

WHEN THE BEST TEAM LOST

By Bob Carroll

Before any football game, someone is sure to intone, "May the best team win." (Unless he's of a grammatical bent; in which case: "May the better team win.") Alas! as every football fan knows, the superior team doesn't always come out on top. Remember the 1968 Colts? From the view of a whole season, the Colts were a much stronger team than the Jets who downed them in Super Bowl III. One can argue, correctly I believe, that the Jets were the better team on only one day out of 365. But, of course, that was the day they played the game.

Until the NFL was born, pro championships were won like present college titles -- as much on opinion as on the field. When the season ended, writers, fans, and other influentials would let their feelings be known and the team with the most backing would get the cigar as the regional or whatever champ. Sometimes the title turned on a game; sometimes not. For example, the 1917 Canton Bulldogs could still claim the Ohio championship (which amounted to the U.S. title) despite losing their final game to Massillon. Ohioans looked at the two teams and agreed (except in Massillon) that the Bulldogs with Jim Thorpe were the class of the state and had just had an off day.

In the early years of the NFL, the championship for a season wasn't official until the league owners voted it so at the spring league meeting. For many years, the result of the vote taken in early 1921 was lost and it was often printed in learned texts that "no league championship was awarded for 1920." At last the record was found and the 1920 Akron Pros are now recognized as the league's first champions.

But, the very next year, a problem arose with Buffalo.

1921 Buffalo All-Americans

Buffalo began the season with a gang of stars; ends Heinie Miller and Luke Urban, tackles Lou Little and Bob Nash, guards Swede Youngstrom and Bill Brace, center Lud Wray, and a backfield of Tommy Hughitt, Ockie Anderson, Elmer Oliphant, and Pat Smith. All were either legitimate All-Americans or close to it.

The accurately-named All-Americans were a terrific team for most of the season. Then, their own manager torpedoed them. In late November, Frank McNeil informed NFL president Joe Carr that many of his players were doing double duty -- playing for non-league Philadelphia on Saturday and for Buffalo on Sunday. They'd been doing so for two seasons as McNeil well knew, so why he chose this moment to blow the whistle is a mystery. He got a game Canton had scheduled in Philly cancelled, and perhaps he hoped he'd get exclusivity from his players. Instead, four of his stars, including Miller, Little and Wray, opted to quit Buffalo and stay in Philadelphia. McNeil had to hurriedly import four players from Detroit (which had finished its season) for a November 20 game with Canton. The best the new Buffalo team could do was tie the Bulldogs 7-7.

Four days later, the All-Americans were in Chicago to face the undefeated Staleys. Despite their weakened condition, Buffalo edged the Chicagoans 7-6. At that point, Buffalo believed itself the league champ. Just to wrap things up, they brought in Dayton and Akron's 1920 champions who had earlier played the All-Americans to a scoreless tie. Buffalo's 7-0 win over the Triangles cinched the title as far as Buffalo was concerned. Their 14-0 decision over Akron was icing on the cake. Their record was 9-0-2; the second-place Staleys were 7-1-0.

But Buffalo had one more trip to make. After whipping Akron on a Saturday, they rode a train all night to Chicago to meet the Staleys again in a game the Buffalo people later claimed was a mere exhibition. As a matter of fact, the day after the All-Americans defeated Dayton, the Buffalo *Evening News* headlined its game story "Undeclared All-Americans Win Championship of A.P.F.A. [NFL]" The story said that Buffalo would "play a number of exhibition games," but "the result of these exhibition tilts will not affect Buffalo's

title." Just why anyone should think that is not clear; the league had set no end date for its season. In theory, a team could keep playing games until the following September and count them all as official 1921 contests. No doubt the mis-information came to the *Evening News* from Frank McNeil.

The All-Americans put up a good fight in Chicago, but the Staleys were fresher and took the game 10-7. That certainly didn't keep the All-Americans from thinking of themselves as league champions. After all, their 9-1-2 record at that point still topped the Staleys' 8-1-0. The Buffalo players even received little gold footballs that declared them 1921 champions. They were that sure!

But out in Chicago, George Halas knew the clock was still running. A week after the Buffalo win, he hosted Canton and beat them 10-0. That brought his Staleys to 9-1-0 -- percentagewise the same as Buffalo. Then, a week before Christmas, when every sane person in Buffalo was huddled around a warm fire, the Staleys played the Chicago Cardinals in a game that could have given the Halasmen one more win than the All-Americans. The Cards refused to cooperate and held the Staleys to a scoreless tie.

