

PCPFL: 1940-45

By Bob Gill

The years during World War II were not good ones for pro football. The NFL barely survived the war years, largely because Sammy Baugh, Sid Luckman and Don Hutson --probably three most famous players in the country--remained in the league for the duration. Not having the benefit of comparable stars, several minor leagues--and one with some claim to major league status--were forced to fold, or at least suspend operations, after the 1941 season: the AFL (1940-41 incarnation), the American Association and the Dixie League, most notably. But on the West Coast--and particularly in California--things were different. The Pacific Coast Professional Football League (PCPFL), founded in 1940, enjoyed its greatest success during the war, so much so that in 1944 a rival league appeared on the Coast--probably the only pro football league organized from scratch during the war years. With the coming of major league football to California in 1946, the PCPFL faded in importance, but from 1942 thru 1945 it was arguably second only to the NFL as a vehicle for pro football.

Even in the beginning, the PCPFL was important enough to merit some attention. In 1940, the new league was made up of five teams: the Los Angeles Bulldogs, the Hollywood Bears, the Phoenix Panthers, the San Diego Bombers, and the Oakland Giants. The Bulldogs and the Bears were the big drawing cards, the Bulldogs because for the past four years they had earned a reputation as the best team in the country outside the NFL (winning championships in two different AFLs, in 1937 and '39, and compiling a 5-4-3 record against NFL teams for the period), and the Bears because they featured one of the biggest stars in the U.S.--Kenny Washington, the UCLA All-American. Washington was prohibited from playing in the NFL because he was black, but that was no problem on the West Coast. Black star Woody Strode, Washington's teammate from UCLA, also played for the Bears. (In 1941, the Bulldogs employed their own black star, though he was later to make his name in a different sport: UCLA's Jackie Robinson.) The Hollywood club was owned and coached by Paul Schissler, ex-NFL coach with the Cardinals and Dodgers. Two years earlier, as coach of the Hollywood Stars, he'd been instrumental in organizing the short-lived California Pro Football League.

In 1940-41, the PCPFL was in essence little more than an excuse for the Bears and Bulldogs to play for something more important than the city championship of Los Angeles; only three games in two seasons did not involve at least one of the LA teams. After all, they were the teams that could draw the big crowds. This was particularly true of the Bears, with Washington and former New York Giant star Kink Richards, who led the league in scoring both years. In 1940, the Bulldogs and the Bears each lost only two games all season--to each other, splitting four games. By winning the last two, the Bulldogs claimed the championship by a half-game over the Hollywood team.

1940 PCPFL Standings	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Los Angeles Bulldogs	7-	2-	1	.778	212	142
Hollywood Bears	6-	2-	0	.750	145	84
Oakland Giants	1-	3-	2	.250	30	65
Phoenix Panthers	0-	3-	1	.000	67	97
San Diego Bombers	0-	4-	0	.000	26	92

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For 1941, the PCPFL was partially reorganized, with Phoenix and Oakland dropping out, and the San Francisco Bay Packers coming in. The Packers only managed to win one game in their debut season, matching San Diego's 1-5 record, though the one win did come against the Bulldogs.

Kenny Washington stayed healthy this year--he'd missed two crucial games, one against the Bulldogs, in 1940--and that was enough to shift the balance of power to Hollywood. The Bears romped through the season undefeated, beating Los Angeles three times, to claim their first championship.

San Diego, though tied with San Francisco for last place, had its own star in 1941--Steve Bagarus of Notre Dame (and later a star with the Washington Redskins in 1945-46), thrilled crowds with his breakaway runs, including a 100-yard return of an interception against Hollywood.

The PCPFL strengthened its standing as a league of substance in 1941 when the Columbus Bullies, AFL champions for the second straight year, came west in early December for games with the Bulldogs and Bears. The year before, the Bullies had whipped the Bears--minus an injured Kenny Washington-- 31-7, but this time around things were different. First the Bulldogs beat Columbus 7-0, and a week later the bears got their revenge, 21-9, in a game billed as "the championship of the small professional leagues."

1941 PCPFL Standings	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Hollywood Bears	8-	0-	0	1.000	167	51
Los Angeles Bulldogs	4-	4-	0	.500	156	119
San Diego Bombers	1-	5-	0	.167	78	147
San Francisco Bay Packers	1-	5-	0	.167	23	107

Even as Hollywood was evening the score with Columbus, the news of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor was spreading up and down the West Coast. With the military fearing another attack, perhaps on California this time, the 1941 PCPFL season was cut short. For a while, it looked like there would be no 1942 season.

