

## **THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 26, No. 4 (2004)**

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*Philadelphia, Dec. 9 (AP): Professional football's four year war was settled across a conference table today. The All-America Conference merged with the National Football League. Thus ended one of the most costly wars in the history of athletics. Losses to clubowners soared to upwards of two million dollars in the protracted battle for players and attendance. The new league is to be called the National-American Football League. The new league will come into being on Dec. 19, the day after the N.F.L. championship game.....*

# **THE 75 DAYS OF THE NAFL**

**by Mark L. Ford**

From December 19, 1949, to March 3, 1950, the 10 NFL teams and 3 teams from the old AAFC were referred to collectively as the National-American Football League, part of the terms of the merger agreement hammered out between the two leagues. Though no games were played during the NAFL's brief existence, a lot that happened that winter affected the NFL for years to come.

That the NFL owners were willing to give up one of pro football's most recognized trademarks was a reflection of how badly they had wanted peace. A three day summit at the end of 1948 had ended with no agreement, and a number of owners were tiring of the war. The AAC had reduced to 7 teams when Branch Rickey sold his football Brooklyn Dodgers, and the Buffalo Bills owner made 1949 his last season. Several of the NFL's ten teams were flirting with bankruptcy as well. Not only were the New York Bulldogs (whose owner Ted Collins had lost more than a million dollars) ready to call it quits. The Packers got league assistance to finish the '49 season, and Art Rooney had declared that he couldn't operate the Steelers in 1950 if a settlement couldn't be reached. "National-American Football League" – referred to in the initial AP reports as "the NAF" – was a small price to pay for peace.

As unimaginable as it might seem now, the National Football League officially came to an end on December 18, 1949, in Los Angeles as the Eagles beat the Rams 14 to 0 in the NFL's eighteenth, and final, championship game. The merger agreement provided some guidelines. Though the All America Conference was gone, the new league divisions would be called "conferences" and the old Western and Eastern Divisions would be replaced by the National and American Conferences. Each conference would have a Chicago team and a New York team, not unlike baseball's National League and American League. Beyond that, the details of this new National-American Football League had to be worked out.

### Day 1 (Dec. 19): BUFFALO INVESTORS SEEK NAFL CLUB

Monday the 19th dawned with Bert Bell as Commissioner of a 13 team league. His first order of business upon returning from California was to deal with several different bidders seeking a 14th franchise. The very next day, Bell was in New York, meeting with representatives of the new "Buffalo Bills Football Club, Inc." The citizens of Buffalo were upset that their AAC team had been left out of the merger, and thousands of fans had come to Memorial Auditorium on December 13 to buy five dollar shares in the new corporation. That first night, \$74,770 had been raised. When the fund approached its goal of a quarter of a million dollars in the first week, Bell agreed to meet with Albert T. O'Neill and others in the Buffalo consortium, and he was impressed with their zeal. "While I can't say Buffalo will get a franchise, I certainly can't say that the city won't," Bell told newsmen. "Buffalo, obviously, has a better chance now than it did a week ago."

### Day 5 (Dec. 23): BILLS BACKERS REACH GOAL

Within ten days, the Buffalo Bills fans had raised \$252,170 from sales of stock and pledges, passing the quarter million dollar mark.

### Day 7 (Dec. 25): ROONEY GIVES BACK STEELER CUTS

Art Rooney had cut the salaries of most of his Pittsburgh Steelers at the beginning of the '49 season. After the merger, he paid the players back in time for Christmas.

### Day 18 (Jan. 5) BELL: HOUSTON, BUFFALO, 16TH TEAM CAN APPLY

Commissioner Bell, who had worked literally day and night on the 1950 schedule, told the press that he had drawn up plans for a 14 team schedule as well as a schedule for the 13 existing NAFL teams, and said that new teams would be considered at the league's upcoming organizational meeting. "We'll take up both Houston and Buffalo at the January 19 meeting here, but they'll have to meet two situations to make the

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league. First, they'll have to receive a unanimous vote of the 13 original franchises. Secondly, they'll have to fit into a schedule." Said Bell, scheduling 13 teams was easier than making a schedule for 14 or 15 – but scheduling 16 teams was like "rolling off a log." "Frankly, I don't think there are 16 football money making cities in the country. But if we can get 16 responsible franchises and the members want to give it a whirl, that's what we'll do."

### Day 23 (Jan. 10): EX-BILLS COACH SIGNS WITH COLTS

Clem Crowe, who had taken over the Buffalo Bills in midseason and coached them to the AAFC playoffs, was hired to coach Baltimore's NFL franchise.

