

The Grange War

1926

By Bob Carroll

Red Grange, the greatest name in football, was everyone's hero. Lindberg had not yet flown to Paris, and only Babe Ruth ranked higher as a sports personality. Grange on a gridiron guaranteed a huge crowd. His endorsement sold pencils, cigarettes, cereal, typewriters, and all sorts of other stuff. He made a movie: *One Minute to Play*; the critics liked it, and the public made it a winner. Red's advice was asked, though not followed, by politicians. Every football-loving boy in America wanted to be Red Grange. Every man who ever played the game or dreamed of it wanted to be his buddy. Every woman with a yen for muscles fantasized him as her lover. 1925 was Grange's year; the same could be said for 1926 -- though in a different way. The NFL's '25 messiah became its '26 adversary.

The redhead from Illinois was big, certainly bigger than that league -- uh, what was it called? Despite the increased status gained by the Grange Tours of 1925, pro football in general and the NFL in particular still ranked far behind college football as an attraction. When Americans thought of pro football, which was still not that often, the first name that came to mind was never Joe Carr or George Halas or even Jim Thorpe; it was Red Grange.

As the National Football League looked toward only its seventh season, it knew it had to deal in some way with Grange. Red was a free agent. The agreement C.C. Pyle had hammered out with Halas and Sternaman for the 1925 Tours contained no reserve clause making Red Bears property in '26. Pyle offered the Redhead's services to Halas and Sternaman for a five-figure contract and one-third ownership of the Bears -- and was turned down.

RED ARRIVES

Grange and Pyle attended the NFL's annual winter meeting, held at Detroit's Hotel Statler on Saturday, February 6, 1926. Red was received as Paris later welcomed Lindberg. As usual, his modesty and All-America demeanor charmed everyone. Even in the difficult days that followed, few club owners had a bad word to say about Grange.

Their epithets were reserved for Pyle, who was received as Paris later welcomed Hitler. To the NFL owners, C.C. was a diabolical Svengali leading the trusting Redhead to ruin. In picturing Grange as an innocent dupe and Pyle as evil incarnate, they underrated Grange and over-indicted Pyle. C.C. was only capitalizing on Red's fame, something that every man in the room was anxious to do. The only difference was that, unlike the others, Pyle was determined Grange would receive the biggest share of the capitalization. Red, who was certainly no pawn, knew full well that Pyle was his way to the lion's share in that lions' den. Pyle's

breezy, many would say arrogant, manner made him as easy to dislike as Grange's pleasant personality made him likeable. That was fine with C.C. He was there for money, not love.

After the introduction of Grange, Pyle got to the point. He announced that he and Red had secured a five-year lease on Yankee Stadium for all the Sunday and holiday dates from October 15 to December 31. They proposed running their own franchise. C.C. painted a convincing picture. With the biggest stadium in the country and the biggest star in football, the league members all stood to profit greatly.

All but one. Tim Mara had purchased his Giants franchise the year before because of its exclusivity. Wasn't that the purpose of a franchise? In the name of profit, would the league set aside Mara's rights and allow a new franchise in Yankee Stadium across the Harlem River, less than a thousand yards away from the Polo Grounds?

A couple of owners didn't have to think twice before jumping on the Grange-wagon. A.H. Bowlby of Rock Island bubbled over. Dutch Sternaman went for it, and even George Halas was non-committal. Mara found himself in a minority. Nevertheless, he was a minority with an exclusive franchise -- in writing. Pyle later claimed that 19 of the assembled 20 owners favored admitting a Yankee Stadium Grange team. But, as much as the other owners wanted Grange in the NFL, he couldn't be in New York unless Mara said okay.

