

Here's Your Hat...

1927

By Don Smith

The year 1927 was one for accomplishing firsts. Charles Lindbergh became the first to fly the Atlantic solo. "Babe" Ruth became the first to hit 60 home runs. The National Football League had no individual exploits to hold against those achievements, but as a group they accomplished something rather unusual -- they surgically removed most of the weak franchises. For the league, this was a first. In the NFL's previous seven seasons, franchises had fallen as regularly as autumn leaves. Most of the departed went quietly, drowning in their own red ink. A few had been removed forcibly for failure to pay their league fees, but that was essentially the same thing. One -- Green Bay -- had been coerced to resign for breaking a league rule (although "Curly" Lambeau had bought a new franchise before the next season), and the Milwaukee owner had been forced to sell his franchise for committing another infraction. But never had a franchise owner been told to go away simply because his team couldn't hack it and was, as a result, costing the other owners money. Until 1927.

One year earlier, it had been incumbent on the league to have as big a membership as possible. In New York, Brooklyn, Chicago, and Philadelphia, NFL teams scheduled directly against the Grange-Pyle American Football League upstarts. A variety of visiting teams provided competition, mostly weak. Every moderately strong NFL team deprived the AFL of a possible franchise. Every NFL game reported helped crowd AFL games off the sports pages. Every football player performing in the NFL was one less playing in the AFL.

But the crisis had passed. It was time to think of the future. Healthy franchises like the Chicago Bears, Frankford Yellow Jackets and New York Giants had lost money in 1926 because of the AFL War, but the prospects were good for 1927 if they could simply avoid being pulled into the abyss by such nonentities as the Canton Bulldogs, Akron Indians, Hammond Pros, and other such losers. The big three had refused to visit the lesser cities for years. A sell-out in Canton's bandbox Lakeside Park would earn the Bears less as visitors than the Halas men could reap from playing host before a modest crowd at Wrigley Field. Even Canton's visitor's share of a Chicago gate was usually more than they could earn at home. So, in 1926, the Canton Bulldogs had hosted such "stellar attractions" as the Columbus Tigers, Louisville Colonels, Akron Indians, and two traveling teams that would go anywhere there was a hundred-yard field -- the Los Angeles Buccaneers and the Nevers Eskimos. If the Bulldogs were to survive another season, it would only be with trips to Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia.

But Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia fans didn't want to see the Bulldogs. Certainly Canton would not be in the thick (or even the thin) of the 1927 championship race; no Bears fan would turn

out expecting to see an important or close game. The Ohio team could offer no new gate attractions. Jim Thorpe, Wilbur Henry, and Pete Calac were all past their prime, but worse, they were old news. For any of the big three to put Canton on its home schedule for 1927 would have been an act of charity. They'd done their charity work in 1926. In 1927, the Bears knew more fans would fly to Wrigley Field for a honey of a matchup against Green Bay than for the vinegar offered by Canton.

Teams in Green Bay, Providence, Cleveland (back yet again) were caught in the middle. Although they couldn't hope to draw the crowds of the big three, a strong attraction like the Bears could put 10-12,000 in the stands. That was good enough to get one or two of the big three as visitors. And the teams were good enough to draw okay home-and-home among themselves. But they certainly didn't want Canton mucking up their schedules. Whether home or away, they'd lose money on the Bulldogs.

Apparently, the Canton people got the message early. They didn't send a representative to the next league meeting, and, since they weren't marked as "absent," it can be assumed they had already dropped out of the league by then. But that left Akron, Dayton, Columbus, Hammond, Rochester, Minneapolis, Louisville, Kansas City, and a couple of other marginal teams to be dealt with. None of the potential winners cared if losers like Canton, Akron, Hammond and Dayton wanted to play games among themselves, just so long as the weaklings didn't get in the way of the serious business of the strong: winning football games and making money.

... There's the Door, Act One

By the time the NFL owners met at the Astor Hotel in New York on Saturday, February 5, 1927, the AFL was dead although no official obituary had been printed yet. The Rock Island Independents, the team that had jumped to the AFL in 1926, even applied for readmission to the NFL. The application never even made it to the floor, the Executive Committee rejecting it out of hand. Times had changed. It was soon made clear to the representatives from Akron, Rochester, and such that the league didn't need any more weak teams with unfilled 4,000-seat stadiums. Nor could it abide any more anemic road teams, whose only use was to show up in Chicago or New York on an odd weekend and provide exercise for the locals. Such clubs, once useful, were now virtual parasites. They drew no fans themselves, yet took a percentage of the gate. Instead of addition, the NFL was about to grow by subtraction.

