

THE PRO FOOTBALL HALL OF FAME - THE BEGINNING

By Chris Willis

The Professional Football Hall of Fame located in Canton, Ohio was built to pay tribute to those players, coaches, and contributors whose outstanding feats have helped the growth of America's favorite sport.

For a football fan, the Hall of Fame is a nostalgic trip back through time, to reminisce about a Gale Sayers run, a Johnny Unitas to Ray Berry touchdown pass, a jarring Dick Butkus tackle, or the kicking "Toe" of Lou Groza.

My first opportunity to visit the Hall of Fame came in the summer of 1985. I was one of 13,000 people who gathered in front of the Hall to witness, what many experts have called the second greatest class ever to be inducted (behind the charter class of 1963). The Class of '85 was comprised of football legends, such as Joe Namath, Pete Rozelle, O.J. Simpson, Roger Staubach, and old-timer's selection Frank Gatski. My memories from this ceremony are ones that I will never forget; it was a unforgettable scene.

Ever since that first visit, I've been a big fan of the Hall of Fame, and starting in 1989 I've made my yearly visit to the Hall coincide with the enshrinement ceremonies and "Football's Greatest Weekend." How did I get so lucky to live only two hours away, in Columbus, Ohio, from football's greatest shrine? By the way, how did Canton become the home of the Pro Football Hall of Fame? I am glad you asked.

There were several solid historical reasons to locate the Hall in Canton; (a) it was the birthplace of the American Professional Football Association (the forerunner of the NFL) on September 17, 1920; (b) it was where the legendary Jim Thorpe first played pro ball in 1915 with the Canton Bulldogs; and (c) where the Bulldogs themselves won back-to-back NFL titles in 1922 and '23.

But Canton wasn't the only city campaigning for the Hall, nor was it nailed down as the official site until after several thoughtful moves. The city of Latrobe, Pennsylvania, was actually awarded the site of the Hall of Fame in 1947, based on the assumption of historians that the first paid professional had played for a Latrobe team. But the city was never able to get the project off the ground and it actually looked like nothing was going to be done.

Then on December 6, 1959, Clayton Horn, the editor of the Canton Repository, instructed one of his sports writers, Chuck Such, to issue a Hall of Fame challenge to the city of Canton. The headline read: "Pro Football Needs a Hall of Fame and Logical Site is Here." This headline raised a lot of eyebrows around the city, but none raised higher than those of H.H. Timken Jr., the chairman of the board at Canton's largest industry, the Timken Roller Bearing Company. He called Such to offer his support, and assigned the company's recreation director, Earl Schreiber to the project. Other cities who still were in the running were Detroit and Pittsburgh, the latter reminded the NFL of the Latrobe story. But it was too late, Canton was well in front of everybody and on January 25, 1961, at the NFL owner's meeting in New York, Canton made a formal bid for the Hall of Fame.

William E. Umstatt, chairman of the executive committee at Timken, accompanied Schreiber to New York for this meeting to be held at the Warwick Hotel. They showed the NFL owners a scale model of the proposed Hall (not one owner looked at it) and gave a short three minute presentation, in which Umstatt estimated the cost of the Hall of Fame to be three hundred and fifty thousand dollars. He also said the city of Canton would donate two hundred and fifty thousand, while Timken himself would donate one hundred thousand dollars. At that point the owners began to listen.

Three months later on April 20th the NFL sent a committee to this committee was comprised of Paul Brown (Cleveland Browns), George Halas (Chicago Bears), and Edwin Anderson (Detroit Lions). A week later at a NFL meeting in San Francisco, Canton won recognition as the Hall of Fame city, with the Washington Redskins casting the decisive vote.

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A fund raising campaign started on December 7, 1961 and in less than three months the city raised \$378,026 through community pledges. It finally looked like professional football had found a home for its Hall of Fame.

On April 4, 1962 the Hall of Fame made another brilliant move by hiring Richard (Dick) McCann as its first director. McCann resigned as the general manager of the Washington Redskins, a job he'd held for fifteen years. It was his responsibility to collect the football memorabilia that would help trace the history of the game. It was his innovation, foresight, and endless dedication that made the Hall of Fame a success from the very beginning.

Canton's hard work had now become a reality with a ground breaking ceremony on August 11, 1962, with NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle doing the honors by shovelling the first dirt. This ceremony also helped launch the annual Hall of Fame game series at Fawcett Stadium, the high school field that sits right across the street from the Hall of Fame. The New York Giants played the St. Louis Cardinals to a 21-21 tie in that first contest.

The building opened to the public on September 7, 1963, with the enshrinement of 17 charter members. The selection committee chose these men first for one good reason -- they made the greatest contributions to the game of football in those "rag-tag days". The seventeen of them in their own unique ways did something to help pro football grow from an unorganized sandlot game to America's favorite spectator sport. The following is a list of these seventeen charter members and their accomplishments.

Sammy Baugh - QB, 1937-52. Game's first great passer ... very accurate.. standout punter and DB.

Bert Bell - Owner, Commissioner, 1933-59. Player draft was his idea ... Eagles owner before becoming NFL Commissioner in 1939 ... negotiated first NFL TV pact. Joe F. Carr - President, 1921-39. Manager of Columbus Panhandles ... NFL President who contributed integrity and stability to the NFL ... banned use of college players.

Dutch Clark -QB, 1931-38. Versatile player, great leader ... 3-time scoring champ.

Harold "Red" Grange -HB/DB, 1925-34. Game's first star attraction ... elusive, electric open-field runner ... superb DB late in his career.

George Halas - E, Coach, Owner, 1920-85. Pioneer of game ... solid two-way end ... 40-year coach with 324 victories.

Mel Hein - C, 1931-45. 60-minute player for fifteen years ... flawless snapper ... always on "all-time" list as center for New York Giants.

Fats Henry - T, 1920-28. Exceptional kicker and kick blocker ... played on powerful Canton Bulldog teams who won NFL titles in 1922 and 1923.

Cal Hubbard - T, 1927-36. Mobile, powerful blocker ... most feared lineman of his time ... member of the Baseball Hall of Fame as umpire.

Don Hutson - E, 1935-45. NFL's first dominating pass catcher ... 99 career receiving TD's ... revolutionized passing game with the Green Bay Packers.

Earl "Curly" Lambeau - Coach, 1919-53. Founded pre-NFL Packers ... first to use the pass as its main weapon ... won 3-peat with Packers in 1929-31.

Tim Mara - Owner, 1921-59. Brought pro football to New York ... survived lean years and inter-league wars ... Won 3 NFL titles in his tenure.

George Preston Marshall - Owner, 1932-69. Innovative, flamboyant owner ... introduced showmanship, bands, and halftime shows to the NFL.

Johnny "Blood" McNally - HB, 1925-36. Powerful runner ... scored when it was most needed ... gave "color" to the NFL in its early years.

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Bronko Nagurski - FB, 1930-37, 43. Game's most intimidating player ... outstanding short yardage runner ... excelled on defense.

Ernie Nevers - HB, 1926-31. Do-everything iron man ... scored 40 points in one game, still a NFL record ... shortest tenure of any Hall of Famer, 5 years.

Jim Thorpe - HB, 1920-28. Great all-around athlete ... game's first great star when he entered pro football in 1915.

The Hall of Fame opened with two buildings that housed 19,000 square feet of the game's history, and over 63,036 people visited the Hall in its first full year. The NFL couldn't have asked for a better setting, and the city of Canton was the perfect site for a Pro Football Hall of Fame.