Halas might have talked the Cardinals into another game, but he decided his claim to the title was strong enough. At the league's spring meeting, he argued that his Staleys had the same winning percentage as Buffalo, had won the second (and therefore more determining) game with the All-Americans, and had outscored Buffalo 16 total points to 14 in the two contests.

Perhaps the Solomon-like thing to do would have been to declare co-champions, but that might have looked a little cheesy for a league only in its second year. Halas got his title. The Bears still claim it as their first championship, although some argue that it was won by A.E. Staley's franchise, with Halas starting his Bears' franchise the next year.

Meanwhile, the All-Americans -- the best team in the league when they didn't have to perform in Chicago after a long train ride -- got zilch. The good news was that Halas' maneuvering convinced some league owners that in the future it might be a nice idea to set a date for the end of the season. Ironically, in 1924, Halas lost a championship because of that. A December victory over the Cleveland Bulldogs would have given the Bears the title, but this time an end date of November 30 had been set before the season (at the suggestion of Halas' partner Dutch Sternaman no less). The win over the Bulldogs was declared an exhibition and Cleveland took the crown, much to George Halas' annoyance.

1925 Pottsville Maroons

The NFL's most celebrated example of the best team not winning a title is the Pottsville Maroons of 1925 if only because the case for the little Pennsylvania town has been argued ever since by a lot of writers who didn't know what they were talking about. As late as the 1960s, Pottsvillians tried to trade Charley Berry's kicking shoe to the Pro Football Hall of Fame for a belated declaration of a championship by the NFL. And in the early 1980s the learned journal of NAASH (North American Association of Sports Historians) devoted a passel of its precious pages to retelling Pottsville's propaganda.

Pottsville had been an independent power for several years before they received an NFL franchise in 1925. Among their line stars were end Charley Berry, guard Duke Osborn, tackle Russ Stein and his brother center Herb Stein. Their rushing attack was irresistible with such exceptional runners as Tony Latone, Barney Wentz, Hoot Flanagan, Jack Ernst, and Walter French.

That the Maroons were the strongest team in the league in 1925 seems clear. But their backers go much farther, erecting a conspiracy theory that would do Oliver Stone proud. In their paranoid vision, the NFL and Joe Carr in particular deliberately robbed the Maroons of a title they'd already won.

On December 6, the Maroons seemed to have that title well in hand. They went to Chicago and plastered the Cardinals, the league's second-best team, 21-7 at Comiskey Park. Pre-game publicity had billed this contest as a "championship game" and "for the championship." The first was misleading; in the parlance of the day, ANY game that counted in the league standings was a "championship game." As for being "for the championship," well, it certainly seemed so at the time. The Maroons and Cardinals were the class of the league. Pottsville's win left them at 10-2-0; the Cards were 9-2-1. So, the Maroons came back to Pennsylvania hailed as champions.

But once more that ol' debil End Date reared its technical head. The season still had two weeks to run! Its close was scheduled for December 20. Having been burned by a too-early end date in 1924, the league had over-reacted and set its 1925 season ending ridiculously late.

Although it's often written that the NFL had no schedules in its early years, that is wrong. Before the season, teams scheduled games up to the end of November. These weren't carved in stone because some weaker teams were always dropping out, but by and large, the major teams knew where they were going to be until right after Thanksgiving. In 1925, the NFL published a league schedule that took it through November 29. When December began, those teams that figured they could still draw crowds were free to schedule more games. And any played before the declared end date counted in the standings. The Maroons-Cardinals game that seemed to give the title to Pottsville was such an arranged game.

Cardinals' owner Chris O'Brien knew how the schedule worked; he'd seen Halas use it and then be victimized by it. He also had a special reason to get back into first place. Red Grange was touring through the east and drawing record crowds. Everyone was making money except O'Brien whose Cardinals, ironically, had faced Grange in his first pro game for the Bears. But Chris had opted to accept a standard guarantee rather than a percentage of the gate. When Grange drew nearly 40,000 to Wrigley Field, O'Brien wanted to kick himself. However, if he could boost his Cardinals back into first place, he just might convince the Bears to play his team one more time.