### Day 26 (Jan. 13): BAUGH TO STAY WITH REDSKINS

Quarterback Sammy Baugh turned down an offer to become head coach at Baylor University's football team, to play another season with Washington.

### Day 27 (Jan. 14): COLTS GIVE UP ON SIGNING HART

Baltimore owner Abraham Watner notified the Detroit Lions that the Colts would no longer try to sign Notre Dame star Leon Hart. Both teams had intended to make him their first choice in the NFL and AAC drafts.

### Day 28 (Jan. 15): McCARTHY WANTS TO MOVE BROWNS TO HOUSTON

Oil multi-millionaire Glenn H. McCarthy announced that he wanted to buy the Cleveland Browns and move their NFL franchise to Houston. "I think they are interested in listening to me," said McCarthy, owner of the Texas-sized Shamrock Hotel and sponsor of the Shamrock Bowl between the Browns and the AAC all-stars in Houston on December 17. McCarthy had bid for an expansion franchise for the 1950 AAFC season, and now planned to present his case personally at the NFL organizational meeting in Philadelphia. Most felt his chances were slim, but not McCarthy: "Personally, I think they need us as badly as we need them. They need us, both for our drawing power and as a stopping-off place for games on the West Coast. I don't doubt that Houston can support a pro team after the Shamrock Bowl game."

### Day 30 (Jan. 17): NFL CLUB OWNERS ARRIVE IN PHILADELPHIA

Representatives of the 13 NFL teams checked into Philadelphia's Bellevue-Stratford Hotel for the organizational meeting of the National-American Football League, to settle issues arising from the merger. Topics of discussion would be the alignment of the league, new franchises, and the assignment of players from the four AAC teams (Hornets, Dons, Bills and Yankees) that had been left out of the merger.

### Day 31 (Jan. 18): COLLINS BOYCOTTS MEETING WITH BELL GIANTS ARE ASSIGNED 6 TOP PLAYERS FROM AAC YANKEES

As part of the merger agreement, New York Bulldogs owner Ted Collins had purchased the rights to all but six of the 32 players on the AAC's New York Yankees, gaining the right to play the 1950 season at Yankee Stadium. The Giants would have their choice of six players and keep playing at the Polo Grounds. Collins and Giants' owner Tim Mara couldn't reach an agreement on players, so Bell ordered both men to appear before him at 4:00 to determine which six players would be allotted to Mara. Unhappy with Bell's solution, Collins declined to appear. The Giants and Bulldogs were to take turns on reserving six players, and Bell acted as the representative of the Bulldogs for that purpose. The Giants came away with Arnie Weinmeister, Otto Schnellbacher, and Tom Landry, Dan Garza (who didn't play), John Mastrangelo, and Harmon Rowe were the others. While Bell's first six choices for Collins were kept secret, the Bulldogs owner got Buddy Young, Jack Russell and Joe Signaigo. Collins ended up releasing all but five of his 1949 Bulldogs team, while hiring 15 of the AAC Yankees, and their coach, Red Strader. Though the Colts, Browns and 49ers were the only 3 AAC clubs officially included in the merger agreement, the AAFC Yankees replaced the NFL Bulldogs for all practical purposes, surviving the merger nearly intact and becoming the New York Yanks.

### Day 32 (Jan. 19): NFL OWNERS DIVIDED OVER 14TH CLUB

Representatives from three different cities made proposals to the assembled owners to add a 14th NFL franchise for 1950. Al O'Neill, the frontman for the Buffalo Bills, pointed to pledges for 15,000 season tickets. Glenn McCarthy, whose team might well have been called the Houston Shamrocks, presented architects' plans for an indoor stadium with seating for 110,000 people and – a half-century ahead of his time – a sliding roof (McCarthy died in 1987, and didn't live to see the building of Houston's retractable-roofed stadium). Frank Ciorallo, the honest owner of the minor league San Francisco Clippers (see Bob Gill's "The Pacific Coast Pro Football League") bid by mail for an Oakland franchise to rival the 49ers. It was believed that expansion to 16 teams was unlikely, and that if the league added a 14th team, Buffalo was the only one that had a realistic chance.

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### Day 33 (Jan. 20): MOTION FOR 14TH TEAM FAILS TO WIN UNANIMITY

Washington owner George Preston Marshall moved to admit a 14th franchise, and Baltimore's Abe Watner seconded. The owners then went into an executive session behind closed doors. Although a 9 to 4 majority was in favor of the entry of the Buffalo Bills to the NAFL, expansion required a 13 to 0 approval by the owners. Louis Effrat, covering the sessions for the *New York Times*, wrote "According to the grapevine, Dan Reeves of Los Angeles, Tony Morabito of San Francisco, and George Halas and Ray Bennisgen, both of Chicago, dissented. Their objections were not aimed against Buffalo, but at a fourteen-team league."

