

## Requiem for the Nighthawks

Milwaukee's bid for a 2nd NFL franchise lays an egg in 1930

By Bob Gill

As the NFL moved into its second decade, commissioner Joe Carr's long-range plans for the league were beginning to take shape. In the latter part of the 1920s, most of the league's small-town teams had dropped out, replaced by teams from bigger cities. Gone were the likes of Hammond, Kenosha, Evansville, Pottsville, Dayton, and even Canton. Instead, newer teams in New York and Philadelphia (Frankford) had staked out potentially more lucrative territory – though in the latter case, the Frankford Yellowjackets didn't survive the curse of the Depression.

Only three "small towns" were left: Staten Island, Portsmouth and Green Bay. Of the three, Staten Island had the best prospects for long-term success, able to draw from New York's huge population base. Doopite that advantage, the Stapletons dropped out of the league after the 1932 season. Portsmouth was probably the worst bet; the Spartans admitted defeat in 1934 when they moved to Detroit.

Somewhere in between was Green Bay. The Packers' population base wasn't much different from Portsmouth's, but the team had established a following since joining the NFL in 1921, and winning the title in 1929 hadn't hurt, either. Still, Carr couldn't have had very high hopes for the team, considering the economic climate and the poor track record of teams from much bigger towns.

Partly for these reasons, Carr had always looked favorably on the idea of putting a team in Milwaukee, which would provide a natural rival for the Packers. Besides, teams that traveled to Green Bay could plan more efficient trips by staying over for another game in Wisconsin. And if, as appeared likely, the Packers were to go belly-up, the Milwaukee team could fill the Packers' role as a northern rival for the Chicago Bears, one of the league's premier franchises.

One try at establishing an NFL outpost in Milwaukee had already failed. The Milwaukee Badgers had entered the league in 1922, and through 1924 they were fairly successful, putting a competitive team on the field with a number of "name" players: Jimmy Conzelman, Fritz Pollard and Red Dunn, to name a few. They peaked in 1923 with a 7-2-4 record. But Conzelman and Dunn left in 1925, and the Badgers suffered through a winless season, hitting rock bottom in a 59-0 loss to the Chicago Cardinals on Dec. 10. And when it came out that the team had employed four Chicago high school players for that debacle, Carr kicked owner Ambrose McQuirk out of the league.

The franchise was turned over to player-coach Johnny (Red) Bryan, and the team did manage to win two games in 1926, thanks mainly to the arrival of one of the greatest ends of the early years, Lavern Dilweg. But that wasn't good enough, and Milwaukee dropped out of the NFL after that season.

In 1930 pro football returned to Milwaukee. Otto Haderer, operator of the Milwaukee Furniture Company, contacted Carr about the possibility of buying the franchise of the defunct Buffalo team and moving it to Wisconsin. Judging from a copy of a telegram on file at the Hall of Fame library, Carr must have responded positively. Haderer wired: "Hold franchise for me as per telephone conversation. Important business matter detains me today from forwarding payment you suggest."

The NFL franchise fell through, but before long the second sentence ("detains me from forwarding payment") was to become the season's most popular refrain.

Despite failing to secure admission to the league, Haderer apparently got more encouragement from Carr. On Aug. 22 the *Milwaukee Journal* reported that "National league officials have been trying for some time to interest Milwaukee capital in the promotion of pro football here, and it is understood that if Haderer gets as good as an even break this season he will be given a franchise in the circuit in 1931."

In an effort to lure paying customers, Haderer announced that his team would play a series of night games at Borchert Field (capacity 13,000). Night football was a new idea in Milwaukee, and the papers told enthusiastically of the lighting arrangements: "24 lamps of 84,000 watts set on 12 poles around the field." Appropriately enough, the team was dubbed the Nighthawks – though newspapers often opted to call

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 14, No. 5 (1992)

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them the Badgers, in memory of the earlier Milwaukee NFL team.