Hastily, he scheduled two weaklings, the Milwaukee Badgers and the Hammond Pros for games the next week. Both teams had disbanded for the season. Hammond came in on Saturday, December 12, and put up a good fight before losing 13-0. But two days earlier, Milwaukee had been an embarrassment. The Badgers couldn't call back enough of their players for a Thursday game to make a whole lineup. A Cardinal player, sub-back Art Folz, helped them out by recruiting four Chicago high school lads to play. Apparently O'Brien was unaware of the high-schoolers, but he knew that Milwaukee didn't present any competition, so he played the game in the morning and didn't charge any admission. A few of the Cardinals refused to play in the travesty but they weren't needed. The score was 59-0 even though the quarters were shortened.

About that time Grange was injured and ordered by his doctors to take some time off. That ended O'Brien's hope for a big payday and he packed it in for the season. Eventually, the use of the high school kids came out. Joe Carr hit the ceiling, declared that the game must be stricken from the records, fined O'Brien \$1,000 for not running a tighter ship, banned Art Folz for life, and ordered the Milwaukee owner to dispose of his franchise within 90 days.

Considering Carr's reaction, Pottsville's contention that he "ordered" O'Brien to schedule two more games so that the Cards could jump ahead of Pottsville in the standings is just plain silly. He did nothing of the kind, and Chicago newspaper stories of the day make it clear that the idea was O'Brien's. One more note: because other business got in the way, the league never got around to voting on Carr's wish to strike the Milwaukee game, so it's still part of the Cards' 1925 record -- 11-2-1.

Technically, that puts the Cardinals ahead of Pottsville's 10-2-0 record, but that's not what cost Pottsville its championship. Earlier in the season, Frankford (Philadelphia) and Pottsville had signed a contract that the area's best team would play a team of Notre Dame grads at Shibe Park in December. At the time, Frankford no doubt viewed including Pottsville as a mere formality. On November 14, they handed the Maroons one of their two defeats 20-0. But then the Yellow Jackets were upset by Cleveland and Providence and the week before the Maroons went out to Chicago to beat the Cardinals, they blasted Frankford 49-0.

So the Maroons looked forward to playing the Notre Dame All-Stars on December 12, the same day the Cardinals completed their season by defeating Hammond. But then Frankford decided to play spoilsport. Perhaps they felt the Maroons had run up the score to embarrass them in the 49-0 loss. They complained to the league that Pottsville would violate the Yellow Jackets' territorial rights if they played a game in Shibe Park. And, just to underline their complaint, they scheduled a game at Frankford Stadium for the same December 12 date.

Did the league really grant territorial rights with its franchises? Though no one has actually found such a statement in black and white, it's certainly a fair assumption. Up to that point, no other team had ever tried to impinge on another's territory. And, when Tim Mara put down \$2,500 for his New York Giants franchise before the 1925 season, he remarked that the exclusive right to anything in New York was worth the price.

We may say that Frankford in lodging a protest was acting unfairly, but they were on firm legal ground as far as the league was concerned. Probably, Joe Carr didn't like it very much but he had to send a telegram ordering Pottsville not to play at Shibe Park. When the Maroons indicated they were bound and determined to play, Carr sent two more telegrams declaring that Pottsville would be immediately suspended if they took the field against the Notre Dame stars. The warnings were ignored.

The Pottsville owner told reporters that Carr had at first given him permission over the telephone to play the game. He didn't bring this up at the later league meeting either because Carr couldn't grant such an incursion on a league team's rights or possibly because he'd learned in the meantime that Carr was in the hospital for surgery at the time when the Pottsville owner said he'd talked to him over the phone at league headquarters.

The Maroons beat the All-Stars 9-7 with Charley Berry kicking a field goal, but they were immediately suspended with eight days still left in the season. They weren't even allowed to play a scheduled Sunday game in Providence. Naturally, a suspended team was ineligible to win a championship no matter what its record. And that was what cost the Maroons the title they erroneously thought they'd already won.

At the next league meeting, when Red Grange and his manager C.C. Pyle announced they were going to start their own league, a lot of stuff hit the fan. The Grange League was born only after the league refused to let him violate Tim Mara's territorial rights and put an NFL team in Yankee Stadium. Mara could cite Frankford's protest of the Pottsville-Notre Dame game as precedent, and the rest of the owners (who would have really loved the anticipated paydays a Grange Game in Yankee Stadium could bring) had to bow to Mara's wishes. Chris O'Brien's fine was quietly rescinded because he was nearly broke, and even old Art Folz's lifetime suspension was lifted (though he never played again). And, to keep a strong Pottsville team from jumping to Grange's new league, Pottsville was let back into the NFL with only a nominal fine.