That evening, a couple of owners attempted a compromise. Perhaps Mara would be willing to countenance a Grange in Brooklyn. Perhaps Pyle would be willing to back off -- to Ebbets Field, ten miles from the Polo Grounds. A meeting was arranged between Mara and Pyle. It was doomed. Mara had developed a healthy dislike for Pyle's arrogance the year before when negotiating the Grange Tour into the Polo Grounds. Now C.C. was treating him as a tiresome obstacle to a New Dawn and Tim had his Irish up. According to one witness, Mara came close to punching C.C.'s lights out.

That Mara's refusal to be bulldozed was fueled by self-interest goes without saying. He saw no profit in allowing his Giants to become New York's "second" team. But beyond that, he could think of long-term profits as opposed to quick riches. If the league caved in this time, what would happen when next year's "Grange" came along and wanted a slice of Chicago? And the year after that, would Philadelphia be given away to another college star? Who was running this show anyway? The league or the stars?

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Faced with Mara's intractable stance, the league had no choice but to bid a regretful adieu to Grange. Okay, announced Pyle, he and Grange would still be in Yankee Stadium in the fall -- in a new league.

The NFL owners went on with their meeting, upholding Carr's 1925 actions in suspending Pottsville, fining the Cardinals, and forcing the sale of the Milwaukee franchise. Then they re-elected Carr president. Although these actions seemed on the surface unconnected to the "Grange Situation," they actually were a necessary step in polarizing the NFL and Pyle-Grange. Pottsville's punishment resulted from Carr's defense of franchise integrity, that is, the exclusive right of an NFL franchise holder to stage games involving NFL teams within its own territory. Carr's penalties of the Cards and Milwaukee concerned player eligibility, a second side of the Grange problem. By supporting Carr's decisions and by re-electing him, the owners endorsed his vision of the league's future.

The eligibility part was an old story. Pro football had been criticized for years for playing college boys under assumed names. Although some of the many independent teams across the country still found places for mysterious "Smith's" and "Jones's," by 1926 the NFL was far past that stage. Milwaukee's use of high schoolers in 1925 was an anomaly in violation of existing rules. But, no rules covered a situation like Grange's. Red had completed his football eligibility at the University of Illinois when he signed with the Bears. He was, however, still eligible for other sports such as basketball, baseball and track until he put his name on the dotted line. Moreover, his pro football tours had taken him out of school, thus depriving the young millionaire of his degree. The league had been damned in press and on campus for its precipitous signing of the Redhead. To avoid further criticism, the owners adopted the following resolution:

That the National Football League ... places itself on record as unalterably opposed to any encroachment upon college football and in preserving the amateur standing of all college athletes ... it is the unanimous decision of this meeting that every member of the National Football League be positively prohibited from inducing or attempting to induce any college player to engage in professional football *until his class at college shall have graduated*, and any member violating this rule shall be fined not less than One Thousand Dollars, or loss of its franchise, or both. (italics added)

Although cynics might call this a classic case of locking the barn door, the rule was well-intentioned. The league said that it would not in any way tamper with student-athletes until after they had used up their eligibility and had a reasonable expectation of graduating. There would be no more signings in late November. More, the open-ended fine and possible loss of franchise put real teeth in the rule.

The rule became one of the NFL's proudest badges of altruism. Whenever it was suggested that its owners were a bunch of mean-spirited money-grubbers who put the almighty dollar ahead of responsibility, the league could point with pride at its "class-has-graduated" rule as an example of how it "protected" both college football and student athletes. Ironically, sixty years later some

student-athletes would be willing to challenge that rule in the courts as a violation of their right to earn a living.

THE GRANGE LEAGUE

C.C. Pyle immediately began negotiations with several cities that had previously expressed an interest in joining the NFL. Among rumored possibles were a St. Louis team backed by baseball great Rogers Hornsby and a Cincinnati team to be owned by Reds owner Garry Herrmann. Supposedly Pyle received five requests for teams from Chicago and three from Brooklyn. Pyle's PR gave the impression that investors were beating his door to splinters.

