

That Indoor World Series

By Don Smith

Younger fans no doubt think of the Houston Astrodome as the place where indoor football began. More astute old-timers will remember the 1932 National Football League championship game played indoors in Chicago Stadium as a landmark contest because of the three rules changes the circumstances of the game prompted and because NFL owners, seeing the advantage of one season-ending championship contest, immediately divided the league into divisions and inaugurated the immensely-popular NFL title game series.

But any fan visiting the Pro Football Hall of Fame almost immediately will learn that the first indoor game was played three decades earlier in 1902 when six professional teams, assumed to be the best of that era, tangled in a tournament in New York's Madison Square Garden.

Commanding a prominent spot in a major new display in the Hall's memento-filled exhibition rotunda is a bib-overall type uniform, complete with flimsy helmet and hard-rubber nose guard, worn by fullback Harry Mason of the Syracuse, NY, All-Stars, the tournament champion. This display is one of 26 new and colorful, fact-filled exhibitions created by the Hall's \$250,000 refurbishing project that was recently completed.

The uniform, the Hall's most recent major artifact acquisition, was donated by Mason's son, who is now an old man himself. Mason actually played the entire 1902 regular season with the Watertown, NY, Red and Blacks, who claimed the "world championship" on the basis of an outstanding season.

But when promoter Tom O'Rourke dreamed up the idea of a gridiron "world series" between the top four pro teams in the nation, the Watertown club felt it could best defend its self-proclaimed laurels by not playing. O'Rourke then invited six other teams, including the Syracuse Athletic Club.

Syracuse, realizing it could not successfully compete with its regular-season squad, quickly loaded up with outstanding "borrowed" talent, including Glenn "Pop" Warner, a top lineman of the day who later became a fabled college coach, and the entire Watertown backfield.

With this formidable array, Syracuse upset favored New York, 5-0, white-washed the Knickerbockers, 36-0, and then repeated the 36-0 score against the Orange, NJ, Athletic Club one day later. Mason scored a touchdown in each of the last two games.