

HAS THERE EVER BEEN A FORFEIT IN THE NFL?

By Bob Carroll

The recent unpleasantness at the Chargers-Giants game where the iceball-throwing by fans became so dangerous that a forfeit to San Diego was threatened sent fans and historians scurrying to the record book looking for a previous forfeit. They found none.

But only because they were looking in the wrong place.

They should have checked the Washington Post of December 5, 1921. There on the sports page they could see the headline:

ROCHESTER ELEVEN FORFEITS TO PROS.

Of course, not too many fans remember that the Rochester Jeffersons were members of the league from 1920 through 1925. And even some historians may not know that a Washington team, variously called the "Pros" or "Senators," was in the league in 1921. Nevertheless, both those long gone elevens had league franchises on December 4, 1921. And when they didn't play, there was a forfeit. The Post story explains it all:

Tim Jordan's local professional football team was awarded yesterday's contest by Referee C.A. Metsler when the Rochester Jeffersons refused to take the field on account of weather conditions. Manager Lyons, of the visiting team, had all of the advertised stars on hand, but would not risk their injuring themselves on account of slipping on the snow-covered field.

The contract signed by the visitors contains a clause to the effect "that if both teams have arrived on the field of play, and it is found that said field is too wet for play, the question of cancellation shall rest solely with the manager of the home team."

As Manager Jordan had his Washington team on hand, and felt that he should not disappoint the 400 or so faithful fans who were on hand. In view of the Jeffs' refusal to take the field, there was nothing left for Referee Metsler to do but give the locals the game, 1 to 0, which he did after 40 minutes of argument.

The "40 minutes of argument" indicates the forfeit was not declared precipitously, and the quoted terms in the contract leave no doubt that the decision to forfeit was correct.

So how come the game doesn't show up in the record book?

Well, for starters, back in 1921 -- a mere 75 years ago -- there wasn't any record book. In fact, the league, then called the American Professional Football Association, didn't publish weekly standings. Apparently, "final standings" for 1921 weren't published until thirty years later when they were reconstructed from scattered and incomplete team records and dimming memories. And, even in those very flawed standings, only teams that played at least six games against other league members were included. That wiped out Washington which faced only three league opponents (not counting Rochester) during the season. Not that they didn't keep busy. The Pros/Senators played thirteen times but mostly against such noted pro football juggernauts as Clarksburg (W.Va.), Wilmington (Del.), Richmond (Va.), and Lancaster (Pa.).

Ironically, Rochester was credited with eight league games in the reconstructed 1921 standings when in fact they played only five league opponents plus the forfeit.

A few years ago, the Elias Sports Bureau, keeper of the NFL's records, huddled with historians and repaired the early standings. They got it almost all right -- except for the forfeit.

The National Football League -- the new name was adopted in 1922 -- remembered for a year or so. At the league meeting, the team owners resolved that Washington had to pay Rochester its \$800 guarantee

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for showing up on that snowy day the previous December. Should Tim Jordan's team not pay, said the league, Washington would be expelled.

The warning didn't bother Jordan. He'd already decided to drop out of the league and hadn't bothered to attend the owners meeting. An NFL franchise just wasn't worth \$800.