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Why the AAFC Cleveland Browns Were the Best Team in Football From 1946 Through 1949

By Andy Piascik

The legacy of the All America Football Conference has not stood the passage of time very well. More than 50 years after three of its franchises merged into the NFL, the AAFC is largely unknown by several generations of fans. Only fans of the league's teams who are still around and pro football history buffs know of its achievements and contributions to the development of football. And to add insult to injury, the increasingly low visibility of the AAFC over the years is largely a result of a conscious attitude of the NFL hierarchy.

That a league that only lasted four seasons and expired in 1949 is largely unknown by today's fans is entirely understandable on one level. Most fans live in the present – this game, this season, these players – and have as a frame of reference primarily who and what they've seen in their time as fans.

Where the AAFC has not been well served, however, is by the NFL's league office, which has essentially relegated the league to a minor league status. From the exclusion of individual feats from official record books to the ignoring of team histories and attainments, the NFL has perpetuated the idea that the AAFC was inferior to such a degree that it warrants only a passing footnote in the game's history.

Among those who serve as at least a slight counterweight to this unfortunate state of affairs is the PFRA and prominent sportswriters like Paul Zimmerman and the late John Steadman. With the AAFC receding further into the past with each season that goes by and with each former AAFC player who passes on, however, it becomes ever more important to document and hopefully to popularize to some degree the league's accomplishments. For the fact is that the AAFC's contributions were many and its players, coaches, and franchises were an instrumental part of the beginning of pro football's modern era.

And as the Cleveland Browns were an integral part of the AAFC, winning the league championship in all four years of its existence, a hypothetical discussion of how good they were compared to the NFL's best of that era is of some importance to the upstart league's place in history.

Regrettably, unlike the American Football League of the 1960's, the All America Conference never got the chance to go head to head with the NFL on the football field. No sooner had it begun play in 1946 than the

AAFC began issuing challenges to the NFL to schedule games. As the NFL title game was often referred to as the world's championship, what the new league and its partisans wanted most of all was to schedule a real world's championship, a Super Bowl two decades before the first Super Bowl.

However, as established organizations invariably do, the NFL refused to play AAFC teams in any venue – exhibition, regular season, or championship – preferring instead to wait and hope the AAFC would go under. Fans are therefore left to speculate, discuss,

and argue such points as the one raised in this article.

One thing about the AAFC that stands out is how good it was relative to the NFL from the very beginning. None of the other rival leagues that have been started since the NFL was organized have been anywhere near as good at their beginnings as the AAFC was when its teams played their first games in September of 1946.

The AAFC compares very favorably to the AFL of the 1960's, the most successful of the NFL's many competitors. Measuring the AAFC and AFL in terms of relative strength to the NFL, it was not until at least the AFL's sixth or seventh season that it was as good as the AAFC was in its first season.

In fact, a case could be made that the AAFC at its best was as good as, and perhaps even better than, the AFL at its best. And victories in the third and fourth Super Bowl's notwithstanding, the AFL never had a team like the AAFC's Cleveland Browns.

To say that the Browns were better than the best team in the NFL in all four seasons from 1946 through 1949 is not the same as saying that the AAFC was better than the NFL. The NFL was the stronger of the two leagues throughout those four seasons, although not by much, and certainly not by as much as the NFL establishment would claim (an AAFC all-star team, for one, would certainly have held its own against NFL all-stars).

Where the AAFC was deficient was in depth, both as a league and among its lower echelon teams. But the notion that the Browns won their championships by being the best of an inferior lot, that they would not have won any (or as many) championships had they been playing in the NFL, and that they would not have been able to beat the best NFL teams because those teams were better honed by stronger competition, is contradicted by a number of important factors.

1. Cleveland's domination of the NFL from 1950-1955. This is a good point to start with because for six years, the Browns ruled the NFL almost as thoroughly as they had the AAFC. They won the NFL Championship in 1950, their first year in the league, were Eastern Conference champions for 6 straight seasons, and won two more championships in 1954 and 1955. Their .817 winning percentage during these years is the highest for any 6 year run in pro football in the last 60 years – better than the Packers of the 60's, the Steelers of the 70's, the 49ers of the 80's, and the Cowboys of the 90's.

