

The Packers Crash Through 1929

By Bob Carroll

The National Football League sailed blithely into the 1929 season, but events off the field that fall would have a far greater bearing on the health of pro football than any games played. The stock market crashed in October, and by the time the last contests were played in December, the country was beginning to feel the pinch. By the next season, it would be in a vice. But just when the Depression was making ownership of an NFL franchise a shakier proposition than ever and ownership of a small town team almost suicidal, "Curly" Lambeau turned the Packers of little Green Bay one of the league's best attractions. With perfect timing, Lambeau upgraded a good Packer team into an NFL powerhouse by signing three veteran players of all-star rank.

In the next few years, as the Depression deepened, every small town NFL team except Green Bay went under. Green Bay's little City Stadium was consistently filled (9,000 seated and 1,500 standing on the best days) and the Pack filled bigger stadiums on the road. Although the town owned the Packers, it was Lambeau, who'd helped found the team in 1919 and salvaged the franchise in 1922, who brought the Packers intact through the nation's most devastating economic crisis. Today, the fans who jam Lambeau Field for every Green Bay game owe their thanks to him.

The Winter Meeting

At two P.M. on Saturday, February 2, President Joe Carr called the annual winter meeting to order at the Hotel Sherman in Chicago. After Carr read his usual hopeful State of the League report, Treasurer Carl Storck read his financial statement, which was received with "considerable comment, all very complimentary," according to Secretary Storck.

Things were in decent shape financially for most clubs, but they couldn't afford to overlook a windfall -- what to do about Buffalo's \$2,500. The Buffalo team had quit in mid-1927 and not operated in 1928. The \$2,500 they'd put into the guarantee fund was still sitting there. It's dispensation occupied much of the afternoon and was finally handed over to the Executive Committee.

C.C. Pyle was one owner in deep financial trouble. His New York Yankees had been without their main attraction, Red Grange, in '28 but Pyle's problems also were reported to stem from some bad investments. At the end of the season, he still owed his players \$7,200. If he couldn't pay them, he'd lose them as free agents. Pyle insisted he'd already paid \$1,200 of what he owed and asked to be given until April 15 to come up with the rest. The league gave him until May 1.

Pyle was nothing if not slick. Heaven only knows all of his wheelings and dealings, but a good example is the case of guard

Mike Michalske. The former Penn State star had put in a couple of seasons for Pyle, and C.C. owed him \$400. Tell you what I'll do, said C.C. Forget the \$400 and I'll let you become a free agent. Then you can make your own deal with some other club and no doubt get a lot more. That sounded okay to Mike who eventually became one of the threesome signed by Lambeau for the Packers. The only thing was, had he waited until after May 1, he'd have become a free agent anyway and Pyle would have still owed him \$400.

Eventually, Pyle handed the franchise for his Yankees back to Giant owner Tim Mara and left pro football. As far as is known, no one suggested a farewell testimonial.

Once Pyle had his extension, business moved on at the league meeting. The 1928 championship was officially awarded to Providence, and the treasurer was instructed to dole out the cash for the usual trophies and pennant.

The summer meeting had been scheduled for Pottsville, but the owners had second thoughts and rescinded that idea. Maybe they just didn't want to go to Pottsville, but more likely they knew what was going to happen to the Maroons because they next voted the July meeting for Boston "in the event there is an applicant acceptable for the Boston franchise on file with the League at that time." If no such applicant was found, they would go to Dayton which was probably going to be open.

The afternoon was growing late, so they adjourned to a dinner hosted by the Bears and Cardinals. By nine o'clock when they reconvened, the Executive Committee was ready with its report. Most of that dealt with small claims by one club against another of ten and fifteen dollars. The real backbreaker was the \$1,932.50 the committee decided the Cardinals owed the Triangles as a guarantee for their game the previous October. Ironically, the 7-0 affair was the only league game won by the Cards in '28, indeed, the only game in which they scored.

Rather surprisingly, the Executive Committee recommended and the owners agreed that Ambrose L. McGurk be allowed to operate the Milwaukee franchise. McGurk was the former Milwaukee owner forced out after the '26 season for employing high school players. Either the league was desperate for an active Milwaukee franchise or they figured everyone had forgotten about the high schoolers. Re-admitting McGurk was certain to be a bad PR move.