Shortly after the meeting began, Dr. Harry March, Tim Mara's figurehead president of the New York Giants proposed that President Carr appoint a committee of nine to consider the "reorganization of the league." This wasn't a bolt out of the blue for

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the owners of healthy franchises; they'd undoubtedly talked it over beforehand. Carr appointed a nice mix of representatives of the strong, the middling and the weak: the Chicago Bears, New York, and Frankford at one end of the spectrum; Kansas City, Akron, and Columbus at the other; and Providence, Pottsville, and Green Bay aligned in the middle. As soon as Frankford was officially declared the 1926 league champions, the committee took a fifteen minute break to "discuss" the matter. In truth, the time was probably spent in telling Akron, Columbus, and Kansas City they were about to be lopped off and kicking around ways to make it as painless as possible.

After the break, the committee reported through chairman Charles Coppen of the Providence Steam Roller, that it felt the league should be divided into two classes -- "A" and "B." This was tantamount to saying "major" and "minor" leagues. Most of the owners of the lesser teams were immediately and understandably upset. After all, they'd paid for major league franchises. Coppen added somewhat lamely that if this plan wasn't "feasible" the Executive Committee could consider a method of reorganization that would "serve the good of the league." In other words, take back your hot potato, gentlemen.

After some more discussion, it was decided to adjourn until the next morning. That would give the advocates of various solutions a chance to work toward becoming a majority. But a simple majority was not what was needed. The strong teams could not cavalierly expell the weaklings, who, after all, had committed no sin other than losing money. Teams like the Bears and Giants might refuse to schedule Akron -- the schedule was still being arranged by individual owners rather than the league -- but if the Akron owners chose to pay their dues and guarantee, they would remain in the league. Somehow a way had to be found to get the unproductive teams to agree, however grudgingly, to their own demise.

Because the Executive Committee had a heavy docket of monetary claims between clubs to resolve, the full membership didn't get together until two in the afternoon on Sunday. One interesting point the committee dealt with was the punishment to be meted out to the New York Giants for playing a game against the Philadelphia Quakers in December of 1926. Although every NFLer took satisfaction in the 31-0 thrashing handed to the AFL champions, the game had been played without league permission. Something had to be done. Playing such a game could result in fine, suspension, or even expulsion. But, of course, the New York franchise was a crucial money-maker. The Executive Committee voted to "condemn" New York. As a slap on the wrist, it wasn't even a near-miss.

When the second general session began, Coppen led off by saying his committee had been unable to arrive at a definite plan although they generally agreed that something had to be done. That part everyone agreed with. Surprisingly, the owners then voted unanimously to accept the "A" and "B" plan. The next problem was in deciding who was an "A" and who was a "B." Carr quickly appointed Coppen chairman of a new committee to solve that little dilemma. Joining him were Shep Royle of Frankford, Johnny Bryan of Milwaukee, Jim Conzelman of Detroit, and Jerry Corcoran of Columbus. It came as no shock that, when the five-man committee reported after a brief recess, the only committee member in charge of a designated "B" team was Corcoran, Joe Carr's protege. The

suggested "A's" were Providence, Frankford, Milwaukee, Detroit, New York, the Bears, the Cardinals, Cleveland, Green Bay, Buffalo, and Brooklyn. Duluth with Ernie Nevers and the strong Pottsville team were designated as traveling "A's" because they could draw well on the road. Kansas City was also a traveling "A," possibly as a compromise, although their "Cowboy image" might have been worth a few tickets at the gate.

The "B's" were Akron, Canton, Columbus, Dayton, Hammond, Hartford, Louisville, Racine, Rochester and Minneapolis. Note that this included the heart of the old "Ohio League" and most of the teams that had originally founded the league less than a decade before as a way of keeping their teams above water. Neither A.A. Young of Hammond nor any Racine representative were present, but the other "B" owners voted docily for their own demotion. So far, so good. Carr immediately assigned committees for each group to discuss "ways and means of formulating the division."

