

## **IN DETROIT, WHERE THE WHEELS FELL OFF**

by Mark Speck

Detroit's pro football history is alive with the names of many wonderful heroes from a colorful past ... Patsy Clark, Buddy Parker, Bobby Layne, Alex Karras, Night Train Lane, Greg Landry, Altie Taylor, Joe Schmidt, Dick LeBeau, Bubba Wyche, Sheldon Joppru.....

Bubba Wyche?! Sheldon Joppru?! Don't recognize them? Well, they too are a part of Detroit's history.

Most of Detroit's history in professional football has been written by the N.F.L. Lions, one of the league's most fabled franchises. Their history, and the city's, is full of great teams, great stars, great plays and great games. For one year, however, the Lions shared Detroit with an ugly step-sister who wrote a chapter of the city's football history that most people would probably like to forget. That ugly stepsister was the Detroit Wheels.

No, not Mitch Ryder's back-up band. These Detroit Wheels were a football team, or what passed for a football team that played in the World Football League in 1974.

Wyche, brother of Sam Wyche, and Joppru were just two members of this Wheels' cast of characters that shared Detroit with the Lions. Actually, to set the record straight, they didn't really share Detroit with the Lions. The Wheels couldn't find a home in the city, so they had to play their home games in Ypsilanti, thirty-five miles from downtown Detroit, at Rynearson Stadium on the campus of Eastern Michigan University.

The Wheels owners would eventually have to dump \$400,000 into the stadium for improvements to the seats and lights just to make it into something of a major-league facility.

One had a sense that this franchise was in trouble right from the start. Shortly after he announced the formation of the W.F.L., Commissioner Gary Davidson was approached by a man named Bud Hucul about placing a team in Detroit. Davidson gave Hucul his blessing until it was discovered that Hucul was a hospital employee whose previous business dealings included 30 arrests and 27 lawsuits.

After the Hucul mess, the Wheels were officially born on December 13, 1973, when Davidson announced that Detroit had been awarded a franchise for 1974. A group of 10 local business and political leaders had put up the necessary \$500,000 entry fee. This group, which was assisted by Mayor Coleman Young, would eventually grow to 33 people, and would include singer Marvin Gaye and Mike Illitch, owner of Little Caesar's Pizza and the N.H.L. Red Wings. This 33 person conglomerate would prove the old saying, "Too many cooks spoil the broth", and would become the butt of many jokes around the league.

"I mean, I don't know the situation in Detroit", quipped Memphis owner John Bassett, "They tell me 33 guys got together and each put in 15 cents to buy the club."

This didn't help the team in its search for available football talent. The owners set about trying to hire Tennessee State coach Jim Merritt to coach the Wheels. On February 1, however, Merritt announced he was rejecting the Wheels offer. So instead of Merritt, a week later the Wheels hired Dan Boisture, who was selling automotive parts. This started a disappointing trend as the Wheels had a difficult time signing and retaining a rather long list of well-known football talent.

In March, the Wheels signed ex-Kansas City Chiefs running back Warren McVea. But McVea reported to camp late, worked out four days and then missed practice. Boisture suspended him and then added insult to injury by giving his #6 jersey to one of the team's ball boys. Mcvea was ultimately traded to Houston, having never worn a Wheels uniform. The team tried to pick up Linebacker Sam Britts, the 1973 CFL Rookie of the Year, but couldn't come up with the cash to pay him and had to send him back over the border.

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Detroit picked future NFL players Ed "Too Tall" Jones, Bill Simpson, Freddie Scott, Rick Middleton and Randy Grossman in the college draft and couldn't sign any of them, and wound up inking only four of their 36 draft picks.

In their hunt for talent, Detroit wound up opening their doors to anyone who even knew what a football looked like. Eventually, over 500 people showed up to fill out questionnaires and talk to the coaches. The Wheels finally hit training camp with 115 players under contract, some of whom could actually play football. But a lot of them couldn't, and in all their wheeling and dealing, the Wheels would wind up releasing 163 players.

The front office remained optimistic despite the fact that many considered the Wheels to be the league's weak link in a weak chain. General Manager Sonny Grandelius trumpeted, "I feel quite confident that, with the talent we have, the Wheels can make an honest, qualified run at the W.F.L. title in our first year".

Echoed coach Boisture, "I believe we can establish ourselves right away as a valid threat in the WFL".

