1920 Decatur Staleys, the top two finishers in the first seven years played mostly at home). To illustrate the point, the contenders are listed in CAPITALS, the competitors in regular print. Star players in 1926 (most in the Hall of Fame) are listed alongside:

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 24, No. 3 (2002)

NFL West contenders:

CHICAGO BEARS (QB Paddy Driscoll, WR/DE George Halas, OT/DT Ed Healey, OT/DT Link Lyman, C George Trafton)

Series with: CHI. CARDS, GREEN BAY, MILWAUKEE

Hosted: Akron, Canton, Duluth, Louisville, New York

Visited: DETROIT

CHICAGO CARDINALS:

Series with: CHI. BEARS, GREEN BAY

Hosted: Columbus, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Racine

Visited: FRANKFORD, MILWAUKEE, NEW YORK

DETROIT PANTHERS (Jimmy Conzelman, coach)

Series with: GREEN BAY

Hosted: Akron, Canton, Chicago, Dayton, Duluth, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Louisville

Visited: FRANKFORD, MILWAUKEE

GREEN BAY PACKERS (Curly Lambeau, coach)

Series with: CHI. BEARS, CHI. CARDS, DETROIT, MILWAUKEE

Hosted: Duluth, Louisville, Racine

Visited: FRANKFORD

MILWAUKEE BADGERS

Series with: CHI. BEARS, GREEN BAY

Hosted: Chi. Cards, Detroit, Duluth, Los Angeles

Visited: Racine

NFL East contenders:

BROOKLYN LIONS

Series with: HARTFORD, NEW YORK, POTTSVILLE

Hosted: Canton, Columbus, Kansas City, Los Angeles

Visited: PROVIDENCE

FRANKFORD YELLOWJACKETS [Philadelphia] (WR/DE Guy Chamberlin)

Series with: HARTFORD, NEW YORK, PROVIDENCE

Hosted: Akron, Buffalo, Canton, Chi. Cards, Dayton, Detroit, Duluth, Green Bay

Visited: (none)

HARTFORD BLUES

Series with: FRANKFORD, BROOKLYN

Hosted: Buffalo, Canton, Dayton, Duluth, Kansas City, New York

Visited: (none)

NEW YORK GIANTS (Tim Mara, owner)

Series with: BROOKLYN, FRANKFORD, PROVIDENCE

Hosted: Canton, Chi. Cards, Duluth, Kansas City, Los Angeles

Visited: CHI. BEARS, HARTFORD

POTTSVILLE MAROONS

Series with: BROOKLYN, BUFFALO, PROVIDENCE

Hosted: Akron, Columbus, Dayton, Duluth, Hammond, Los Angeles

Visited: PROVIDENCE

PROVIDENCE STEAMROLLER

Series with: FRANKFORD, NEW YORK, POTTSVILLE

Hosted: Brooklyn, Canton, Columbus, Kansas City, Los Angeles

Visited: none

NFL west competitors

Duluth (Minn.) Eskimos (RB/DB-Johnny Blood, G/LB Walt Kiesling, RB/DB Ernie Nevers)

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 24, No. 3 (2002)

Series with: Kansas City

Hosted: K.C. only

Visited: Canton, CHI. BEARS, DETROIT, FRANKFORD, Hammond, HARTFORD, MILWAUKEE, NEW YORK, POTTSVILLE, Racine

Hammond (Indiana) Pros

Series with: none

Hosted: Duluth

Visited: Akron, POTTSVILLE, Racine

Kansas City (Mo.) Cowboys (OT/DT Steve Owen)

Series with: none

Hosted: Duluth, Los Angeles (postseason)

Visited: BROOKLYN, BUFFALO, CHI. CARDS, Columbus, DETROIT, Duluth, HARTFORD, NEW YORK, PROVIDENCE

Los Angeles Buccaneers [based in Chicago]

Series with: none

Hosted: none

Visited: BROOKLYN, BUFFALO, Canton, CHI. CARDS, DETROIT, MILWAUKEE, NEW YORK, POTTSVILLE, PROVIDENCE

Louisville Colonels [based in Chicago]

Series with: none

Hosted: none

Visited: Canton, CHI. BEARS, DETROIT, GREEN BAY

Racine (Wis.) Legion

Series with: none

Hosted: MILWAUKEE

Visited: Chi. Cards, Duluth, Green Bay, Hammond

NFL East Competitors

Akron (Ohio) Pros (Fritz Pollard)

