

“If the game catches on, we might some day have some regular N.F.L. franchises in Europe. Who knows what could happen?”

---Pete Rozelle, NFL Commissioner, June 5, 1974

The NFL's surprise announcement of a “satellite league” to introduce pro football to Europe didn't pan out until 17 years later. What happened has been a mystery, until now. Research on both sides of the Atlantic sheds new light upon

THE FIRST ‘NFL EUROPE’

by Mark L. Ford and Massimo Foglio

It's nearly forgotten now, but in the late spring of 1974, two European entrepreneurs met with the NFL owners and persuaded them to loan players to a six team football league in Europe. Even more surprising is that the NFL abandoned the project reluctantly, and only after a discussion between the U.S. State Department and Pete Rozelle.

I. A different “world” football league

Bob Kap and Adalbert Wetzel had been planning to bring pro football to Europe for two years. Wetzel was a West German entrepreneur who had owned the soccer team Munchen 1860, also known as the Munich Lions, and gave the idea credibility in Europe. Kap was a former soccer coach who had once worked for the owner of the NASL's Dallas Tornado team, Chiefs' founder Lamar Hunt. Those credentials earned the two men a chance to speak before the National Football League owners on the afternoon of Wednesday, June 5, 1974.

An intriguing presentation began at 2:45 pm at the NFL's Park Avenue headquarters in New York. European interest in soccer was declining, according to Wetzel, while interest in American football had been growing. Kap had organized a corporation called Intercontinental Football League, Inc., and sold franchises to six investors, including Wetzel. The teams were prepared to play an inaugural season of four games in April and May 1975, followed by a playoff for a European championship. The National Football League was asked to lend its players and staff to the European league, in exchange for the American television rights.

By the early 1970s, the NFL was already looking to promote its product abroad. The league had sent players to tour American military bases and hospitals during the Vietnam war. Tex Schram, general manager of the Cowboys, had scouted Europe in search of new talent, the biggest catch being Austrian soccer star Toni Fritsch. On May 27, 1972, forty-two NFLers (including Dan Pastorini, Bob Hayes, Jim Kiick, Jan Stenerud, Alan Page, Matt Snell and Merlin Olsen) had demonstrated “le rugby Americain” before 8,000 in Paris. NFL Bleu beat NFL Rouge that day, 16-6, in a game that closely followed a script. Two years later, interest in overseas play was revived.

Kap and Wetzel might not have gained the chance to speak to the NFL owners, but for the uncertainties that had come with the new WFL, whose scheduled debut was only a month away. Already, the NFL owners had voted overwhelmingly (24-2) to overhaul the rules in response to innovations that the WFL had promised. Gary Davidson had named his circuit the World Football League, with a stated goal of eventually having franchises in

places like Tokyo and Rome. If the WFL was going to be a success – and in June 1974, there was little reason to predict its failure – then the NFL had to at least study the foreign market. Adalbert Wetzel and Robert Kap had already done the homework.

“The owners responded favorably to the idea on the basis that they had little to lose and something to gain,” noted a commentator at the time – including some spring training for developing players and promotion of the NFL abroad. Kap’s European investors had some corporate support, with Pan American on board as the official airline of the Intercontinental League. If the experiment failed, the Europeans’ losses would be minimal, because there were only two stadium dates in each of the six cities. According to the minutes of the meeting, Buffalo’s Ralph Wilson moved, and Houston’s Bud Adams seconded, a motion to explore the proposal further, and the membership gave the project the green light. Commissioner Rozelle then named Schram, and Oakland’s Al Davis, as a “committee to explore all ramifications of involvement in European competition.”

II. A Tough Sell – Football in Europe

Although American football had been played by service teams at NATO bases since the end of World War II, most people in Europe got their first sight of the game at the cinema, when the film M*A*S*H (with its climactic ball game between the 4077th and the 325th Evac) became a worldwide hit in 1970. Enough people took an interest to organize clubs, although the foreign game got about the same welcome in Europe that soccer was receiving in the United States. After watching 22 men in helmets and shoulder pads, one Italian journalist sneered that “The players dress like Martians,” while others felt that the starts and stops that come with football’s scrimmage system, made the game “too slow”.

