

Tacoma Story

Bart Ripp; The News Tribune

Fifty-five years ago, professional football was a Sunday curiosity. There was no television coverage. Players had to work a weekday job to support a family in post-World War II America.

Pro football was kind of a sanctified roller derby. Teams were concentrated, as was much of the population, in the Eastern cities of New York, Boston, Washington and Philadelphia, and through the industrial Midwest in Pittsburgh, Chicago - blessed with the Bears and Cardinals - Detroit and Green Bay. There was also a new franchise in Los Angeles called the Rams.

On the West Coast, where soldiers and sailors came home from the Pacific war and took delight in the mild climate and hot economy, there was a league nearly comparable to the National Football League. The Pacific Coast Professional Football League had followings up and down Highway 99, in Los Angeles, where there were three teams, in San Francisco and Oakland, and, for one season, in Tacoma.

Tacoma's only men's professional football team was a one-year wonder, the Indians. They won seven games, lost four, averaged about 13,000 fans for five Sunday games at Stadium Bowl, managed to get a spot in the PCPFL's championship due to a quirky forfeit by the rival San Francisco Clippers, quickly gathered to travel to Los Angeles for the title game, were trounced, 38-7, and never played again.

The PCPFL, a league second only to the NFL, limped through the 1947 season. Then, time ran out on the league. The NFL had come to Los Angeles. The All-America Football Conference, founded by Chicago Tribune sports editor and baseball All-Star Game pioneer Arch Ward, had discovered new markets and bequeathed the Baltimore Colts, San Francisco 49ers and the mighty Cleveland Browns to the NFL by 1950. By then, four years after a boiler factory owner had started the Tacoma Indians, the local pro football team was just a memory.

The Indians live in a modest museum open during Tacoma Dome sports events. The Shanaman Sports Museum of Tacoma-Pierce County has a display, curated by sports historian Marc Blau, of Indians history, programs, tickets and a red wool jacket with an Indians emblem.

The memorabilia was donated by Indians coach Steve Slivinski, fullback Marv Harshman and a sports fan named Vic Rafanello, who is a Green River Community College professor.

Blau wrote a letter to Cle Elum coal miner Harry Cusworth, who played guard for the Tacoma Indians, and asked if he had any memorabilia. "I never heard

anything back," Blau said. "Two years later, I got a letter from George Cusworth, Harry's son. He sent his dad's Indians jacket. That's it - hanging up there."

"I never even knew we had jackets," Slivinski said.

Slivinski and two of his star players, Harshman and Marv Tommervik, recently gathered in the museum to discuss Tacoma's only pro football team. Slivinski, 84, was the coach. He was a University of Washington guard and linebacker, selected by the Washington Redskins in the 11th round of the 1939 draft. He played 53 games for the Redskins, including the famed 73-0 trashing by the Bears in the 1940 NFL championship.

Slivinski's Redskins paychecks were signed by owner George Preston Marshall, who was the last NFL owner to allow black players on his team. Marshall was renowned for wearing Indian head dresses through District of Columbia streets before home games, rousing fans to come see his lads play at Griffith Stadium.

Slivinski's Redskins teammates included Hall of Famers Sammy Baugh, the best quarterback of his era, and a tackle named Glen "Turk" Edwards. A 6-foot-2, 260-pound giant in a time when a 200-pound player was a big fellow, Edwards was born in 1909 in a Douglas County town called Mold, nine miles north of Coulee City. Edwards starred at Washington State, excelled for the old Boston Braves, who moved to Washington and became the Redskins, and had his career ended by a weird injury - he blew out his knee turning to leave a pregame coin toss in 1940.

Tommervik and Harshman were called the Marvelous Marvs at Pacific Lutheran College, as PLU then was known. Tommervik was the star tailback in the Indians' single-wing offense, Harshman the fullback.

The Marvs made the most money. They each were paid \$7,800 by owner Al Davies, who owned Birchfield Boiler on Tacoma's Tideflats, building steel boilers and ships. The team's headquarters was in the boiler plant at 2503 E. 11th St.

Davies paid the Marvs a \$2,000 bonus to sign with the fledgling Indians, rather than the AAFC's New York Yankees. "Davies gave us the extra money because we were local guys and they thought that would draw fans," Harshman said. Harshman and his wife Dorothy used the signing bonus to buy a set of solid birch furniture. "I was 28," he said, "and wanted to do something with my life."

He did. Harshman is revered as Washington's best basketball coach. He coached 13 years at PLU, 13 years at Washington State and 14 glorious seasons at

the University of Washington. He is 84 and attends every Huskies game.

In football, this Marv yields to the other. Harshman said Tommervik was the Indians' best player. "He was a passer like nobody else," Harshman said. "In the single-wing, the tailback ran everything. He was our best player."