This was all understood at the time, but about fifteen years later when most of the details were blurred or forgotten a Pottsville sportswriter created the myth of the "stolen championship." And, because others are both lazy and ready to believe the worst about anyone in power, the story was picked up and retold by later writers who couldn't be bothered to check their facts. It wasn't until the 1980s, when a few determined historians -- most notably former Pottsville *Republican* editor Doug Costello -- actually researched the story, that the truth came out. Pottsville no doubt had the best team of 1925, but they blew the championship themselves.

1932 Green Bay Packers

No NFL team has ever won more than three consecutive championships but the Depression Era Packers made a great try. In fact, if modern rules are followed, they succeeded.

Though little remembered today in the wake Don Hutson's 1935-45 success and Vince Lombardi's powerhouses of the 1960s, the Packers' first great team was its 1929-31, three-time champions. Coach Curly Lambeau had got together the league's best end in Lavie Dilweg, best tackle in Cal Hubbard, best guard in Mike Michalske, and best pass receiver in Johnny Blood. For 1932, he added rookie fullback Clarke Hinkle and gave passer Arnie Herber a starting spot in the backfield. Hinkle finished fourth in rushing in the league and Herber became the first passing leader in this season when official stats were kept for the first time.

Green Bay began the season with business as usual. By mid-November, the Pack stood 8-0-1. The New York Giants, suffering through a down year, upset them 6-0 at the Polo Grounds on November 20. After winning two more games, Green Bay suddenly forgot how to play offense and lost two final

December games to Portsmouth and the Bears. That left them at 10-3-1, still with four more wins than any other team had garnered. Yet, the Pack found itself in third place.

The reason was the way the NFL handled ties. It ignored them; they didn't exist when figuring a team's winning percentage. As a result, the Packers trailed the Portsmouth Spartans with a 6-1-4 mark and the Chicago Bears with a completely absurd record of 6-1-6. Had the modern method of counting a tie as a half win and half loss been used the Packers would have ended on top and won their fourth consecutive title.

But, as Dr. Pangloss said, everything happens for the best in this best of all possible worlds. The Bears and Spartans with identical 6-1-forget-the-ties records held a playoff to determine the league championship. And, because of a Chicago snowstorm, the game was played indoors at Chicago Stadium on an 80-yard field (60 yards between goal lines). And, because of the squeezed field, hash marks were used to bring the ball into the field of play for the first time. Moreover, the game was won by the Bears on a controversial pass play that helped convince the rulemakers to liberalize the restrictions surrounding forward passing. And, finally, the NFL saw how the public responded favorably to an end-of-season playoff and so, by the next season, divided itself into two divisions to set up a Championship Game finale.

Probably the NFL would have found its way to these logical changes even had Green Bay been awarded the '32 title under a different system for counting ties. Probably it would have just taken a little longer to get around to them. Probably.

As things turned out, the Bears would have liked the Championship Game idea to start a few years later - - say, in 1935.

1934 Chicago Bears

The Bears might have got to the top with a goofy record in 1932, but they kept improving. In '33 they won the first official Championship Game, beating the New York Giants in an exciting game. The next year, Halas' team peaked, going from a good team to an overpowering juggernaut. Among the Bears stars were linemen Link Lyman, George Musso, Joe Kopcha, Zuck Carlson, and Walt Kiesling; ends Bill Hewitt, Bill Karr, and Luke Johnsos; and backs like Gene Ronzani, Carl Brumbaugh, and Jack Manders. The players who pushed the Bruins over the top were fullback Bronko Nagurski and halfback Beattie Feathers.

Nagurski was football's premier line plunger. If he couldn't quite leap tall buildings at a single bound, he could at least blast holes through any defensive line including the Maginot. In 1934, it was his blocking for the rookie Feathers that took the prize. Time and again Feathers, a quick and elusive runner out of Tennessee, would set sail around end, spring into the open as Nagurski leveled a couple of would-be tacklers, and then use his own skills to negotiate the remaining distance to the end zone. He averaged a fantastic 9.9 yards every time he carried the ball.