Detroit had already established themselves as a valid threat to good sense. As costs mounted during training camp, one of the team's owners suggested that camp could be moved from the EMU campus to Belle Island, where the players could be housed in tents.

The Wheels who survived camp opened the season in Memphis. Detroit fell behind 18-0 and lost 34-15. The Wheels lost four fumbles and gained only 56 yards rushing.

A week later, the Wheels opened their home season. "We'll sell out!" proclaimed ticket manager Brian Rekiel. Instead, the Wheels drew the smallest crowd of the young WFL season -- only 10,631 people. The Wheels were not helped by the fact that one local newspaper listed the game's starting time as 8:30 and another reported it as 7:30. Not only that, a late touchdown by Florida sent Detroit to their second straight loss, 18-14.

"Of course I'm disappointed", said Grandelius, "We thought we'd draw more than this, but we're not panicking. We've just got some work to do. I think maybe the people don't identify with this stadium yet. I think once people find it's not so difficult to find or to get to, they will begin coming out. We're certainly not ready to give up. There's nothing wrong with the caliber of football we're playing here."

Club President Louis R. Lee spent most of the game walking through the stands talking to fans. "I was trying to convince the people to come back next time" Lee said. When was the last time one saw the Lions' owner William Clay Ford begging fans to come see his team?

Four days later, the Wheels led 16-14 in the third quarter, but the Hawaijans exploded for 22 points to win 36-16. Wyche was intercepted three times, and the Wheels were still 0-for-1974.

And in deep trouble. The owners were already weighing three options open to them: (1) Sell the team to investors who would move the team; (2) Sell the team to local investors; or (3) Keep dumping money in a hole in the ground. Esther Edwards, one of the owners and Vice-president of Motown Records, was reportedly willing to purchase controlling interest in the club. Upton Bell, son of former NFL Commissioner Bert Bell, was also trying to put a group together to buy the team and move it to Charlotte, North Carolina.

"There is no question the ownership will have to be re-structured" said Grandelius, "It's a simple matter of mathematics. The fan support hasn't been there. Our owners realize now, too, that it's a difficult proposition to try to operate a business with 33 owners."

Commissioner Gary Davidson was a little more to the point. "There are definitely some problems in Detroit," understated the Commissioner.

And the players were feeling the brunt of it. The team had to cancel practice when they couldn't afford to get their uniforms back from the cleaners. A printing bill wasn't paid so there weren't programs for one of the games. The team ran out of adhesive tape, and were saved only when a local medical supplies salesman donated a case to the club. Punter Chuck Collins said a shortage of towels forced him to dry off after practice with two T-shirts. Another player was denied a shoestring.

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The losses continued, at the bank and on the field. The Wheels second home game drew only 14,614 fans and Detroit lost 21-18 to Birmingham. On August 7, in Birmingham, a crowd the Wheels could only dream of--40,367--watched the Americans whip the Wheels for the second week in a row, 28-22. The Wheels turned the ball over five times. Memphis trashed Detroit 37-7, shredding the Wheels defense for 279 yards rushing. Detroit committed four turnovers and gave up seven quarterback sacks. Another small gathering at Rynearson -- 10,300 -- watched the Wheels get flattened by the Chicago Fire, 35-23. Detroit had a net minus 2 yards passing in the game as their quarterbacks were once again sacked seven times. Near the end of the game, the Wheels' pep band heaped insult onto injury by playing "Light My Fire"!

Boisture and the Wheels continued to try to come up with the right combinations to turn the season around. So far, the club had used three quarterbacks, ten running backs and 15 receivers. But nothing seemed to work. The Wheels turned the ball over four times and blew a 16-14 lead in a 27-23 loss to the Philadelphia Bell. On Sept. 6, the Wheels announced a crowd of 6,351 fans at Rynearson, but observers put the figure closer to 2,500. Detroit lost to Southern California, 10-7 as the Sun defense held the Wheels to minus 11 yards passing. Rookie quarterback Bruce Shaw completed one pass all day.

Financial hardships plagued the team as well. As the team's demise grew more imminent and rumors circled the team like vultures, the Wheels went more than a week without selling a single ticket. During one game, the P.A. announcer reported to the small crowd that the Wheels would be on the road the following week. The crowd cheered. At another game, the few people who had bothered to show up entertained themselves with a game of Frisbee.

