

DID TOO MANY COACHES SPOIL THE BROTH ?

**There may be a reason the NFL hasn't seen
co-coaches in quite a few years.**

By Mark Speck

Co-coaches. An idea that has been tried by numerous pro football teams over the years. Usually with mixed or negative results. When one thinks about it, the whole concept seems absurd. Can one imagine Vince Lombardi and Paul Brown, Don Shula and George Allen, or Bill Parcells and Jimmy Johnson trying to co-exist on the same sideline at the same time? Both of them thinking they were in control, while neither of them really were? Heck, sometimes assistant coaches can barely get along on the sidelines, let alone head coaches. Remember Buddy Ryan socking Kevin Gilbride?

But teams have tried it. Quite a few times down thru the history of pro football, teams have thought they'd be better off with two men in charge instead of one. Most of them found out fairly quickly that it wasn't going to work. Something about the old saying, too many cooks spoil the broth? Well, the majority of these owners found out that too many coaches can spoil the broth as well.

The idea of co-coaches goes back to the very roots of pro football, and the first few attempts were relatively successful, one reason the concept lasted as long as it did.

In both 1922 and 1924, George Halas and Dutch Sternaman shared coaching duties with the Bears. In '22, the Bears went 9-3 and two years later Chicago was 6-1-4. Of course, Halas and Sternaman were co-owners of the team, and therefore unlikely to fire each other, and also two of the league's top players.

Two years later, in 1926, the NFL added a road team to their ranks called the Los Angeles Buccaneers. The Bucs played all their games on the road, which couldn't have made things any easier for co-coaches Brick Muller and Tut Imlay. But despite the fact that Muller and Imlay both coached the team and also played for the Bucs (and may have sold tickets as well for all we know), L.A. finished the season 6-3-1.

In 1930, the Orange (N.J.) Tornadoes moved to Newark and hired Jack Fish and Andy Salata as co-coaches. Neither man had ever coached in the NFL before, and it showed, as the Tornadoes more resembled a slight breeze than their namesake. Newark scored a grand total of 51 points in 12 games, and finished dead last in the 11-team NFL with a 1-10-1 record. The Tornadoes promptly blew away after the season, and folded. A year later they were replaced by a new team called the Cleveland Indians. This club also tried the co-coach experiment, but with about the same poor results. Al Cornsweet and Hank Workman could coax only 2 wins in ten games out of their « Tribe ». Like Newark the year before, the Indians dropped out of the NFL after one season.

Because of these poor showings, no NFL owners seemed willing to try the idea of a two-coach team, so the co-coach idea didn't appear again until World War II. When George Halas joined the Navy in November of 1942, he left his two assistants, Hunk Anderson and Luke Johnsos, in charge. The two co-coaches led the Bears into the '42 title game and then guided Chicago to the '43 championship. A 23-11-2 record made them the most successful co-coaches in history. There were other instances of using the co-coach concept during the war, but they weren't nearly as successful, and for them the reasons were financial, as the war effort left a few teams struggling to survive. None more so than Pittsburgh and the Chicago Cardinals. The Steelers had always been a threadbare operation, and the war depleted what little assets the club had. In 1943, the team merged with their cross-state rivals, the Philadelphia Eagles. The « Steagles », as they were called, combined their rosters, and also combined coaches, as Greasy Neale of the Eagles and Walt Kiesling of the Steelers shared coaching duties. They did a commendable job with what they had, and the club finished a respectable 5-4-1 record.

A year later, the Steelers, still feeling a money pinch, combined forces with the equally strapped Chicago Cards. The Cards had always played second-fiddle to the Bears in Chi-Town, and the war was leaving them

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depleted as well. So the « CarPitts » were born, and the name fit, as this club was really the pits. The CarPitts nickname was very appropriate, for like their namesake, this club was just like a carpet---everybody walked all over them. They finished 0-10, scoring 108 points while giving up 328. Art Rooney called this team the worst in the history of pro football.

