

KENOSHA CARDINALS

Life on the Fringe

by Bob Gill

As most people know, pro football in the years before the Second World War was quite different from the modern game, not only in style of play, but also in organizational structure. Most importantly, with only ten teams (and 25-man rosters) in the NFL, there were still enough good football players left over to stock other (in most cases, minor) leagues. In the 1930's (thru 1941) these included the American Association, the Dixie League, the Pacific Coast League, and four different AFL's. All played good football, and a couple claimed, with some justification, to be major leagues in their own right.

But if those were the days of the strong minor leagues, they were also the days of a stranger (by today's standards) phenomenon: the existence of several major independent teams capable of competing on equal footing with NFL clubs. From 1927, when the NFL reduced its membership to twelve teams, thru 1941, after which the war changed everything, it was almost never the case that the ten (or twelve, or eight, depending on the size of the league) best teams in the country were all in the NFL. Teams like the Ironton Tanks, the Memphis Tigers, the St. Louis Gunners, and the Los Angeles Bulldogs were all, at one time or another, better than at least a couple of NFL teams.

And there were other independent clubs that, while probably not quite up to major league level, were at least good enough to play several games per season with NFL teams and put up good fights. After the war, the birth of the AAFC and a more tightly-structured system of minor leagues spelled the end of the line for the top independents, and even by 1940 the field had been narrowed to one major team, probably the last of a now extinct breed: the Kenosha Cardinals.

Quick question for football historians: What do Johnny Blood, Beattie Feathers, Jim Gillette and Paul Christman have in common? Answer: All played for Kenosha during the Cardinals' peak seasons, 1940-41. They were far from the only attractions, though, because for those two years, Kenosha, Wisconsin, had made the big time – or at least, they were on the fringe.

For several years, the Cooper Underwear Manufacturing Company had sponsored a semi-pro team in Kenosha – a team for the most part undistinguished. But in 1937, in the words of the Kenosha *Evening News*, the Cardinals (or Coopers, as they were sometimes known) made the big jump from "just another sandlot team to the most feared independent eleven in the state." Their only competition for state semi-pro honors came from the LaCrosse Lagers, defending champions of the minor Northwest League. But LaCrosse refused to schedule the Kenosha club, thus leaving the dispute unresolved for 1937.

So for 1938, Cooper's Cardinals (another popular appellation for the team) set their sights on the undisputed championship of Wisconsin – and then had it handed to them when (out of fear, as the popular explanation in Kenosha had it) LaCrosse failed to field a team.

Brimming with confidence, Gilbert S. Lance, chief representative of Cooper's, Inc., announced that the Cardinals would attempt to schedule a number of "big-time" teams to fill the gap left by LaCrosse's absence. He contacted several clubs in the American Football League, which had been known as the Midwest League in 1937, but had changed its name and expanded its territory in the offseason. Two AFL teams accepted Lance's offer: the Calumet (or East Chicago) Indians, booked to invade Kenosha on Thanksgiving Day, November 24; and the Nashville Rebels. At first the Cardinals were scheduled to travel to Nashville on November 6, until Lance decided that the team's budget couldn't cover the trip. Instead, the Rebels agreed to come to Kenosha on November 27; but the AFL playoff schedule, released at the last minute, put Nashville in St. Louis on the same day, and the Kenosha game was canceled.

The Cardinals did agree to one long trip, a journey to Des Moines November 20 to play the Comets, who had succeeded LaCrosse as Northwest League champs in 1937. As the date approached, Comets'

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 5, No. 1 (1983)

management requested the game be shifted to Kenosha. Lance agreed; but when Des Moines demanded too large a guarantee, that game too was called off.

Shortly afterward, the Calumet team canceled the November 24 game; this time, however, the Cardinals had a quick solution. They booked the Dayton Rosies, another AFL team, as a replacement and beat them easily, 31-0. The club had achieved another noteworthy win on November 13, beating the Chicago Gunners 13-0. The Gunners had an important Midwest team for several years and featured star tailback Pug Rentner, formerly with the Bears and Redskins in the NFL. In 1937, before Rentner's arrival, they had shut out Kenosha.

The Cardinals finished the 1938 season undefeated (one tie), but obviously things weren't going very smoothly. The club wanted to bring in more high-caliber opposition, but that was difficult; most of the better teams by that time were members of leagues, and thus had other commitments that took priority. Obviously, joining a league was one available solution. The AFL seemed the logical choice, but Lance was dubious about that possibility. Instead, he said, he would prefer forming a new league with, say, the Chicago Gunners, the Calumet Indians, and a few other Midwestern teams, like maybe Des Moines.