At the same time, to give his league an air of legitimacy, Pyle looked for a nationally-known figure to front as president. After being turned down by famed sportswriter Grantland Rice, he settled on William "Big Bill" Edwards, the Princeton All-America of the 1890's. Edwards had become a New York politico and served in such non-sports capacities as Collector of Internal Revenue and Street Cleaning Commissioner. His last known direct connection with football had been as a game official in 1907 and his only affiliation with pro football was as referee for the Franklin-Watertown game at Madison Square Garden in 1904. Pyle got "Big Bill" for a promised \$25,000, and Edwards ascended to his office with a ringing speech about preserving "high-class football" and "red-blooded sport."

On July 17, Pyle announced the make up of his new American Football League. Three clubs were clustered around New York: Pyle's New York Yankees, featuring Grange; the Brooklyn Horsemen, promising to field the more famous Horsemen of Notre Dame; and the Newark Bears, made up mostly of southern players. The Boston Bulldogs brought a group of Ivy Leaguers into the AFL. The Philadelphia Quakers were owned by Leo Conway, the one-time "boy manager" of an earlier Quaker team. The Cleveland Panthers looked to be made up of players from the 1925 NFL Bulldogs.

The Chicago Bulls listed former Bears quarterback Joey Sternaman -- Dutch's brother -- as their owner, coach and star. Joey's defection would hurt the Bears, but the crusher came when the Bulls gained the right to play in Comiskey Park, exiling poor Chris O'Brien to dingy little Normal Park.

Two clubs were announced as traveling teams that would play almost exclusively on the road: the Wilson Wildcats, featuring U. of Washington All-America George "Wildcat" Wilson, who was also the owner of record; and A.H. Bowlby's Rock Island Independents. Rock Island had asked and received permission to suspend operations in the NFL -- six days before they were announced in the AFL camp. Although the Independents were one of the NFL's charter members, one NFL executive characterized their jump as "good riddance to bad rubbish."

Pyle was supposedly no more than the New York team owner in his league, but that was for public consumption. The Wilson Wildcat franchise was undoubtedly Pyle's concoction, and there was a strong likelihood that he was backing Joey Sternaman in Chicago. In other words, he probably owned one-third of the league. He might as well have owned it all as far as dictatorial control went. The public thought of the AFL as the "Grange League;" In reality, it was Pyle's.

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THE NFL PREPARES FOR WAR

Joe Carr had been strangely silent when Pyle made his power grab at the NFL winter meeting. No doubt the Pres was of two minds. Surrendering to C.C. would weaken the league, perhaps fatally. On the other hand, Grange's proven ability to pull crowds would strengthen the league, perhaps enough to offset throwing franchise integrity to the wind. Tim Mara's refusal to back down took any decision out of Carr's hands. And once Pyle announced his new AFL, Carr was a fortress in opposing it.

The defection of the Rock Island Independents was a loss only to the NFL's pride; the team was a box office loser. Pyle also tried to woo Chris O'Brien and his Cardinals. Even though the Cardinals were not a money-maker, they were the 1925 champions and their loss would have really hurt the older league. Chris O'Brien stood firm, forcing Pyle to make his arrangement with Joey Sternaman. When the AFL Bulls gained the right to play in Comiskey Park, O'Brien was in deep trouble. Carr and the league helped a bit by quietly rescinding the \$1,000 fine levied for participating in the "high school game" with Milwaukee. Finally, to keep operating, O'Brien was forced to sell "Paddy" Driscoll to the Bears for \$3,000.

Another NFL fear was that the Pottsville Maroons, at that point acknowledged as pro football's strongest team, would join the new league. The Maroons would make a powerful road attraction for Pyle's AFL. At the NFL's summer meeting, Pottsville was re-embraced after paying only a slap-on-the-wrist fine of \$2,000.