Bob Kap, whose resume included introducing professional soccer to skeptical Texans, wasn’t deterred by the critics. By 1973, Kap had sold six franchises in the “Intercontinental Football League”, even before the World Football League was introduced, and had an organization with which the NFL could do business. One of the investors, Bruno Beneck of Rome, had been instrumental in introducing baseball to Italy and was ready to do the same with pro football. Beneck’s recollections and memorabilia from the short-lived league, preserved by football historian Fausto Batella, show the extent to which the NFL was prepared to go in exporting the gridiron game.

“I was already the ‘father of baseball’ in Italy, bringing the American game here in 1946, after the War,” said Beneck in an interview shortly before his death. “I had run the Italian Baseball Federation since 1969, and after the ‘72 Olympics, I was lobbying to have baseball added as an Olympic sport. That’s what I was busy with when Bob Kap approached me about bringing another American game here.

“I wasn’t unfamiliar with American football. I had been the director of ‘Domenica Sportiva’, which was Italy’s most popular TV sports show, and occasionally we would get some football highlight films. I had met with Lamar Hunt, and we had talked informally about the game. But, really, my love for football started when Kap presented the idea of bringing the game here. Baseball had done moderately well, after all, and I could see the possibilities.

“There wasn’t anything like an owners’ meeting. Kap came to Rome in 1973, and presented his plan to me. I reviewed the contract and the bylaws, which spelled out details for a league in ‘continental Europe’ and paid the franchise fee [\$37,000], and it seemed workable. You know, Kap talked about interest from places like Japan, and even Argentina, which I dismissed as ‘sales talk’. There were other owners, though I never met any of them. I had an available stadium, the Stadio Flaminio, and if Kap could make this work, I was ready to go to the next level.”

And so it was that Bob Kap’s years of work, travelling the globe, meeting with potential investors and sponsors, and selling franchises, had brought him to 410 Park Avenue in New York.

III. The Plan

At the 1974 press conference at NFL headquarters in New York, the teams were

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announced as follows:

Barcelona (Spain) Almogovares
Istanbul (Turkey) Conquerors
Munich (West Germany) Lions
Rome (Italy) Gladiators
Vienna (Austria) Lipizzaners
West Berlin (Germany) Bears

An explanation is in order on some of the team nicknames. Lipizzaners are a breed of showhorses from Austria, while the Almogovares were the Spanish counterpart to the Vikings, medieval warriors known for their ferocity in battle. Munich and Berlin were symbolized by a lion and a bear, respectively, centuries before these were associated with Detroit and Chicago.

The IFL was to be divided into two divisions of three teams each. The likely organization would have been for the teams from German speaking nations (Munich, West Berlin and Vienna) to be in one group, and the southern teams (Barcelona, Rome and Istanbul) in another.

The inaugural season was envisioned as a European-style tournament, with round robin play rather than a single elimination playoff. Within a three team division, a club would play its two division rivals twice, one game at home and one away, for a total of four contests. A hypothetical 1975 schedule might have looked like this:

April 11:	Barcelona @ Rome	
	Munich @ West Berlin	
April 18:	Rome @ Istanbul	
	West Berlin @ Vienna	
April 25:	Istanbul @ Barcelona	Vienna @ Munich
May 2:	Rome @ Barcelona	West Berlin @ Munich
May 9:	Barcelona @ Istanbul	Munich @ Vienna
May 16:	Istanbul @ Rome	
	Vienna @ West Berlin	

If there was to be any playoff, it would have been only if there was a tie for first place in the southern division, such as two teams going 2-1-1 and the other going 2-2-0. The championship would then have been based on the total points in two games, one hosted by the southern finalist, the other hosted by the winner (Berlin, Munich or Vienna) of the northern crown.

According to information released at the time, the IFL clubs were to be stocked in three ways. First, the six NFL divisions would be matched to the six European teams for supplying rookies and reserve players. Thus, Barcelona, located the furthest west, might draw from the AFC West teams (in 1991, the Raiders and the Broncos would play an exhibition there).

Second, the IFL team owners would be free to borrow name players with whom the locals could identify. The archives of Italy's football league, FIAF, include a press kit for the Rome Gladiators franchise, showing that the team had worked out arrangements with Italian-Americans like Oilers quarterback Dante Pastorini, linebackers Nick Buoniconti (Miami) and Doug Buffone (Chicago), Browns center Tom DeLeone and Rams guard Joe Scibelli.