As it turned out, though, that idea fell through. That left the AFL as the best alternative, so the Cardinals applied to – and were accepted by – the league early in 1939.

Through 1938, the Cardinals had been almost exclusively a homegrown team. But joining the AFL was a step upward for Kenosha, and Lance was aware that the club would need to go farther afield for players. Head coach John Reis and assistant Perry Lippert (line coach) were retained, as was much of the 1938 squad, including star receiver Dick Hegeman (35 receptions, 501 yards, 12 touchdowns), and backs John Cherny (270 yards rushing, 19-31 passing), Eddie Hartnek (264 yards rushing, 32-72 passing) and Art "Red" Horne (167 yards rushing). But the team also signed several notable newcomers during the course of the season, including backs Art Buck (from Carroll) and Vince Gavre (from Wisconsin), along with linemen Paul Berezney (from Fordham), Wally Kilbourne (from Minnesota), and Clem Naughton (from DePaul).

The final standing for the 1939 AFL showed three new members at the top: the Los Angeles Bulldogs, the Columbus Bullies, and the Cincinnati Bengals. But despite their new players, Kenosha, the other "expansion" club, finished with a 2-7 record, good (?) for seventh place in the eight team league. The team suffered mainly from an inability to win close games, losing to east Chicago by scores of 17-15 and 7-6, and to Cincinnati by 10-7. The low point of the season came in two losses to the Dayton Bombers, arguably the worst team in the league. Those were the only games the Bombers won all year; and despite the name change, this was the same club the Cardinals had routed a year earlier.

Both Kenosha wins came at the expense of the Louisville Tanks, three-time league champions, who dropped to 2-9 and thus kept the Cardinals out of last place. Kenosha's 34-10 victory in Louisville on November 19 featured the season's outstanding individual performance, by Art Buck, who scored four touchdowns, all on runs of at least 48 yards--three from scrimmage (longest 73 yards) and one an interception return. Buck also added the conversions after all four scores, for a total of 28 points, and gained 296 yards for the day, 195 rushing and the rest on returns of all kinds.

Also on the positive side, the Cardinals did manage to win four non-league games, including a 17-0 verdict over the Des Moines Comets, to finish with an overall 6-7 record. In post-season balloting by the players, Buck and backfield mate Art Blaha, along with center Tony Monik, were chosen as the team's most valuable players. They were officially designated "honorary co-captains" as the vote ended in a three-way tie.

So Kenosha could look back with some satisfaction (though with some misgivings as well) on its first season as a full-fledged pro football team. And for 1940, there would be changes. Most importantly, the club severed its ties with Cooper's, Inc.; from now on, the Cardinals would be run by the Kenosha Sports Association, which was headed by none other than "Gib" Lance, in his new role – at least the title was new – as president and general manager.

The AFL itself planned a few changes for the coming season. With Los Angeles joining the new Pacific Coast League, the league installed a new franchise in Milwaukee, to be known as the Chiefs. Green Bay protested that this was a violation of its territorial rights, but the AFL, feeling its oats after its most

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 5, No. 1 (1983)

successful season, was willing to challenge the established league now. In fact, there were hints that the AFL was about to declare itself a second major league. Combined with the new team in Milwaukee – a natural rival for Kenosha – this news made the prospects for the Cardinals' 1940 season very good indeed.

But in July a group of eastern Businessmen persuaded three AFL teams--Milwaukee, Columbus, and Cincinnati – to defect, and along with soon-to-be-organized clubs in Boston, New York, and Buffalo, to form a new league, this one also to be called the AFL. The new league, lacking nothing in the way of nerve, immediately claimed major league status.

This development left the old AFL holding the bag – and a nearly empty bag it was. Louisville and Dayton, perhaps influenced by the unstable status of the league, announced that they would not field teams; that left the "league" with only three clubs: Kenosha, East Chicago, and the St. Louis Gunners. Realizing that a three team league wouldn't work, the AFL – the old one, that is – gave up the ghost.

Kenosha and St. Louis applied for membership in the new "major league" AFL, but were eventually turned down. However, the league did make arrangements for its teams to play the Cardinals in a series of "official exhibitions" – these usually meant Sunday or Wednesday night games just before or after the teams visited Milwaukee. St. Louis and East Chicago were left out in the cold, to schedule what games they could; Kenosha agreeably lined up dates with each club.

