

THE IMPACT OF RED GRANGE ON PRO FOOTBALL IN 1925

By John M. Carroll

Excerpted from his forthcoming book

In 1925 the NFL and other pro leagues as the (Pennsylvania) Anthracite Football League were strictly small time compared with college football or major league baseball; there is no evidence to suggest that Grange's much heralded barnstorming tours rescued pro football from oblivion.

There can be little doubt, however, that the enormous publicity surrounding Grange's turning pro and his two barnstorming tours with the Bears in 1925-26 brought pro football into the national consciousness as never before. During his first eight games as a pro, Grange played before an estimated 200,000 fans, including 36,000 in his debut at Cubs Park, 35,000 in Philadelphia, and over 70,000 at the Polo Grounds in New York. Grange's presence in the Bears' lineup attracted upwards to 150,000 fans on the Bears' second tour in the South and on the Pacific Coast during December and January (nine games), including a crowd some sources estimated at over 70,000 at the Los Angeles Coliseum. How many of these fans or the readers who followed Grange's tours in the press became followers of pro football remains in doubt. For many casual fans Grange was more a curiosity than an advertisement for pro football. In his story on the Bears' game at the Polo Grounds during the first tour, sports writer Allison Danzig noted that "to call these 70,000 spectators football followers needs correction. There were thousands in that tremendous assemblage who probably never saw a game before, who did not have the slightest idea of what the proceedings were all a bout." They simply wanted to see Grange. Columnist Damon Runyon gave a similar assessment of the throng of some 70,000 who would watch Grange perform in Los Angeles. America was interested in Red Grange, but not necessarily pro football.

Of more lasting importance to the growth of pro football than the 1925-26 tours was the fact that because of Grange, major sportswriters began to seriously report on pro football for the first time. Beginning in Philadelphia, prominent writers such as Grantland Rice, Damon Runyon, and Ford Frick from New York newspapers and Westbrook Pegler of Chicago, covered Chicago's game with the Frankford Yellow Jackets and remained with the Bears for most of the remaining eastern games. Grange later recalled that when the prominent sportswriters began to follow the Bears' tour, "I knew pretty well after that that pro football had come a long way. "In subsequent seasons, these writers and others continued to cover Grange and pro football and allot more space to the so-called "postgraduate" game in the nation's sports pages. The publication in 1929 of the Carnegie Report on intercollegiate athletics, which revealed a myriad of corrupt practices in college football, and the onset of the Depression convinced many sportswriters that the longstanding attacks on pro football by college officials were to a large extent hypocritical. During the 1920s, college football had been associated with the mounting prosperity and when the economic dam burst in 1929, many critics were quick to single out the intercollegiate game as an institution corrupted by the material excesses of an affluent era. In 1930, for example, sportswriter and social critic John R. Tunis charged that "the governors of the various (college) sports know perfectly well that the athletes are taking money on the side; the recent Carnegie Report showed many of the football players in the colleges to be as plainly bought and paid for as players on the New York Giants." As an indication of the changing climate of opinion on pro football, the *New York Times* pronounced in 1931 that "numbers of ball enthusiasts prefer the economical skill, the mature precision, the finesse, and the art of the professional game to the comparatively bungling college match."

The prominent sportswriters who Grange helped draw to the pro game played an important role in educating the public to the merits of professional football. A case in point is a satirical story which Westbrook Pegler wrote on a Chicago Bears victory over the New York Giants at the Polo Grounds in 1931. Pegler described three spectacular Bears' forward pass plays, which he said, "had they been 'tossed and ketched' in a famous college game, would have sent echoes ringing down for weeks," and added that "it looked as though some of the boys were actually willing to die, or at any rate be very ill, for dear old Mr. Mara and the dear old George Halas, manager of the Chicago Bears, Inc." Reflecting on the

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criticism heaped upon college football in the Carnegie Report, Pegler noted that "professional football had a difficult time for several seasons in New York, owing to popular disinterest and bad weather, but this year patrons have seen little difference between teams which play to support expensive college plants, including coaches, press agents, and graduate managers and the kind that play to support such as Mr. Mara."

