

Goodbye, Bulldogs, Hello

1924

By PFRA Research

At the league meeting in January at the Sherman Hotel in Chicago, the owners re-elected Joe Carr, along with Dunn and Storck. Canton's Bulldogs, of course, were voted the league championship. Both moves were foregone conclusions.

They set the fee paid a referee at \$35 per game, with the umpire and head linesman to get \$25 each.

In a "fine print" move, they voted that "any player transferred by release or purchase after the fifth scheduled game cannot play with the club by whom he was released [for] the balance of that season or the following season." This offered some protection for the players. Up until then, an injured player could be released to make room on the 16-man roster and then re-signed once he was well. However, the purpose was not altruistic. By the end of the season, most losing teams closed up shop for the year. Teams still fighting for a title continued play. It was common practice for them to snatch up some of the better players from the losers to bolster their rosters for the final, crucial games. If the original team didn't object, there was nothing to stop it. For example, in 1923, after Duluth closed its season on Thanksgiving, the Bears grabbed quarterback Joey Sternaman for their last four games. Under the new rule, a team letting a player go elsewhere at the end of the season had lost him for good.

The most interesting decision to come out of the meeting was that the league would divide itself into an eastern and western division. Most newspaper accounts stressed this point, along with the additional news that the champions of each division would hold a championship game to determine the league's top team. Such announcements were premature -- by about ten years!

From a competitive standpoint, a split league made good sense. League membership ran around twenty teams each season, but two-thirds of them were out of the title hunt by the first of November. With two divisional titles at stake, more teams could bill upcoming games as having a bearing on the title race. Significantly, the western teams were the first to push for the split, indicating they'd grown tired of watching Canton's annual trek to the championship. Canton, of course, was in the "east."

Additionally, none of the western teams were thrilled by the prospect of all those obligated trips into Ohio. They almost always lost money there. For that matter, teams like Dayton weren't ecstatic about hosting the likes of Duluth. About the only match-ups that could draw their weight were those between two Ohio teams. Under a division system, teams could hope for sectional schedules that would be more exciting for their fans.

That all sounded fine in principle, but when it came to making it work, things came apart. The first suggestion was for a nine game schedule, with the first five to be sectional, and one representative

from each club to act as a schedule committee. Almost no one liked that idea. All right, how about a schedule committee appointed by Carr with two reps from each division drawing up a nine game slate? No, they didn't want that either.

George Halas suggested a seven game schedule, the first five being sectional, drawn up by a seven member committee with Carr as chairman. Forget it.

What with all the discussion, complaining, re-wording, and so forth, the hour was drawing late. Most of the men in the room had a long train trip ahead of them and work on Monday morning. "Babe" Ruetz of Duluth finally came up with the right idea. Everyone would go home, become a committee of one to arrange a seven game (at least) schedule for his own team with other teams from his section, and bring it to the meeting in July. Then they'd work it all out.

That met with everybody's approval. It should have. It was what they'd all been doing for years.

The representatives were edging toward their coats and hats when they admitted Kansas City as a new league member. Welcome aboard, and see you later.

Once the moguls got back home, the idea of two divisions disappeared although most teams kept their early scheduling sectional. The fine idea promulgated in January never found its way into the standings that fall.

The Second Meeting

When the owners held their second league meeting on a July Saturday, again in Chicago, they seemed anxious to get secondary business out of the way before tackling a schedule again. There were enough problems anyway.

The St. Louis franchise -- Ollie Kraehe's bunch -- was declared vacant. Louisville and the Oorang Indians got permission to suspend for a year. Rock Island and league champion Canton needed more time to come up with their \$1,000 guarantee.

Toledo was in deep trouble and was given ten days to transfer its franchise. Apparently, they'd done the unforgivable -- used a college player. On the other hand, the owners decided, if a new owner could not be found, they could forgive the old owner for one year as long as he paid his dues. Before the season began, the Toledo Maroons moved to Kenosha, Wisconsin.

The moguls decided the league could pick up a little spare change by charging \$100 for every franchise transfer. Before the meeting ended, they had a hundred from Buffalo when Frank McNeil sold

The Professional Football Researchers Association

his team to Warren D. Patterson and the team's quarterback, "Tommy" Hughitt.

More money came in when they admitted an important new member -- the Frankford Yellow Jackets. Frankford was a Philadelphia suburb. The Jackets had built a worthy reputation as the strongest team in a tough town, succeeding Leo Conway's old Philadelphia Quakers. Pennsylvania Blue Laws forbid football on Sunday, necessitating Saturday games for the Jackets. Very quickly they fell into a pattern of playing at home on Saturday, then jumping on a train to play somewhere else on Sunday. As a consequence, in some years, they played twice as many games as some other NFL teams. Lesser teams would have crumbled, but from the start the Yellow Jackets were one of the league's best teams.