Series with: Canton

Hosted: Hammond

Visited: Buffalo, CHI. BEARS, DETROIT, FRANKFORD, POTTSVILLE

Buffalo (N.Y.) Rangers

Series with: Dayton

Hosted: Akron, Columbus, Kansas City, Los Angeles

Visited: FRANKFORD, HARTFORD, POTTSVILLE

Canton (Ohio) Bulldogs (OT/DT Pete Henry)

Series with: Akron

Hosted: Columbus, Duluth, Los Angeles, Louisville

Visited: Akron, BROOKLYN, CHI. BEARS, DETROIT, FRANKFORD, HARTFORD, NEW YORK, PROVIDENCE

Columbus (Ohio) Tigers

Series with: none

Hosted: Kansas City

Visited: BROOKLYN, Buffalo, CANTON, CHI. CARDS, POTTSVILLE, PROVIDENCE

Dayton (Ohio) Triangles

Series with: Buffalo

Hosted: Buffalo only

Visited: DETROIT, FRANKFORD, HARTFORD, POTTSVILLE

As for the nine teams in the smaller American Football League, it appears that more frequent travel was planned. By the sixth week of the season, however, teams began failing and by week 10, only four of the original clubs were left. The de facto division of the AFL might have been geographical:

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 24, No. 3 (2002)

AFL West: Chicago Bulls, Cleveland Panthers*, "Los Angeles" Wildcats, Rock Island Independents*

AFL East: Boston Bulldogs*, Brooklyn Horsemen*, New York Yankees, Newark Bears*, Philadelphia Quakers

***folded in midseason**

De Facto Playoffs

In theory, all 22 teams were eligible to win the NFL crown. In practice, however, only eleven teams appear to have played home-and-away had schedules that would give legitimacy to a championship claim. From its inception, the NFL's race came down to an eastern club and a midwest club. East and west generally did not meet until the end of the season, usually after November 30.

Consider the first six years before 1926:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Western champ</u>		<u>Eastern champ</u>	<u>Meeting</u>
1920	Decatur Staleys	(#2)	Akron Pros (#1)	Tie, 0-0
1921	Chicago Staleys	(#2)	Buffalo (#1)	Chicago 10-7
1922	Chicago Bears	(#2)	Canton Bulldogs (#1)	Canton 7-6
1923	Chicago Bears	(#2)	Canton Bulldogs (#1)	Canton 6-0
1924	Chicago Bears	(#2)	Cleveland Bulldogs (#1)	Cleveland 16-14
1925	Chicago Cardinals	(#1)	Pottsville Maroons (#2)	Pottsville 21-7

In each case, a western team (from Illinois) and an eastern team (Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania) each placed in the top two finishers, and those teams met at least once during the season. In the two seasons before 1926, the final showdown ended in controversy. The Cleveland Bulldogs had played a rematch against the Bears in 1924 and lost 23-0, but got out on a technicality, since the game hadn't been approved by the league. In 1925, of course, the Pottsville Maroons were penalized for playing an unsanctioned game against former Notre Dame all-stars.

With these two precedents, east-west meetings in 1926 generally didn't take place until season's end. In the first ten weeks of play, there were only three such games (the Giants came to Chicago to play the Bears on October 9; the Cardinals travelled east to play New York and Frankford on the November 6-7 weekend). Until the Thanksgiving weekend, the contenders stayed within their region, with races in east and west.

Ties did not count as a win or loss, so by week five (October 16-17), the Cardinals (4-0-0), the Bears (3-0-1) and the Packers (1-0-2) were unbeaten in the west. Pottsville, PA (2-0-0) and Frankford (3-0-1) led in the east after the Giants had sustained their first loss, 7-0 to the Bears. The games afterward reflected the race:

WEEK FIVE (October 16-17, 1926)

Frankford: beat Giants at Philadelphia, 6-0, and in NYC 6-0

Pottsville: beat Brooklyn at home 14-0, in Brooklyn 21-0

Green Bay: beat Milwaukee at home, 7-0

Chicago Bears defeated Chicago Cardinals, 16-0 (at Wrigley Field)

FRANKFORD 5-0-1 (1.000); POTTSVILLE 4-0-0 (1.000)

BEARS 4-0-1 (1.000); PACKERS 2-0-2 (1.000); CARDINALS 4-1-0 (.800)

With the win over the Cards, the Bears (tied once) took a lead, with the twice-tied Packers close behind. Pottsville, unbeaten and untied, was slightly ahead of once-tied Frankford.

