

## THE EARLY NFL: THE COLLEGE LEAGUE

By Bob Carroll

People who don't know any better are always going on about the un-professional way professional football was conducted in the first decade of the National Football League. You hear weird stuff – like the scheduling was week-to-week and the rosters were day-to-day. In point of fact, league teams arranged their schedules together from the very first; that some of the arrangements were never fulfilled had more to do with financial calamities involved in launching a new and unproved business than in any lack of scheduling know-how by team nabobs. They knew how to put it on paper in September; they just couldn't guarantee a product in November. As far as liquid rosters, one of the big reasons for starting a league at all was to keep players from flitting all over the map at the drop of a payday.

Another bit of folk wisdom from folks who haven't checked it out goes that just about all the early players were sandlotter who (maybe) got through high school but couldn't even spell c-o-l-l-e-g-e. But, if you've actually checked the early rosters, you've found that there were more college guys present than not. It was the sandlotter who was in the minority.

You could see that, but proving it to a know-nothing who wouldn't take the time to read the pedigrees on the teams' rosters was something else again. Those kind want the numbers – and quick – because they're doing lunch with somebody else.

Okay, here's what you need.

David Neft, than whom there ain't no better authority, did a lot of hard work for years and a little math work recently to see just how many players in the league's first baker's-dozen seasons had really been enrolled at an honest-to-gawd institution of higher cerebrum and how many learned their football hard knocks at the School of Hard Knocks.

Over the last couple of decades, Neft has been on more college campi than blue jeaned bottoms to check out the particulars of ancient NFLers. Did they really attend and play for Dear Olde Siwash? Those ivy-covered walls he couldn't get to see in person, he contacted by phone or mail. If you had a dime for every school he knows first-hand, you could buy a month's provisions at your local Stop-and-Drop. The results of David's look-see pretty well prove the point that the league – from its first toddling – was college-dominated. And that it very quickly became nearly universally university.

Here we go:

YEAR & LEAGUE	TOTAL NO. LEAGUE PLAYERS	PLAYERS WHO DID NOT ATTEND COLLEGE*	
		NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
1920 APFA	285	89	31 %
1921 APFA	426	157	37 %
1922 NFL	382	118	31 %
1923 NFL	392	92	23 %
1924 NFL	366	72	20 %
1925 NFL	432	66	15 %
1926 NFL & AFL	675	82	12 %
1927 NFL	282	27	10 %
1928 NFL	215	19	9 %
1929 NFL	310	33	11 %
1930 NFL	303	16	5 %
1931 NFL	264	8	3 %
1932 NFL	216	3	1 %

\* - Includes those players for whom no information has been found.

Only in its first three seasons did the number of NFL (nee APFA) non-collegers hover around one-third – the greatest number and percentage being in 1921 when the league took in a high number of “club” teams like the Cincinnati Celts, Louisville Brecks, Washington Senators, and Tonawanda Kardex. Once these had folded and the old Columbus Panhandles reorganized as the Tigers, fewer than one quarter of the league’s men were non-college.

The old wives’ tale about how Red Grange made playing pro football “respectable” for collegians is borne out by the numbers, but it’s worth noting that the digits were already falling by 1925 like that stock you bought last week – and Red didn’t play for pay until Thanksgiving that year. Still, it’s kind of surprising that in ‘26, when there were more teams active than ever, what with two leagues competing, the percentage continued to plummet. You’d have thought the need for more players would have brought sandlotters out of the woodwork.

The last three years on the chart (1930-32) probably reflect something besides new-found respectability for pro football. It was Depression-time. A job – any job – was hard to come by even with a sheepskin on the wall. Those hunnert-buck-a-game salaries looked pretty good.