Both Marvs agreed that the league's best player was San Diego Bombers quarterback Jay Stoves, who was from Chehalis and played for Washington State. "We didn't really know much about the other teams," Tommervik said. "When you got through playing a team, then you had a scouting report."

They rarely practiced. Slivinski occasionally called a practice at Renton High School, since many of the players worked in Seattle or attended graduate school at UW. Cusworth drove to Sunday games from Cle Elum, where he worked in a coal mine.

Home games were at Stadium Bowl. It had no track, no grass, just that grand view. There were H-shaped wooden goal posts set at the goal line. "You'd go down and hook the goal post with your arm so you could swing in another direction," Harshman said, "and that would run the defender into the post. Tommervik would get the ball to you and you'd have a touchdown."

Tickets cost \$2.50 for east-side bleachers, \$1.50 for the west end zone and 75 cents for kids. The Elks Club band played and the Eagles fraternal drill team performed. Fans received refrigerators, nylon stockings and men's topcoats in drawings held during the game.

The Indians rode Pullman trains to games in Salt Lake City, Sacramento, Oakland and San Diego, and a plane to Honolulu. "We flew to Hawaii," Slivinski said, "and played two games over there. Everybody who went to Hawaii played two games to cover the travel (expense). Hawaii (the Hawaiian Warriors) had no road games.

"They had their own officials. With 20,000 people in the ballpark, the officials were reluctant to make a call against the home team."

A reserve end and quarterback, a former UW player and Philadelphia Eagle named Chuck Newton dreaded flying. He drank a fifth of whiskey to prepare for the Matson Airlines four-motor prop plane's trip to Hawaii. "The guys carried Chuck onto the plane," Harshman said.

"He would rather have walked to Hawaii," Tommervik said.

The Hawaiian Warriors had a tackle named Wayne Sterling, who had played at UW. He was a Honolulu police lieutenant. He threw a luau for the Tacoma team. "It lasted for days," Tommervik said. "We slept right on the beach."

"Girls met us with leis at the Honolulu airport," Harshman said. "We had left our pregnant wives at home and we thought we were really something."

Something propelled the Indians into the league championship. The San Francisco Clippers beat the Los Angeles Bulldogs, 24-19 on a long pass in the game's final minute to win the PCPFL Northern

Division and earn a trip to Los Angeles for the championship game on Jan. 19, 1947.

But when league officials went to the Clippers locker room to congratulate them, they discovered a ringer. It was tackle John Woudenberg wearing the uniform belonging to Courtney Thorell. Woudenberg was a tackle for the San Francisco 49ers. Because the PCPFL had an agreement with the NFL not to use AAFC players, the score was changed to a 1-0 Los Angeles victory. The Northern Division title was declared a forfeit and Tacoma vaulted into the championship game.

It was played before 5,200 fans at 18,000-seat Gilmore Stadium, owned by oil baron E.B. Gilmore, patriarch of the Farmers Market in Los Angeles.

The Bulldogs were loaded with 11 players who had NFL experience. They included Joseph Americus Margucci, a Detroit Lions halfback nicknamed "White Britches"; lineman Forrest McPherson, who retired to Centralia; and wingback Elvin Hutchinson, who was anointed "The Red Oak Express," honoring the town where he lived in Iowa.

Los Angeles won easily, 38-7. It was the Indians' last game.

"We had some good players," Slivinski said, "but I think Davies lost interest after that one season."

Linemen Glen Conley and Byng Nixon attended Lincoln High, the UW, then played on the Indians. They were called "The Birdcage Twins" because they wore facemasks, nothing but a plastic bar, on their helmets.

Helmets were a novelty in the 1940s. The NFL made them mandatory in 1943. Another archaic rule, penalized by 10 yards, was no coaching from the sidelines.

The Indians' best receiver was a former Ballard High and PLU end named Sigurd Sigurdson, who everyone called "Sig." He caught passes for 104 yards for the 1947 Baltimore Colts in the AAFC, blew out a knee and never played again. "I often wonder what a player like Sig could do in the NFL today," Harshman said. "I yell at the TV a lot. I see somebody make a tackle, catch a pass or something, and they're dancing and strutting around. They're all saying, 'Look at me, look at me.'"

"We never did that. We played both ways. We were much more disciplined. It was our business."

"If anybody did that nonsense (dancing)," Slivinski said, "they wouldn't be around for the next play. We were much more for the team than an individual."

Watching today's professional games on television reminds Harshman how far away 1946 was. "But you know," Harshman said, "I start talking about the guys and all the good players we had, then it doesn't seem that long ago. It comes back. It all comes back."

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