

NFL COMPETITORS: 1926 - 1975

By Stephen Hensley

"There is a great public demand to see the game." Those are the words of W.H. "Big Bill" Edwards, the commissioner of the new American Football League in 1926. This was the first attempt to set up a rival league opposite the National Football League. It would not be the last. In all there have been six major attempts to wrestle parts of the market from the NFL. A couple were successful but for the most part the attempts have been failures. Yet all of them started out with the same premise that Big Bill Edwards expounded over a half century ago, "There is a great public demand to see the game."

The first of these leagues was the American Football League (a name to be used several more times) which was founded in 1926 because Harold "Red" Grange was denied a franchise with the NFL in New York City. After turning pro with the Chicago Bears late in the 1925 season, Grange had led the Bruins through a 19-game, coast-to-coast tour which had been a financial lifesaver for all of pro football. Grange's manager, promoter Charles C. "Cash and Carry" Pyle, believed that Grange had enough fan appeal to start his own team. But the move was blocked by Tim Mara, owner of the year-old New York Giants. Although most of the NFL teams were willing to approve the move, Mara would not sanction another team in the Giants' area.

Undaunted, Pyle decided that a whole league could be supported by Grange's popularity. He formed a nine team league, the teams being the Boston Bulldogs, Brooklyn Horsemen, Chicago Bulls, Cleveland Panthers, New York Yankees (Grange's team), Newark Bears, Philadelphia Quakers, Rock Island Independents (who jumped from the NFL), and the Los Angeles West Coast Wildcats (a road team led by George "Wildcat" Wilson).

Big Bill Edwards assumed the \$25,000 a year post of commissioner. He was a former Internal Revenue Service Collector and Street Cleaning Commissioner of New York who had been a famous football player at Princeton. He was heavy into rhetoric in his promotion of the league with such quotes as, "I want to help preserve the high class football as it is played in the colleges ... Our slogan is football for all and all for football. We want to let the public in on the greatest of all red blooded American sports!"

But the league was not successful. Not all of the teams that started that 1926 season finished it. The Philadelphia Quakers won the championship over Grange's Yankees.

In 1927, the NFL absorbed the AFL. New York ended up with two clubs -- the Giants and the Yankees -- after all. But the teams were to have no conflicting dates, leaving New York City with only one game per Sunday where there had been two or three in the metropolitan area of the previous year. President Edwards and Pyle completed the final reorganization and also announced that the three teams in Chicago had been combined into two. Other developments from the absorption saw the reduction of teams from 29 to 12. With the abundance of over 300 players and a record number of newcomers, this would make for a faster game and also increase the roster limits.

The owners looked with hope to a future of prosperity after the war of the previous year. The abundance of players as a result of the elimination of franchises enabled the owners to cut salaries and the increased competition resulted in a better brand of football and higher attendances. As for Grange, he played for the Yankees in 1927, sat out a year with a bad leg, and then returned to the Bears where he played until 1934.

In November of 1935, another new league was announced by Dr. Harry A. March. This new American Football League was to be composed of eight northeastern teams and, he said, would in no way conflict with the NFL.

In the fall of 1936, the AFL began operation in Boston, Providence, New York, Jersey City, Syracuse, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia. The AFL set player limits at 25 for the first three games and 22 after that.

The new league started out in a state of flux. The Syracuse franchise was moved to Rochester because of a lack of support for a winless team. A week later the team disbanded with coach Don Irwin switching to New York. A week after this, the Brooklyn team moved to Rochester to finish the season. In the midst of all this, Dr. March resigned as the commissioner because of the way the owners were signing football players. Apparently they were raiding NFL clubs, colleges, and other teams.

In most major newspapers, accounts of AFL games were hardly more than space fillers at the ends of columns. However, in 1937 an article appeared which drew headlines. Larry Kelley, the former Yale All-American and Heisman Trophy winner in 1936, signed a one-game contract to play with the Boston Shamrocks. Here was a player of repute (although Boston did not have a

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passer to go with him). His contract also gave him the option to play in four more games. Kelley had rejected an NFL contract with Detroit because the daily practices would have made him unable to teach school in New Jersey during the week. He could fly to the Boston games on the weekends without practicing. Apparently this was the high water mark for the second attempt at establishing a rival to the NFL.