First, though, Haderer had to get some players. For starters, he signed Red Bryan, the Badgers' last coach, to lead the new Milwaukee entry. Bryan, a veteran of six NFL seasons, had spent most of his time with the Chicago Bears, including 1923, far and away his best year. As coach and player with Milwaukee, he would earn \$200 per game, plus 10 percent of the net profits when the season was over.

On Aug. 24 Haderer announced the signing of George Trafton, the Bears' all-pro center. Even though Trafton was well past his prime, this would have been a coup, but George had second thoughts before reporting, and eventually went back to Chicago. That was a disappointment, but Haderer and Bryan did manage to bring in several other NFL veterans. Among them were two strong ends: Clem Neacy, who had played for the earlier Milwaukee NFL team, and Tillie Voss, who had played almost everywhere else.

The tackles also had NFL experience. Jerry Lunz had played with the Chicago Cardinals in 1925 and '26, while Harvey Long had been with the Bears in 1929. Guard Garland Buckeye was a veteran of five seasons in the NFL and one in the 1926 AFL, but like Lunz he had been absent from big-time football for the past three years. His running mate, Gene Smith, had no NFL experience, but had played with the Staten Island Stapletons and the Orange A.C. in 1927 and '28, before they joined the league.

On the other hand, center Al Droegkamp was a newcomer to big-time pro football, as were quarterback Maurice Hosier and fullback Paul Franklin. Halfbacks Chet Willegalle and Ken Failing did have pro experience, the former with the Minneapolis Red Jackets and the latter with the Akron Awnings, a very good team that played on the same circuit as the Portsmouth Spartans and the Ironton Tanks.

The reserves included guards John Mattison and Harvey Engelking, tackle Fred Failing (Ken's brother, a veteran of the Ironton Tanks), end Ken Isley, and backs Bob Crowley, Fred (Shorty) Mendelsohn, Don Pollock, Arnold (Swede) Sandberg and Ed Steckeddy.

Of the players who started the season, Voss was the highest-paid at \$100 a game, befitting his status as a former all-pro. It's harder to explain Smith's \$87.50 salary and Sandberg's \$85. A host of players got \$75: Buckeye, Crowley, Hosier, Long, Lunz, Mattison, Neacy, Pollock, and both Failings. Franklin, Isley, Steckeddy and Willegalle signed for \$60 a game, Mendelsohn for \$50. Engelking got \$40 per game, while Droegkamp was a bargain at \$25 per game.

There were a couple of conditions to these salary figures. For one, when the team played two games in the same week, players would get only 60 percent of their normal salaries for the second game. For another, they were to receive 75 percent of their money right after each game, with the other 25 percent coming in a lump sum at the end of the season. This was apparently designed as a hedge against an unprofitable year – a very good idea on Haderer's part, as it turned out.

Those were the days before guaranteed contracts, when a team could release an injured player and ignore any financial obligations. In those circumstances, Haderer's treatment of reserve halfback Frank Royce was fairly generous: Injured before the season started and unable to play, Royce was paid \$10 after the first game and \$20 after the second.

While Bryan drilled the team in the intricacies of his double-wing offense, Haderer was busy lining up a tough schedule that included games with four NFL teams and several top-notch non-league opponents. The only negative news was his failure to line up a game with the Green Bay Packers. Though Milwaukee papers noted that the matchup seemed like a natural, the Packers' management gave Haderer "only a half-hearted promise of a game" – a near-promise that was never fulfilled.

Still, the Nighthawks did open the season against an in-state rival, the Oshkosh All-Stars, on Sept. 28. There was no scoring until the game's final minute, when Milwaukee recovered a fumble deep in Oshkosh territory and Ken Failing tossed a short pass to Pollock for a touchdown. It wasn't pretty, but the Nighthawks emerged with a 6-0 road victory.

Four days later Haderer's team inaugurated its Thursday night schedule, taking on the Chicago Bears under the lights at Borchert Field. Reports of the attendance ranged from 3,000 to 4,500, with the lower figure more likely; but all accounts agreed that the Bears won 26-0, and the margin could have been greater. Red Grange gave the crowd a thrill by sprinting 20 yards for the first touchdown and passing to his brother Gardie for another. The Milwaukee ground attack was pretty well smothered for most of the

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 14, No. 5 (1992)

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game, but they did complete several passes, losing a touchdown at one point when Voss hauled one in just inches over the end line.