At the same time Rock Island was given NFL permission to suspend operation for a year, the Rochester Jeffersons, Cleveland Bulldogs, and Minneapolis Marines begged out of the 1926 season. Rochester was done for good, Minneapolis would try again in 1929, and new Cleveland franchises would bounce in and out of the league for years. The AFL Panthers were not directly related to the Bulldogs, despite the presence of seven former Bulldogs players.

Carr more than made up for the missing, boosting NFL membership all the way to 22 teams. The war strategy was to fight the AFL with numbers -- teams in the league, players under contract, and games available to fans. New franchises were added in Hartford and Brooklyn (with Mara's permission). The old Racine franchise was resurrected for one final go. So was Louisville. Aaron Hertzman had no field to play on in Kentucky and no other NFL team cared to visit there anyway. So the Brecks called themselves "Colonels" and played out of Chicago as a road team. The manager was Bill Harley, "Chic's" ever-available brother. Typically, Bill told people he owned the team.

The most interesting new arrivals were two other road teams. The Los Angeles Buccaneers, headquartered in Chicago, were nearly all West Coast players. The biggest names were two-time All-America end Harold "Brick" Muller and quarterback Talma "Tut" Imlay, both from the University of California "Wonder Teams" of 1920-22. The sudden influx of West Coast players into the heretofore eastern and midwestern world of major league pro football was at least partly a result of the Grange western tour the previous January. Nearly every available Pacific Coast star played for either the Bucs or the AFL Wilson Wildcats in 1926.

Except for one -- the greatest western star of all.

SAVING THE NFL

Hope came from, of all places, Duluth. The Duluth team had been a money loser from the time it joined the NFL in 1923. Four players operated the franchise in 1925 and on two occasions they had to chip in their own money to meet guarantee for clubs visiting Duluth. Ole Haugsrud, the club treasurer, was given the franchise in 1926. To make things legal, he handed the players a dollar, which they immediately spent on twenty nickle beers.

At the summer meeting, the NFL members were scheduling games among themselves when Haugsrud dropped a bombshell. He had signed Ernie Nevers to a contract. In the 1920's pecking order of football stars, Nevers ranked second to Grange in public adoration. A big blond Minnesotan, he'd earned the description "One Man Team" while playing for "Pop" Warner at Stanford. Warner ranked him as even better than his earlier protege, Jim Thorpe. Nevers could run, pass, kick, and play defense on a par with Thorpe, and "Pop" gave Ernie the edge on competitive spirit. Until Haugsrud announced his coupe, the other NFL owners had figured Nevers was going with Pyle's AFL.

When the owners heard the NFL had a new attraction that nearly rivaled Grange in appeal, they cheered. "You've saved the league!" Haugsrud was told. Then the "moguls" scrambled to schedule the "Ernie Nevers Eskimos," as the Duluth team was now called. Before Haugsrud could say "Drawing Card" three times fast, he had a bulging schedule.

Only one game was played in Duluth. More than twenty, counting exhibitions, took place on the road, in a schedule that ended in Sacramento, California, the next January. In one stretch, the Eskimos played four games in eight days. Nearly all of the games were played with a roster of only 13 men, and the team was tagged "The Iron Men of the North."

Nevers signed for \$15,000 and a share of the bigger gates, making him the highest-paid NFL player. At that, he was a bargain. His name drew good crowds, and Haugsrud claimed a \$3,000 profit for the season. On the field, Nevers lived up to his "One-Man Team" reputation. The Eskimos lined up in a double-wing formation, similar to a modern shotgun, with Nevers as the only deep back. He called signals, handled the ball on every play, did most of the running, and all of the passing and kicking. On defense, he played a roving linebacker.

Besides Nevers, two other team members later became members of the Pro Football Hall of Fame: wingback Johnny Blood and guard Walt Kiesling. However, despite Nevers' heroics and enough legends to fill their own book, the Eskimos were only an ordinary team, winning against weak foes and losing to all their strong opponents.