A week later, Kelley announced he would not play after all.

For two seasons, the NFL went unchallenged. Then, in Chicago in 1940, a new league was organized with the catchy title of the American Football League. Big Bill Edwards was mentioned as a possible commissioner but the job went to William D. Griffith, the former publicity director at Ohio State University. The league was composed of six teams: Columbus, Milwaukee, Boston, New York, Buffalo, and Cincinnati.

The Columbus Bullies won the 1940 championship and the league announced an expansion for 1941. They expanded from six to five teams.

The AFL did try a new tactic to obtain college players. They voted to draft fifty outstanding 1940 college stars and letting these players decide which teams they wanted to play with. Douglas Grant Hertz, a well known promoter, purchased the New York team and vowed to make a great effort to sign Michigan's Tommy Harmon, the Heisman Trophy winner, and All-American "Jarrin' John" Kimbrough of Texas A&M, the two biggest college stars of the previous year. Hertz also announced in August that he had withdrawn his team from the league only to play "exhibition" games against the other AFL teams. The New Yorkers were carried in the league standings, which -- despite a few appearances by Harmon and Kimbrough for Hertz's team -- were led again by Columbus.

In early 1942 the league made claims that it was not experiencing any financial difficulties and that it would return the following fall. Yet when September arrived, the owners insisted that they were so tied up with war work they were unable to operate the league.

Thus ended AFL III.

In September of 1944, a group of millionaires announced the All-American Football Conference. This new league was to be the most successful attempt at capturing some of the NFL market to this time.

Many famous names were announced as being connected with the AAFC. Mrs. Lou Gehrig was to be the owner of the New York club. Baltimore was supported by former world heavyweight champion Gene Tunney. The Los Angeles team boasted such backers as Don Ameche, Bing Crosby, and Bob Hope. "Sleepy Jim" Crowley, one of the Four Horsemen of Notre Dame, was named commissioner with a five year contract of \$25,000 per year.

The league started with two rules concerning their operation: no team was to have a player or coach who had a contract with an NFL team and they were to sign no player with college eligibility left. In 1945, the league went to work gaining talent. Paul Brown, the Great Lakes Naval Center coach and former coach of Ohio State's 1942 National Champions, was named to coach Cleveland. In another deal Dan Topping, owner of the Brooklyn team in the NFL, "jumped" his NFL team to the AAFC, giving the new league an established team in New York. It turned out that Topping had been paid \$100,000 to join the new league. An additional help was that Topping had contract rights to many players from his years in the NFL. These players were to be divided over the league.

The fact that America was just emerging from World War II worked in favor of the new league. Many college stars were just ending their terms in the service so there was a lot of available talent. Such former college and service team stars as Glenn Dobbs, Frankie Sinkwich, Otto Graham, Norm Standlee, Frankie Albert, and Elroy Hirsch signed with AAFC teams.

There appeared to be acceptance for the brand of football that was played by the All American Football Conference. The largest crowd in pro football history attended the opening game between the Cleveland Browns and the Miami Seahawks in September 1946. The Browns proved to be the class of the league by winning the championship in each of the four seasons that the AAFC operated. Each year the Browns challenged the NFL champ to a play-off game but to no avail. In fact, the only response that was received was no response.

The All-American Conference was somewhat unstable. It had three commissioners in the brief span in which it operated, and although some teams were very successful, the Miami entry lasted only one year and the Brooklyn entry was disbanded before the last season. The question at the time was could two football leagues be supported? In the end, the answer was no.

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The war between the two professional leagues continued into 1949 and early that year eight of ten NFL owners were willing to accept Cleveland, San Francisco, Baltimore, and Buffalo into the NFL. But the vote had to be unanimous.