Third, each team would sign locally-known soccer stars to handle kickoffs, punts, and scoring attempts. Adalbert Wetzel would have drawn someone from the Munich 1860 soccer team to kick for his Lions. Gladiators' owner Bruno Beneck had ties with Rome's Lazio club, which supplied many of the Italian national team's World Cup soccer players. According to records at FIAF, each team was given territorial rights to a major college, with Rome to have first choice of Notre Dame's stars – there being no franchise in Ireland.

A copy of Beneck's February 19, 1973 contract with the "Intercontinental Football League, Inc." was saved by Fausto Batella, including the IFL bylaws. The league's mailing address was P.O. Box 783, Dallas, Texas 75221. Bob Kap was President, and Paul M. Thorp, a Dallas attorney, was the General Secretary.

"It is the purpose of the Intercontinental Football League to introduce and foster American style football as a sport and profitable industry in nations in which the game is not now played," the bylaws recited. "The League initially will operate in Continental Europe and in the City of Istanbul in the Continent of Asia," (hence the "intercontinental" name).

"It is the League's intention to preserve the game in its American form," wrote the founders, "and yet to add to the exhibitions the rich traditions of countries in which our teams will play." To that end, the IFL bylaws provided, "the official game rules of the League shall be the same as the game rules adopted for play in professional football in the United States...with such modifications as the League may deem advisable to edify the spectators."

Kap had some experience with the North American Soccer League's tweaking of the rules of soccer to fit American tastes. Thirty years later, one can only wonder what variations he might have planned to make football more "edifying" to European audiences. All of the countries where the IFL would have played used the metric system. Would a team have faced a "4th and centimeters" situation, or gain "meterage"? Might the rules of the gridiron be adjusted for an audience raised on soccer?

While penalty kicks were probably not contemplated, it is likely that the game clock would have run almost continuously, for the gridiron game was criticized in Europe as being too slow (in 1992, a Dolphins-Broncos exhibition in Berlin, the local scoreboard operator provided one of the shortest NFL games ever, seldom stopping the clock). If the time were displayed at all, audiences raised on soccer were used to the clock starting at 0:00 and counting upward to 90:00 – indeed, when the first NFL exhibition in Europe was played in 1983, a clock that counted down had to be shipped to London.

"The rules shall utilize American terminology," it was provided. A halfback would not be called a "halbspieler" or a "mediano", and at best, the touchdown would be "der Touchdown". "Each game shall be commenced by the playing of the national anthems of the contesting teams. The home Club shall be responsible for displaying the flags of the home nations of the contestants, along with the official banner of the Intercontinental Football League. The participating Clubs are obligated to provide half-time entertainment of good quality."

For each game, the host team and the visiting team would divide the gate receipts 60%-40%. Each team would pay 8 percent of those gross receipts to the IFL's Dallas office, a minimum of \$15,000 (which the IFL would collect at the beginning of the year as a security deposit). The IFL would collect 15% of sponsors' promotional considerations (Pan American Airlines was slated to be one of the sponsors), and 20% of the television sales, before dividing the remainder equally among the clubs.

Rather than playing a championship game, the IFL scheduling rules provided that "The Champion Team shall be determined by the results of two games between the two finalists, which games shall be played in the two Home Territories of the finalists."

As the year 1975 got ever closer, however, a successful launch of the concept became ever less likely.

IV. An idea stopped by world coNFLict and iNFLation

On October 31, 1974, the NFL owners met in executive session at league headquarters in New York. Tex Schram and the Giants' Andy Robustelli delivered their report "on the matter of spring football in Europe". According to the minutes of the meeting, "Action on any definitive plan was deferred pending the Commissioner discussing the project with United States government officials."

Normally, the U.S. government wouldn't have been holding discussions with Pete Rozelle, but the league seemed determined to go overseas in spite of turmoil brewing in Europe. The State Department had good reason for concern. During summer 1974, war broke out between Greece and Turkey over the island nation of Cyprus. The U.S. ambassador in Cyprus had been assassinated, and the weapons sales to Turkey were blocked. Worse, terrorism was on the rise in many of the other nations where games would be staged. Rogue groups, like the Red Brigades in Italy and the Baader-Meinhoff gang in West Germany, had taken to kidnappings.