In a 13 team league, each team would play five other members of its conference at home and away, one game against a designated "swing" team, and one game against a team from the other conference, for 12 games. On the other hand, two 7 team conferences meant that all the games would be against conference opponents, or that the season would have to be extended. Said Steelers' owner Art Rooney, "I lobbied for a day and a half for a losing cause. I thought Buffalo would be a very good football town." The owners were still not in agreement on alignment of the conferences.

### Day 34 (Jan. 21): DEADLOCKED NAFL BEGINS COLLEGE DRAFT

After three days and nights of meetings, the NAFL owners hadn't resolved the questions of scheduling, alignment and player distribution. Rules changes required an 11/13ths majority approval, and little was accomplished, so Commissioner Bell was called upon to rule. Both leagues had drafted earlier and in some cases, two teams held rights to the same player, so trades were made. Cleveland yielded to Detroit on Doak Walker and the 49ers gave up claims on Glenn Davis to the Rams. By 9:00 Saturday night, the draft began, with the order determined by each team's 1949 winning percentage. Thus, Baltimore (1-11-0 in the AAC) picked first, the N.Y. Bulldogs (1-10-1 in the NFL) second. The sessions continued well into the next morning.

### Day 36 (Jan. 23): NAFL OWNERS APPROVE ALIGNMENT PLAN, 12 TO 1

Under pressure from Commissioner Bell, the NAFL owners finally decided the alignment of 12 of the league's 13 teams. "They couldn't come to an agreement after arguing all afternoon," said Bell, "so I told them I was going to make up the divisions myself. At that point, Halas made a motion for the divisional breakdown that was finally accepted. Halas' motion was seconded by Jack Mara." Essentially, the former Western Division made up the National Conference, and the Eastern teams formed the American Conference. The weaker Chicago and New York clubs traded places, the Cardinals joining the Giants, and the (soon to be called) Yankees aligned with the Bears. Each conference got an AAC club, the 49ers on the National side with the western clubs, the Browns to the National side. The third AAC entry, Baltimore, was the "swing team" which would play the 12 others. The Colts were not assigned to either conference, but Redskins owner Marshall was adamant that he didn't want them to be playing in the American Conference. Marshall's was the lone vote against the motion, which needed an 11/13ths majority.

Almost overlooked in the reports on the contentious league meeting was the owners' unanimous approval of a rules change recommended by the coaches. Free substitution, tried by the NFL during the World War II years, was brought back for the 1950 season with little publicity.

### Day 46 (Feb. 2): LAMBEAU LEAVES GREEN BAY AFTER 31 YEARS

Two months after the Packers had renewed his contract for another two years, Curly Lambeau left the franchise that he helped found, accepting an offer to become the Chicago Cardinals' coach for two years. In accepting the resignation, Packers' president Emil R. Fischer said Lambeau's most recent actions "brought a dangerous disunity of purpose, one which, in my opinion, threatens the existence of the club."

### Day 50 (Feb. 6): RONZANI BECOMES NEW GREEN BAY COACH

Gene "Tuffy" Ronzani, backfield coach for the Bears, was hired as the new head coach for the Packers at a salary believed to be between \$10,000 and \$15,000 per year. Ronzani had been the head coach for the Bears' Newark and Akron farm clubs.

### Day 54 (Feb. 10): BUFFALO BILLS MONEY TO BE REFUNDED

Albert T. O'Neill, who led Buffalo's unsuccessful bid for an NAFL franchise, announced that he would refund \$180,690 that had been put up by 9,700 shareholders to capitalize the team.

### Day 55 (Feb. 11): SABAN QUILTS THE BEARS; HART SIGNS WITH LIONS

Lou Saban quit as a Bears assistant coach to become head coach at Case Institute in Cleveland. He would later coach in the AFL, first for the Boston Patriots and later for Buffalo's AFL Bills team. Detroit's bonus draft pick, Leon Hart, signed a three year contract reputedly worth \$12,000 to \$15,000 a year.

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### Day 62 (Feb. 18): SHAUGHNESSY FIRED AS COACH OF L.A. RAMS

Clark Shaughnessy, who had coached the Los Angeles Rams to the 1949 NFL Championship game, was fired by Rams owner Dan Reeves, and replaced by Rams line coach Joe Stydahar. The Eagles had shut down the Rams' offense in the title game in Los Angeles for a 14-0 win. Bitter about his treatment, Shaughnessy told the press, "When Stydahar gets through coaching the Rams, I can take any high school team in the country and beat them." In his two years as Rams coach, Stydahar went twice to the final game, and won the 1951 league championship.