But despite Rooney's proclamation, there might have been a worse team in the NFL that very same season. In the East Division, the sorry Brooklyn Tigers started the season 0-5 and canned head coach Pete Cawthon. Frank Bridges and Ed Kubale were named co-coaches, but this was not a case of two heads being better than one. The Tigers went 0-5 under Bridges and Kubale, and were worse than they'd been under Cawthon, as they were shut out three times and outscored 85-13.

Despite these setbacks, teams continued to try the co-coach idea. In the AAFC it was tried twice. In 1946, players Bob Dove, Ned Matthews and Wee Willie Wilkin took over the reins of the Chicago Rockets from ousted head man Pat Boland, who had earlier replaced Dick Hanley. Under their coaching trifecta, the Rockets fashioned a 2-2-1 record, including a 51-14 shellacking at the hands of the Browns, and sank from third to fourth place in the league's Western Division. A year later, the Los Angeles Dons tried the idea of two coaches, hiring Mel Hein and Ted Shipkey to replace Dudley De Groot. The Dons were 5-5 when the duo took over, and the co-coaches didn't improve the club any, as L.A. went 2-2 under their command.

These instances didn't stop the Cardinals from trying it again in 1949. After Jimmy Conzelman quit, the Cards' owners couldn't quite decide on a new head coach. One group wanted Phil Handler, the other wanted up-and-coming assistant Buddy Parker. So they struck a compromise and hired them as co-coaches. The team, as one would expect, performed poorly under their coaching duo, losing 4 of their first six, including 3 of 4 at home. Finally, the Cards wised up and kicked Handler upstairs (and hopefully somewhere else as well) and put Parker in charge. Alone at the helm, Buddy turned Chicago around, and the Cards went 4-1-1 under him the rest of the way, including a 42-19 win over Detroit, a 65-20 rout of the New York Bulldogs, and a 41-21 smashing of the Green Bay Packers. Of course, for the Cardinals and their fans this story has an unhappy ending. Instead of re-hiring Parker after the season, Chicago let him walk to Detroit, where he turned the Lions into one of the NFL's best teams.

The Handler/Parker experiment was the last time the concept of co-coaches was ever used in anything other than a strictly interim or temporary basis. It was tried several times here and there for a game or two, the last being in 1978. The results were always mixed, and never successful enough to merit an attempt over a full season. It seemed that too many cooks, and too many coaches, did indeed spoil the broth. So, it's very doubtful one will see Jon Gruden and Brian Billick sharing the same headset anytime soon.

CO-COACHES

- 1922, 1924 Chi. Bears--George Halas/Dutch Sternaman 14-4-4
- 1926 Los Angeles Buccaneers---Tut Imlay/Brick Muller 6-3-1
- 1927 Frankford --Pug Daugherty/Charley Rogers/Ed Weir 0-0-1
- 1930 Newark Tornadoes---Jack Fish/Andy Salata 1-10-1
- 1931 Cleveland Indians---Al Cornsweet/Hank Workman 2-8-0
- 1942-45 Chicago Bears---Luke Johnsos, Hunk Anderson 23-11-2
- 1943 Phil. Eagles-Pitt. Steelers--Walt Kiesling/Greasy Neale 5-4-1
- 1944 Brooklyn Tigers---Frank Bridges/Ed Kubale 0-5-0
- 1944 Chi. Cards-Pitt. Steelers--Phil Handler/Walt Kiesling 0-10-0
- 1946 Chi.Rockets--Bob Dove/Ned Matthews/Willie Wilkin 2-2-1
- 1947 Los Angeles Dons---Mel Hein/Ted Shipkey 2-2-0
- 1949 Chicago Cardinals---Phil Handler/Buddy Parker 2-4-0

THE COFFIN CORNER : Vol. 26, No. 3 (2004)

- 1951 Chicago Cardinals---Phil Handler/Cecil Isbell 1-1-0
- 1953 Green Bay Packers--Scooter MacLean/Hugh Devore 0-2-0
- 1961 St.L.Cards--Chuck Drulis/Ray Prochaska/Ray Willsey 2-0-0
- 1978 New England Patriots--Hank Bullough/Ron Erhardt 0-1-0

Total Record 60-67-11