Haugsrud claimed the Eskimos played 19 league games and ten exhibitions from October to early January 1927, for a backbreaking schedule. However, research reveals only 14 league games were played and several announced games were rained out. The Eskimos NFL record was 6-5-3 for 1926. Exhibitions are harder to prove; although only eight of these have been verified, it is quite possible Haugsrud's ten were actually played.

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The game total is important only because it affects an unofficial record often credited to Nevers -- 1711 minutes played in '26. Haugsrud claimed that Ernie was incensed over a clause that Joe Carr insisted be put in his contract, that he play at least 25 minutes of every game. Ernie was used to playing every minute. According to Haugsrud, he insisted on playing all but 29 minutes during the season. If the number of games played was "only" 24, Nevers total playing time was 1411 -- still an incredible achievement.

Most of his 29 minutes on the bench came on October 31 against Milwaukee. He had abdominal pains indicating a possible appendicitis. The doctor advised him to sit this one out, but when the Eskimos fell behind, 6-0, in he came. He threw a 40-yard pass for the tying touchdown and then kicked the extra point.

Haugsrud, in several accounts from memory, claimed Nevers kicked five field goals against Hartford and completed 17 consecutive passes against Pottsville in '26. He did neither. However, he scored all the points in a 16-0 win over Hartford, on three field goals, a touchdown, and an extra point, and he completed a total of 17 passes against Pottsville in 1927.

In other words, once the air is taken out of the Nevers Legend, it's still bigger than life.

RED'S LEAGUE GOES INTO THE RED

The AFL counted heavily on the charisma of well-known backs to draw fans. Besides Grange, Sternaman, and "Wildcat" Wilson, Eddie Tryon of Colgate, Harry Stuhldreher of Notre Dame, Doug Wycoff of Georgia Tech, Pooley Hubert of Alabama, and Al Kreuz of Penn signed up. The only decent line in the league belonged to Philadelphia, where Leo Conway lured former NFL tackles Centruy Milstead and "Bull" Behman from the Giants and Yellow Jackets respectively. Conway's Quakers proved the old adage that games are won in the trenches. They defeated Grange's Yankees twice in late November to win the first, and as it turned out, only AFL championship.

By that time, the only AFL teams still playing were the Quakers, Yankees, Wildcats, and Chicago Bulls, three of those four apparently underwritten by Pyle. Of the other five hopefuls, Cleveland and Newark quit at the end of October. The Brooklyn Horsemen gave up and merged with the NFL Brooklyn Lions (becoming the "Horse-Lions!") in early November. Boston surrendered after November 14. The Rock Island team ended up broke and stranded in Chicago the next week.

What happened? Generally, the teams were under-capitalized; when the league didn't capture fan interest early, the owners couldn't cover promised salaries. A particularly rainy autumn compounded the problem; only Grange could get fans to brave the cold and wet. Most of the teams weren't very good; they'd been hastily assembled, lacked acceptable linemen, and were badly coached. And finally, the games, though often close, were always dull. Despite the famous backs, scoring was rare. In 41 league games, the AFL scored only 42 touchdowns. Only the Yankees averaged two a game; the champion Quakers earned 33 of their 93 points on field goals.

Few players ever received all the money owed to them. Joey Sternaman claimed he came out of the venture dead broke.

Reportedly, league president "Big Bill" Edwards never saw a penny of his \$25,000 salary.

MEANWHILE, IN THE NFL ...

Most of the problems that afflicted the AFL were present in the older league. The weather was just as bad. Talent was spread thin, and most of the 22 teams were weaklings. The traveling Colonels didn't score a point in their four games. Hammond managed only a single field goal in its four contests. Neither those two nor Racine and Milwaukee finished the season. Columbus, Canton, Dayton, Akron, Hartford, and Brooklyn barely limped to the end.

The Nevers Eskimos drew fans here and there, but not enough to completely offset heavy losses for even the stronger teams. Tim Mara's Giants, going directly against Grange, lost \$40,000. In Chicago, where three teams squared off, both the Bears and Cardinals were badly hurt.