The point for the discussion at hand is that the Browns NFL dynasty of the 1950's validates their AAFC championships. Had they flopped in the NFL, or even been just a middle of the pack team, their AAFC accomplishments would have been downgraded and any claims to them being better than the NFL's best in 1946-1949 discredited. But not only did they not fail, they dominated the NFL as few teams have before or since, winning 10 more games over 72 regular season games than the next best team during those 6 seasons.

The only fly in the ointment is the championship game losses. Here's how the Browns did from 1950-1955 against some of the NFL teams that were supposedly so superior to the AAFC: Cardinals 12-0; Steelers 11-1; Redskins 10-1; Eagles 8-4; Giants 8-4-1.

2. Paul Brown. The first day he walked onto the Browns' practice field in 1946 he raised the bar on coaching in pro football.

His almost scientific approach to preparation was beyond anything done by all previous coaches in football history. Brown's meticulously organized practices, his methods of scouting opponents, his use of a full-time coaching staff, his use of game film to both strengthen his own team and to develop game plans to attack the weakest links of other teams, his use of tests to both assess the learning capabilities of players and to ensure their preparation, his determined shattering of the color line, his use of a wide open passing offense, the draw play, the pass pocket – these and other innovations are all reasons why Brown may be the greatest coach of all time, with only Vince Lombardi as a

serious contender.

The degree to which Brown was way ahead of all other coaches of the era in question including George Halas (probably the biggest single figure in football history but not in the same league as Brown as a coach or innovator, certainly not in the late 1940's), Jim Conzelman, and Greasy Neale (coaches of the 1946 Bears, 1947 Cardinals, and 1948 and 1949 Eagles, respectively) and the advantage that gives the Browns in this discussion cannot be emphasized strongly enough.

3. The continued excellent play of many Browns players after the merger. This point dovetails with #1. Otto Graham, Marion Motley, Mac Speedie, Dante Lavelli, Frank Gatski, Lou Groza, Horace Gillom, Bill Willis, Lin Houston, Lou Rymkus, Warren Lahr, Tommy Thompson, Dub Jones, Tony Adamle, Tommy James – the team's core players – all continued to excel in the NFL as they had in the AAFC. All except Gillom got all-pro mention in the NFL (punters were not selected as a separate position until the 1960's) and many made it numerous times.

Gatski, Groza, Houston, and Gillom were actually better after the merger. Motley was the leading rusher in Cleveland's first NFL season. Ten Browns players got all-pro mention or were selected for the Pro Bowl at the end of the 1950 season and all played for the team in the AAFC. An average of 8 Browns who played with the team in the AAFC were either first or second team all-pro or were selected for the Pro Bowl in the team's first six NFL seasons – not including the many players who joined the team after 1949 who also earned such honors.

That's something to mull over: the Browns had a core of players who began in the AAFC, including many who were there from day one in 1946, who were still among the NFL's best right through 1955. All of the many Browns who made all-league in the AAFC and then played for the team in the NFL after the merger also made all-NFL first or second team at least once or played in at least one Pro Bowl. All of these points taken together serve to lay to rest any notion that the Browns players were not as good against the NFL as they were when playing in the AAFC.

4. The Browns passing game. It was like nothing pro football had ever seen before 1946. The Graham-Lavelli-Speedie triumvirate was the fulcrum of the attack, but the Browns regular use of their backs in the passing game was also an innovation not seen before. It was an attack of deadly efficiency that got even better when flanker Dub Jones joined the team in 1948.

With the great Motley running the ball, the Browns did not have to throw the ball all over the place. What they did instead was use the pass and run to complement each other, throwing more than most teams of the era, and utilize the long pass much more than was common (Graham was tops in yards per attempt 5 times in his 10 seasons, and 47 years after his retirement still holds the all-time career mark of 8.63 (his "official" mark); his career mark is 8.98 counting his 4 AAFC years).