Concerning the Buffalo money, the committee said, in effect, everyone put in a claim and we'll divvy it up in July. They then

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"legalized" the whole thing by declaring the Buffalo franchise forfeited.

In the elections, Carr was again named president and Storck secretary-treasurer. The Hon. James E. Dooley of Providence, H.S. Royle of Frankford, and George Halas of the Bears were elected to the Executive Committee. Aaron Hertzman, owner of the Louisville Brecks, one of several franchises suspended with league permission, was elected Sergeant of Arms in an "old boy" move that gave him an excuse to come to the meetings.

The league offices were now all in the hands of some of pro football's least successful entrepreneurs. President Carr's Columbus team had long since folded. Vice President John A. Dunn's Minneapolis club had been inactive since 1924. Storck's Dayton team was all but dead. And now Hertzman!

A week after the meeting, Storck wrote Carr a letter. He included the various claims the teams had against Buffalo's \$2,500. However, he added, "I met Mr. Weil of the Buffalo Club in the Hotel Sunday and he advised me that they were going to start legal proceedings with reference to their guarantee fund. I imagine that we will have some problems on our hands with this before we get through."

In view of the league's modern experiences with multi-million dollar lawsuits, it's rather quaint to see the league officers nervous over a mere \$2,500. But everything was scaled down in those years. As an example, Storck in the same letter discussed Carr's salary and the expenses of the league office: annual salary \$3,500, out of which came office rent of \$165 and stenographers fees of \$360, leaving the president \$2,975 for his year's work.

Friedman to the Giants

The Packers were not the only team to improve itself with new talent. Before the July meeting -- which turned out to be in Atlantic City -- owner Tim Mara of the New York Giants purchased the franchise and entire squad of the Detroit Wolverines, the third place team in 1928. The combination of the best of the Giants and Wolverines squads gave New York a good defense and the best offense in the league.

Benny Friedman, the main reason Mara swung the deal, shone as a runner, passer, kicker and gate attraction. He made the Giants a profitable enterprise after Mara had lost about \$40,000 in the 1928 season. Friedman's high salary, said to be \$10,000, was well-earned. Easily the best passer in football, Friedman's throws gobbled up more than 1,500 yards, and his 20 touchdown passes would not be topped until 1942.

Roy "Bull" Andrews, the Wolverines' coach was put in charge of Mara's club. The important players accompanying Friedman and Andrews from Detroit were backs "Tiny" Feather and Len Sedbrook, center Joe Westoupal, and tackle Bill Owen, whose older brother Steve had been with the Giants for several years. Besides Stout Steve, another key holdover was Tony Plansky, a talented track and field athlete from Georgetown who bounced back from an injury-spoiled 1928 rookie season to become, next to Friedman, the chief New York runner. Friedman's favorite pass targets were Sedbrook and end Ray Flaherty, a refugee from the Yankees.

With his Detroit purchase, Mara controlled three NFL franchises: his Giants, Detroit, and the one C.C. Pyle had returned.

The July Meeting

Most of the July meeting was taken up with who was in and who was out of the league. Among those who showed up were Messrs Lowe and Weil of Buffalo. In effect, the league caved in to their threat of a lawsuit and gave them another chance -- so long as they promised they'd really and truly play a whole season in 1929. To save a little NFL face, they had to post an extra \$2,500, but if they stayed through the whole season they'd get \$5,000 back. Then, to insure their staying, Carr finagled his trouble shooter Jerry Corcoran in as team manager.

Ambrose McGurk never got off the ground with his Milwaukee team. The league insisted that he post the regular \$2,500 guarantee. He asked that they skip that little technicality and they refused.

One of the NFL's pioneers called it quits in July. Chris O'Brien sold the Chicago Cardinals to Dr. David Jones for a reported \$25,000. The Cardinals had been around in one form or another since the turn of the century and had been the champs in 1925. But they'd never recovered from the 1926 war with Grange's American Football League.

Upon the motion of Robert Haines of Frankford, seconded by "Curly" Lambeau, the owners tended a rising vote of thanks to O'Brien "for the manner in which he operated the Chicago Cardinal Franchise and to express the regret of the club owners at his retirement from active participation in the league."