In the end, things worked out. When October arrived it was soon apparent that the San Diego Bombers were the new kings of the hill. The Hollywood Bears, with Paul Schissler in the service and Kenny Washington unable to play, fell off drastically, as did the Bulldogs. San Francisco had improved, but not enough to keep the San Diego club from establishing itself as the class of the league--though not the best team on the West Coast.

1942 PCPFL Standings	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
San Diego Bombers	4-	1-	0	.800	71	28
San Francisco Bay Packers	2-	1-	0	.667	32	28
Los Angeles Bulldogs	2-	2-	0	.500	35	62
Hollywood Bears	0-	4-	0	.000	15	35

That honor may have belonged to the March Field Flyers, a service team coached by Schissler, and featuring several noted college stars and ex-PCPFL players. The Santa Ana Flyers, another base team, coached by former Bulldog Garrett Arbelbide, were also on a par with the pro clubs.

With public interest in the military teams so high, the PCPFL clubs began to play regular games with March Field and Santa Ana, so that by the end of the season they had each become virtually league members. March Field and San Diego, with Steve Bagarus becoming the

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scourge of the West Coast in Kenny Washington's absence, were clearly the two best teams, and in two late-season encounters the March Field Flyers defeated San Diego, 33-12 and 28-14, to claim the 1942 title for the "extended" PCPFL. In five games with "league" teams--including one with Santa Ana--the Flyers were undefeated.

There were several changes in the PCPFL for 1943, not the least of which was the decision not to play the service teams any more. Although the games with the military were often lucrative, apparently--and probably correctly--the league owners decided that they detracted from the PCPFL's image as a league that could stand on its own two feet.

Of the other changes for 1943, the most controversial involved the Los Angeles Bulldogs. In the summer, a sports entrepreneur named Bill Freelove began signing Bulldog players right under the nose of LA owner Jerry Corcoran. In a very short time, he had acquired the services of almost every significant player the Bulldogs had. Corcoran, left without a team, was understandably furious; it looked like there would be no Los Angeles Bulldogs that year. But then the Hollywood Bears franchise, which had almost collapsed in 1942 without Kenny Washington and Paul Schissler, was granted a "leave of absence" by the league until Schissler returned. This left a number of Hollywood players unemployed, including 1942 player-coach Kink Richards. Corcoran quickly went to work, and with these players and a few remaining Bulldogs from 1942, he was able to field a team as usual.

For 1943, the PCPFL granted "associate memberships" to three teams: the Richmond Boilermakers, the Alameda Mustangs, and Freelove's Los Angeles Mustangs. The Richmond team faded quickly from sight, but the other two were around through 1945. In addition, the Oakland Giants were reinstated after a two-year absence. However, for most of 1943 no team could beat the San Diego Bombers, who claimed their first undisputed PCPFL championship, suffering only a single late-season loss to the Bulldogs. In Los Angeles, the Mustangs claimed the city championship, winning two of three games with their intercity rivals, and finishing tied for second place with Oakland. For Bill Freelove, the 1943 season was at least a qualified success.

1943 PCPFL Standings	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
San Diego Bombers	7-	1-	0	.875	214	117
Los Angeles Mustangs	4-	4-	0	.500	167	124
Oakland Giants	4-	4-	0	.500	118	143
Richmond Boilermakers	2-	2-	0	.500	44	41
Los Angeles Bulldogs	3-	4-	0	.429	119	125
Alameda Mustangs	1-	3-	0	.250	53	72
San Francisco Bay Bombers	1-	4-	0	.200	30	123

But 1944 was a different story for Freelove. The other PCPFL owners, not appreciating the way he had raided Corcoran's team, chose not to renew the Mustangs' membership. Only Alameda, of the three "associate" members from 1943, remained, though the team was shifted to San Jose. Instead, a new Hollywood team was formed, this one called the Wolves, to bring the total of teams up to six. Bill Freelove and his Mustangs were left out in the cold.

Freelove fought back. Working very quickly, he formed his own league--using the always-popular name, the American Football League--and announced that play would begin in 1944. The new AFL consisted of eight teams: the Hollywood Rangers, the San Francisco Clippers, the San Diego Gunners, the Oakland Hornets, the Seattle Bombers, the Portland Rockets, the Los Angeles Wildcats, and Freelove's own LA Mustangs. Thus the two leagues were in direct competition in Oakland, San Francisco, San Diego, and especially Los Angeles, where there were five professional teams at the same time--probably a record.