A few minutes later, everything fell apart. Corcoran, who'd been appointed chairman of the "B" group, reported that the only thing his people would accept would be the sale of their franchises back to the league for the current franchise application fee of \$2,500 per. In some cases, that was \$2,400 more than had been paid for the originals. The ten "B's" were proposing to sting the league treasury for \$25,000, certainly more than resided there at that moment. The "A's," still the majority, quickly voted no.

The ball was back in Carr's court. He was instructed to come up with an acceptable plan by April 15.

There's the Door, Act Two

It took him until April 23, when the owners met again, this time at Cleveland's Hotel Statler. The only representatives of the previously-designated "B" teams who bothered to show all had other league connections: Minneapolis's Jack Dunn was NFL vice-president, Dayton's Carl Storck was secretary-treasurer, and Louisville's Aaron Hertzman was sergeant-at-arms. Jerry Corcoran, though nominally the Columbus manager, was actually Joe Carr's trouble-shooter.

Carr outlined a six-point plan to reorganize the league. Then the assembled solons raked it back and forth until they were satisfied. The final plan was an interesting blend of carrots and sticks:

- 1 - Each Club which so elects may suspend operation for the season of 1927 without the payment of dues and any club which desires to retire definitely from the League shall upon the surrender of its franchise certificate to the League President be refunded its pro-rata share of any money in the League Treasury at the time said certificate is surrendered.

A pro rata share of the league treasury, about a 20th, would have been a few hundred dollars at best -- a far cry from the \$2,500 the losers had asked for in February. Nevertheless, it was better than a sharp stick in the eye, which was about all they could hope for if they opposed the league once the plan had been voted in. The better part of the deal was the chance to remain a member of the league without paying dues. A team could sit out a year for free, hoping for a better situation in 1928. This was so appealing, that a couple of "A" teams took advantage of it.

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2 - In the event a club elects to suspend for the season of 1927 ... the League will give such clubs the privilege and right of selling any player's contract up to and including September 15, 1927, providing they are going to disband their team. If a club elects to withdraw from the League as per the above plan, but elects to operate an independent Club, the League will respect the rights of their players during the entire season of 1927. The above protection and privilege to sell players shall be restricted to such players as are under contract at present or on the reserve list of said club as of April 23, 1927.

Again the carrot: Although it would be a buyer's market, the losers could try to sell their players to the "A" teams before the next season to offset their 1926 losses. Or, if they wanted to continue operating outside the NFL, they'd have a season's grace before their rosters were raided. The stick: don't try to sign anybody coming out of college this year. They are ours!

3 - In the event a number of clubs elect to accept the above proposal to form a league among themselves, the National Football League agrees to respect their players' contracts and territorial rights, and to extend in every manner possible help in the organization and operation of their league, agreeing to play exhibition games with them whenever possible and extending such other courtesies that may be within its power.

This was a major carrot because Joe Carr really wanted a pro football minor league with some sort of working agreement with the NFL. He could envision an arrangement similar to baseball's minor league system, where players could be developed for the major league NFL. Significantly, the offers to respect territorial rights and to arrange lucrative exhibition games were not made to teams choosing to play as independents.

Carr's hope wasn't realized in 1927. An eight-team Ohio State League under the leadership of his trouble-shooter Jerry Corcoran was announced in pre-season, but it fell through. Several teams, including Johnny Bryan's Milwaukee Badgers, did operate as independents in '27 and were scheduled for a few exhibitions.

4 - In the event a club elects to suspend as per the foregoing, the League will agree to permit such club to retain its franchise certificate in the National Football League and to dispose of it to any new member that may be voted upon favorably by the League. The League further agrees that no new franchise will be issued until all suspended franchises have been sold or cancelled, and that an applicant for a franchise in the League who may be acted upon favorably by the League President or the Executive Committee will be referred to the clubs holding the suspended franchise certificates to purchase them. However, any such owner of said suspended franchise certificate shall be limited to asking as its purchase price the amount that shall be the application fee for the time said sale or transfer is proposed.

This wasn't as good as it sounded. Although in theory a team could suspend and then sell its franchise for \$2,500, the league had to approve the new buyer, and they weren't looking for new members. The only team that really benefited by this clause in 1927 was the New York Giants.

5 - All the foregoing agreements which the League makes with any club which elects to avail itself of this voluntary retirement privilege is contingent upon said club refraining from having any connection, associating or friendly relation in any way, shape or form with any other Football League, or organization of any kind that does not have the approval or sanction of the National Football League.

