

# GOIN' TO THE DOGS

By Paul M. Bennett

They're off and running excitedly and enthusiastically chasing that elusive rabbit.

The long since departed and all but forgotten, All-America Football Conference was a professional football league that had "gone to the dogs." Literally!

Some football fans, such as those dour National Football League diehards (you know who you are), would say that "going to the dogs" definitely had described the AAFC's level of play during the league's all too brief, four-year tenure as a fiery competitor to the established pro league. Their argument was further reinforced after the league finally called it quits following the end of the 1949 season, when three of its teams (Cleveland Browns, San Francisco 49ers and Baltimore Colts) were absorbed, or merged (if one is kind), into the NFL commencing with the 1950 season.

AAFC fans would simply say "pooh" to those NFL naysayers. What did they know? Haughtiness and arrogance seemed to have been their credo. Conservative to a fault. A new idea must be a bad idea!

The eight-team AAFC had played football at a level that was both entertaining to the viewing public and similar in quality to that of the older, ten-team league. The only problem the AAFC seemed to have had was its overall lack of depth, talent-wise, and, more importantly, its lack of adequate team competition.

The AAFC's chief asset had been the powerful and innovative Cleveland Browns, arguably one of professional football's most dominant franchises. Ever! However, its chief liability had been those same Cleveland Browns, a team that had won all four AAFC championships; thus, indicating the lack of competitiveness on a league-wide basis.

What truly annoyed the older league's diehards was the Browns' continued string of successes after the team had entered the staid NFL. The Browns, coached by the brilliant Paul E. Brown, were often disparaged as having a mere "college coach" as its mentor. They crowed that he soon would learn the meaning of playing professional football in a real league.

*Not!*

The Browns quickly destroyed the so-called myth of inferiority that had been loftily claimed by the diehards and, lo and behold, went on to win the 1950 NFL championship in the newly expanded league. To further add insult to those fractured egos, the Browns played in every NFL championship contest from 1950 to 1955 and managed to win three of the six contests.

Not too shabby! Ten consecutive years of play with quarterback Otto Graham at the helm, ten consecutive appearances in a championship game, four AAFC titles and three NFL titles. What a run!

The Browns' remarkable ten-year record of success could be likened to that of the Boston Celtics' dynasty in basketball or to the New York Yankees' overwhelming accomplishments in baseball over the years.

The short-lived (1946-1949) All-America Football Conference (AAFC) had been the brainchild of Arch Ward, sports editor of the *Chicago Tribune*.

Along with many other sports related ventures, Ward's fertile mind previously had conceived the innovative idea for Major League Baseball's All-Star Game, first played in 1933 between the American and National League, and the College Football All-Star Game, first played on August 31, 1934, at Soldier Field, Chicago, an annual contest for charity that pitted the previous year's NFL championship team against a football squad composed of recent college graduates, many of who would enter the professional ranks at a later date. (The College Football All-Star Game was discontinued after the July 23, 1976, contest for all kinds of sensible reasons).

Under Ward's aegis the first organizational meeting of the AAFC took place in St. Louis on June 4, 1944, and it was deliberately convened to be a clandestine affair. It was in Ward's best interests, having been more than a close "friend" of most of the NFL owners, to keep the news of the formation of "his" new league in secret until it either was absolutely necessary or merely advantageous to announce it. Word of some new league, however, had gotten out by late August/early September 1944, and a formal announcement of the formation of the All-America Football Conference was issued on September 2, 1944.

World War II was being fought at a furious pace on all fronts during this particular period of time, one that included the AAFC's inception and initial development stages (D-Day had just taken place on June 6, 1944). The AAFC obviously was not prepared to commence its football operations until some unspecified later date -- if at all. Some speculated that it could be possible, although not likely, that the new league might be ready for the 1945 football season. They were wrong! The moguls had made a wise decision by selecting the 1946 season for the AAFC's start-up date. By the time the 1946 football season rolled around the war had long since ended. The manpower shortages in professional sports had been relieved, normal transportation had been restored throughout the nation and disposable income was plentiful enough for sports fans to spend their dollars on this type of entertainment. Accordingly, the eight-team AAFC quickly moved to develop into a viable entity and begin play.