WEEK SIX (October 23-24, 1926)

Frankford: beat Canton at Philadelphia, 17-0

Pottsville: lost to the Steamroller in Providence, 14-0

Green Bay: beat Racine at home, 35-0

Chicago Bears: beat Duluth at home, 24-6

FRANKFORD 6-0-1 (1.000); POTTSVILLE 4-1-0 (.800)

BEARS 5-0-1 (1.000); PACKERS 3-0-2 (1.000)

The Frankford Yellowjackets, Chicago Bears and Green Bay Packers remained unbeaten while Pottsville's 14-0 loss to Providence ended perfection.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 24, No. 3 (2002)

WEEK SEVEN (October 30-31, 1926)

Frankford: lost in Providence 7-6; beat Providence at home 6-3

Pottsville: beat Buffalo at home 14-0

Green Bay beat Cardinals in Chicago, 3-0

Chicago Bears beat Akron at home, 17-0

FRANKFORD 7-1-1 (.875); POTTSVILLE 5-1-0 (.833)

BEARS 6-0-1 (1.000); PACKERS 4-0-2 (1.000)

When giant-killer Providence rolled over the Yellowjackets, 7 to 6, Pottsville was back in the running in the east. The Bears and Packers stayed unbeaten but were soon to meet again. Earlier, they had played to a 6-6 tie in Green Bay. The rematch was set for November 21 at Wrigley Field.

WEEK TEN (November 20-21, 1926)

Frankford: beat Dayton at Philadelphia, 35-0

Pottsville: beat Hammond at home 7-0

Chicago Bears defeated Green Bay 19-13 at Wrigley Field

FRANKFORD 10-1-1 (.909); POTTSVILLE 10-1-0 (.909)

BEARS 10-0-1 (1.000); PACKERS 6-1-2 (.857)

The Packers had given the Bears the only blemish on their record, a 6-6 tie at Green Bay. The Bears won by a touchdown, 19-13, giving the Pack its first loss.

WEEK ELEVEN

Thanksgiving Day, November 25

Frankford Yellowjackets beat Green Bay Packers in Philadelphia, 20-14.

Chicago Bears: tied the Chicago Cardinals 0-0 (at Wrigley Field).

November 27-28

Frankford: beat Detroit in Philadelphia, 7-6

Chicago Bears: beat Canton at home, 35-0

Pottsville: tied the Rangers 0-0 in Buffalo

FRANKFORD 12-1-1 (.923); POTTSVILLE 10-1-1 (.909)

BEARS 11-0-2 (1.000); PACKERS 6-2-2 (.750)

On Thanksgiving Day, the 6-1-2 Packers went to Pennsylvania to face 10-1-1 Frankford and lost their second straight game, 20-14. Frankford narrowly beat visiting Detroit 7-6 two days later, while the Bears averted a loss to the Cardinals, holding them to a scoreless tie, and Pottsville tied Buffalo instead of beating them. With regular play at an end, the Bears were unbeaten (11-0-2), and Frankford (12-1-1) was a few percentage points ahead of Pottsville (10-1-1), .923 to .909.

Once again, the championship came down to a meeting between the best team in the west - the unbeaten Chicago Bears - and the best in the east, the once-beaten Frankford Yellowjackets. After five consecutive title games in Chicago, the 1926 deciding game was set for Shibe Park, home field for baseball's Philadelphia Athletics.

There's no need to recount that game. Suffice to say that there was another parallel between the 1926 and 2001 seasons, as the contest came down to a tie-breaking kick. Just as Adam Vinatieri's last second field goal gave a Boston team an upset win over a St. Louis opponent, Ernie Hamer's extra point was the deciding factor in a Philadelphia team's 7-6 win over Chicago.

Epilogue

And there, the parallels end. Though both years saw 31 teams, there was expansion after 2001, contraction after 1926. The 2002 NFL would add an unprecedented 32nd franchise in the Houston Texans. The 1927 NFL would have only 12 teams, even after adding the AFL's Yankees. Indeed, the sole common feature for both seasons would that - whether it was the Buccaneers, Wildcats, Rams or Raiders - there would be no teams representing Los Angeles.

An alternate look at the 1926 season....