Considering the strength of the opposition, it wasn't a terrible showing, but Haderer and Bryan were far from satisfied. With an even stronger opponent, the New York Giants, up next, they went looking for reinforcements. Within a few days they had signed tackle Duke Hanny, guard Joe Kresky, and backs Albert (Johnny) Bloodgood and Leland (Shorty) Elness. Hanny and Bloodgood were well-traveled NFL veterans, Elness had played with the Bears in 1929, and Kresky had spent 1929 with the Ashland Armco Yellowjackets, another strong team on the Portsmouth-Ironton-Akron circuit.

Their efforts paid off against New York, as the Nighthawks played the powerful Giants tough before taking a very respectable 6-0 loss. A long pass from Benny Friedman to Dale Burnett in the third quarter set up the Giants' score, with Ossie Wiberg going over for the touchdown.

But despite the home club's much-improved showing, fog and damp weather held the crowd to 2,200, and in the words of one local columnist, Haderer "took it on the chin ... for a snug \$2,000." The writer appealed to Milwaukee fans to support the team, and concluded "that a fellow like this deserves a helping hand."

Another team in need of a helping hand was the Frankford Yellowjackets, a former NFL powerhouse now fallen on hard times. With their roster depleted by injuries and the losses mounting, the Yellowjackets picked up three Milwaukee linemen – Harvey Long, Jerry Lunz and Gene Smith – for their Oct. 12 game in Green Bay. Apparently the Nighthawks' status as a would-be NFL franchise made them subject to league rules against tampering, because the Milwaukee papers reported that "the Jackets wired Joe Carr for permission to use Lunz and Long (and presumably Smith) and it was granted."

Haderer himself soon heard from Carr, but this time the news wasn't good. On Oct. 13 the bank notified him that a \$21.82 check to the NFL office – for one percent of the gate receipts from the home opener against the Bears – had bounced, and on Oct. 17 Carr wrote a polite note asking what was going on, while still "wishing you success."

Meanwhile, the Nighthawks had encountered more rainy weather on the night of their next home game, Oct. 16 against the Columbus Bobb Chevrolets (billed as the Columbus Tigers). The visitors' schedule was more flexible than an NFL team's, so the game was pushed back 24 hours. At the same time, Haderer announced that Bryan had been removed as coach, replaced by erstwhile Yellowjacket Harvey Long. One report of the coaching change said Haderer had already lost \$10,000 for the young season.

The postponement didn't help things: Friday night's weather wasn't any better, and only 800 fans turned out, paying prices of \$1.50 for "field seats" and \$1 for grandstand seats. But they did see the Nighthawks win one for their new coach. Bloodgood led the way, scoring two touchdowns in an 18-0 victory.

Just two days later the Nighthawks were back in action, hosting the oddly named Mills Stadium team, a strong opponent from Chicago, in the first Sunday home game of the season. Tillie Voss blocked a punt and ran it in for a touchdown in the first quarter. Soon afterward, the visitors scored on a long pass to take a 7-6 lead. Then, in the second quarter, Shorty Elness broke loose for a 45-yard touchdown run, with Voss cutting down the last defender. Milwaukee's 12-7 lead held up through a scoreless second half, keeping Long's coaching record perfect.

At the gate, however, it was another story. No attendance figures were reported from the team's first daylight game, but the *Milwaukee Sentinel* said the Mills Stadium eleven "threw more passes than there were fans in the stands."

Haderer was really feeling the financial pinch now. On Monday he got an overdue notice for a \$770.60 bill from A.G. Spalding & Bros., the sporting goods manufacturer. On Tuesday he had a date in the district attorney's office, probably about a breach of contract suit by the Electric Construction Company, which had installed the lights at Borchert Field. Haderer didn't show, but that day's newspapers carried his denial of rumors that the Nighthawks were finished.