This strategy that was balanced but more pass-oriented than was common, and more "vertical" than most passing attacks, together with the incredible talent the Browns had at the skill positions, put tremendous pressure on defenses that could not gear themselves to stopping only the pass or run or one particular player.

In Jack Clary's *Cleveland Browns*, Philadelphia defensive back Russ Craft talked this way about the Browns passing after the Eagles were stomped by Cleveland in the 1950 season opener: "We just never played against a team that threw to a spot as well as Cleveland. We would be on top of their receivers but they caught the ball anyway because it was so well timed. It was like trying to cover three Don Hutsons ... impossible ... impossible." The bit about three Don Hutsons is an exaggeration to be sure, but it is no exaggeration to say that there was no team in the NFL in the years in question that could either match or stop the Browns powerhouse passing attack.

5. Mac Speedie. The most forgotten great receiver in pro football history, Speedie's

greatness is linked directly to #4. Speedie was the most prolific pass catcher in the AAFC's history by a wide margin. He was better than teammate Dante Lavelli in 5 of the 7 seasons they played together, and Lavelli is deservedly enshrined in Canton. (The only reasons Speedie has not made it to the Hall of Fame yet are the NFL's continued denigration of the AAFC and Paul Brown's unwillingness to pay him as much as the Saskatchewan Roughriders).

He led the AAFC in receptions 3 times, was first team AAFC all-league in 3 of its 4 years and second team once, and then continued his great play in the NFL. He led the NFL in receptions in 1952 and was probably the best end in football over his three NFL seasons, the only player at that position to make first team all-pro twice in that stretch (1950-52).

The importance of Speedie's greatness is best illustrated by a comparison of the Browns and the 1948-49 Eagles, the strongest of the NFL teams of the 1946-1949 period under discussion. If we think of Motley and Van Buren as even and Lavelli and Pihos as even, then the Browns have a big edge in weapons because the Eagles just do not match Graham at quarterback or Speedie at the other end position.

6. Hall of Famers. The Browns had 6 future Hall of Fame players for each of the 4 seasons from 1946-1949. The 1946 Bears, by comparison, had 4, the 1947 Cardinals had 1, the 1948 Eagles had 3, and the 1949 Eagles had 4.

This is an inexact means of comparing two teams, but it does give us some indication of the relative strengths of each. In all team sports, the number of great players a team has at a particular time is some measure of how good that team is.

Think of other teams that strung together a series of championships – the Packers of the 60's, the Steelers of the 70's – and the number of great players from those teams who eventually made their way to Canton.

Conversely, the teams they bested during those years – the 2nd and 3rd best teams of those eras who may even have won a championship or two – have fewer (and sometimes far fewer) players in the Hall of Fame.

It's an analogous situation with the Browns and the other teams of the late 1940's. In essence, by inducting so many more Browns into the Hall of Fame than the other teams of the era in question, important football experts are essentially acknowledging retroactively that the Browns had better players and, by inference, better teams.

The Browns clearly have a substantial advantage here. (Interestingly, despite the NFL's official non-acknowledgement of the AAFC and of the records of its individual players, the Hall of Fame also saw fit to include 4 Browns – Lavelli, Speedie, Motley, and Willis, (but not Graham!) on its all-1940's team although none of these players played a single down in the NFL until 1950). *[Note: HOF Decade Teams were chosen by the Hall of Fame selectors, not the NFL.]*

7. Browns 35 Eagles 10. The Browns and Eagles did eventually play on September 16, 1950, in the Browns first NFL game. Nine months earlier, each won their respective league championships, the Browns the AAFC for the fourth consecutive time, the Eagles the NFL for the second consecutive time.

It was a Saturday night season opener with 71,000 fans in attendance at Philadelphia's Municipal Stadium, and the Browns thrashed the Eagles in one of the most significant regular season games in pro football history. The Browns had added some players from AAFC teams that had not been a part of the merger – most notably Len Ford, John Kissell, and Abe Gribron – and had lost John Yonakor, Edgar Jones, and all-AAFCers Lou Saban and Ed Ulinski to retirement.