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 24, No. 3 (2002)

STANDINGS, NOVEMBER 28, 1926

NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE

WESTERN CONFERENCE

	<u>W</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>T</u>	<u>Pct.</u>
Chicago Bears	11	0	2	1.000
Green Bay	7	3	2	.700
Chicago Cardinals	5	6	1	.455
Detroit	4	6	2	.400
Milwaukee	2	7	0	.222

EASTERN CONFERENCE

	<u>W</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>T</u>	<u>Pct.</u>
Frankford	12	1	1	.923
Pottsville	10	1	1	.909
New York	8	4	1	.667
Providence	5	6	0	.455
Hartford	3	7	0	.300
Brooklyn	3	8	0	.273

Second Division

	<u>W</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>T</u>	<u>Pct.</u>
Los Angeles	6	2	1	.750
Kansas City	6	3	1	.667
Duluth	6	4	2	.600
Racine	1	4	0	.200
Hammond	0	4	0	.000
Louisville	0	4	0	.000

Second Division

	<u>W</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>T</u>	<u>Pct.</u>
Buffalo	4	4	2	.500
Akron	1	4	3	.200
Dayton	1	4	1	.200
Columbus	1	6	0	.143
Canton	1	9	3	.100

Championship - Frankford Yellowjackets 7, Chicago Bears 6

AMERICAN FOOTBALL LEAGUE Standings November 21, 1926

	<u>W</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>T</u>	<u>Pct.</u>
Philadelphia Quakers	6	2	0	.750
New York Yankees	8	3	0	.727
Los Angeles Wildcats	5	6	1	.500
Chicago Bulls	5	3	2	.455

Failed Teams

	<u>W</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>T</u>	<u>Pct.</u>
Cleveland	3	2	0	.600
Boston	2	4	0	.333
Rock Island	2	6	1	.286
Brooklyn	1	3	0	.250
Newark	0	3	2	.000

Championship Series:

Philadelphia 13, New York 10; Philadelphia 13, New York 6

...and a Golden Age look at the 2001 season.

If the past season were reported the way 1926 was, the outcome might still have been the same. Imagine, for a moment, 21 NFL franchises and 10 AFL teams (no merger) in separate pennant races. No playoffs (some teams played more than 16 games) except for one NFL-AFL meeting. No overtime games (ties instead, which didn't count in the standings). No 2 point conversions.

Thus, San Francisco's 12-4-0 season becomes 10-5-2. How? Two overtime wins against Atlanta count as 13-13 and 31-31 ties. The 49ers 25-22 OT win over Carolina would not have happened but for a 2 point conversion that kept the game from ending 22-21. Likewise, a 49ers 37-31 loss to Chicago would have ended 31-30 in regulation. Add a 21-15 loss to Green Bay (no wild card games) and history is revised. With the additional games, the St. Louis Rams would still be on top of the NFL, and New England would rule the AFL – even counting a 13-13 “tie” with Oakland:

NFL

Team	<u>W</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>T</u>	<u>Pct.</u>
St. Louis	15	2	1	.882
Pittsburgh	13	3	2	.813
Green Bay	13	5	0	.722
Philadelphia	13	5	1	.722
Chicago Bears	12	5	0	.706
San Francisco	10	5	2	.667
Baltimore	10	7	0	.588

AFL

Team	<u>W</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>T</u>	<u>Pct.</u>
New England	10	5	3	.667
Miami	11	6	0	.647
N.Y. Jets	10	7	0	.588
Oakland	10	7	1	.588
Denver	8	7	1	.533
Tennessee	6	10	0	.375
Cincinnati	5	9	2	.357

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 24, No. 3 (2002)

Tampa Bay	9	7	1	.563	San Diego	5	9	2	.357
Seattle	8	7	1	.533	Kansas City	5	10	1	.333
Atlanta	7	7	2	.500	Buffalo	3	12	1	.200
Cleveland	7	7	2	.500					
Washington	7	8	1	.467					
New Orleans	7	9	0	.438					
N.Y. Giants	6	9	1	.400					
Indianapolis	6	10	0	.375					
Arizona	6	10	0	.375					
Dallas	5	10	1	.333					
Minnesota	5	11	0	.313					
Carolina	2	13	1	.133					
Detroit	2	14	0	.125					

Last word: "...and Adam Vinatieri booted a field goal, averting a tie and giving the AFL Patriots a 20 to 17 win over the NFL Rams. It marked only the 10th victory by an AFL team (compared to 26 by the NFL) since the pennant winners began meeting in 1967."
