

Edward Sternaman

This article was written by Budd Bailey.

It was once said about New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner by partner John McMullen that “There is nothing quite so limited as being a limited partner of George Steinbrenner’s.” The same probably could have been said about working with another George – the longtime owner of the Chicago Bears, George Halas. Dutch Sternaman spent about a decade as a co-partner in owning the Bears once the franchise was created, and he has taken a back seat to Halas in terms of history remembering the team’s early days. Even so, Sternaman certainly qualifies as an important pioneer of the National Football League.



Edward Carl “Dutch” Sternaman was born in Chicago, Illinois, on February 9, 1895. His parents were John R. Sternaman Jr. and Lula (Lamken) Sternaman. John was born in Switzerland in 1868, and his name at the time was Hans Johann Sternaman. He arrived in America in 1870.ⁱ Edward had three brothers – Chester, Joseph, and Paul (he was the second-oldest).ⁱⁱ The name Edward didn’t last too long, as soon everyone was calling him Dutch. The family lived in an old house in Springfield. Everyone used an outhouse in the backyard until indoor plumbing was installed in 1910. Vacant lots were on either side of the house, giving the boys some space to develop their athletic talents.ⁱⁱⁱ

Dutch was one of the best athletes in his class at Springfield H.S. He told his sister in an unpublished interview about his first coach, Roy “Daddy” Wents. “The ‘Daddy’ nickname was given by me when on his first day going to school,” Sternaman remembered. “He said he was

just made a father. His wife had just had a baby girl. I called him ‘Daddy’ and it stuck for his life.

“‘Daddy’ Wentz was a big man who took a rough kid like me and put me on end and said, ‘Kid, you will make a great football player. Just tackle those fellows when they come around end.’ I didn’t listen too closely to him in math class that day, and when he saw me come out for football practice he came over, put his arm around me and said, ‘You are all right.’ He was getting ready to give me my first real beating.”

He graduated from the school in 1915 with four varsity letters in football, basketball and track and a 13th in baseball. That’s a reason why Sternaman is in the Springfield Sports Hall of Fame.^{iv} He also was given a watch with this inscription: “To Edw. C. Sternaman by the faculty and students of Springfield High School.”

From there Dutch moved on to the University of Illinois. Sternaman’s coach there was Bob Zuppke, who was good enough eventually to reach the College Football Hall of Fame. Zuppke was one of the most creative coaches in the business. He thought up the concepts of the huddle and the flea flicker, and he helped popularize the I formation on offense. The Illini won national titles in 1914, 1919, 1923 and 1927, and won seven Big Ten Conference titles. No wonder the Illinois field is named after him.

Sternaman earned letters in 1916 and 1917. His 1916 season ended a little prematurely, as he received a kick to the head during a season-ending scoreless tie with Wisconsin on November 25.^v Dutch was named a captain of the team for the 1918 season, but he was drafted into the Army of May of that year. He spent less than a year with the armed forces, working in recreation at Camp Funston within Fort Riley in Kansas.

“The Alumni Quarterly” of the University of Illinois had this note about Sternaman in its February 15, 1919 edition: “Dutch Sternaman, (’19) – his real name has escaped us for the time being, but Dutch will do for all his friends – was roughly upset in a motorcycle accident at Camp Funston in December, and has been stretched out on an iron hospital bed for several weeks. He is physical director of Funston, and last fall captained the football team.”

Sternaman eventually recovered. He had just finished his final season at Illinois in 1919 when he received an odd business opportunity. A semi-pro football team from Arcola, Illinois, had just gotten clobbered, 41-0, by another independent team nicknamed the Decatur Staleys. Sternaman was offered the chance to help put together a better team for the Arcola franchise for a rematch. Dutch would be paid \$150 for the game, and he could invite some “friends” along. Everything seemed set ... and then the Staley franchise heard about Arcola’s “recruiting” of talent, and didn’t show up for the game.^{vi}

Sternaman was invited to Decatur to talk to A.E. Staley, owner of a starch business as well as a team in an industrial league. Dutch was offered the chance to help the team move up in competition. However, his parents thought he should stay in school in order to receive a degree in mechanical engineering. Besides, Zuppke wasn’t a big fan of pro football. He once said to his players in 1917, “Just when I teach you fellows how to play football, you graduate and I lose you.”^{vii} Zuppke no doubt had some influence on the situation.

Sternaman did finish that degree in February, 1919. Now the story takes a little twist. It was at Illinois in 1917 where Sternaman first encountered a man who would have a great effect on his life. George Halas was a key member of an Illini squad that won the 1918 Big Ten title. The championship came with a trip to the Rose Bowl; Illinois won the game and Halas was named the Most Valuable Player. Halas spent some time playing baseball in the New York Yankees' organization in 1919. After the season, he turned up on the football roster of the Hammond Pros.