Right on the heels of the Cardinals' news came the announcement that the Duluth franchise, inactive in 1928, had been sold to Orange, NJ, interests by Ole Haugsrud and Dewey Scanlon.

Later that summer, new Cardinal owner Jones hired Haugsrud as his team manager and Scanlon as his coach. Although Haugsrud and Scanlon had sold their Duluth franchise to Orange, they had several of the Duluth players under personal contract. By far, the most important was Ernie Nevers who was willing to return to pro football.

Jones tried hard to bring the Cards back to major-league caliber. Before the season he sent them to an out-of-town training camp at Coldwater, Michigan. This was long considered the first example of an away-from-home pre-season camp but recent evidence is that the Giants and, perhaps, Duluth both tried it in 1926. A more significant move was to return the team to Comiskey Park for its league games.

Nevers, the big blonde fullback, missed the Cardinals' first two games because he was playing baseball, and then he needed a few games to gel with his teammates. Once they came together as a unit, the Cards won three of their last four games. In the annual Thanksgiving Day meeting with the Bears, Nevers scored a record 40 points by running for six touchdowns (another record) and kicking four extra points as the Cardinals won 40-6. That performance helped Nevers win the league scoring championship with 85 points, a mark that would hold until 1940.

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The Stapes

Another versatile back was Ken Strong, a rookie out of New York University, who signed with a new NFL member -- Staten Island Stapletons. Strong, an All-America tailback from N.Y.U., was one of the most versatile backs in football history. He ran with speed and power, blocked and tackled fearlessly, and was a fine enough punter and place kicker to earn a living as a specialist long after his days as a regular ended. In his senior year, he led all college players in scoring.

The Stapes started out in 1915, five years before the NFL was born in the midwest. Dan Blaine, a good halfback and a native of the working-class neighborhood known as Stapleton, along with three other players formed the team to play other semi-pro squads from New York and New Jersey. The Stapes played more for fun than money. Just as well: crowds were small; salaries averaged \$10 per game.

Nevertheless, they managed to do well, winning several local semi-pro titles before World War I. After military service, Blaine took over sole ownership in 1919.

Blaine himself prospered in the 1920s. His ownership of several restaurants on Staten Island made him wealthy. Some people say the restaurants were actually speakeasies where one could still get a stiff drink during Prohibition, and that Blaine was deeply involved in bootlegging. At any rate, he stayed in the Stapleton lineup at halfback until retiring in 1924 at the age of 33.

That same fall, the Stapes claimed the Metropolitan championship by beating the best independent pro teams in the area. However, Mara's newly-formed Giants moved into the Polo Grounds the next year and completely eclipsed the Stapes, particularly with the sell-out visit by Red Grange and the Chicago Bears on December 6. On Thanksgiving, the Giants played the Stapes in an exhibition game and bested them 7-0.

Blaine began upgrading his operation during the 1926 season. His squad started poorly and fan interest dwindled. Then, on November 14, the Newark Bears of the American Football League visited Staten Island. The AFL, the newly-organized challenger to the NFL, had gathered many high-caliber players. The Newark squad featured rookie fullback Doug Wycoff of Georgia Tech and a number of players from southern schools, but the team owner had run out of money and his players had gone several weeks without pay. When the Bears whipped the Stapes 33-0, Blaine hired the Newark squad en masse to finish out the season as Stapletons. The move killed the Newark franchise and gave Blaine a roster of big-league quality.

In 1927, the Stapes fielded basically the same squad, although Doug Wycoff defected to the Giants. The Maramen, an awesome team, won the '27 NFL championship and twice humbled the Stapes in non-league games, 19-0 and 18-0. The Stapes enjoyed a moment of glory when they beat the NFL Duluth Eskimos, starring Ernie Nevers 7-6 on November 27.

By 1928, Blaine was in full pursuit of an NFL franchise. He bolstered his squad by luring Doug Wycoff back as player-coach and by signing six graduates from the nationally-ranked New York

University team. The southern veterans and N.Y.U. rookies blended together to give the Stapes their best season ever. They went 10-1-1, including a 3-1 record against NFL teams. They even fulfilled a Staten Island fantasy with a 7-0 victory over the Giants on Thanksgiving Day.