Ironically, the NFL had a strong, three-way race for its championship -- just the kind of thing that should have made some money. By the end of November, the Bears were undefeated and the Yellow Jackets and Pottsville Maroons had only one loss each.

On December 4, the Jackets and Bears faced each other at Philadelphia's Shibe Park. A mere 10,000 turned out for the game of the year -- 12,000 fewer than the crowd for the AFL Yankees-Quakers game the week before. For 55 minutes, the teams battled back and fourth across the 50-yard-line. The closest either came to a score was Paddy Driscoll's field goal attempt in the third quarter, blocked by Philadelphia player-coach Guy Chamberlin. With five minutes left, Chicago had the ball at its own 38 when rookie Bill Senn took a handoff, burst through the Jackets' defense, and raced to a touchdown. Driscoll tried for the extra point, but once more Chamberlin blocked his kick.

Trailing 6-0, the Yellow Jackets brought the kickoff back to their 25. Tailback Hust Stockton began passing, connecting several times to end Rae Crowther. The clock was down to a minute and a half when the Jackets reached the Bears' 27. Stockton took another snap and lofted the ball for blocking back "Two-Bits" Homan streaking for the end zone. Homan, the smallest man on the field at 144 pounds, made the catch of the day just as he crossed the goal line. When fullback Tex Hamer's kick split the uprights, the Jackets moved into first place on a 7-6, "miracle" win.

The Maroons, with basically the same cast from 1925 intact, were still in the race with games scheduled on the next two weekends with Chicago and Philadelphia. But on December 12, the Bears knocked them off 9-7 at Wrigley Field. Driscoll scored the Bears' points on a touchdown and field goal. Only 5,500 attended. Six days later, the Yellow Jackets cemented first place on a scoreless tie with the Maroons at Frankford Stadium.

For Guy Chamberlin, the Frankford championship was his fourth in five seasons as a coach and sixth in eight seasons as a player, counting the unofficial U.S. title with Canton in 1919. Philadelphia added the NFL crown to the AFL's won earlier by the Quakers.

After the Quakers had their title in hand, Leo Conway tried to wangle a game with the Yellow Jackets, but Frankford refused only in part because its schedule was filled. However, Tim Mara agreed

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to let his Giants play the Quakers at the Polo Grounds on December 12 in an odd sort of "Super Bowl," with the champions of one league playing the seventh-place team of the other circuit. It turned cold and snowed. Only 5,000 diehard fans came out to see the AFL's best against the NFL's ordinary. What they saw was an embarrassment for the "Grange League." The Giants climbed all over the Quakers to win, 31-0.

There could be no more doubt; the AFL was dead.

1926 FINAL NFL STANDINGS

	W	L	T	PF-PA
Frankford Yellowjackets	14	1	2	236-49
Chicago Bears	12	1	3	216-63
Pottsville Maroons	10	2	2	155-29
Kansas City Cowboys	8	3	0	76-53
Green Bay Packers	7	3	3	151-61
New York Giants	8	4	1	147-51

Los Angeles Buccaneers	6	3	1	67-57
Duluth Eskimos	6	5	3	112-81
Buffalo Rangers	4	4	2	53-62
Chicago Cardinals	5	6	1	74-98
Providence Steam Roller	5	7	1	89-103
Detroit Panthers	4	6	2	107-60
Hartford Blues	3	7	0	57-98
Brooklyn Lions	3	8	0	60-150
Milwaukee Badgers	2	7	0	4-66
Akron Indians	1	4	3	23-87
Dayton Triangles	1	4	1	15-82
Racine Tornadoes	1	4	0	8-92
Columbus Tigers	1	6	0	26-93
Canton Bulldogs	1	9	3	46-161
Hammond Pros	0	4	0	3-56
Louisville Colonels	0	4	0	0-108