As far back as 1938, the Green Bay Packers had offered the Cardinals a game on Labor Day, but the Cards had refused because the team didn't organize that early. For 1940, the Packers repeated the offer; this time the details were agreeable to Kenosha management, and the team opened its season in Green Bay on September 7. In a surprisingly close game, the Packers won 17-0, using mostly second and third string players. Johnny Blood, playing his last game for the Pack, carried 7 times for 46 yards.

Encouraged by their performance against the NFL champs, the Cardinals were bolstered in a more tangible sense shortly afterward when the Packers released Blood, Feathers, Gillette, and several others, who were quickly signed by Kenosha. Blood became a backfield coach, joining the staff of head coach Reis and line coaches Lippert and John Biolo, like Blood a player-coach. With the addition of these new recruits, the team moved confidently into its "official" schedule with AFL clubs. In six games against the four top teams in the league (omitting tail-enders Buffalo and Cincinnati), the Cardinals compiled a 4-2 record, winning single games with Boston and New York, and splitting a pair with both Columbus and Milwaukee, the first and second-place teams.

Feathers and Gillette were the stars of the opening game with Columbus, combining on two scoring passes in a 13-7 win. Though on the receiving end then, Gillette turned passer afterward, with four scoring tosses in the next four games. Then in mid-October he left the team, along with blocking back Glenn Olson, to join the Cleveland Rams. At about the same time, Feathers was hurt, missing several games as a result, and Art Buck went into the service. These losses off the field, and back-to-back on-field setbacks at Columbus and Milwaukee, threatened to short-circuit the season for Kenosha.

But late in October the Cardinals picked up John "Weenie" Wilson, a 5'8" scatback just released by Milwaukee, and he took up the slack starring in two big late-season wins. First, on November 13, Wilson broke loose for two long scoring runs, of 62 and 43 yards, as the Cardinals beat the New York Yankees 14-0. Then on November 17 he completed a long touchdown pass to Johnny Dolan in the fourth quarter to beat his former teammates in Milwaukee, 13-3.

Just prior to Wilson's two-game spree, the Cardinals had slipped past the Boston Bears 17-14, on Ken Binder's field goal. At the time, the Bears were pressing Columbus and Milwaukee for the league lead, so victory was cause of celebration in Kenosha – though of course it was overshadowed by the subsequent win over the Chiefs.

By the time Kenosha had built up such a rivalry with the AFL's best that a third game with league champion Columbus was scheduled for December 1; but snow and cold weather forced its cancellation. Still, the Cardinals could look back on a very successful season, which they finished with a 10-3 record. At a post-season banquet given for the team, Harry Leysenaar, a tough runner and receiver, was named the year's "honorary captain," beating out other candidates like half-back Al Christiansen (who missed several games with injuries) and fullback Dan Koster.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 5, No. 1 (1983)

Proud of their 1940 successes, the Cardinals were ready to take another step upward in 1941; in addition to home-and-home dates with both Columbus and Milwaukee, Lance scheduled six games with NFL teams, including the Bears, Giants, and Packers. Preparing for the tougher schedule, the club picked up two of the AFL's better backs of 1940: Ernie Wheeler from Boston and former Cardinal Art Blaha from the Chiefs. Top additions from the college ranks were end Dave Rankin from Purdue, back Les Bruckner from Michigan State, and guard Chet Peterson from Lake Forest. And in anticipation of large crowds, the team enlarged Lake Front Stadium, its home field, to hold 5,000 fans.

Even before the season started, though, things began to go wrong for Kenosha. Early in August, the team lost two of its top players from 1940, when Den Binder, quarterback and kicker, broke his ankle in a baseball game, and Frank Soeka, the leading receiver in 1940, underwent an emergency appendectomy. Neither would play a down in 1941.

Still experimenting with different lineups in the absence of Binder and Soeka, the team opened its season August 19 (its earliest game ever) against the Chicago Bears, NFL champions, and lost 27-6. A short pass from Wheeler to Al Christiansen accounted for the Cards' scoring. Considering that the Bears had beaten the Redskins 73-0 only eight months earlier, and were about to repeat as league champs, this was a very respectable showing for Kenosha; the record attendance of 6,200 was also encouraging.

