

The 60-Yard Circus

By Bob Carroll

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When the National Football League reached its 13th year in 1932, it had come a long way from its humble beginnings in Ralph Hay's Canton, Ohio, Hupmobile showroom, but it still had a long way to go. Pro football was still a very distant second to the college game in popularity. And football in any form couldn't match baseball's hold on the nation's sports fans.

The problems were obvious. The league had teams in New York, Brooklyn, and Boston and two teams in Chicago, but it still hadn't broken free of its small town origins. League president Joe Carr had worked hard at locating NFL franchises in larger cities all during the 1920s, only to see failures in such major league cities as Philadelphia, St. Louis, Detroit, and Cleveland. Other unsuccessful franchises of note included Buffalo, Cincinnati, Washington, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Louisville, Akron, Toledo, and Kansas City. If anything, the league seemed to be going backwards. Neither Portsmouth, Green Bay, nor Staten Island could be mistaken for a metropolis. Until the NFL established itself exclusively in major league cities, many critics agreed, it was unlikely to be considered as a major league.

The Great Depression was hardly unique to pro football, but it certainly exacerbated the league's problems. With so many potential fans in bread lines, small wonder that teams had trouble filling even the smaller stadiums. Since the onset of the Depression, franchises had gone under in Providence, Cleveland, Frankford (Philadelphia), Minneapolis, and Newark. Membership had dropped from twelve teams in 1929 to only eight entering 1932.

Any excitement of a championship race was lost by mid-October for many teams. The league had nothing resembling parity and no plan for achieving it. Too many championship races had seen either runaways by one or two clubs while the rest of the league maneuvered to stay out of last place, or had been embroiled in controversy when it came time to award the championship, or both.

Worst of all, the NFL's product needed refurbishing. NFL football had too many dull, low-scoring games. In 1931, half of the league's teams averaged a single touchdown plus extra point or less per game. On those occasions when a team got two touchdowns ahead in the first half, the game was as good as over. Why spend hard-to-get entertainment dollars on games that weren't very entertaining?

The NFL played under virtually the same rules as college football, but the perception of the two games by the fans was different: college football, awash in ancient rivalries and hoopla, was exciting; pro football, with its low scores, was not. The only major change in the rules for 1932, a substitution change allowing a replaced player to return in a subsequent quarter, had no effect on the lack of scoring. In 1932, NFL games averaged only 16.4 points for both teams, the lowest per-game record since 1926. Ironically, at a time when the NFL showed the least offense in years, the league decided to keep official statistics.

Since at least 1927, league owners had been talking about splitting the league into divisions so there could be two title races and, as a season-ending extravaganza, a championship game. But the result was only talk. The NFL went into yet another season under championship rules established more than a decade earlier -- a single race determined by winning percentage.

The 1932 season began as a continuation of the previous season, but before it ended, it pointed the way toward solving some of the problems besetting pro football.

The Season

In midseason, the Green Bay Packers looked like a sure bet to win their fourth straight NFL championship. On the eve of their annual trip east, they had won seven games, including victories of 15-10 over the Portsmouth Spartans and 2-0 over the Chicago Bears, and had been

held to a scoreless tie by the Bears. The unbeaten Pack flexed its defensive muscle, posting five shutouts in the eight games. The rival Spartans and Bears had no losses other than those with the Packers, but both teams had won fewer games and had been tied more often. After the games of November 6, the Packers would meet the relatively weak clubs in Boston, New York, Brooklyn, and Staten Island, then end the season with key games in Portsmouth and Chicago.

Green Bay coach Curly Lambeau traveled east with a squad that had undergone key changes. The veteran line featuring Cal Hubbard, Mike Michalske, Lavie Dilweg, and Nate Barrager was unchanged, but the backfield had an injection of youth. After two years of inactivity on the bench, Arnie Herber won the starting tailback job with long-range passing that more than offset his lack of speed afoot. By the end of the season, he ranked as the league's first official leading passer. Powerful rookie Clarke Hinkle from Bucknell settled in for a long stretch as the Packer fullback. Second-year men Hank Bruder and Roger Grove also saw increased playing time in the backfield. Of Green Bay's veteran backs, Johnny Blood still played most of the time, but Verne Lewellen and Hurdis McCrary slipped into reserve status, Red Dunn retired, and Bo Molenda was traded to New York. With a brand new backfield, the Packers kept winning.