This emphasis on the influence of sportswriters combined with the initial impact of the Carnegie Report and the beginning of the Depression in popularizing pro football does not diminish the fact that Grange attracted a large number of fans to pro games. During his two years with the New York Yankees (1926-27) and six additional seasons with the Chicago Bears (1929-1934), Grange was a major gate attraction. In the 1926 season with the Yankees of the AFL, the year before his career-threatening knee injury, Grange helped attract nearly 220,000 fans to fourteen New York league games, which undoubtedly gave the Yankees the best per game attendance average in both the AFL and NFL. Given the notoriously bad weather which held down attendance that season and the head-to-head competition with the New York Giants of the NFL, Grange's ability to attract fans is notable. After he was seriously injured early the following season, Grange's importance as a drawing card for both the Yankees (now in the NFL) and the league became further apparent. When ever it was announced that Grange would be unable to play due to his injury, attendance at the games fell off precipitously. As a part owner of the Yankees with [Charles C.] Pyle, Grange clearly aggravated his knee injury by playing hurt in an effort to meet contractual obligations with other teams and boost attendance.

After a year lay off in 1928 due to his injury, Grange returned to the NFL as a player with the Bears and continued to be the league's premier drawing attraction for several seasons. In later years, Grange and numerous other commentators have emphasized his diminished abilities in his so-called comeback seasons, which was true, but does not address the fact that Grange was one of the best backs in the NFL from 1929 through 1931. He made the all-NFL teams in 1930 and 1931 not for sentimental reasons, as some have suggested, but because he was an outstanding all-around player. During his first four comeback seasons, Grange's presence in the lineup could be expected to draw an extra two-to-five thousand fans to Chicago games both at home and on the road. In Philadelphia during the 1929 season, for example, the local press and the Frankford Yellow Jackets heavily publicized Grange's appearance in the city on November 16. They were rewarded when "more than 10,000 fans, one of the largest crowds ever to jam Yellow Jacket Stadium, "watched the home team defeat the Bears. Frankford's largest home attendance up to that point in the season had been a little over 6,000. Two weeks earlier at Wrigley Field, the combination of Grange and former Michigan star Benny Friedman, then with the Giants, attracted 26,000 fans. The bottom line was that Grange put fans in the seats to watch professional football.

Some commentators at the time and since have argued that the promotion of Grange as a kind of superstar of football did more to damage pro football than it did to promote the game. It led to a "star system" in the NFL during the late 1920s which gave the game a circus-like atmosphere rather than emphasizing the overall high quality of play. Few of the highly touted players such as Grange, Friedman, Ernie Nevers, and Bronko Nagurski could consistently live up to expectations and thus the public became disillusioned with the game. Frankford Yellow Jacket player/coach Guy Chamberlin remarked at the end of the Bears' eastern barnstorming tour of 1925 that "Grange broke down mentally and physically, because more was asked of him than any human being could perform. The pro players on other teams were affected by the Grange splurge, and the public is disillusioned." Other critics have alleged that the star system also created an unhealthy atmosphere in which coaches or promoters might be tempted to "arrange" for notable performers to make long runs or touchdowns in order to enhance future gates. Brooklyn Dodgers' owner and player John "Shipwreck" Kelly maintained that George Halas and Chris Cage of the Dodgers made such an agreement for Grange to make a long run in a post-season exhibition game between Brooklyn and Chicago in 1934. In Grange's case, the star system also contributed to a feature player performing while injured to meet contractual agreements or to increase attendance. While there appears to be some validity to the charges that the star system of the 1920s entailed considerable risks and disillusioned some potential fans, it may have also provided a necessary transition to a more solid organization for pro football which was achieved by the 1930s.