In Spain, Basque rebels had killed that country's prime minister with a remote control bomb, and the memory of the PLO attack at the 1972 Olympics in Munich was still fresh. The prospect of Joe Namath being held for ransom was not that far-fetched. Moreover, a combination of double-digit inflation, recession and an energy shortage became a problem at home and abroad.

There were problems in Europe as well. Beneck, owner of the Rome franchise, recalled that Kap had lined up Pan American Airlines as a league sponsor that would fly the teams around in return for promotional considerations. "When Pan Am pulled out, it was blamed for the collapse of the IFL," said Beneck. "By that time, though, the project had gotten well out of hand. There were enough economic and political problems that kept this from going forward."

The final word on the subject came at the owners' meeting at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu on March 21, 1975, where it was recorded that "Commissioner Rozelle reported on exploratory talks he had had with persons in Washington regarding the exposure of NFL football in Europe. He said the general feeling was that the state of the economy, both in the United States and Europe, made such a project impractical at this time."

V. Gone, but not forgotten

Overseas, investors still had not given up. Beneck, the owner of the Rome Gladiators franchise, and Kap had gotten a favorable response from the Cowboys and the Dolphins on playing a 1977 exhibition game at the Flavian Stadium in Rome, and Pan Am was willing to fly both teams to Italy in exchange for promotional considerations. By then, the IFL had already staged its first game in Japan (a 20-10 win by the Cardinals over the Chargers). Announcements were made in the Italian press that the first NFL game in Europe was imminent. Then disaster struck.

"The arrangements were already complex," recalled Beneck later, "Then, as luck would have it, new complications – the financial variety – suddenly came up. Pan Am, which had run into its own money problems, announced it was dropping its sponsorship. We knew then that there would be no NFL game in Rome. It was also the last straw for the IFL, which had staked everything upon that game. After that, Kap never was able to get a top level football team to consider coming to Europe. Who remembers Bob Kap today? But even if he didn't realize the dream of an Intercontinental Football League, he did plant the seed for the American game to grow in Europe, and in 1977 we were able to get the four Italian sports papers to cover the four football teams that comprised the first league here, FIAF."

"Looking back on it, the 1970s was too soon for bringing NFL football to Italy, but I thought that the American game would be entertaining to watch. I like to say that there are three things I look for in a sport – entertainment, entertainment, and entertainment. I didn't expect kids would want to grow up to be football players, but I had some definite ideas about what we could accomplish, which was to fill a small stadium."

Beneck continued to work on bringing the grid game to a skeptical public in Italy and elsewhere. By 1986, there were enough leagues in Europe for a playoff among champions, and the first "Eurobowl" was played under the sponsorship of EFAF, the European Federation of American Football. The home turf for Beneck's Rome Gladiators was Beneck's own "Vince Lombardi Stadium".

Meanwhile in Texas, Tex Schram, the Dallas Cowboys general manager who had tried to take NFL ball overseas in 1974 and 1975, still dreamed of the globalization of pro football. In 1986, Schram brought "America's Team" to London for the first annual American Bowl at Wembley Stadium, going up against the defending NFL champion Bears. Exhibitions followed in Sweden, Germany and Spain. After Schram retired from the Cowboys, he was tapped to develop the World League of American Football, which proved to be more popular in Europe than in North America.

When the WLAFL reorganized in 1995 with six franchises in Europe, many of the ideas from 1974 were put to successful use. Today's NFL Europe, with six teams, a springtime schedule, and rosters combining NFL players and local athletes – has many similarities to a league envisioned thirty years ago.

VI. IFL 1975 vs. NFLE 2005

A remarkable correlation can be seen between 1974's proposed Intercontinental Football League and today's NFL Europe.

Six teams.

In NFL Europe, the six teams are in a single division, playing each other at home and away in a 10 game schedule. The IFL would have split its six teams into two divisions – probably grouping the teams from Germany and Austria in one conference, and the southern teams (Barcelona, Rome and Istanbul) in another. In the first year, at least, the idea was for each team to play only four games, a home and away series with the other two clubs in the division, over six weeks.

Spring season.

Football in springtime was a radical idea in 1974. The IFL would have played its games in April and May, and NFL Europe's season goes from April to June. In both 1975 and 2005, the idea was the same – to let American football players compete in Europe during the NFL's off-season.