When wide receiver Jon Henderson's son had to be treated at a hospital, Henderson was told the Wheels' hospitalization policy was worthless, and he had to scrape up \$500 to pay the bill. Players took to bringing their own towels to the locker room. Eventually, as things got worse, groups of players moved their wives and kids into a single house, making it easier to evacuate if the franchise had to move.

Even the coaches were affected. Lack of funds made it impossible for games to be filmed. One coach, Owen Dejanovich, was living in the basement of fellow assistant Chick Harris. "People won't lease to me when they hear I'm with the Wheels", Dejanovich said, "Three times I've made deposits and three times they've given my money back. Once I offered the people \$1,700. That was two months rent plus the deposit, which is a lot of money." Dejanovich and his wife began looking into motels with kitchenettes.

"The situation here is desperate", Bubba Wyche wrote in an S.O.S. to the commissioner's office, "Please give us some relief, will you?"

Through it all, the Wheels circled the wagons, rallied and managed to beat the Florida Blazers, 15-14 in Orlando on Sept. 11. The margin of victory was a Blazer missed action point pass in the last quarter. But it would be Detroit's only taste of victory. They lost to the Sun in Anaheim 29-24 and then were crushed 37-7 by another team in financial trouble, the New York Stars. In fact, the win over Detroit was New York's last game in the Big Apple. Upton Bell, who had considered buying the Wheels, purchased the Stars and moved them to Charlotte.

So as the Stars headed toward North Carolina, the Wheels headed toward the football graveyard. A 14-11 loss to Shreveport on Oct. 2 put their record at 1 win and 13 losses. In keeping with their short-lived tradition, the Wheels, for the 8th time in the season, blew a lead to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. Detroit saw an 11-7 lead evaporate along with their offense, which produced only 7 first downs and 85 yards rushing. The Wheels turned the ball over 3 times and Bubba Wyche was sacked three times. Of all the punishment, abuse and hardships the Wheels had endured during the season, Wyche had probably endured the most of all. Hobbled by injured knees, Wyche had been sacked 44 times in 14 games. His agony was the epitome of the Wheels sorry season.

One day after the loss to Shreveport, creditors packed a bankruptcy court in Detroit to file \$1.4-million worth of claims against the Wheels. On October 7, Davidson announced that those games involving the Wheels and the Jacksonville Sharks for the up-coming week had been postponed. If new investors were not found in 2 or 3 days, the commissioner stated, both teams would be folded. The financial calvary was not coming over the hill for the Wheels, however. When Davidson's deadline approached, the clock struck midnight for Detroit. Davidson announced that the Wheels and the Sharks had been removed from the league schedule. The Wheels had officially fallen off.

The players were stunned, saddened and bitter.

"I expected the utmost", said Bubba Wyche, "I had visions of everything being rosy... I never dreamed anything like this would happen."

"Circumstances in Detroit had prevented us from having a good club and it seemed like every time mistakes were made, the players were the only ones who suffered", reflected wide receiver Hubie Bryant, "Everybody was at each other's throats ... not the players themselves, though. I'm proud that even the Detroit team stuck together in the face of all those problems."

"I don't know where things went wrong", said kick returner and defensive back Rocky Long, "but they sure went wrong somewhere along the line. The first time I knew we were in trouble was when I read it in the papers. The team and the coaches always have been the last ones to know anything. We never know, from day to day almost, where we're going to practice, or where we're going to play. We went a couple of games without scouting film because the club couldn't afford to process it and more than once we've worn dirty uniforms to practice. We've just had to patch up old stuff and make it do. I guess because we couldn't buy any- thing else.

"All the problems have put a lot of pressure on everybody," Long concluded, "We've been thinking about everything but football."

"They were just thirty-two jerks who thought they'd be millionaires overnight," snarled punter Chuck Collins, "They told us only one truthful thing out of five thousand lies. That was the fact we were bankrupt."

The Wheels had written their own chapter to Detroit's professional football history. It was part tragedy, part comedy, a real-life theater of the absurd. Their saga lasted less than a year, but was filled with more pathos than five seasons with the Lions. Karras, Layne, Schmidt and LeBeau are names easy to remember. But once heard, the story of Wyche, Joppru, Henderson, Bryant, Long and Collins isn't easy to forget.