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With Jerry Giesler as president; the 1944 AFL made a few significant advances in Pacific Coast football. For one thing, they set up what was really the first true Pacific Coast league, with the inclusion of teams in Seattle and Portland. Also, the AFL was responsible for bringing back Kenny Washington, the West Coast's biggest drawing card, who played with San Francisco. Another big name, though not a player, was Seattle's coach--Hall of Famer Dutch Clark. Faced with such strong competition, the PCPFL made its won improvements in scheduling and organization-- improvements that would outlast the new league.

The only problem with all this was that there just weren't enough good football players to go around with so many teams competing for talent. As a result, both leagues were dominated by one strong team in 1944: the PCPFL by Steve Bagarus and the San Diego Bombers, who averaged 37 points a game in an undefeated season, and the AFL by the Hollywood Rangers, also undefeated in eleven games.

The AFL San Francisco Clippers, with Washington again establishing himself as the best player on the Coast, Bagarus notwithstanding, had the only other legitimately strong team, finishing second to the Rangers. Their only losses came against Hollywood.

For the rest of the clubs, it was often a tough season. Three AFL teams--San Diego, Oakland, and the Los Angeles Wildcats--didn't finish their schedules. All six PCPFL teams made it to the end, but had to endure their new status as the second-best league on the West Coast.

Finally, on December 21, PCPFL president J. Rufus Klawans announced a merger of the two leagues for the 1945 season, ending an interesting, though unprofitable, football war. The Hollywood Rangers and the San Diego Bombers immediately scheduled two games, home-and-home, to decide the Pacific championship. The Rangers swept the Bombers, 42-7 and 21-10, to make their right to the title undeniable.

1944 AFL Standings	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Hollywood Rangers	11-	0-	0	1.000	376	83
San Francisco Clippers	7-	3-	0	.700	193	120
Seattle Bombers	5-	5-	1	.500	200	157
Portland Rockets	3-	6-	0	.333	163	205
Los Angeles Wildcats	2-	4-	2	.333	133	171
San Diego Gunners	2-	4-	1	.333	42	161
Los Angeles Mustangs	3-	7-	0	.300	105	201
Oakland Hornets	0-	4-	0	.000	14	128

1944 PCPFL Standings	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
San Diego Bombers	9-	0-	0	1.000	335	54
San Francisco Bay Packers	4-	3-	0	.571	107	122
Oakland Giants	4-	3-	0	.571	46	86
San Jose Mustangs	2-	4-	0	.333	69	109
Los Angeles Bulldogs	2-	5-	0	.286	105	168
Hollywood Wolves	0-	6-	0	.000	46	169

In 1945, the reorganized PCPFL again consisted of six teams: the Los Angeles Bulldogs, the Oakland Giants, the San Francisco Clippers, the San Diego Bombers, the San Jose Mustangs, and the Hollywood Bears--with both Paul Schissler and Kenny Washington back. The Hollywood Rangers refused to merge with the Bears, and instead tried to exist as an independent team. The experiment lasted only six games. Then, with their best player, former Brooklyn Dodger tailback Dean McAdams, deserting to join the Bulldogs, the Rangers faded quietly away. The PCPFL owners, especially Corcoran, would have nothing to do with Freelove, and when he also tried to play his LA Mustangs independently he had no more success than Hollywood. The

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PCPFL, on the other hand, enjoyed its best season in 1945. Steve Bagarus was gone, starring now with the Washington Redskins, but with the end of the war there were several returning stars to take his place. San Diego had Bosh Pritchard, later Steve Van Buren's running mate with the Philadelphia Eagles. In addition to McAdams, the Bulldogs added another top player, already a great college star on the West Coast and soon to be one of the AAFC's best--Frankie Albert. But the league's top attraction was still Kenny Washington, who led the Bears in an exciting race for the title with the newly-powerful Oakland team. By beating Oakland in two late-season encounters-- including a 48-0 rout in which Washington only played to do some kicking-- and then struggling to a 10-10 tie with the LA Bulldogs in the season's finale, the Hollywood Bears won the 1945 championship by a half-game. Although disappointed at finishing second, early season leader Oakland, boasted the league's MVP in Mel Reid, still another black star barred by the NFL.