When the NFL met the next summer to consider new members, Blaine's application for a franchise was approved. The Stapes came into the league on the old Brooklyn Lions-New York Yankee franchise which they obtained from Tim Mara after C.C. Pyle returned it to him. Although the same franchise was involved, the 1926 Lions, 1927-28 Yankees, and 1929 Stapletons were three different teams. Tim Mara, with actual ownership of three franchises, counting the inactive Detroit Wolverines, was only concerned with protecting his territorial rights and made no attempt to influence the Stapleton owners in running their team. If he had, Ken Strong would have joined Benny Friedman in the 1929 Giant backfield.

Blaine now had a full major-league schedule to play in cozy Thompson's Stadium, the Stapes' classic minor-league ballpark. Built in the early 1920s by the wealthy owner of a local lumber company, Thompson's nestled against a hill in the working-class Stapleton neighborhood and doubled in summer as a home for semi-pro baseball. Inside its stockade fence, about 8,000 uncovered bleacher seats ringed the field. The team's sheds standing just outside the fence. One of Blaine's restaurants was next door, and after games and practices, fans could rub elbows and maybe even quaff a beer with the players. A hard core of 3,000 fans paid their way into every game, but another couple hundred usually watched for free from the hill behind the south end zone. Although dwarfed by places like the Polo Grounds and Wrigley Field, little Thompson's Stadium hosted four years of NFL football in an often electric atmosphere.

Blaine wanted to polish his team by hiring a glamorous superstar and set his sights on Ken Strong. After graduating from N.Y.U. in the spring of 1929, the Connecticut native signed his first pro contract with the New York Yankees baseball team as a power-hitting outfield prospect. He hit .285 and poled 21 homers for New Haven in the Eastern League during the summer, leaving pro football offers aside until late in the diamond season.

As he was leaving the ballpark in New Haven on Friday afternoon, August 31, Dan Blaine and Doug Wycoff walked up to Strong and introduced themselves. They explained the Stapleton's new adventure and offered the then-very high salary of \$300 per game to put his famous name and talents to work for the Stapes.

This was years before the college draft started, and Strong had a date in New York that night to speak with Giants' coach Roy Andrews. Blaine gave the young star his phone number and asked him to call right away if things didn't work out with the Giants.

That night Andrews shocked Strong by offering him only \$200 per game. The coach spoke eloquently of the Giants' already heavy payroll and of the influential people owner Tim Mara could introduce him to. Strong told Andrews that he was interested in getting paid to play football, not in hard luck stories or contacts. Andrews handed Strong the phone number of Mara's office and told him to call back tomorrow.

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After leaving Andrews, Strong called Blaine and bent the truth, telling him the Giants offer was \$350 a game. Blaine countered with an offer of \$5,000 for the season plus a rent-free apartment. Strong accepted on the telephone, and the newspapers broke the story the next day.

Strong rushed for 527 yards in his first season. Together with player-coach Doug Wycoff, he gave the Stapes a powerful running attack, but their inability to come up with an adequate passer kept their offense from scoring many points.

Other New Teams

Another "new" team, the Boston Bulldogs, was actually the Pottsville Maroons relocated. Dr. J.G. Striegel had apparently found new financing in Massachusetts. The Providence Steam Roller acted as guardian angel for the deal, guaranteeing the check that brought the Bulldogs into the league and later helping out financially. It's not clear whether the money might be considered loans to a franchise Providence hoped would become a profitable rival or if the Steam Roller was actually backing the franchise.

Some of the old Pottsville players went along with the team to Boston; others, including speedy halfback Johnny Blood, made their own deals. The Bulldogs played a pair of games at Pottsville during the season.

NFL Vice President John Dunn resurrected his Minneapolis Marine franchise in a new incarnation -- the Redjackets -- primarily as a vehicle for Herb Joesting, the popular All-America fullback from Minnesota.

Of these new members, Buffalo and Boston would fold after one season. Also going out of business after this year were the Dayton Triangles, charter members of the league who lost all six games this season and scored only 7 points.