Better yet, Frankford drew well. The western teams finally had someplace to go in the east where they could make some money. Any residual thoughts about a two-division league must have ended right there. Everyone wanted to go to Philadelphia.

Finally, the league owners got to the league schedule, having further complicated it by everything they'd done up to then. Everyone had brought a tentative schedule with him and no doubt penciled in a few other games since meeting up with the other owners at Chicago. A move to appoint a committee of five to resolve the chaos into a league schedule was defeated. They couldn't even agree on who or how many people would make up the final slate.

While all the whys and wherefores and why-nots and where-nots were under discussion, someone apparently asked just what actually constituted the "season." "Dutch" Sternaman of the Bears suggested a starting date of September 27 and a closing of November 30. The league champion, he added, should be determined "on a percentage basis of all games between league teams played between the above dates inclusive." "Curly" Lambeau of Green Bay seconded, and the measure was adopted. Ignored was the fact that teams contending for the championship almost always continued playing into December. Indeed, the 1921 Staleys, with "Dutch" Sternaman in the backfield, had outmaneuvered Buffalo for the championship by winning December games. December was a long way off, but surely team owners, if they thought about it, must have realized that ending the "season" on November 30 would make any December games mere exhibitions -- games unlikely to stir up enthusiasm among their fans. One might suspect that at least some of the owners didn't quite understand what they were voting for. Certainly Halas and Sternaman would find reason to regret the early closing date when the 1924 season reached its climax.

With the league schedule still up in the air, the meeting was adjourned until the next day, allowing everyone to cluster in little groups to decide what they wanted.

The stronger clubs wanted an increase in the number of players they could hire and the amount of money they could pay them. Most of the lesser clubs wanted to save money, although it was obvious from the 1923 injury report that teams were being murdered by holding to 16-man rosters. There were more teams scraping by than putting money in the bank, and so the roster limit

was increased to 18 players but the salary limit kept at \$1,200 per game. In other words, teams could hire two more players but they could only be paid by taking money from the team's other players. Poor teams could use that as an excuse to cut some salaries, while the stronger teams would, as they always had, find ways around the limitations.

The schedule mess was finally settled by adopting what they'd roughed out the day before. In other words, the games each team had scheduled for itself were made official. Then, before they finally went home, they all agreed that anyone who wanted to could withdraw from the schedule up to August 15th. Translation: do what you want but if you change your mind, do something else.

The Bulldogs Move

Cleveland sports promoter Sam Deutsch was involved in both minor league baseball and boxing in the city. In 1923, he went for the big time, acquiring the Cleveland NFL franchise vacated a year earlier by Jimmy O'Donnell. He took the name "Indians" for his club -- it not only matched the American League baseball club but also there was tradition, sort of: everyone had called O'Donnell's '21 team that because Thorpe, Guyon and Calac played with them. But Deutsch was determined to put on a better brand of football for Clevelanders than O'Donnell had ever delivered. Going into their final 1923 game Deutsch's Indians were undefeated in six games. Unfortunately, it was all illusion. They'd beaten or tied league patsies to keep their record immaculate. Then the real article -- the Canton Bulldogs -- came to Cleveland for that final game and showed Deutsch what he really had by pounding his team 46-10.

Once the humiliating smoke cleared, Deutsch had time to be impressed with Guy Chamberlin and the Bulldogs. Their teamwork, defense, and scoring ability was better than any pro team he'd ever seen. It was the kind of team he wanted for Cleveland.

The Bulldog's season-ending victory gave Canton both its second consecutive NFL championship and its second consecutive undefeated season. The 'Dogs were a gridiron success.

But a financial disaster.

High salaries and low attendances, traveling expenses and lousy weather had combined to put the team deep in ink redder than their jerseys. On August 3, 1924, the Canton Repository reported that due to losses of approximately \$13,000, the Canton Athletic Company had sold the Bulldogs to Cleveland Sam Deutsch, "and [the Bulldogs] will henceforth compose the Cleveland team, with a few exceptions."

"The sale of the Bulldogs caused consternation in Canton. The Bulldogs had never had a losing season on the field! They'd had Thorpe, Guyon, Chamberlin, Henry, Calac, Lyman, and a whole raft of other stars in their lineup at one time or another. They'd just won two straight NFL titles and had taken U.S. professional titles in 1916, 1917, and 1919 before there was a league. How could the best pro football team in the world be sold "down the river" up to Cleveland?"

Actually, the team hadn't made a profit since the pre-World War I days of Jack Cusack, a state of affairs that had turned Ralph Hay to first push for a league and finally to sell the club. Attendance at

The Professional Football Researchers Association

Lakeside Park was pegged at a 2,500 average, assuring the Bulldogs of dropping better than a grand per home game. Some of that could be made up on the road if the weather held. When it didn't -- and it didn't in 1923 -- the losses went through the roof.