1945 PCPFL Standings	W	T	L	Pct	PF	PA
Hollywood Bears	8-	2-	1	.800	248	95
Oakland Giants	7-	2-	0	.778	151	105
Los Angeles Bulldogs	5-	5-	1	.500	163	143
San Diego Bombers	4-	4-	0	.500	159	126
San Francisco Clippers	1-	7-	0	.000	47	195
San Jose Mustangs	0-	5-	0	.000	58	162

When both the NFL and the AAFC invaded California in 1946, the PCPFL found itself no longer the top league on the Coast--or even the next best. The league still held on through 1947, maybe even 1948, but it was never again the West Coast's major league.

In 1946, though, the PCPFL was responsible for another interesting bit of football history, again--though indirectly-- involving the Bulldogs. For that season, the league expanded to nine teams, including Tacoma, Salt Lake City, and Honolulu, and two divisions, Northern and Southern. The Bulldogs, winners in the South, played San Francisco in the season's last game. A win for the Clippers meant the Northern title, while a loss would give the title to Tacoma.

San Francisco pulled out a 24-19 victory on a long pass in the last few minutes, apparently earning a trip to Los Angeles two weeks later for the championship game. But when victorious Clippers' owner Frank Ciralo went to the locker room to congratulate his coach Bill Howard and his players, he found San Francisco 49ers' tackle John Woudenberg wearing the uniform that should have belonged to Courtney Thorell.

The PCPFL was under a working agreement with the NFL and banned the use of AAFC players. Honest owner Ciralo notified PCPFL president Klawans who declared the game forfeit to Los Angeles. According to the *LA Times*, Woudenberg was not the only ringer in the Clippers' lineup that day--there may have been two or three others as well.

So, with the Northern Division title decided by the forfeit-- a singular occurrence, if not a unique one--the Tacoma Indians played the Bulldogs for the championship, which Los Angeles won in a rout, 38-7.

Though the PCPFL declined in importance with the westward expansion of the major leagues, league supporters could still take pride in the performances of several former Pacific Coast stars in the NFL and AAFC. Kenny Washington, barred from the NFL for years, was still good enough in 1947, at age 29, to average over seven yards per carry with the Los Angeles Rams. Longtime PCPFL fans wondered, no doubt, what he could have done had he been in the NFL earlier, before he'd absorbed the pounding that went with five years of two-way pro football. Frankie

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Albert was soon a great star with the 49ers, second only to Otto Graham among AAFC quarterbacks. Bosh Pritchard became an important cog in the backfield of those powerful Philadelphia Eagle teams in the late 1940s.

Even if these players had not enjoyed the success they did, the PCPFL would still have importance. It featured blacks when the NFL still held firm on the color line. And, the league kept pro football in the limelight on the West Coast, so that when the major leagues decided to move west, there was already an appreciative audience waiting there.

The 1982 Super Bowl champion 49ers probably don't know it, but their franchise owes a debt to the San Francisco Bay Packers, the San Francisco Clippers, Kenny Washington, and the PCPFL.

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PCPFL STAT LEADERS 1945

SCORING	PTS
Washington, Hollywood	68
Reid, Oakland	45
Clark, San Diego	36
Elsey, Los Angeles	24
J. Sullivan, San Diego	24

RUSHING	YDS
Elsey, Los Angeles	659
Washington, Hollywood.	542
Parsons, Los Angeles	392
Petrovich, Hollywood	364
Pritchard, San Diego	363

PASSING	COM	YDS
Pritchard, San Diego	80	1248
Reid, Oakland.	65	1134
Washington, Hollywood.	55	765
Albert, Los Angeles.	20	325

PUNTING	AVG
Provost, San Francisco	44.6
Albert, Los Angeles.	42.5
Petrovich, Hollywood	41.6
Nelson, Hollywood.	41.5

1940-45 PCPFL Composite Standings

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	P/G	A/G
San Diego Bombers	25	15	0	.625	883	564	22.1	14.1
Hollywood Bears/Wolves	22	14	1	.611	621	434	16.8	11.7
Oakland Giants	16	12	2	.571	345	399	11.5	13.3
Los Angeles Bulldogs	23	22	2	.511	790	759	16.8	16.1
Los Angeles Mustangs	4	4	0	.500	167	124	20.9	15.5
Richmond Boilermakers	2	2	0	.500	44	41	11.0	10.3
San Francisco Bay Packers/Clippers	9	20	0	.311	239	575	8.2	19.8
San Jose/Alameda Mustangs	3	12	0	.200	180	343	12.0	22.9
Phoenix Panthers	0	3	1	.000	67	97	16.8	24.3