Two of the AAFC teams soon engaged in the league's very first game, an exhibition contest (some call it pre-season), played on the West Coast.

One of the AAFC's original eight teams was the Brooklyn Dodgers, co-owned by William D. Cox and Gerald Smith. (This was not the same Brooklyn Dodgers that had been a member of the NFL since 1930. That defunct team had met its demise after the 1945 season. These Dodgers were a brand new entity). Cox, a wealthy lumber man, had gained some measure of fame (or infamy) in baseball when he owned the 1943 Philadelphia Phillies, but he was removed from that position and banned from the sport for life by Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis for what Cox described as "minor" gambling activities. To Landis there was no such thing as minor gambling by owners, players or anyone affiliated with professional baseball. So good-bye, Bill! Despite his acrimonious departure from baseball, Cox's previous misdeeds hadn't seemed to have any effect on the AAFC's seven other owners and he was welcomed into the club. Gerald Smith, Cox's mostly silent partner, was the owner of the popular and prestigious *Street & Smith* publications, which still are being circulated on today's newsstands.

Cox opted to conduct the Dodgers' pre-season training camp in a beautiful part of the nation, the high desert of Bend, Oregon, about a two and one-half hour drive southeast of Portland. Dr. Mal Stevens, formerly the head coach at New York University, had been named as the Dodgers' first head coach and his new team's roster included two college superstars, multi-talented tailback Glenn Dobbs of Tulsa and Bill Daley, a fullback who had starred at both Minnesota and Michigan.

Another AAFC team that had chosen to train on the West Coast in 1946 (Santa Rosa, California, to be precise) was the Chicago Rockets. The owner was John L. Keeshin, a wealthy trucking magnate from Chicago. His team's head coach was Richard E. (Dick) Hanley, formerly the mentor of the El Toro (California) Marines during the war years, and the Rockets' roster was replete with many of Hanley's former service players. Three of the Rockets' players already had earned a name for themselves in football. They were halfbacks Elroy (Crazy Legs) Hirsch of Wisconsin and Billy Hillenbrand of Indiana and an enormous tackle (for the times -- two hundred and sixty pounds), Wee Willie Wilkin (St. Mary's - California), who formerly had starred for the NFL Washington Redskins.

The AAFC's first-ever game, an exhibition contest, was to be played at Portland's Multnomah Stadium on Sunday night, August 18, 1946. L. H. Gregory, the sports editor of the *Portland Oregonian*, had been kind enough to provide the contest with a wealth of coverage in the local newspaper and the much appreciated publicity had helped to draw in many fans.

Just before the game was to be played, Gregory, in an interview with Charles (Chile) Walsh, the General Manager of the NFL Los Angeles Rams, who happened to be in Portland for matters other than the AAFC's pre-season contest, pointed out that professional football players were being paid for the first time for playing in non-regular season contests such as the AAFC's upcoming game. In past years the players had received nothing -- *nada* -- for playing in non-regular season games. With the advent of the

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 20, No. 6 (1998)

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new league, both the NFL and AAFC opted to pay its players for these pre-season contests albeit at a lesser rate than for the regular season games. (Well it was better than getting nothing!)

The local and national newspapers carried some interesting publicity photos of some of the players prior to the league's debut game.

The Associated Press issued a photo captioned: "From the Gridiron to the Slopes: Dodger Backs Set for Fast Start."

It portrayed halfback Bob Paffrath (Minnesota), blocking back Mickey Colmer (Miramonte Junior College in California), tailbacks Mickey Mayne (Texas) and Glenn Dobbs (Tulsa) on snow skis on an unidentified Cascade Mountain snow field (possibly at either nearby Mount Batchelor or Mount Hood). The temperature in the high desert surrounding Bend had soared to the mid-nineties and the players had sought welcome relief in the snow-capped mountains. (Or at least the owners welcomed some free publicity shots.)

Another photo that appeared in the *Portland Oregonian* on August 15, 1946, involved a somewhat comical feature regarding Portland's Multnomah Stadium and its varied uses.