### Day 67 (Feb. 23): U.S. ARMY ALLOWS "MR. OUTSIDE" TO JOIN THE RAMS

Lt. Glenn Davis, the 1946 Heisman winning back from Army, announced that the United States Army had accepted his resignation, clearing the way for him to play for Los Angeles. The Army had declined to allow him to quit in 1948, when he had attended the Rams' training camp.

### Day 69 (Feb. 25): WALKER SIGNS FOR \$38,000, CLEATS AND LACES

The Detroit Lions signed their second Heisman-winning player to a three year contract worth at least \$38,000 and possibly as much as \$60,000. Walker, who won the trophy in 1948, joined '49 Heisman winner Leon Hart. The Lions, who had a 4-8-0 record in '49, would become a powerhouse in the 1950s. Walker joked that his signing bonus was "a couple of cleats and shoelaces."

### Day 75 (Mar. 3): OWNERS UNANIMOUS, WILL OPERATE AS NFL IN 1950

Commissioner Bert Bell announced in Philadelphia that upon advice of counsel and the consent of all thirteen team owners, the league would drop the National-American Football League name and operate again as the National Football League. Bell added that 1950 would mark "the thirty-first continuous year of the NFL." Wrote the Associated Press, "Last December, Bell, in announcing the 'merger,' described the National-American as a 'new league.' It expired today without one football game having been played."

### EPILOGUE

"National American Football League" was an awkward name that probably seemed a good idea in the exhaustion of marathon negotiations. Like "DeBennville" or "Alvin," however, the name just didn't fit. Even the three AAFC owners recognized the value of keeping a good trademark.

It's possible also that the name was contrived with the expectation that pro football would be organized on the same terms as major league baseball – whose National League and American League had only 8 teams apiece in 1950. One of the terms of the merger was that each conference would have a New York team and a Chicago team. The National-American name might have been but a seldom seen umbrella, like "MLB," under which two pennant races could go on without violating antitrust laws. The first press releases on December 9, it should be remembered, called the circuit "the NAF." Had it not been for the NFL bylaw requiring unanimous approval for expansion, 14 or even 16 teams might have been organized into two conferences without regard to geography. Imagine, if you will, how it might have been:

#### NATIONAL CONFERENCE

CHICAGO BEARS  
NEW YORK YANKS  
BALTIMORE COLTS  
LOS ANGELES RAMS  
PHILADELPHIA EAGLES  
GREEN BAY PACKERS  
SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS  
HOUSTON SHAMROCKS

#### AMERICAN CONFERENCE

CHICAGO CARDINALS  
NEW YORK GIANTS  
WASHINGTON REDSKINS  
CLEVELAND BROWNS  
DETROIT LIONS  
PITTSBURGH STEELERS  
OAKLAND CLIPPERS  
BUFFALO BILLS

Happily, it didn't work out that way. Glenn McCarthy, the Houston oil millionaire, ran into financial trouble only a few years after his super stadium proposal. The Baltimore Colts franchise folded after winning only one game in 1950. After a credible 7-5-0 record in 1950, the New York Yanks went 1-9-2 the next year, played in 1952 as the Dallas Texans, and folded at the end of a 1-11-0 season, to be replaced by a reorganized Baltimore Colts team.

Afterward, the NFL prospered as a solid 12-team league, with a stability that would not have come had there been rampant expansion. The key rules change during the NAFL's brief existence – free substitution of players – had little immediate effect, but paved the way for the specialization that would transform pro football. The NFL finally amended its bylaws in 1960 to require 3/4ths, rather than unanimous, approval for

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new teams. In 1966, when the NFL agreed to a true merger with a new rival, the lessons from 1950 had not been forgotten. Unification then came over four years, time enough to hammer out the issues accompanying a merger.

Though the NAFL name never became more than a bit of trivia, part of the concept became part of today's NFL. The ownership removed the National and American tags after the 1952 season, with those two entities becoming the "Western Conference" and "Eastern Conference," respectively. The idea of conferences was retained, the NFL's only reminder that there had once been an All America Conference. The last traces of the NAFL's existence were gone – until 1970, when another merger agreement called for a 26 team football league. Those old conference titles were brought out of the attic, and have been part of the NFL's makeup ever since – and today's NFC and AFC, more likely than not, owe their names to 1949's forgettable "National-American Football League."

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