Grange's decision to turn pro most probably contributed to a more rapid transition of the NFL from a distinctly small time operation in 1925 to a more firmly established league by the early 1930s. Given what we know about the history of major league baseball, it seems clear that the NFL of the mid 1920s was evolving from a league burdened with too many marginal franchises in small cities to one that was beginning to recognize that its future success and prosperity was linked to promoting teams in larger cities. When Grange arrived on the scene, league president Joe Carr was already moving cautiously in

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that direction. In terms of weeding out some of the "tank town" franchises that made up the NFL, however, he was impeded by the fact that they were the core of the league when it was founded in 1920 and their owners remained a force in NFL affairs. After Grange demonstrated that pro football had the potential of attracting crowds of thirty, forty, and even seventy thousand to a single game, the process of transforming the NFL from an organization based on small franchises mainly surrounding the Ohio Valley to one grounded in the nation's larger cities was difficult to resist. It might be argued that if the league were to prosper such a transformation was inevitable, but Grange's impact on pro football almost certainly speeded up the transition.

Because there are so many variables to consider, it is difficult to state with certainty Grange's role in the rise of professional football. We can safely say that Grange did not save a faltering NFL in 1925. The preponderance of evidence suggests that Grange's emergence as pro football's first real superstar propelled the NFL and pro football in general forward in establishing the game as a major league sport. The line of progress was halting and certainly Grange was only one of the forces that contributed to the rise of pro football. But Grange deserves some of the accolades accorded him as a pivotal individual in the emergence of the professional game.

FIRST GRANGE TOUR

Official NFL games in CAPS

Thursday	November 26	Home	CHICAGO CARDINALS	0- 0	T	39,000
Sunday	November 29	Home	COLUMBUS TIGERS	14-13	W	28,000
<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>December 2</i>	<i>Away</i>	<i>*St. Louis</i>	<i>39- 6</i>	<i>w</i>	<i>8,000</i>
Saturday	December 5	Away	FRANKFORD YELLOW JACKETS	14- 7	W	36,000
Sunday	December 6	Away	NEW YORK GIANTS	19- 7	W	68,000
<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>December 8</i>	<i>Away</i>	<i>*Washington</i>	<i>19- 0</i>	<i>w</i>	<i>8,000</i>
Wednesday	December 9	Away +	PROVIDENCE STEAM ROLLER	6- 9	L	15,000
<i>Thursday</i>	<i>December 10</i>	<i>Away</i>	<i>*Pittsburgh</i>	<i>0-24</i>	<i>l</i>	<i>18,000</i>
Saturday	December 12	Away	DETROIT TIGERS	0-21	L	6,000
Sunday	December 13	Home	NEW YORK GIANTS	0- 9	L	18,000

SECOND GRANGE TOUR

<i>Friday</i>	<i>December 25</i>	<i>Away =</i>	<i>*Florida Collegians</i>	<i>7- 3</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>25,000</i>
<i>Friday</i>	<i>January 1</i>	<i>Away</i>	<i>*Tampa Cardinals</i>	<i>17- 3</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>12,000</i>
<i>Saturday</i>	<i>January 2</i>	<i>Away</i>	<i>*Jacksonville Stars</i>	<i>19- 6</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>35,000</i>
<i>Sunday</i>	<i>January 10</i>	<i>Away</i>	<i>*New Orleans Stars</i>	<i>14- 0</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>10,000</i>
<i>Saturday</i>	<i>January 16</i>	<i>Away</i>	<i>*Los Angeles Tigers</i>	<i>17- 7</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>75,000</i>
<i>Sunday</i>	<i>January 17</i>	<i>Away @</i>	<i>*California Stars</i>	<i>14- 0</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>n/a</i>
<i>Sunday</i>	<i>January 24</i>	<i>Away</i>	<i>*San Francisco Tigers</i>	<i>9-14</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>n/a</i>
<i>Saturday</i>	<i>January 30</i>	<i>Away</i>	<i>*Portland All-Stars</i>	<i>60- 3</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>n/a</i>
<i>Sunday</i>	<i>January 31</i>	<i>Away ^</i>	<i>*Northwest All-Stars</i>	<i>34- 0</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>n/a</i>

+ -at Boston, MA

= -at Coral Gables, FL

@ -at San Diego, CA

^ -at Seattle, WA