The American Football League was presumed dead, but there was to be no resurrection involving any of the "B" teams. Mess around with C.C. Pyle or any neo-Pyles and all signals were off.

6 - All of the foregoing shall be operative for a period of one year from the date of the schedule meeting of 1927 or until the schedule meeting of 1928, at which time the foregoing agreements may be revised or broadened as the membership of the League decides. In other words, take the deal within a year because its going to get worse.

Although the next move wasn't part of Carr's plan, it definitely added some incentive for the "B's" to drop out of the league. George Halas proposed that the guarantee fee that each club was to deposit at the schedule meeting in July be raised a thousand dollars to \$2,500. Storck suggested that it go all the way to \$5,000, which sounds like a fit of pique. Of course, at the time, he probably figured his Dayton Triangles would be history by the schedule meeting. The league settled for Halas' proposed figure.

The NFL was still following the playing rules made by the colleges. No one had yet suggested that pro football make up its own rules. The new brainstorm of the collegians for 1927 was to move the posts off the goal line and set them on the back line of the endzone, ten yards deeper. The idea was to reduce the number of field goals and encourage teams to open up offensively. This made more sense for the college teams, who spent more time practicing their offenses than the pros, but it worked okay for the NFL in '27. Successful field goals dropped from approximately one every two games to one every three games, but scoring went up from 15.3 points per game (both teams) to 18.2 points per game. Although the new distance would eventually cause more ties to be played, that wasn't evident at first as the percentage of tie games in the NFL dropped from 12.1 to 8.3.

Providence couldn't comply with the new rule. The Cycledrome where the Steam Roller played had been built for bicycle races and the track cut across one endzone five yards deep. The league decided that the goalposts at both ends should be set at a depth of five yards.

Another odd rule change in 1927 allowed a team planning to punt from its own endzone to move the ball ten yards downfield. After the runback, the ten yards were given back to the receiving team. Fortunately, this oddity was short-lived.

And Yet More Meetings!

The scheduling meeting was held at the Hotel Northland in Green Bay on Saturday and Sunday, July 16 and 17. The first order of business was to find out who was in and who was out. The "ins" had to step forward and post their \$2,500 guarantees. Most of the "B" owners had sent word of their intentions. Out were Akron, Brooklyn, Columbus, Detroit, Hammond, Kansas City, the Los Angeles road team of 1926, Louisville, Minneapolis, Milwaukee,

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and Rochester. Brooklyn handed its dormant franchise to Tim Mara to settle some debts, giving the Giants owner two NFL franchises. No one seemed to object. Sam Deutsch had controlled two franchises in Cleveland in 1924 and all it ever got him was a championship.

Milwaukee, as mentioned earlier, would operate as an independent under Johnny Bryan in 1927. Detroit decided to sell as many players as it could. Owner Jimmy Conzelman apparently profited by the sale of player-coach Jimmy Conzelman to Providence. Star tackle Gus Sonnenberg and guard Jack Fleischman were also peddled to the Steam Roller. Kansas City sold most of its roster to the new Cleveland team that was to be built around Michigan All-America Benny Friedman. Former K.C. coach-manager (and probably part-owner) Roy Andrews became coach of the Cleveland (what else?) Bulldogs. The other "outs" had in theory merely suspended operations for a year, but the only one to ever try to come back was John Dunn's Minneapolis club.

The "ins" were Buffalo, Cleveland, Chicago Bears, Chicago Cardinals, Dayton, Duluth, Frankford, Green Bay, New York, Pottsville and Providence. The surprise was Dayton. Carl Storck's Triangles were one of the weakest teams in pro football and strictly a "roader" around the NFL. He had apparently taken on a partner named Redelle to keep the Triangles going. Though Storck could call in some old debts among the other owners to schedule him a few games each season, there seemed to be no real reason for him to hang on and post his guarantee -- until the next day.

Before the teams began scheduling, Dewey Scanlon of the Duluth-Nevers Eskimos began discussing raising the visiting team's guarantee, a subject close to his heart in that the Eskimos were always visitors. The formula until then had been \$1,200 for salaries and \$100 for hotel and traveling expenses. Eventually it was decided to raise the guarantee to a flat \$2,500, although a visitor would still get its gate percentage should that prove larger. Under that system, Storck, whose payroll was surely the lowest in the league would make a nice profit on every game he could wheedle. The owners then began arranging games. As each deal was made it was marked on a large blackboard set up at one end of the room. Storck was given a full plate for October when home teams could count on reasonable crowds for almost any game if the weather was good. If nothing else, a visit by the dreadful Triangles figured to help a team improve its winning percentage so it would be in the race in November when crowds only showed for winners. Only Green Bay was willing to waste a Sunday on the Triangles in November.