Though confirming that a Thursday night game with the Minneapolis Red Jackets had been canceled, and admitting that his losses to date totaled \$15,000, Haderer said he had "found additional financial backing, (and) I know it shall be easier sailing."

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 14, No. 5 (1992)

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But the financial news didn't get any better. On Oct. 23, the day of the canceled Minneapolis game, Haderer got an overdue notice for ads in the *Wisconsin News*, plus notification that another check to the NFL had bounced (this one presumably for the Giants game).

Meanwhile, the Nighthawks were preparing for a game with the Memphis Tigers, one of the two best teams in the country outside the NFL. (The other was the Ironton Tanks.) In Memphis, 5,500 turned out to see the Milwaukee crew play its best game of the season in trouncing the Tigers 9-0. Two pass interceptions keyed the victory. Paul Franklin returned one for a touchdown in the second quarter; Bloodgood picked one off in the fourth quarter and then booted a 31-yard field goal to clinch the win, their third in a row under coach Long.

Unfortunately, success on the field couldn't stop the bills from pouring in. A day after the Memphis game, another Haderer check bounced, this one in payment for the floodlights – apparently a result of the meeting with the district attorney. From Dr. Ralph Davis came the threat of more legal action if he wasn't paid immediately for "treatments I gave your football boys."

Finally, Haderer threw in the towel. On Oct. 28 the *Sentinel* carried this report: "Otto Haderer, who apparently found the business of promoting professional football a little too strenuous financially and finally ran afoul of the law, is definitely out of the racket now, and Johnny Bryan, coach, has assumed the office reins in addition to his other duties."

Haderer was through with the football business, but the business wasn't through with him. The litany of overdue notices, bounced checks and court dates continued through January 1931. In the end his losses totaled \$21,000.

Bryan's return as coach was something of a surprise, but it may be that his earlier dismissal had been simply an economic move, and no reflection on his work as a coach. Now, with Haderer out of the picture, the team needed someone in charge, and Bryan's experience with the Badgers in 1926 made him a logical choice. His reappearance on the sidelines also allowed Harvey Long to quit with a spotless record as a coach, though continuing as a player.

Haderer's withdrawal left the Nighthawks without a real financial backer, but the *Sentinel* found some encouragement in "the certified check handed them by the Memphis management" after Sunday's game. Even then, the \$1,000 check was apparently only half of what it was supposed to be, but the Memphis team was looking for a rematch. Bryan scheduled a return trip for Nov. 16, at which time he was to get the missing \$1,000 plus another \$2,000 guarantee.

In the meantime, the Bryan-led team had an Oct. 29 game scheduled with the Chicago Cardinals. The game was booked for a Wednesday night rather than the usual Thursday, probably in hopes of changing their luck at the gate. And it worked – sort of. The crowd of 2,500 was one of the best turnouts of the season, but it still wasn't enough to pay the bills. And on the field, everything fell apart, as Ernie Nevers ran for two touchdowns, threw for three, and booted two extra points to lead the Cards to a 33-6 win. Franklin's short run in the fourth quarter provided the only Milwaukee score in what was to be the Nighthawks' last home game.

Undaunted, they traveled four days later to Oshkosh, where a crowd of only 1,500 watched the All-Stars avenge their earlier defeat with a 6-0 victory.

With the team in terrible shape financially, those two disappointing losses probably would have ended the season. But there was still the matter of that return game in Memphis, with its promised \$3,000 payday. Thus, though the Nighthawks played no games the weekend after the Oshkosh trip, Bryan's team was still intact when it traveled to Tennessee to play the Tigers on Nov. 16. The Milwaukee team played a good defensive game but mustered little offense, and lost 6-0 when Memphis blocked a punt and returned it for a touchdown, sending a crowd of 4,500 home happy.

Having fulfilled its obligation in Memphis, presumably picking up a good check in the process, the Nighthawks had no reason to go on – and they didn't. Most of the players disappeared from the pro football scene. Bloodgood, Bryan, Buckeye and Neacy, all veterans of several NFL seasons, hung up their cleats for good, as did most of the less-distinguished members of the team.