A week later, though the Philadelphia Eagles demolished the Cardinals 35-6, in a game that seriously dampened whatever hopes Kenosha fans may have had for the season. The game was a complete rout, Christiansen's 4- yard run for the Cards' only score coming after the Eagles had already registered 27 points. For the game, Kenosha amassed only 65 yards in total offense.

Despite their poor showing against Philadelphia, the Cardinals received an encouraging note from NFL commissioner Elmer Layden a few days later, in which he complimented the city on its team and promised further NFL support, in the form of visits by league clubs. Then on August 31 the Cards traveled to St. Paul, Minnesota, for a charity game with the New York Giants. The team made a much better showing this time, but still wound up on the short end of a 34-7 score, Wheeler's short plunge and Peterson's conversion accounting for all their points. Most local observers were satisfied with the club's performance, though, considering the strength of the opposition (the Giants would win the Eastern Division title in 1941).

Nine days later the team was back at Lake Front, hosting their namesakes, the Chicago Cardinals. Blaha starred for Kenosha, rushing for 40 yards and completing 5 passes for 74 more and two touchdowns, one of them to Wheeler, who also threw a scoring pass of his own as the home team took a 21-7 halftime lead. In the second half, however, Ray Mallouf (12-19 passing) led a Chicago comeback, throwing for two scores, and the game ended in a 21-21 tie. But even though the final score was slightly disappointing, the game clearly marked the club's best showing of the season to date.

A two-week layoff followed, and then the team returned to action against the Cleveland Rams September 23, in a game which turned out to be a disaster for Kenosha. Cleveland rushed for over 200 yards in a 34-0 laughter, and limited Cardinal passers to 7 completions in 28 tries, with 3 intercepted.

Next to visit Kenosha were the Columbus Bullies, who had played two tough games with the Cardinals in 1940. This time, however, it was no contest, Columbus winning in a rout, 34-7. Blaha was the only bright spot for Kenosha, gaining 51 yards on the ground, including a 17-yard run for the Cards' score. Even the *Evening News* could find nothing good to say about the game, calling it a "stinkeroo."

Remarks like that hurt, but a couple of days later there was worse news from Milwaukee. The Chiefs, scheduled to play at Kenosha October 7, with a return game in Milwaukee later in the month, canceled the second game after scouting the Cardinals' dismal performance against Columbus. In addition, Chiefs' management informed Lance that instead of splitting gate receipts for the Kenosha game (as they had originally agreed), they wanted what the *Evening News* called a "huge guarantee." This was probably only a tactic to make Kenosha call the game off; and it worked – the next day the game was officially canceled.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 5, No. 1 (1983)

In the meantime, the team was off to the Canadian province of Manitoba, to meet the Winnipeg Blue Bombers. The unusual game was played under Canadian rules which gave each team three downs to make ten yards, and an extra man in the backfield, called the flying wing (a position filled for Kenosha by Johnny Blood). In addition, touchdowns counted only five points. Even under the strange (to them) conditions, the Cardinals did well, building an early lead and then weathering a late Winnipeg rally for an 18-16 victory. Blaha was again the Cards' chief threat, running for one score, throwing to Blood for another, and intercepting four passes.

Returning home from Canada, the team was idle for three weeks owing to the cancellation of both Milwaukee games. With nothing much to do around Kenosha, Blood, Wheeler, and Johnny Dolan traveled to Buffalo where the AFL Tigers were in need of help after losing their opener to Cincinnati 29-0. All three Kenosha recruits played (Blood under his real name, McNally) for Buffalo October 8 against the New York Americans (formerly the Yankees), but they didn't help much as the Tigers lost again, 26-7.

After the game, Blood (5 carries, longest gain 8 yards) returned to Kenosha, but Wheeler and Dolan remained to help Buffalo get even with Cincinnati, 16-0, October 19. Four weeks later, Wheeler would return for the Tigers' final two games, both against Milwaukee, this time bringing with him Kenosha's Clem Naughton.

For the moment, though, Wheeler and the rest of his teammates were concerned with the Cards' October 26 game at Columbus. This time the club put up a good fight, particularly Blaha, who rushed for 84 yards, including a 6-yard touchdown in the second quarter that brought Kenosha within a point at 7-6 (Blood's dropkick for the conversion was blocked). But in the second half Columbus scored twice more, and came away with a hard-earned 20-6 victory.

A week later the Cardinals were back home to host Winnipeg in a rematch, this one also played under the Canadian rules. Blood again played the flying wing, and this time the home team routed the Canadians, 35-6. A key figure in the win was a new player who completed 10 of 25 passes, two for touchdowns. The *Evening News* would only say that he was "listed in the program as Pete Hogan of St. John's," but other observers indicate that he was in fact Paul Christman, the Missouri All-American, making his debut in the professional ranks.

