

PRO FOOTBALL SPREADS SOUTH

By Bob Gill

In 1946, with the shift of the Cleveland Rams to Los Angeles, the N.F.L. for the first time became a coast-to-coast operation. Today, as a result of continued expansion, it is truly a national league, with teams spread across the whole country. But this was not always the case. In the early years of the N.F.L., travel was not as easy as it is now, and having the teams in close proximity to each other was one way to keep expenses down. Consequently, during the Depression the entire league covered only a relatively small area in the Northeast United States.

But despite the lack of major-league representation, other regions of the country did develop some strong teams of their own. In the early 1930's, probably the best football outside of the N.F.L. was played in the South; by 1933, three top-notch teams had emerged in that region – teams capable of holding their own against N.F.L. clubs. Their success prompted the creation, in 1934, of a strong (though minor) league. But by the end of 1935, not one of the teams – eight in all – that had been important in Southern football was still in business. The story of their demise is a graphic illustration of the difficulties involved in operating a pro football team in those years.

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For several years the most famous team in the South had been the Memphis Tigers, who had with some justification claimed the independent pro title since 1929. In that year, they had beaten the Green Bay Packers, undefeated N.F.L. champs, 20-7. Actually, the Tigers had been strengthened that day by the addition of several N.F.L. players, including Ken Strong, so the victory was not as impressive as it might seem; still, it drew national attention to Memphis, and helped justify their claim to the “national pro championship,” as they called it.

Then in 1931 a promoter named Bud Yates formed a new challenger to the Tigers, the St. Louis Gunners. By 1932, the Gunners were able to play Memphis to a standoff in three games, St. Louis winning 6-0, Memphis winning 12-0, and the third game ending in a scoreless tie.

Memphis, incidentally, didn't lose another game all year; but the Tigers might have if they had played the Oklahoma City Chiefs, another new team playing its first season in 1932. The Chiefs, led by Len Sedbrook, former New York Giant, beat the Gunners 2-0 in their only meeting, and went undefeated until a 13-7 loss to the Portsmouth Spartans in their finale, a game in which Oklahoma City had the best of the statistics but not the score. St. Louis also lost to the Spartans (12-0) and the Chicago Cardinals (20-7) but these – along with the loss to the Chiefs – were the Gunners' only defeats of the season.

All three clubs had some claim to an “independent championship,” but since Oklahoma City hadn't played Memphis, St. Louis had split with the Tigers, and the Chiefs-Gunners game had been played in such poor conditions – pouring rain and over an inch of mud – the title was pretty much up in the air.

In 1933 there was no such problem, as the St. Louis Gunners established themselves as the best team in the country outside of the N.F.L. Indeed, with a 2-2-1 record against N.F.L. teams, the Gunners may have been better than some major-league clubs. But beating Memphis and Oklahoma City still wasn't easy; the first game with each resulted in ties (0-0 vs. the Chiefs, 13-13 vs. the Tigers). The second time around, though, the Gunners beat Memphis in its own park 14-3, and shut out the Chiefs 19-0.

As for the other two teams, Oklahoma City could claim to be second best after beating Memphis twice, 14-0 and 20-7. In addition, this year the Chiefs managed to tie Portsmouth 7-7 in the final game. Memphis, in its only encounter with an N.F.L. team, lost to the Cincinnati Reds 17-0 in the season opener.

It wasn't a very good year for the Tigers all around; they also lost another game to a new Southern contender, the Charlotte Bantams. Formed in 1932, the Bantams played mostly teams along the South Atlantic Coast, and finished the 1933 season with a 10-3 record, including a split of two games with Memphis. The Tigers won the first game at home 27-10, while Charlotte took the second 13-3. The Bantams' season ended on a disappointing note, however, when they were routed by Portsmouth in their last game, 40-6.

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A fifth noteworthy team made its debut in the South in 1933 – the Tulsa Drillers. Made up largely of former Tulsa University players led by player-coach Billy Boehm, the Drillers started late and played only three games, two against Oklahoma City, one against St. Louis. Though they lost them all, they held the Chiefs to a single touchdown in their second encounter, losing 7-0. Tulsa had a final game with Portsmouth – yes, the Spartans again – cancelled because of cold weather.

With five good teams – teams considered suitable opponents for N.F.L. clubs – now playing, naturally there was talk of a league; and on November 14, 1933, S.A. Goodman, owner of the Memphis Tigers, announced plans for an American Football League, to begin play in 1934. Goodman contended that Memphis played “as good football as in the N.F.L.,” and that St. Louis and Oklahoma City could “win [games] in the N.F.L. any time.”

At least the latter statement was probably true; if there were doubters, the Gunners may have convinced them two days later when they demolished the Brooklyn Dodgers 21-2. Charley Malone, later a top-notch end with the Redskins, caught three touchdown passes from Don Moses for the Gunners’ scores. A few weeks later, St. Louis swamped the Chicago Cardinals 28-7, with Malone accounting for two more scores on receptions. On this high note, the 1933 season came to an end, with great hopes for 1934.

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“We don’t want a Southern League,” S.A. Goodman had said in 1933, “nor a secondary league [to the N.F.L.]” Well, he actually failed on both counts; but the 1934 American Football League, with Goodman as its president, was certainly a strong league – the strongest minor league yet in operation. By late August, the new circuit planned to include teams in Memphis, Charlotte, Tulsa (now called the Oilers), Oklahoma City, St. Louis (not the Gunners, but a new team called the Blues), Louisville, Dallas, and Houston. The St. Louis Gunners, actively seeking an N.F.L. franchise, didn’t want to bind themselves to the new league, and so had declined to join; undaunted, the league had found backers to organize the Blues, including former Gunners Dick Frahm and John Breidenstein on the squad.

But the A.F.L.’s first setback came on August 28, when Oklahoma City was dropped from the schedule because of “difficulties in getting a suitable stadium.” The Chiefs had previously played in the city’s minor-league baseball park, which seated only around 2,000, if that many; the new league was hoping for bigger crowds. With Oklahoma City out, Houston was also scratched, to keep an even number of teams in the league in order to avoid clumsy byes. For Houston, the loss was not great, since no team had yet been assembled there; but this sequence of events resulted finally in the demise of the Chiefs less than two months later.

With six teams rather than eight, the new league opened for business on October 7. The schedule called for a ten-game season, with each team playing home-and-away games with each of the other five members. St. Louis quickly established itself as the class of the circuit, with Memphis and Louisville a notch above the remainder. No one was surprised when the Blues marched undefeated to the title. The final standings were:

St. Louis/Kansas City Blues	7-0-1	1.000
Memphis Tigers	5-3-2	.625
Louisville Bourbons	5-3-0	.625
Dallas Rams	3-6-0	.333
Charlotte Bantams	3-7-0	.300
Tulsa Oilers	1-5-1	.167

With the title conceded to St. Louis by the end of October, the most dramatic event of the season may have been the shift of the Blues to Kansas City in early November. The move was unavoidable after the Gunners finally got their wish and were accepted into the N.F.L. to replace the Cincinnati Reds – a team which both the Blues and the Louisville Bourbons had beaten, incidentally. With major-league competition in town, the Blues didn’t have much choice but to pull out. Kansas City, fairly close and comparable in size, seemed a logical choice; but the team was not a success there, attendance averaging about 2,500 for their last three home games.