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 14, No. 5 (1992)

But a few players did manage to catch on with other teams. Duke Hanny and Gene Smith finished the season in the NFL with the Portsmouth Spartans.

Tillie Voss, Harvey Long and Paul Franklin stayed in Memphis and played out the year with the Tigers. It was Voss's last hurrah, but Long returned for two more seasons in Memphis, 1932 and '33. Franklin hooked up with the Chicago Bears in 1931 and stayed through 1933. As late as 1939 he was still playing high-level football with the East Chicago Indians of the AFL.

Joe Kresky disappeared for a while, but resurfaced in 1932 with the Boston Redskins. He moved to Philadelphia in 1933 and stayed through 1935, and played his last game in 1938 with the St. Louis Gunners of the AFL, where in one game he lined up across from Franklin, his old Nighthawk teammate.

Otto Haderer, the man who dreamed of an NFL franchise, eventually resolved his financial problems and re-emerged as a successful businessman, running the Heirloom Shop, an antique business, from 1940-68. His venture into the football world wasn't forgotten, though. In 1964 the *Milwaukee Journal* carried a long story about Haderer's great gridiron experiment, and when he died in 1970 at the age of 85 his obituary in the *Journal* identified him as the man "who organized the Milwaukee Nighthawks professional football team."

As for Joe Carr, the NFL's first leader went to his grave in 1939 having never realized his goal of establishing a team in Milwaukee. And today's experts, with their talk of TV markets and population bases, are still waiting for that team in Green Bay to fail.

### 1930 MILWAUKEE NIGHTHAWKS

Sept. 28	A	6	Oshkosh All-Stars	0	W	
Oct. 2	H	0	Chicago Bears	26	L	3,000
Oct. 9	H	0	New York Giants	6	L	2,200
Oct. 17	H	18	Columbus Bobb Chevrolets	0	W	800
Oct. 19	H	12	Mills Stadium (Chi.)	7	W	
Oct. 23	H	--	Minneapolis Red Jackets	--		
Oct. 26	A	9	Memphis Tigers	0	W	5,500
Oct. 29	H	6	Chicago Cardinals	33	L	2,500
Nov. 2	A	0	Oshkosh All-Stars	6	L	1,500
Nov. 16	A	0	Memphis Tigers	6	L	4,500

Player	Pos	Hgt	Wgt	Age	College
Albert Bloodgood (Johnny)	QB	5-8	152	28	DePauw; Nebraska
F. Bogue	C		191		Knox
Johnny Bryan (Red)	HB	5-7	180	33	Dartmouth; Chicago
Garland Buckeye (Gob) Burrus	G C	6-0	245	32	Wabash
Bob Crowley	HB		180		Marquette
Al Droegkamp	C		195		Milw. Normal
Leland Elness (Shorty)	HB		165	24	Bradley
Harvey Engelking	G-C		220		Carroll
Ken Failing	HB		190		Stevens Pt.
Fred Failing	T		190		Central J.C.
Paul Franklin	FB	6-2	198	24	Franklin
Frank Hanny (Duke)	T	6-0	215	32	Indiana
Maurice Hosier	QB		180		Butler
Ken Isley	E		180		Illinois
Joe Kresky	G	6-0	210	22	Wisconsin
Harvey Long	T	6-0	205	24	Detroit
Jerry Lunz	T	6-3	203	28	Marquette
John Mattison	G		190		Davis-Elkins
Fred Mendelsohn (Shorty)	QB		150		Marquette
Clem Neacy	E	6-3	212	31	Colgate
O'Neill	T		188		Marquette
Don Pollock	HB		215		Wisconsin
Frank Royce	HB		185		Butler
Arnold Sandberg (Swede)	FB		190	30	none
Schwade	G				
Gene Smith	G	5-9	190	24	Georgia
Ed Steckeddy	FB		205		St. Viator
Tillie Voss	E	6-3	205	31	Detroit
Chet Willegalle	HB		190	28	Carleton