For more than a decade, college games had been controlled by four officials. In 1929, the NFL finally added the fourth man, the field judge, to the crew. Another important rule change declared a fumble when the ball hit a member of the receiving team but that it was dead if touched by a member of the punting team. And, in an effort to control fighting, the penalty for such an offense was placed at 15 yards or half the distance to the offender's goal line, whichever was greater. No one recorded the number of fights during the season, but one game in October saw a 40-yard penalty stepped off.

Building a Winner in Green Bay

The three Packer newcomers -- "Cal" Hubbard, Mike Michalske, and Johnny Blood -- blended perfectly with talented holdovers like tailback Verne Lewellen, the NFL's best punter, blocking back and ace passer "Red" Dunn, All-NFL end "Lavie" Dilweg, rugged fullback "Bo" Molenda, and veteran center "Jugger" Earpe. Together, they formed a versatile offensive unit and the league's most impressive defense.

Three Packer runners -- Lewellen, Blood, and Molenda -- rushed for more than 400 yards each, prospering behind a line bolstered by 250-pound Hubbard and cat-quick Michalske. Big "Cal" had requested a trade to Green Bay after starring for two years with the

New York Giants. Michalske signed as a free agent. Both were fine blockers. On defense, they made the Packers nearly impregnable. Green Bay matched its 1928 total of 39 pass interceptions and allowed only three touchdowns to its opponents all season.

The third newcomer was one of pro football's most colorful characters. His real name was John McNally, but early in his career, while on his way to earn some secret cash with a semi-pro team, he picked up a pseudonym from a movie marquee. The theater was playing the Valentino film "Blood and Sand," and John McNally became forever afterward "Johnny Blood."

He'd put in four years with weak NFL teams in Milwaukee and Pottsville before coming to Green Bay. Lambeau, upon learning Johnny was available, called him and offered him \$100 a game, but \$150 if he'd stop drinking. According to the legend, Johnny opted for the hundred.

With a team like the Packers, Johnny could showcase his talents. He could outspurt most other players, was a slashing inside runner, caught passes better than any back or end in the league, and was a first-rate punter and defensive back.

Additionally, he led the league in times fined by his coach. He ignored training rules and curfews, but his ability was so great that Lambeau, who was now a bench coach, had to put up with him.

The Race: Small Town vs. Big Town

Both the Giants and the Packers raced through the first two months of the season without a loss. The Packers won their first five games, all at home, by allowing their opponents a total of four points on two safeties. Next came four victories on the road in the midwest, in which the Pack finally gave up two touchdowns. Their only close call came in a fumble-filled performance against the Chicago Cardinals before 10,000 fans at Comiskey Park. Leading by only 7-0 midway through the final quarter, the Packers let a long Cardinal pass slip by them for a touchdown. Only an extra point try that sailed wide of the crossbars kept Chicago from a tie.

The Giants, meanwhile, had opened their season with a scoreless tie with the Orange Tornadoes, a new member of the league from a small city outside of Newark, New Jersey. After that slow beginning, Friedman got the offense in gear and the Giants reeled off eight straight victories. Two of those wins were shutouts over the Providence Steam Roller, who dropped from champions to also-rans with the retirement of key players "Curly" Oden, Gus Sonnenberg, and Clyde Smith, along with the lackluster play of tailback Wildcat Wilson.

The most impressive New York victory of the string was a 32-0 trouncing of the Frankford Yellow Jackets on October 20 in the Polo Grounds. The Yellow Jackets had their usual tough squad, but they could not best either the Giants or Packers in five meetings this year. Nonetheless, they had a solid star in fullback Wally Diehl, who gained more than 500 yards rushing on offense and intercepted seven passes on defense.

The season's showdown came on November 24 in the Polo Grounds when the 8-0-1 Giants faced the 9-0-0 Packers before an audience of 25,000. The Packers did not have the services of key backs Red Dunn and Eddie Kotal, who had been injured in the

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November 10 victory over the Bears. Hubbard and Michalske led a Green Bay pass rush that gave Benny Friedman little time to set up. Verne Lewellen consistently boomed 60-yard punts to keep the New Yorkers in poor field position.