In 1920, Halas moved to Decatur to work for the A.E. Staley Company, which owned the football team there. Mr. Halas became the player-coach of the team, and represented the Staleys at the meeting in Canton, Ohio, where the American Professional Football Association – which eventually became the National Football League – was born. Halas did some recruiting of players, offering the chance to play football along with steady work at the company. Sternaman was the first player to sign with the team.^{viii}

The Staleys first took the field on October 3, 1920 for a game against the Molina Tractors on Staley Field in Decatur. They earned the 20-0 win, thanks mostly to Sternaman's three touchdowns on relatively short runs. That was a good sign about how the 5-foot-7, 177-pounder running back would do. Statistics are a bit incomplete from that era, but Sternaman scored 12 touchdowns for the year and led the league in rushing and field goals. As for the team, it went 10-1-2 and finished in second place. It was less successful off the field, as the Staleys lost \$14,406.36 – the price for recruiting a group that led the league in payroll.^{ix}

Economics are always a problem for new sports leagues, and football was no exception. Decatur's stadium only had 1,500 seats with standing room for 1,000 more. It was no match for a team with big-time aspirations.^x In 1921, a recession forced some layoffs by the company. Staley realized the team had become a drain on the company's finances. In addition, some of the employees thought the players were spending too much time on the job concentrating on football and not enough on their work duties.

Staley suggested to Halas that the team move to Chicago, and he'd even contribute \$5,000 to the move and employ the players in his business for a year if the name Staleys remained attached to the team. Halas bought the franchise for \$100 and took the team to Chicago, and Sternaman came along.^{xi} Halas offered Sternaman the chance to acquire 50 percent of the franchise, and a deal was made. The team went on to win a controversial championship in 1921, as the Buffalo All-Americans claimed that the season's final game against the Bears was an exhibition and should not count in the standings. Sternaman kicked the winning field goal in that decisive contest. A postseason vote of the owners gave Chicago the title. Sternaman was one of two players to start every game in those years.^{xii}

Halas and Sternaman were competing with agent/promoter Bill Harley for the chance to own the NFL (a name suggested by Halas) franchise for Chicago in 1922. The old teammates were picked to own the franchise by the league in an 8-2 vote, and the duo incorporated the Chicago Bears franchise on April 1, 1922. The team moved into Cubs Field (later Wrigley Field) for the 1922 season, and used the Bears' nickname as a play off the name of the baseball team that

occupied that facility, the Cubs. Not surprisingly, the new owners picked orange and blue as the team's colors – the same as Illinois' choices.

The team had a familiar last name on its roster, as Dutch's brother Joseph played for the Bears. Joey had followed Dutch to the University of Illinois, and played football there through 1921. The story about why he didn't play for the Illini in 1922 is unusual. Once the college season was done, Joey was one of nine Illinois players who took part in an annual semipro football game between the towns of Carlinville and Taylorville. The catch is that they were "ringers" – top players brought in to help Taylorville win – and used fake names. Carlinville had its own newcomers in the form of some players from Notre Dame. The two municipalities bet \$100,000 each on the game's outcome, figuring that the ringers would make victory a sure bet for their side. Sternaman and future major league baseball manager Charlie Dressen led Taylorville to a 16-0 win, but when the full story of the game went public he was banned from playing for Illinois. The game led to the Big Ten's hiring of a Commissioner.^{xiii}

The Bears were consistent winners in that era, as they didn't have a losing season until 1929. Dutch Sternaman stayed on the playing roster through 1927, while still serving as the owner of half of the Chicago franchise. He actually had an impact on the league standings in 1924. Sternaman introduced a rule change that would force all official games to be played between September 27 and November 30, and it was approved by the other league owners. The Bears played a game in December against Cleveland that they billed as a championship game. Chicago won the game, which Cleveland treated like an exhibition game. Both teams claimed the championship, but the league said the Bears-Bulldogs game did not count, and Cleveland was awarded the title.^{xiv}

In 1924, Sternaman is said to have created a phrase during a pregame pep talk that eventually caught on and moved into other areas of life: "When in doubt, punt!"^{xv} Along the way, he received a U.S. Patent in 1925 for a type of football shoe that he had developed. Dutch started selling the product after that.^{xvi}

Halas and Sternaman teamed up to expand their sports holdings in 1925. They created the Chicago Bruins, who played in the American Basketball League. The ABL was started and organized by Joe Carr, the president of the NFL at the time. The Bruins lasted until 1931, when the Depression forced the league to fold.^{xvii}

Also in 1925, the Bears became the center of the football world. They signed Red Grange, perhaps the game's first superstar, to a contract after he finished his season at Illinois. The team put together an unprecedented barnstorming tour of several major cities in an attempt to cash in on Grange's fame. The Bears played 16 games in nine weeks, including eight games in 12 days. One of them in New York's Polo Grounds on December 6 attracted 70,000 people.^{xviii} Pro football had been far less popular than the college game at that point, but Grange's tour put the sport on the map nationally.