By the end of the year the leagues did merge. Dan Topping was persuaded to sell his Yankees and Washington agreed to let Baltimore operate in their area. These were contributive factors in the merger. Cleveland, San Francisco, and Baltimore became members of the NFL. The players on the remaining teams ended in a pool to be drafted by the teams in the new National Football League.

The final attestation as to the quality of play in the AAFC was shown in 1950. The Browns, in their first NFL season, won the championship.

Sunday afternoons in 1960 brought to the TV football fan a new game to watch. Instead of (or after) watching Jimmy Brown or Johnny Unitas, one could tune in a wide open attack unrivaled by anything seen in the established National Football League. Here was a game that created new stars for the American football fan and thus the name of the new league was the American Football League.

The AFL was founded by Lamar Hunt, the son of H. L. Hunt, the Texas multimillionaire. The league was supported by vast sums of money -- most of the owners were very wealthy -- but the factor that did the most to establish the AFL was television exposure. TV brought more games to more people than any other medium had been able to do. Another important factor was the caliber of the talent they got. The AFL picked up such NFL castoffs as future Hall of Famer George Blanda, who led Houston to the first AFL title. Billy Cannon, the 1959 Heisman Trophy winner, was signed, but one of the favorites was a little 5'6" cannonball named Charley Tolar. Two players, kicker Ben Agajanian and linebacker Hardy Brown, became the only men to play in the NFL, AFL, and AAFC.

The battle for player talent escalated into a full scale war with both leagues vying for the same college players. Although the lure of the established NFL attracted a majority of the big name college players, the AFL still signed many quality stars. Probably the most celebrated signee for the AFL was a quarterback from Alabama named Joe Namath.

Although the AFL met with ultimate success by merging with the NFL and creating a post season extravaganza called the Super Bowl the first few years were not a total success. Even with a \$185,000 per club TV contract the league lost over \$4-1/2 million the first season. When H.L. Hunt was told that his son Lamar had lost one million dollars this first year he remarked, "Goodness, the boy has only 123 more years to go." But it continued on in June 1966, it was announced that a merger agreement had been completed leading to full integration with a plan for 28 teams by the 1970 season. This merger led to the present setup of the NFL with its two conferences and three divisions within the conferences. Thus the AFL succeeded far better than any attempts previously had because of three elements: money, TV exposure, and name players.

The World Football League was the last try, to date, to establish a league opposite the NFL. The WFL was the brain child of Gary Davidson, a corporate lawyer and founder of both the World Hockey Association and the American Basketball Association. Davidson's premise was that one would probably lose money at first but those coming in on the ground floor would make a lot of money if it succeeded. He sought the three things that had made the AFL: money, TV exposure, and name players.

The money available for the 1974 season was from the assortment of backers of each of the teams that set up franchises in such places as Jacksonville, Memphis, Birmingham, and Honolulu. The WFL then went out to capture talent. Through raids on the NFL they signed such established stars as Calvin Hill, Larry Csonka, Jim Kiick, and Paul Warfield to large contracts. But the league could never get the television exposure that had been so important to the AFL's success. Except for a few scattered games the TV coverage was practically nil.

So, by the 1975 season, the WFL was in dire straits. Despite claims that the league was healthy and planning for expansion in 1976, many clubs were unable to meet payrolls. This was in September. Two weeks later the league announced that it was beginning a national marketing program to boost sagging attendance figures.

Despite such last minute efforts, the WFL went out of business on October 22, 1975.

Why did the WFL fail? Well, lack of the three essentials were three important reasons. The money ran out; there was no television; and the name players who were signed were either injured or lacked competent supporting casts. Also the WFL was not able to sign the good college players as the old AFL had done. But another factor enters there for conjecture. Had pro

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football reached a saturation limit? The large established markets were not threatened. Smaller cities were used and they were unable to sustain teams.

There have been six attempts to capture some of the NFL market. In a couple of cases success of the league was accomplished not by independent operation but rather by merger. In most of the cases though, there was not a "great public demand to see the game."

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Stephen Hensley investigated the attempts to establish NFL rivals as a research project for P.F.R.A. member Robert C. Barnett while a student in Professor Barnett's class at Marshall University.