

THE END OF THE PCPFL

by Bob Gill

When we left the Pacific Coast Pro Football League (*The Coffin Corner*, July, 1982) the league had just lost its pre-eminent place in West Coast football with the coming of the NFL and AAFC. Then the Los Angeles Bulldogs won the 1946 PCPFL title by beating the Tacoma Indians 38-7 in the championship game after the San Francisco Clippers, apparent Northern Division winners, finished out of the money because they used AAFC tackle John Woudenberg in a crucial game against the Bulldogs.

The point totals for San Francisco and Los Angeles are based on a 1-0 score for the Woudenberg game, although the score was originally 24-19 in favor of the Clippers. And of course the championship game is not included.

Despite competition from the two major leagues, the PCPFL appears to have been on solid footing in 1946 -- but the appearance is slightly deceiving. Several teams had trouble completing the season. Oakland dropped out in early November after a dispute with the city over a new stadium; Salt Lake City played its last game on November 10; San Diego was inactive after November 29 (the season ended January 29). Sacramento played no games after November 16, except for a 57-7 debacle against Los Angeles a month later. Even Northern Division champ Tacoma ended the season on a sour note, losing two games in Honolulu, the last on December 13, and then disbanding for the year, trailing San Francisco by a game and a half. Only when the Clippers lost their last two games (the other was to Hollywood) did the Indians make it into the title game -- a dubious distinction. They had to call the team back together on short notice and were generally unprepared, as the score indicated.

The most positive development in 1946 was the emergence of the Hawaiian Warriors, a new team based in Honolulu, as a strong club. The Hawaii club played all its games at home, with visitors coming in for two-game sets to make the long trip worthwhile. After losing their first three games (two to Los Angeles, one to San Francisco) by a total of ten points, the Warriors finished the season as one of the league's best teams and financially they were by far the most successful. San Diego, formerly strong at the gate with NFL stars Steve Bagarus, Bosh Pritchard, and Hary Clark, had fallen on hard times; a last-place team was not enough for their fans so soon after the three-time champions of 1942-44. And in Los Angeles, the Bulldogs and Bears had to compete with the NFL Rams and AAFC Dons, with disappointing results: for one Sunday afternoon game, drew Bulldogs 547 fans.

By the fall of 1947, San Diego, Oakland, Hollywood, and Tacoma had officially dropped out, leaving the PCPFL with five teams. The best of the bunch was Honolulu, led by Melvin (Buddy) Abreu, the league's leading rusher and scorer. But when the Bulldogs beat the Warriors 35-34 on November 30 (despite 32 points by Abreu), the two teams were thrown into a virtual tie for first place. The championship was decided on the same week; this time the Warriors won 7-6, to clinch their first PCPFL title.

That was the good news for the season. The bad news was that by the time Honolulu and Los Angeles had finished their series, there were only three active teams left in the league -- the other being San Francisco. Salt Lake City and Sacramento had both dropped out a couple of weeks earlier, cancelling their home-and-home series and leaving the PCPFL for good. That left the league with only three teams to carry over for 1948.

But there was worse to come. A week after the Warriors and Bulldogs had settled matters on the field, PCPFL President J. Rufus Klawans flew to Honolulu to investigate charges that several local players had bet on the big game. And on December 15, Klawans announced that four Warriors had been "permanently suspended" for gambling: star backs Abreu and Ray (Scooter) Scussell, center Jack Keenan, and guard Floyd (Scrap Iron) Rhea. Ten others were "suspended indefinitely," including Keith Spaith, one of the leagues's top passers. There was no suggestion that any of these players tried to throw the game; they had apparently bet on their own team. But the real point was that for the second straight year, the PCPFL ended its season with attention focused not on the playing field, but on legal and administrative matters.

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With the loss of their top three offensive players, the Warriors did not appear likely to repeat as champions in 1948. The Bulldogs were probably the favorites -- but in Los Angeles they had other problems. Interest in the team had declined so much in the last two years that they were finally forced to move to Long Beach, leaving the city they had occupied for twelve successful years. Actually, the team played only one game in Long Beach; around the league they were still known as the L.A. Bulldogs.