The road trip began with a 21-0 victory over the Boston Braves on November 13. George Preston Marshall and two partners organized the Braves for 1932, presumably having purchased the 1931 Newark franchise, but a \$46,000 loss this season left Marshall the sole owner for the future. The Braves could not match the Packers, but they did have a respectable club. Its star was Cliff Battles whose open-field running made him the first official NFL rushing champion. While the Braves and Packers met in Boston, the Bears and Spartans, true to habit, fought to a 13-13 tie in Chicago.

One week later, the Packers made their annual pilgrimmage to the Polo Grounds. The Giants had a different look from the powerhouse squads of 1929 and 1930. Benny Friedman had moved across the East River to play with the Brooklyn Dodgers after Giants owner Tim Mara turned down his bid for part ownership of the club. The Giants relied on Chris Cagle as their main running threat and selling point in advertisements. To

throw the bulk of their passes, the Giants reacquired veteran Jack McBride who had starred for their first team in 1925 and their championship squad of 1927.

Without Friedman, the Giants shuffled into the game 2-5-1. Before 30,000 fans, however, New York smothered the Packers' offense and built a McBride-to-Ray Flaherty touchdown pass in the first half into a 6-0 upset. The Bears and Spartans both won their games. All three contenders had one defeat apiece, but the Packers had won eight, the Spartans five, and the Bears three.

The Packers finished their eastern swing without further trouble, beating the Dodgers 7-0 in Ebbets Field on Thanksgiving Day and the Staten Island Stapletons 21-3 three days later in tiny Thompson Stadium. Meanwhile, the Bears defeated the Cardinals, who were much weakened by the retirement of Ernie Nevers, 34-0 on Thanksgiving and met the Spartans the following Sunday in a rematch which, of course, ended in a tie 7-7.

The Spartans hosted the Packers on December 4, and, in a couple of hours, the Green Bay dynasty was over. Eleven Spartans played the entire game. Portsmouth's Dutch Clark, Father Lumpkin, Ace Gutowsky, and Glenn Presnell outperformed the Green Bay backs as the Packers' offense went to pieces, completing only one pass in sixteen attempts. The 19-0 Spartan victory dropped the Packers out of the race with two losses to go with ten wins and a tie. Additionally, it assured Portsmouth with a 6-1-4 mark of finishing in at least a tie for first place.

The Bears were still alive. The same afternoon the Spartans were ending Green Bay's hopes, Chicago beat the Giants at Wrigley Field 6-0 to stay within a half game of Portsmouth. The Giants finished fifth in an eight-team league with a 4-6-2 mark. The Maramen needed some new blood, but Coach Steve Owen would stay on to supervise the rejuvenation.

Portsmouth had completed its schedule, but the 5-1-6 Bears still had one more game left to play -- with Green Bay no less. On December 11, Green Bay faced the Bears and a heavy snowstorm in Chicago. The Packers' offense continued to flatline, but after three quarters the score stood 0-0. Then, in the final period, the Bears put up nine points to bring Chicago at 6-1-6 into a tie with 6-1-4 Portsmouth for first. Despite

all the disputed championships in the league's first dozen years, this was the first race to actually end in a tie.

Had the league compiled its standings as it does now -- counting a tie game as a half win-half loss - the championship would have gone to Green Bay with ten-and-one-half "wins" to Chicago's nine and Portsmouth's eight. However, the rules established in 1921 were in effect. Winning percentage, based strictly on wins and losses, determined the order of finish; ties were simply ignored.