The Eagles played this game without the great Van Buren, but their head coach Greasy Neale for one was very clear about this not affecting the outcome: "We'd probably have had another touchdown if Steve had been in there ... maybe two more. But as for winning

the game, well ... that's something else."

And after the game, NFL commissioner Bert Bell – a man who had been around pro football since the 1930's and not exactly an AAFC or Browns partisan – was stirred to remark, "Cleveland is the best football team I have ever seen." (Both quotes from Clary).

8. The Browns defense. The Eagles defense of the late 1940's was a formidable unit, allowing the fewest points in 1949 and registering shutouts in the 1948 and 1949 NFL title games. But although less heralded, Cleveland's defense was arguably better, and certainly better over the long term. Led by Bill Willis, Lou Saban, Tony Adamle, John Yonakor, and George Young, the Browns led the AAFC in fewest points allowed in all four years.

In the 4 championship games from 1946 through 1949, they allowed only 26 points, an average of 6.5 per game. And they continued their status as football's number one unit after going into the NFL, allowing the fewest points in a season 6 times from 1950-1957 and the fewest yards in 4 of their first 6 NFL seasons.

Think about that run of fewest points allowed for a moment, and then consider that the Browns defense of the 1940's and 1950's is never mentioned as one of the top units in the game's history. Across two leagues, the Browns allowed the fewest points 10 times in 12 seasons. No defense can touch that mark including the Eagles.

9. Groza and Gillom. The kicking game in pro football changed with the arrival of these two outstanding players. Although neither came into their true greatness until after 1949, both had solid seasons in the AAFC. The degree to which each stretched the field on the kicking game is what sets them apart from just about every other kicker of the time, including the Eagles outstanding duo of 1948-49, punter Joe Muha and placekicker Cliff Patton.

Gillom not only kicked for distance – he still ranks 7th all-time at 43.8 yards per kick – he invented hang time before Ray Guy was born. In Dave Newhouse's chapter on the Browns in *Greatest Sports Dynasties*, Ara Parseghian, a teammate in 1948-49, said of Gillom forty years later that "he'd put the ball into orbit, it would level off and go for a while, and then it would come down. I'd match him with today's punters, all right."

Groza only had one big AAFC season but he kicked more field goals and totaled more kicking points over those 4 years than anyone else in the AAFC and NFL (although he also played more games than NFL kickers because of the AAFC's longer season).

Equally if not more impressive is the distance factor. From 1946 through 1949, when there was not one single field goal made in the NFL from beyond 50 yards, Groza made *four* from that range.

Brown had this to say about Groza's long distance abilities: "I reasoned that there are just so many turnovers in football, just so many times when your offense has a chance to score ... That's where a long range field goal kicker like Groza helped us put a lot of games out of reach of the opposition which didn't have a kicker like him." (Newhouse). His skills put the Browns in scoring position as soon as they crossed midfield.

The Groza and Gillom duo ranks with Jan Stenerud and Jerrel Wilson as the two best kicking tandems in pro football history.

10. Otto Graham. Graham was the best quarterback in pro football in the late 1940's, better than Sid Luckman, better than Bob Waterfield, better even than Sammy Baugh.

This is one of the most important of the arguments in favor of the Browns because of the nature of the quarterback position. Graham was substantially better than the quarterbacks of the four NFL champions at issue: Luckman (Bears 1946), Paul Christman (Cardinals 1947), and Tommy Thompson (Eagles 1948 and 1949), a critical point for this discussion.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 27, No 3 (2005)

His accomplishments in the AAFC were outstanding: all-pro all four years, passing leader three times, and MVP or co-MVP three times.

Using the passer rating system in use today, Graham's 1946 season was football's best for over 40 years until the advent of the ratings-friendly West Coast offense and is still the third best ever, while his cumulative rating for 1946-1947 is the best consecutive seasons rating of all-time.