The Bears cruised through their first ten games with only a 10-9 win over the Giants providing any kind of a test. Then, in the eleventh game, both Feathers and all-NFL guard Joe Kopcha were knocked out for the season with injuries. Despite that, the Chicagoans took their final two games with victories over a strong Detroit team. The Bears' 13-0-0 mark was the first all- winning regular-season record in NFL history.

The Eastern Division champion New York Giants set to oppose the Bears in the Championship Game at the Polo Grounds was certainly not chopped liver. Players like Ken Strong, Harry Newman, Mel Hein, Red Badgro, and Ray Flaherty were legitimate all-stars. Still, the Giants had dropped five games during the season -- two to the Bears. The possibility loomed of a Chicago blow-out.

The weather man refused to cooperate. On game day, the field at the Polo Grounds was covered with enough ice to sink the Titanic. Both teams slipped and slid through a first half that ended with the Bears on top 10-3. At half time, the Giants got themselves a load of sneakers from Manhattan College. It took the third quarter to get everybody shod and used to the new footwear, but in the fourth quarter the sure-footed New Yorkers scored 27 points to make the final 30-13.

The "Sneakers Game" goes down as one of the most legendary upsets in NFL history, and the Giants deserve credit for being plucky, lucky, and footwise. But few would grant them the honor of really being the better team in 1934.

1942 Chicago Bears

By 1942, with the U.S. nearly a year into the war, every NFL team had lost a few star players to the service. The Bears were missing George McAfee, Ken Kavanaugh, Dick Plasman, and a dozen others. Even George Halas left during the season to join the Navy. But, if the Bears were hard hit, they started with far more than any other team in the league. This, after all, was the club that had demolished Washington 73-0 for the 1940 championship and then rode roughshod through the league in 1941. If the '42 team didn't have quite the dimension of the 1941 monsters, they certainly were head and shoulders above anyone else. Still hanging out at Wrigley Field were Sid Luckman, Gary Famiglietti, Hugh Gallarneau, George Wilson, Hamp Pool, Bulldog Turner, Lee Artoe, Joe Stydahar, Danny Fortmann, and George Musso.

In an all-winning, eleven-game season -- the second in league history -- the Bears' closest call was a 16-0 victory over Detroit. They scored 376 points to their opponents' 84. Certainly the Championship Game looked like a mere formality.

Their opponents, the Washington Redskins, were a pretty fair team themselves. Any squad that boasted Sammy Baugh was dangerous. Other topnotch 'Skins included linemen Ki Aldrich, Willie Wilkin, Dick Farman, and Clem Stralka, and runners Andy Farkas and Dick Todd. Still, this was basically the same team the Bears had manhandled 73-0 two years before. That was the kind of defeat that could permanently damage a team's psyche. Nevertheless, 36,000 fans turned out for the title game at Griffith Stadium, most of them hoping for a miracle.

From the start the Redskin line outplayed their more balleyhooed Bear opposites, thoroughly throttling the Chicago running game and rushing Sid Luckman into too-quick tosses. But, the Redskins' stout defense was betrayed by their offense when Chicago's Lee Artoe returned a fumble 52 yards for the first score of the game shortly after the second quarter began. He botched the extra point, but so what? Bears fans were sure the rout was on.

But it wasn't. The 'Skins continued to stuff Chicago's offense. Then, two-thirds through the period, Baugh hit speedy Wilbur Moore with a 39-yard touchdown toss, and, when Bob Masterson made the PAT, Washington went into the halftime break holding a paper-thin 7-6 lead.

Stopping a Bears offense that had averaged 34 points per game for a whole half was a kind of miracle; shutting it out for a whole game defied belief even among the most pious Redskins worshippers. Yet Willie Wilkin and company did exactly that. Andy Farkas added a second Washington touchdown on a short run in the third quarter and the defense did the rest. The final 14-6 verdict hardly equaled the Bears' 73-0 romp of 1940, but considering Chicago's on-paper advantage, it was heady stuff. The 'Skins may not have been the best team in the league on any other day that season, but they were just that on the one day that really counted.

In the ensuing fifty years, the NFL has had many big upsets -- some on a par with those of the Giants in '34 or the Redskins in '35. It's had disappointments that matched those of Buffalo in '21 and Pottsville in '25. There may have even been results as odd as what happened in 1932. But the first twenty-five years set a tone that continues -- "On any given Sunday"