The Playoff

The league office hastily arranged a playoff game for a week later in Chicago. As an extension of the season rather than a championship game, the playoff would count in the regular season standings. That meant the loser would slip to third place behind Green Bay.

Then a weather disaster descended on Chicago. For a week, bitter cold and heavy snow ruled out all possibility of football at Wrigley Field. Bears owner George Halas remembered his team and the Cardinals had played a charity game indoors at Chicago Stadium in 1930; he suggested that as a site for the playoff. The snow continued to fall. By Friday, the Spartans agreed.

Chicago Stadium was a nice side for its usual tenants -- hockey teams and circuses. It was absurdly small for football -- 45 yards wide and 80 yards long. Rounded corners further cut into the playing space. With two half-moon endzones, a mere 60 yards remained between the goal lines. At least they wouldn't play on hockey ice. A circus was scheduled into the stadium a few days later so a six-inch layer of dirt covered the floor. Apparently the dirt was recycled from an earlier circus; several of the players who appeared in the game insisted that years later they still had the smell of elephant manure in their nostrils.

To accommodate football on a postage stamp, several special rules had to be put in. Kickoffs were made from the ten-yard-line. When a team crossed midfield, it immediately was set back twenty yards. Because a solid fence surrounded the field only a few feet from the sidelines, the ball was moved in ten yards after each out-of-bounds play instead of starting the next play right at the edge. A team lost a down each time. College

football had legalized this a year earlier, but this was the first use of "hash marks" in the pros. Another special rule dictated that touchbacks were brought out to only the ten. Field goals were banned.

The game's major influence on the future of how pro football came to be played would surface during its playing.

Ralph Jones, the Bears' coach since 1930, had promised a championship within three years of taking the Bruins' helm. He had all his weapons ready. Fullback Bronko Nagurski was unrivaled as a line smasher. Versatile quarterback Keith Molesworth could reel off long runs, and Red Grange was still a dangerous runner despite traveling on the knees of a man twenty years his senior. Guards Joe Kopcha and Zuck Carlson were all-pros, and Bill Hewitt was so fast at defensive end he constantly had opponents screaming he was offside.

In contrast, Spartans coach Patsy Clark came into the game at a severe disadvantage. Dutch Clark, his star tailback and the league's 1932 scoring leader, had contracted to begin work at Colorado College as basketball coach with the expectation that his NFL season would be over with Portsmouth's last scheduled game. School officials wouldn't release him from his basketball commitment to return east for the unexpected playoff.

Nevertheless, the Spartans fought the Bears on even terms for three quarters. Neither team scored. The 12,000 fans who braved snowdrifts to get to the game began to suspect yet another tie was in the making.

Then Chicago halfback Dick Nesbitt intercepted an Ace Gutowsky pass and returned it ten yards before being knocked out of bounds at the Portsmouth seven. The ball, as per the special rule, was brought into the field ten yards, costing the Bears a down. On second down, Nagurski blasted six yards to the one, but on his next try, he lost a yard. Fourth and two! Nagurski faked a line smash, retreated a few steps, and fired a pass to Grange in the endzone.

The rules stated that a forward pass could only be thrown from five or more yards behind the line of scrimmage. The Spartans screamed that Nagurski was not the required distance from the

line of scrimmage. The officials disagreed; the touchdown stood.

The Bears added the conversion and, a few moments later, a safety. The 9-0 win allowed Ralph Jones to make good on his promise.

The Portsmouth *Times* called it “a sham battle on a Tom Thumb gridiron,” but the game had more significance than its immediate effect on the standings. The idea of bringing the ball into the field instead of starting play at the sideline opened up the game and the loss-of-a-down penalty was

dropped. The dispute over whether Nagurski had tossed his scoring pass from the required five yards back led to the dropping of that constricting rule. Potsy Clark was quoted as saying the league might as well legalize throwing from anywhere behind the line of scrimmage because players “were doing it anyway.”

But the game’s most important lesson was the interest generated among fans by a game for all the marbles at the end of the season. By the next year, the league finally would be split into divisions with a championship game at the end.