And as with points #1 and #3, Graham's greatness continued in the NFL from 1950-1955. He was first team all-NFL five times and second team once in those six years, was the league's passing leader three times, and MVP three times (and conceivably could have won twice more except that no award was made in 1950 or 1952).

Check out the incredible one-sidedness of two sets of Graham's numbers compared to the NFL's two championship quarterbacks in 1946 and 1947:

	Comp. %	Yds. Per Pass	TD%	Inter %	TD/INT ratio	Rating
1946						
Graham	54.6	10.54	9.8	2.9	3.4/1	112.1
Luckman	48.0	7.97	7.4	7.0	1.1/1	71.0
1947						
Graham	60.6	10.23	9.3	4.1	2.3/1	109.2
Christman	45.8	7.28	5.6	7.3	1.1/3	59.0

Philadelphia's Thompson had a monster year in 1948 and thus fares better in such a comparison, but Graham's numbers for 1949 are better than Thompson's, as are his cumulative totals over the two seasons.

The real point regarding Thompson is that no one, probably not even anyone in Philadelphia, can seriously put forward the idea that Thompson was better than Graham during those two years. Modern fans who have grown up watching Staubach, Fouts, Elway, Marino, Young, and Favre are likely to be completely unaware of how great Graham was (and how great he was right from the start of his career). It was Graham, after all, and not any of those outstanding players, who was selected as one of the 4 quarterbacks by the Hall of Fame to the 75th anniversary all-time team (Baugh, Unitas, and Montana being the others).

And as with head coach Paul Brown, the substantive advantage the Browns had at this, the single most important position in football is of the utmost significance and is a big reason why they were better than the NFL champions in all four of the seasons from 1946 through 1949.

11. Willis, Motley, and Gillom. The Browns led the way in the final re-integration of pro sports, ahead of even the baseball Dodgers.

Right from the beginning of their careers, Willis, Motley, and Gillom were among the best in the game at their respective positions. At 235 pounds, Motley was as big as most linemen of that era and about as fast as any back. Players from that time speak of him in the awed tones reserved for the very best. Motley's career 5.7 yards per rush is the best ever, he was the AAFC's all-time leading rusher, and he shone especially bright in Championship Game play. In four AAFC title games, he rushed for 415 yards, five touchdowns, and 8.6 yards per carry.

Willis helped revolutionize middle guard play, anticipating in some ways the middle linebacker position of the 4-3 that would take hold a decade later. He was strong enough to play inside as a down lineman and quick and fast enough to drop into pass coverage and pursue sideline to sideline.

Gillom was one of the game's best punters and a more than adequate fill-in at end on

both offense and defense.

In contrast to the Browns, the NFL's four champions of 1946-49 had no black players. Only seven blacks played in the NFL during that period, compared to 20 in the smaller AAFC. Cleveland's trailblazing role gave them an important advantage over the NFL champions of that time, an advantage that also manifested itself in 1950-55 when the Browns continued to lead the way with more blacks than just about any team in sports.

What games between the Browns and any of the NFL champions would have looked like is impossible to say, of course. Could Cleveland have romped the 1946 Bears or the 1948-1949 Eagles the way they did the Eagles when they eventually played them in 1950? It's possible, although one suspects the games would have been closer than that.

Although games are not played on paper, hindsight tells us the Browns were the better team, primarily because of the significant advantages they had in the passing game, on defense, in the kicking game, and at head coach. (It isn't so difficult to imagine the Browns blowing out the 1947 Cardinals, one of the weakest champions in history).

However, the real point is this: the preponderance of the evidence indicates that the Browns were the best team in football in each of the years from 1946 through 1949. Taken with their 1950-1955 run, we can then begin to think of the AAFC years of this remarkable team not as a separate and questionable accomplishment, but rather as the first part of a dynasty that is unmatched by any team in the annals of pro football: ten championship game appearances and seven championships in ten seasons. Or as Pete Pihos said of the Browns after the Eagles' 35-10 loss in 1950, "We met a team from the big league."