The ridiculous schedule did leave everyone involved a bit grumpy. When the tour was in San Francisco, Sternaman told Bears' center George Trafton that he wouldn't be starting. Trafton considered that a huge insult, so he threw a punch that sent Sternaman sailing through a window

and out on to a lawn. Sternaman evened the score in Chicago the following winter, when he challenged Trafton to another fight. While Trafton was removing his overcoat, Sternaman got the jump on the much-bigger man and beat him up.^{xix}

Grange's initial stay with the Bears was short-lived. He wanted a five-figure contract (perhaps in the form of one-half of all gate receipts; accounts differ) and part of the team to stay. When Chicago turned that deal down, Grange jumped to the new American Football League. The AFL only lasted one season (1926). Grange returned to Chicago in 1929 and played for the Bears through 1934.

The AFL also had another effect on the Bears besides the loss of Grange. Joe Sternaman became the owner of the ninth franchise of the new league, and quickly signed a lease for the team (named the Bulls) to play in Comiskey Park. The Chicago Cardinals had to move their home games to Normal Park. Meanwhile, the relationship between Dutch Sternaman and Halas was never the same after that action.^{xxxix} Halas accused Dutch of trying to join his brother with the Bulls.

The relationship of the two men continued to deteriorate as the years passed. Sternaman wasn't pleased with Halas's coaching approach, and the two men seemed to be spending more time looking out for each other than the team. "My relationship with Dutch Sternaman was worsening," Halas wrote in his autobiography. "Mutual trust had almost vanished. The split hurt the team. I developed plays. Dutch would drill them into the backfield, I into the line. I was steadily moving toward an open game with a sixty-forty division between running and passing. Sternaman wanted a tight game. The consequence was that I would tell the team to do this and Sternaman would tell them to do that."^{xxii}

Sternaman's playing time dropped in 1927, and he retired soon after. He married Florence Brunkow on May 18, 1928. Dutch and Halas continued to own the team through the 1920s, and they had money problems for most of the decade. Both men had to work other jobs to break even. For example, Sternaman worked in sales, owned some gas stations, and was a manager of the Chicago Blackhawks hockey team.

Halas – who had retired from playing after the 1928 season - stepped down as coach after a disappointing 1929 season (4-9-2), and was replaced by former Illinois assistant coach Ralph Jones.^{xxiii} The new coach immediately moved the quarterback right behind the center, installing a more open version of the T-formation in the process. It turned the fortunes of the team around. The Bears improved to 9-4-1 in 1930.^{xxiv}

By 1931, the Depression had drained Sternaman of some of his financial assets, and he needed help to pay the mortgages on his investment, an apartment building and a gas station. The solution was to sell his share of the team to Halas, who according to one version of the story came up a bid of \$38,000 and delivered the money shortly before a deadline to complete the transaction. It wasn't easy; Halas had to borrow the money from a variety of people, including George Trafton's mother and future Chicago Cardinals' owner Charley Bidwell.^{xxv}

Sternaman's association with football was essentially over at that point, although he did coach football at North Park College in Chicago in 1936, 1937 and 1948. Most of his time was spent tending to duties with the Public Service Petroleum Company, which sold gasoline and heating oil.

Since Sternaman was around at the start of pro football, it's our good fortune that he saved many items from those days – letters, photos, memorabilia, etc. The family donated the merchandise to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, and the Sternaman Collection became the biggest group of memorabilia about the sport's early days at the Hall. The collection also has brought renewed attention to Sternaman's role in the early development of pro football.

Sternaman died at the age of 77 on February 1, 1973. He is buried in Elmhurst, Illinois, at the Mount Emblem Cemetery. His daughter, Margaret, died in 2019, while his son, John, died in 2022. ^{xxvi}

Sources

Photo courtesy of Find-a-Grave.com. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/18838775/edward-carl-sternaman>.

Some information on Sternaman's high school days is contained in an unpublished interview of Sternaman done by his daughter in 1970.

Some statistical information is from Pro Football Reference. <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/>.

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