The rest of the league included only three teams: Honolulu, San Francisco, and the Hollywood Bears, reformed after a year's layoff, with former Bulldog owner Jerry Corcoran as manager. In Honolulu, the Warriors managed to field another good team, despite their off-the-field losses. Mel Reid, the league's MVP with Oakland in 1945, was the new backfield ace, and his passing supplied enough offense to keep the club in contention. In fact, the Warriors set a PCPFL record for points in a 75-21 win over Hollywood early in November.

But the Bulldogs were also in the race, as predicted; they beat Honolulu 34-7 in the season's second week, after the Warriors had taken the first game of their set 7-6. These were the only setbacks either club suffered -- on the field, that is.

Off the field, the PCPFL was falling apart. Attendance was down again, even in Honolulu; the Bulldogs' one game in Long Beach drew 850; Hollywood didn't even try to play any home games. Things got so bad that for most of November all four teams were idle. Then on the 28th Honolulu beat San Francisco 19-6; they topped that the following week with a 45-7 romp. Thus the Warriors finished the season with a 5-1 record, and clinched at least a tie for first place, pending the outcome of the Bulldogs' last two games, postponements from earlier in the year.

By this point, though, interest in the league had declined so far that the Bulldogs never even completed their schedule, leaving the Warriors as repeat champions. The honor didn't mean much, even in Honolulu, and by 1949 it was generally forgotten -- along with the PCPFL itself, which called it quits before the next season.

The demise of the PCPFL was not important news in Los Angeles -- the big story there in 1949 was the Rams' western Division title. When the Rams and the Philadelphia Eagles took the field in the L.A. Coliseum for the NFL championship game that December, it marked the city's finest moment (to that date) in pro football; but the Bulldogs -- and the league they had inspired -- were not around to see it. Their time had passed.

1946 Standings

(supplied by Bob Braunwart)

Northern Division	W-L-T	Pct	PF	PA
Tacoma Indians	7-4-0	.636	202	141
San Francisco Clippers	6-4-0	.600	182	112
Sacramento Nuggets	2-5-1	.286	67	201
Salt Lake City Seagulls	2-5-1	.286	81	138
Oakland Giants	1-5-0	.167	66	89

Southern Division	W-L-T	Pct	PF	PA
Los Angeles Bulldogs	9-2-1	.818	300	161
Hawaiian Warriors	8-4-0	.667	236	185
Hollywood Bears	5-5-1	.500	188	196
San Diego Bombers	1-7-0	.125	65	164

1947 Standings

	W-L-T	Pct	PF	PA
Hawaiian Warriors	7-2-0	.778	267	121
Los Angeles Bulldogs	5-3-0	.625	165	126
San Francisco Clippers	4-4-0	.500	158	175

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Salt Lake City Seagulls	1-4-1	.200	48	130
Sacramento Nuggets	0-4-1	.000	75	161

Individual Leaders Rushing

Buddy Abreu, Honolulu	704 yds
Ray Scussell, Honolulu	431
Joe Churich, Salt Lake	350
Pete Franceschi, S.F.	341
Ray Patterson, Sacramento	336

Scoring

Buddy Abreu, Honolulu	83 pts
Bob Schmidt, L.A.	40
Vic Ramus, S.F.	34
Nate Howard, S.F.	30
Pete Franceschi, S.F.	30
Ray Scussell, Honolulu	30
Abe Addams, Honolulu	30

Passing

Vic Ramus, S.F.	36/607 yds
Keith Spaith, Honolulu	42/550 yds
Mel Reid, S.F.	27/550 yds
Oscar Givens, Honolulu	35/548 yds
Ben Reiges, L.A.	27/347 yds
Ray Patterson, Sacramento	14/237 yds

Punting

Ken Soffee, Salt Lake	55 -yd avg (!)
John Wright, Honolulu	42 -yd avg
Keith Spaith, Honolulu	41.8-yd avg
Fred Erdhaus, L.A.	39.3-yd avg
Bob Libbee, Sacramento	39.2-yd avg

1948 Standings

	W-L-T	Pct	PF	PA
Hawaiian Warriors	5-1-0	.833	181	86
Long Beach Bulldogs	3-1-0	.750	102	49
Hollywood Bears	1-3-1	.250	93	152
San Francisco Clippers	0-4-1	.000	69	158