In the first quarter, Johnny Blood helped set up a Green Bay touchdown with a short run. A few moments later, Lewellen threw a short pass to blocking back Hurdis McCrary for the TD.

Defense dominated the second quarter, and the Packers clung to their 7-0 lead at the half. In the third period, the Giants finally showed some of their league-leading offense. Three Friedman passes sandwiched among some good line smashes moved them 70 yards. A pass to Plansky yielded the touchdown, but when Friedman missed the extra point, Green Bay still led.

The roof caved in on New York in the final quarter. Lewellen went deep in punt formation, but instead of booting, he tossed a 26-yard pass to Blood, good for a first down at the New York 43. Hurdis McCrary threw to Lewellen for 16 more. Then fullback "Bo" Molenda drove in for the touchdown on a series of plunges.

Moments later, veteran center "Jugger" Earpe intercepted a Friedman pass at the Giant 37. The Packers took the ball into the endzone on a drive culminated by Blood's scoring run.

In their 20-6 triumph the Packers played practically the entire game with only eleven players. Guard Jim Bowdoin had to leave the field with an injury in the final minute of play.

Neither team lost any of its remaining games. The Packers played a scoreless tie at Frankford on Thanksgiving Day, then routed Providence and the Bears to wrap up the season as undefeated champs, the first since 1923. When the Packers arrived home by train on December 9, a welcoming party of 20,000 fans danced and celebrated all night in freezing temperatures.

Bad News for the Bears

Among the many highlights of the Packers' season were their three victories over their arch-rivals, the Chicago Bears. After six games, the Bears stood at 4-1-1, but their final nine contests resulted in eight losses and a tie. It was the Bears' first losing season.

Part of the problem was that the Bruins had too many past-their-prime regulars, but even more destructive was the trouble at the top. The team's co-owners, George Halas and Dutch Sternaman had differing opinions about how the offense should work. Consequently, the offense didn't work at all.

On the bright side, Halas coaxed Red Grange back into uniform to share a halfback slot with Paddy Driscoll, playing his final season. Coaxable because of stock market losses, Grange played well, rushing for 552 yards. However, the lingering effects of the leg injury that had forced him to the sideline in 1927 meant he was no longer the awesome breakaway runner of old.

Let There Be Light

No doubt the Packers' showdown victory over the Giants was the most important game of the season as far as the championship race was concerned. However, the Bears' 40-6 loss to the Cardinals wherein Nevers scored all of the Cards' points remains the most famous tilt of the season. But neither game had the lasting significance of a contest the Cardinals played earlier that year in Providence.

The Steam Roller had scheduled a visit from the Cards on Sunday, November 3, but heavy rain forced a postponement. The Providence management certainly didn't want to miss a chance to benefit from Nevers' drawing power, so they talked the Cards into sticking around for a Wednesday meeting. Meanwhile, the Steam Roller went down to Staten Island for a previously-scheduled election day meeting with the Stapletons. After tying the Stapes, 7-7, they grabbed a train back to Providence.

The novelty of the Wednesday game was that it was played at night -- the first night game in the NFL. Temporary floodlights were installed at little Kinsley Park, rather than the Cycledrome. About 6,000 curious fans filled the tiny park.

Nevers rose to the occasion with one of his greatest performances. He threw a touchdown pass, scored a running TD, kicked an extra point, and booted a 33-yard field goal. For those who thought night football would make passing impossible, he completed 10 of 18 tosses for 144 yards, while running for 102 yards on 23 carries.

1929 FINAL NFL STANDINGS

	W	L	T	PF-PA
Green Bay Packers	12	0	1	198-22
New York Giants	13	1	1	312-86
Frankford Yellow Jackets	9	4	5	129-128
Boston Bulldogs	4	4	0	98-73
Chicago Cardinals	6	6	1	154-83
Staten Island Stapletons	3	4	3	89-65
Orange Tornadoes	3	4	4	35-80
Providence Steam Roller	4	6	2	107-117
Chicago Bears	4	9	2	119-227
Buffalo Bisons	1	7	1	48-142
Minneapolis Redjackets	1	9	0	48-185
Dayton Triangles	0	6	0	7-136