The owner of the stadium at that time was the prestigious Multnomah Athletic Club and it had leased the facility during the summer months for, among other things, greyhound racing. To take advantage of the humorous disparity between dog racing and professional football, the photo in the *Oregonian* depicted five of the Dodgers' linemen coming out of the starting boxes used by the greyhounds. It also showed one of the Dodgers' backs as the "official" starter. If one ever witnessed a greyhound race he would know how difficult it would have been for a pro football lineman to stuff himself into one of those narrow boxes. He might not have been able to be extricated without the use of the "Jaws of Life."

There it was for all to see. Pro football finally had gone to the dogs!

Perhaps not quite literally, but at least figuratively.

(NFL diehards would agree that the AAFC, throughout its brief history, *literally* had gone to the dogs. Spoilsports!)

The AAFC marked its debut on Sunday evening August 18, 1946, before a crowd of 16,442 in Portland, Oregon, as the Brooklyn Dodgers and Chicago Rockets played to a 14-14 tie. Don McLeod, a sports writer for the *Portland Oregonian*, offered a detailed account of the contest.

The historic starting lineups for the combatants were as follows:

	<u>Brooklyn Dodgers</u>	<u>Chicago Rockets</u>
LE	Jim McCarthy	Bob Dove
LT	Frank Hrabetin	Wee Willie Wilkin
LG	Vic Obeck	Joe Ruetz
C	Russ Morrow	Bob Osterman *
RG	Harry Buffington	Tony Sumpter
RT	George Perpich	Charlie Huneke
RE	Willard Perdue	Frank Quillen
QB	Nick Forkovitch	Scott Gudmundson#
LH	Cal Purdin	Walter Clay
RH	Lew Mayne	Ned Mathews
FB	Dom Principe	Ernie Lewis

\* never played in an official game in any major professional football league

# did not play in an official AAFC contest but had played in the NFL (Boston Yanks: 1944-1945)

So where were the superstars? Why weren't they in the starting lineups?

Glenn Dobbs, Bob Paffrath, Tex Warrington (Auburn), Martin Ruby (Texas A&M), Bill Daley and the Daukas brothers (Nick-Dartmouth and Lou-Cornell) of the Dodgers. And Elroy Hirsch, Billy Hillenbrand and Bob Hoernschemeyer (Indiana) of the Rockets.

The "Three-H Club" of Elroy Hirsch, Billy Hillenbrand and Bob Hoernschemeyer of the Rockets were at the annual College All-Star Game in Chicago, as were the Dodgers' Martin Ruby and Bill Daley. The other players cited would enter the contest after the game had started.

So kick out the dogs. Here come the horses and mules.

The Rockets captured the opening kickoff and quickly fashioned a ten play drive, which included eight running plays and two passes, and the ball was brought down to the Dodgers' twenty-one yard line. However Dodgers' linebacker Nick Forkovitch (William & Mary) alertly pounced on a Rocket's fumble and Brooklyn had its first possession on offense.

Dobbs entered the fray at tailback and lost little time displaying his considerable talents. Standing near his own goal line, he unleashed a quick kick that had caught the Rockets completely off-guard. The bouncing ball finally came to rest at the Rockets' fifteen.

The Rockets might have been embarrassed by Dobb's brilliant and unexpected kick but they were quick to return the favor as Ernie Lewis' (Colorado) punt carried seventy-five yards and finally stopped at the Dodgers' six.

After another exchange of punts, the Dodgers had possession of the pigskin at their own twenty. On the first play from scrimmage, tailback Mickey Mayne sprinted around his own right end, evaded several aspiring tacklers and broke into the open field. The crowd roared its approval.

So much for Mickey's good fortune. The swift back suddenly had developed a charley horse (which begged the question: "What was training camp for?") during his lengthy dash and he toppled to the turf just five yards short of the elusive goal line. A Rockets' defender immediately piled on to insure no further movement and the first quarter's "punting duel" had come to an end. The crowd moaned with disappointment at Mayne's misfortune.