In a statement to the Repository, C.A.C. spokesman Lester Higgins explained, "Some time ago letters were sent out to Canton merchants and manufacturers, informing them of the financial situation and probability that the Bulldogs would hardly be continued without assistance in a substantial way." He added, "The letter brought very few favorable responses and but few promises of aid. Hence the decision to give up the ghost. Deutsch was the only bidder for the team and his offer of \$2,500 was accepted by telephone Saturday night to clear up the whole matter."

Deutsch had bought the team for only slightly more than its weekly payroll!

Now that the sale was accomplished, Bulldog fans came out of the woodwork, raising a hue and cry. Some formed a "fans committee" to raise hell. The gripes came so loud and often that three days after revealing the sale, Higgins announced that the C.A.C. was reconsidering. There would be a public meeting, he declared, where Cantonians could put up or shut up. "If only a few of the followers are kicking on the sale, there will be no Bulldogs for Canton this season, as those who backed the team last year will allow the sale to Deutsch to go through. But, if the Chamber of Commerce hall is jammed and packed to its full capacity tomorrow night, then it will be apparent that the football bugs of this city want to retain the Bulldogs for another season at least."

Predictably, Bulldog loyalists responded with an overflow turnout at the meeting. "Overflow" sounded nice, but in fact it only meant about 500 people. Still, it was an intimidating mob. The Canton Athletic Company waffled. According to Higgins, there existed a legal technicality that could block the sale of the Bulldogs. One of the stockholders Attorney William B. Quinn contended that a quorum was not present at the meeting at which the sale was approved. Furthermore, Deutsch had bought only the players, not the franchise or the uniforms, as the Clevelander insisted.

Well, sure! Players like Wilbur Henry and Guy Chamberlin were a dime a dozen. Just so long as Canton saved the jerseys and a piece of paper! Still, the quorum dodge sounded promising. Perhaps the Bulldogs might yet be saved. Higgins contacted NFL President Joe Carr and asked him if the league would object to the sale being blocked.

"Not if it's legal," said Carr. What else could he say?

But, from a reality standpoint, anyone might note that in all the angry multitude at the Canton assembly there was a real paucity of hard cash support. If words were dollars, the Bulldogs could have stayed in Canton for a decade. Their support came from the heart, but the bills had to be paid from the wallet.

Sam Deutsch had a healthy wallet and able lawyers. From Cleveland, he thundered he'd acted in good faith and now his prestige as a sports promoter was at stake. He'd not give up his Bulldogs without a fight, he vowed.

Both sides exchanged threats of legal action. For Deutsch, his day in court promised vindication and a powerhouse team in Cleveland. For the C.A.C., it meant more bills. Although many of the Canton businessmen who made up the C.A.C. sincerely wanted to find a way to keep the team at Lakeside Park, most of them recognized the Bulldogs as a White Elephant. They'd originally subscribed for \$250 apiece to run the Bulldogs when they acquired the team from Hay. Now they found themselves \$13,000 in debt, with no prospect of the team ever paying off. They wanted out from under, but they didn't dare appear too eager. After all, they had to do business with the same folks who were wringing hands over losing the team. For days, the Canton Repository and Daily News filled up with rumors of compromises and possible solutions. New backers, new players, new hopes.

Finally, ten days after the initial call for public support, the matter was resolved. Lawyer Quinn told the C.A.C. stockholders that, after a lengthy investigation, it was his opinion that, "Deutsch's purchase, while presenting a few technicalities, had no flaws in it worthy of a defense in court," and hence was considered valid. The Canton Bulldogs were no more.

Deutsch had the players, the uniforms, and the franchise in the National Football League. As a matter of fact, he had two -- his Cleveland Indian franchise AND his "Cleveland" Bulldog franchise. If he'd decided to operate both of them, he could have presented the league with a sticky problem.

But, of course, he didn't and never had intended such a thing. He simply transferred all the best Bulldog players to the Indians' roster and then offered to sell the stripped franchise back to Canton. A few football-desperate Cantonites actually thought it over, but sanity prevailed. So Deutsch let his new-purchased Canton franchise gather a thick coat of dust during the 1924 season.

However, to confuse later histories, Deutsch changed the name of his Indians to "Bulldogs." Ever since, the question has been: Were the Bulldogs who went on to win the 1924 NFL championship the same team that won the '22 and '23 titles, thereby scoring the league's first triple?

Well, yes and no.

Yes, the team had most of the same players, the same coach, the same nickname, and apparently the same uniforms. But no, it did not have the same city or owner, and most important not the same franchise, and so -- technically -- it was not the same team.

Nor was it the same kind of championship race. The two Canton wins had been, except for one or two scares, pretty much cakewalks. The 1924 race was a donneybrook that wasn't finally resolved until the following January.