

CRASH OF THE TITANS

Book Review by Bob Gill

Sports books tend to focus, understandably, on great teams and outstanding players, since fans generally care more about them. But how many books can you read about Lombardi's Packers or the Cowboys in the era of Troy, Emmitt and Michael (not to mention Jerry, Jimmy and Barry)? Even granting that the top teams are more intrinsically interesting, even the most fascinating stories tend to become hackneyed through over-exposure.

This is particularly unfortunate when you consider that there are a lot of very worthy stories to be told about the also-rans – and many of them go *untold*.

But not all of them. In *Crash of the Titans* (Total Sports Illustrated, 335 pages, \$23.95), William Ryczek does his part to balance the scales with a sympathetic chronicle of the first three years of New York's AFL franchise, from 1960-62. These are the pre-Namath years, the pre-Jet years – or, more appropriately, the Wismer years, because the story is dominated by Harry Wismer, the chronically underfunded and overbearing owner whose lust for the spotlight often worked to the detriment of his team. To compare him to a contemporary figure from baseball, Wismer had the bluster and domineering manner of Charles O. Finley, but without Finley's resources. As a result, he wasn't able to stick around long enough to learn from his many mistakes.

Wismer's excesses and eccentricities provide much of the book's comic relief, but the story as a whole is not a comedy. Rather, it's a thorough account of a struggling team in a struggling league – a very familiar story to anyone who's spent as much time looking up minor league football as I have, or to anyone who's made a study of the NFL's early years.

Wismer is far from the only memorable character in the book. Equally vivid is the portrait of Sammy Baugh, one of the game's greatest players and a decent coach, handicapped by a shoestring budget and his own laid-back approach, constantly feuding with the owner, but offensively innovative and beloved by virtually all of his players. Baugh has always been a favorite of mine, but I had no idea how highly regarded he was as a person as well as a player, and I'd be fond of this book if it contained nothing else of interest.

That's not the case, though; instead, this is a book filled with anecdotes and short profiles of many players of interest – all-stars like Don Maynard and Larry Grantham, lesser stars like Art Powell, Al Dorow and Bill Mathis, even rather obscure figures like Hubert Bobo, Alex Kroll, Jack Klotz and Howard (Hayseed) Stephens.

And perhaps more than the players, this is the story of an era – an era when players needed other jobs in the offseason (and also after they left football, as shown in the "where are they now?" section of the epilogue), when quarterbacks called their own plays, when checks sometimes took even funnier bounces than the football. It wasn't a golden age – for one thing, medical treatment for athletes was skimpy at best, as the Titans began to realize after Howard Glenn's death in the locker room from an undiagnosed broken neck he'd suffered a week earlier. But not everything that's changed since then has been an improvement, either, and you'll get a good sense of just how different things were in those days that seem so recent but were actually four decades ago.

As recounted in the introduction, one person Ryczek interviewed for the book was a former reporter who couldn't understand why he had chosen such an obscure team to write about. But by the end of their talk, he admitted, "You just might have something there."

Anyone who reads the finished product will certainly agree.