Players supplied by the NFL.

The idea for the IFL was to match each of the six teams to one of the six NFL divisions. One can speculate that Barcelona, Rome and Istanbul would have been linked to the AFC West, Central and East divisions, respectively. The NFC assignments are more difficult to divide – would the NFC Central players have been lent to the Munich Lions, or the West Berlin Bears? Would Tex Schram have linked the NFC East to Vienna, where Toni Fritsch had been a soccer star? Would the NFC West teams be more suited to West Berlin, or would western (Rams and 49ers) and southern (Saints and Falcons) teams work better with Munich?

That question was never reached, and completely avoided by the time NFL Europe was launched. Today, each NFL team must send at least six players to Europe, and the league office makes the assignments. Six teammates are likely to be assigned to six different European teams.

Well known alumni.

By 1974, some of the NFL's top stars, including Nick Buoniconti, Bob Hayes, Alan Page and Merlin Olsen, had already played in goodwill tours overseas, or had expressed interest in the IFL. While established NFL stars don't play in NFL Europe, an appreciable number of today's star players got their pro careers started overseas. Quarterbacks Kurt Warner and Jay Fiedler, Patriots' kicker Adam Vinatieri, Chargers' punter Darren Bennett, and Jets' guard Tom Nutten, are all alumni of the Amsterdam Admirals.

Home-grown Talent.

Most of the players would be American, but the plan in 1974 was for field goals, extra points, kickoffs and punts to be made by local soccer players. In NFL Europe, each team has at least eight "national" players who make the cut in training camp at Tampa and get assigned to the team in their home country. Players from Mexico were assigned to Barcelona, now Cologne, while those from Japan are sent to join Amsterdam's Dutch players. Under NFLE rules, placekicking duties (extra points and field goals of 20 yards

or less) are reserved for a national player.

Manfred "Manni" Burgsmuller had been a soccer star and had played on the West German national team in the 1980s. As a 25 year old player for Essen in 1975, he might have volunteered to kick for the Munich Lions if the league had launched. He became the placekicker for the Rhein Fire after retiring from soccer, and played pro football until the age of 52.

Expansion vs. Stability.

The six NFL Europe teams are all owned and operated by the National Football League, while the IFL had local owners.

Bob Kap, the Gary Davidson of Europe, planned to expand the IFL if its first season was a success. At the 1974 press conference, the league founders identified four other franchises for a 1976 season, with colorful names like the Milan Centurions, the Paris Lafayettes, the Rotterdam Flying Dutchmen, and derivatives like the Copenhagen Vikings. Batella's collection of memorabilia shows that Kap was trying to sell franchise rights for the Monaco Bears, the Amsterdam Clippers, the Madrid Toreros and the London Big Bens.

On the other hand, since its launch in 1995 as an exclusively European league, NFL Europe has maintained a consistent format of six teams over nearly a decade. Berlin was added only after the London Monarchs were dropped, and Barcelona replaced by Cologne, Germany. The current franchises are located in Holland (Amsterdam Admirals) and Germany (the Berlin Thunder, Frankfurt Galaxy, Cologne Centurions, Hamburg Sea Devils, and Dusseldorf's Rhein Fire). The West Berlin Bears never faced the Barcelona Almogovares, but the Berlin Thunder defeated the Barcelona Dragons in the 2001 World Bowl. Italy and Austria never received an NFLE franchise, but the Bergamo Lions won three European championships, two of them at the expense of the Vienna Vikings. Though still well behind soccer and basketball, American football's popularity in Europe has grown to the point where more than 50,000 players participate in twelve nations. More than thirty years after that 1974 meeting in New York, two dreams from that day have come true. The NFL has its overseas league in Europe, and a new game has taken root in the Old World.

Epilogue

The year 2003 saw the loss of two men who pioneered American football in Europe. Tex Schram, the Dallas Cowboys general manager who did more than anyone else in the National Football League to take the sport overseas, died on July 15. Three months later, Bruno Beneck, the Italian promoter who brought both baseball and football to his native land, passed away on October 25. The Intercontinental League of 1974 had been a failure, despite the work and investment of Schram and Beneck. Undeterred, both men continued to work at introducing American football to Europe, and both lived long enough to see the sport take root on that continent.