On the opening play of the second stanza halfback Bob Paffrath rammed through the center of the defense and scored the game's -- and the Dodgers' -- and the AAFC's -- first "unofficial" touchdown. Jim McCarthy (Illinois) provided the extra point and the Dodgers jumped in front of the Rockets, 7-0.

The remainder of the period featured both teams see-sawing back and forth with no real scoring threats having been provided by either team.

In the third period, Billy Boedecker, a speedy halfback from DePaul University, returned a booming punt by Dobbs to the Dodgers' thirty-two yard line. With that advantageous field position to start a possible scoring drive the Rockets, behind the passing arm of fullback Ernie Lewis, moved down to the nine. Halfbacks Walter Clay of Colorado and Walt Williams of Boston University were able to push the ball down to the one on two rushing plays and Clay then rolled off his right tackle for the Rockets' first (glaring?) score. Williams kicked the extra point and the game was deadlocked, 7-7.

The third period ended on a quiet note and the fourth quarter exhibited series after series of futile offensive prowess by both teams. However, the Dodgers finally caught a lucky break when O'Neal Adams (Arkansas), a former NFL end with the New York Giants, captured a Rockets' fumble at Chicago's sixteen yard line. Dobbs immediately entered the game for the Dodgers and called for two unsuccessful running plays. Then he rifled a scorching eleven yard pass to end Joe Davis of USC for a first down at the three. Paffrath duplicated his earlier feat by cutting sharply over tackle and tumbling into the end zone for his, and the Dodgers', second touchdown of the evening. McCarthy converted for the second time and the Brooklynites led, 14-7.

Suddenly energized, back came the Rockets. After returning Brooklyn's ensuing kickoff they warmed up the airplanes. Walt Clay threw two successful completions and the ball was advanced to the Dodgers' thirty. Clay then uncorked the prettiest play of the evening (if one discounted the spectacular quick kicks and Mayne's aborted scoring dash). He took the ball from center, faked another forward pass, and with the Brooklyn defenders ferociously charging towards him, threaded his way through the defense to score his second TD on an exciting and crowd-pleasing thirty yard run. Williams added the tying extra point, 14-14.

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 20, No. 6 (1998)

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Even though that touchdown and extra point had represented the final scoring in the contest it did not signify the end of the excitement for the fans, players and coaches.

In the last three minutes of the contest Dobbs filled the air with passes, most of which were caught for short gains. Mickey Colmer had grabbed one of Dobbs' aerials and was able to break away from the Rockets' defenders, but he finally was pulled down at Chicago's sixteen yard line. That was as far as Brooklyn was able to go and the game clock signified an end to the AAFC's first-ever contest, albeit an exhibition game.

L. H. Gregory's column in the *Portland Oregonian* the following day indicated an attendance figure of eighteen thousand fans. However, he accurately pointed out that 16,442 had been paid admissions and that was the official count used by the AAFC in its annual Record Manual.

James J. Richardson, the Multnomah Club's manager, stated that receipts had amounted to \$30,995.58.

Multnomah Stadium. A fine football facility?

Perhaps. It certainly was adequate as a venue for a football game. However, it also featured other sports, including Portland's minor league baseball team in the Pacific Coast League.

And one mustn't forget the greyhounds chasing the proverbial rabbit.

Theeeeeere goooooes Swifty, Rusty, whatever!

The AAFC went on to complete its exhibition season and start its first regular season as a viable challenger to the established status of the well-entrenched National Football League. Four red ink drenched, money-losing years later the two competitors would merge and the AAFC would be no more. Just another footnote in sports history tomes.

Nevertheless, the AAFC had made its mark on the football world and had caused significant changes in the sport, which ultimately proved to be the catalyst for the game's overwhelming success in the 1950s.

And the dog racing?

A new facility called the Multnomah Race Track was built on the east side of Portland at a later date and it was used exclusively for greyhound racing. It still is in operation and happens to be a favorite venue for the author and his wife.

Portland's original Multnomah Stadium is no longer used for the "doggies," but it has continued as a multi-sports facility (baseball, football and the like).

Well, that's the whole doggone story. Now some cynics could truthfully say that the AAFC truly had gone to the dogs!