Storck managed to come up with one new wrinkle in 1927 by signing Walter Achui, the former Dayton U. halfback, and the league's first Chinese player. Achui, called "Sneeze" for humorous reasons and "Chink" with less wit, was a ten-second dash man, but he seldom got a chance to show it with the Triangles' horrible blocking. If "Sneeze" wasn't exactly a drawing card, he was at least a curiosity. In 1928, Storck hired the league's second oriental, Art Matsu, a blocking back from William and Mary.

The owners left the scheduling meeting thinking their league work was finished for the year, but such was not to be. A month and a half later, on September 4, they trooped to Cleveland for a "special" meeting. Tim Mara had figured out what to do with his second,

"Brooklyn" franchise. He'd rent it to C.C. "Cash and Carry" Pyle. The meeting had been called to okay the deal and to reorganize the schedules.

Mara disliked Pyle intensely, but he was no fool. Pyle still had "Red" Grange, a football team, and a lease on Yankee Stadium. By taking C.C. into the NFL, Mara effectively put a leash on him. As an outsider, Pyle could have scheduled independent teams into Yankee Stadium all season long, thereby cutting into attendance at the Polo Grounds. But once inside the NFL, Pyle was stuck with doing just about anything Mara wanted him to do. A schedule was arranged that kept Pyle and Grange out of New York until November 8, Election Day. And that was the only date on which both the Giants and the Yankees were opposite each other in the Big Apple. On the other two November dates Pyle was allowed, the Giants were visiting somewhere else. In December, the two teams would play a home-and-home series, with the Giants hosting the preferable first game. For all the rest of the Yankees' schedule, Grange and company would visit and, hopefully, the Redhead's still-charismatic name would make everyone rich. Even Dayton agreed to host a game with Grange. Cleveland arranged two visits, one to be played in Detroit, where the combination of Grange and Benny Friedman figured to set a box office record.

The only hang-up was making some provision for Joey Sternaman. Apparently Pyle still owed Joey, and something had to be done before the Giants-Yankees arrangements could be made. At first it looked like Joey would be allowed to purchase an interest in the Cardinals, which would have put him in business against his brother Dutch, the half-owner of the Bears. Chris O'Brien of the Cardinals could have used almost any new money, but something queered the deal -- most likely Joey refusing to become part owner of a team headed for bankruptcy. The final arrangement found Joey re-joining the Bears, his old team. He wasn't given a part of the ownership, and whatever special consideration he got to sweeten the deal has been lost.

Newspaper reports of the agreement called it a "merger" of the NFL and AFL. Technically, that may have been true, at least in the same way a bass merges with a minnow. The Yankees were the only AFL team to retain any identity, although there was supposedly an arrangement made to divvy the Chicago Bulls between the Cardinals and Bears. In addition to Joey Sternaman, Bulls' fullback Buck White played for the Bears in 1927. Back Red Strader and tackle Abrey Goodman, Bulls' regulars, subbed for the Cards in '27.

With Grange aboard, along with Joey Sternaman and Paddy Driscoll with the Bears, "Wildcat" Wilson in Providence, Benny Friedman in Cleveland, and Ernie Nevers traveling around with his one-man show, the NFL had the most and the biggest stars in its history. And with a tighter, twelve-team league to divide the loot, everyone looked forward to 1927 being the best year ever.

FINAL NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE STANDINGS: 1927

Teams	W	L	T	PF-PA
New York Giants	11	1	1	197- 20
Green Bay Packers	7	2	1	113- 43
Chicago Bears	9	3	2	149- 98
Cleveland Bulldogs	8	4	1	209-107
Providence Steam Roller	8	5	1	105- 88

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New York Yankees	7	8	1	142-174	Dayton Triangles	1	6	1	15- 57
Frankford Yellow Jackets	6	9	3	152-166	Duluth Eskimos	1	8	0	68-134
Pottsville Maroons	5	8	0	80-163	Buffalo Bisons	0	5	0	8-123
Chicago Cardinals	3	7	1	69-134					