"Hogan" wasn't there the next week when the Cardinals hosted the Packers in their season's finale, but it's unlikely that he would have made much difference, as the power house from Green Bay humiliated them, 65-2. Only Paul Berezney's endzone tackle of George Paskvan in the first quarter kept the Cards from being shut out, and that was small consolation. That play and Balaha's 50 yards rushing were all the crowd of 3,000 had to cheer about – unless of course they were Packer fans. In fact, there may have been quite a few of those in the stands by the time the debacle was over.

For the season, the Cardinals had failed to win in eight games against American opposition – and while admittedly they played tough teams, an 0-7-1 record wasn't satisfactory to anybody. The two wins against Winnipeg helped, but not nearly enough. At the team's annual banquet later that week, no one was named "honorary captain" for 1941 – a significant omission.

Though the team was officially through for the season after the banquet, many of the players weren't. Wheeler and Naughton went to Buffalo for the final two weeks of the AFL season; and when they took the field November 16 against Milwaukee they found three of their Kenosha teammates among the opposition: Blaha, Berezney, and John Biolo.

A few weeks later, several members of the Cardinals reassembled to play a charity game in Memphis, Tennessee, against the Richmond Arrows of the Dixie League. Actually, only 14 Kenosha players took part in the game, with Blood serving as head coach; the team filled out with a few NFL players, including Bruiser Kinard and Billy Jefferson. Despite the changes, the "new look" Cardinals kept their 1941 winless streak intact, losing another one, 29-13.

The game in Memphis was played on December 14, a week after Pearl Harbor. And with war declared against Germany and Japan, soon it was impossible to assemble even 14 members of the club – for civilian activities, anyway – as more of them followed former teammate Art Buck into the service. So, on that note, the Kenosha Cardinals closed up shop for the duration, never to reopen for business.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 5, No. 1 (1983)

1939 KENOSHA CARDINALS

S-24	H	78- 0	*Austin (Ill.) Bears
O- 1	H	7-14	Dayton Bombers
O- 8	H	0-14	St. Louis Gunners
O-15	H	17- 0	*Des Moines Comets
O-22	H	15-17	Chicago Indians
O-29	H	21- 0	Louisville Tanks
N- 1	A	6- 7	Chicago Indians
N- 5	A	0-14	Columbus Bullies
N-12	H	7-19	Dayton Bombers
N-19	A	34-10	Louisville Tanks
N-23	H	41- 0	*Drewry's A.C.
N-26	H	7-10	Cincinnati Bengals
N-30	H	----	Columbus (can.)
D- 3	H	41-18	*Marquette All-Stars
D-10	A	----	St. Louis (can.)

1940 KENOSHA CARDINALS

S- 7	A	0-17	Green Bay Packers
S-18	H	13- 7	Columbus Bullies
S-29	H	20- 0	Chicago Indians
O- 2	H	35- 0	Chicago Brown Bombers
O- 6	A	0- 7	Milwaukee Chiefs
O-13	A	7-20	Columbus Bullies
O-16	H	----	St Louis (can.)
O-20	H	18- 0	Chicago Indians
O-27	H	29- 6	Des Moines Comets
N- 2	H	80- 0	Inland Marines
N- 6	H	17-14	Boston Bears
N-13	H	14- 0	New York Yankees
N-17	A	13- 3	Milwaukee Chiefs
N-21	H	46- 0	Chicago Gunners
D- 1	H	----	Columbus (can.)

1941 KENOSHA CARDINALS

A-19	H	6-27	Chicago Bears
A-26	H	6-35	Philadelphia Eagles
A-31	A	7-34	NY Giants (at St.Paul(MN))
S- 9	H	21-21	Chicago Cardinals
S-23	H	0-34	Cleveland Rams
O- 1	H	7-34	Columbus Bullies
O- 4	A	18-16	Winnipeg Blue Bombers
O- 7	H	----	Milwaukee (can.)
O- ?	A	----	Milwaukee (can.)
O-26	A	6-20	Columbus Bullies
N- 2	H	35- 6	Winnipeg Blue Bombers
N- 9	H	2-65	Green Bay Packers
D-14	A	13-29	Richmond Arrows (at Memphis, Tenn.)

*-Non-AFL game