

1936: THE FIRST DRAFT

By Bob Barnett

When the NFL convened for its annual player draft this year, it was a media event of the first order. The team tables and the NFL head table in the grand ballroom of the Sheraton Hotel in New York were bathed in the glare of television lights as the drama of who-got-whom was played out live before an ESPN audience and dozens of newspaper and magazine reporters. Many of the players who expected to be drafted in an early round attended the draft in person, but almost every other eligible football-playing college senior watched the television event with intense interest. As well they should have, for an early round selection can be negotiated into a seven-figure, multi-year contract, while a twelfth round pick can result in receiving only the NFL minimum, \$40,000.

This year's draft is obviously quite different from the very first NFL draft held in 1936. In contrast to today's practice of scouting virtually every college football player in the U.S., owners often compiled their draft lists from well-worn copies of *Football Illustrated* magazines. Then they got ready to talk contract in the low four figures. Worse yet, neither the fans nor the the players knew the draft was taking place and frankly did not care.

The idea of a draft was hatched in the fertile brain of Bert Bell, the beleaguered owner of the Philadelphia Eagles, in 1935. Bell, who successfully served as NFL commissioner from 1946 to 1959, founded the Eagles in 1933. After season records of 3-5-1 and 4-7, Bell noticed that the consistent winners -- the Packers, Bears, and Giants -- drew good crowds, while the rest of the league was sinking in a sea of red ink. It didn't take a genius to figure out that as the rich got richer they might not have anyone to play against. It was Bell's plan to award exclusive negotiating rights with selected college seniors, round by round, the teams with the poorest season records choosing first. This idea appealed even to the rich teams because they realized a draft would keep players' salaries down as teams no longer bid against each other. In 1935, the nine owners agreed to hold the first draft at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Philadelphia on February 8, 1936.

In the meantime, the Eagles suffered through a disastrous 2-9 season which encouraged the fans to stay away in droves. To cut costs, Bell fired head coach Lud Wray and appointed himself head coach. He also sold tickets in his spare time. Since most of the other teams had only an owner, coach, and maybe a business manager, not much time was spent in preparing for the first draft.

Art Rooney, Sr., owner of the Pittsburgh Pirates (the name was changed to Steelers in 1940), recalled how they scouted players. "We used to go down to the train station on Saturday night and buy the out-of-town newspapers to read about the college games. We also looked in the press books of various schools, read magazines and All-American lists. I spent a lot of time going out to local colleges and looking at players and I had some very good friends in the coaching ranks who would talk to me about players they knew about or played against. It wasn't as complicated as it is today."

When the owners settled in around the table at the Ritz- Carlton in February 1936, the United States was in the grip of the Great Depression. However, President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal had stimulated the economy and reduced unemployment from a high of 25 percent in 1933 to 17 percent in 1936. One of the New Deal agencies, the National Recovery Administration, influenced Bert Bell and the NFL in a couple of ways. For one, when Bell purchased the Philadelphia franchise in 1933, he called them the Eagles after the blue eagle symbol of the NRA. Some people even said that the NFL draft represented the feeling of business cooperation that the NRA was attempting to promote. Of course some cynics countered that the draft was only an attempt to keep players' salaries low.

The Eagles won the first pick with their 2-9 season, barely nosing out the Boston Redskins at 2-8-1 for the worst 1935 record. Bell selected the University of Chicago's Heisman Trophy winner Jay Berwanger. That move came as a surprise to everyone because Berwanger was reportedly asking for an exorbitant contract of \$1,000 a game and everyone knew Bell didn't have that kind of money. Before the day was over, however, Bell traded the rights to Berwanger to George Halas' Chicago Bears for journeyman tackle Art Buss.

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The draft continued through the afternoon with the nine NFL teams selecting nine players each. The Pittsburgh Pirates picked Notre Dame back William "Bill" Shakespeare in the first round. The Brooklyn Dodgers chose Alabama end Paul "Bear" Bryant in the fourth round. The eighty-first and final selection was guard Phil Flanagan of Holy Cross chosen by the New York Giants. All three of these players refused to sign NFL contracts.

The reason they did not sign was a common problem -- low salaries. "I didn't even know they had a draft until I got a letter from the Packers with an offer of \$125 a game," said Wally Fromhart, a seventh-round pick from Notre Dame. "Actually that was not a bad offer because I believe that the Bears signed (Joe) Stydahar (first-round selection) for \$100 a game. I didn't even try out because I had an offer to coach high school at Mt. Carmel in Chicago for a lot more money, if you can imagine that."

The players who did sign certainly didn't do it for the money. The second player selected in the draft, Riley Smith, an All-American back from Alabama and teammate of Bryant's did join the Redskins. "I signed because I wasn't ready to quit playing ball," Smith said. "I just wanted to keep playing. I signed for \$250 a game and a little bonus. We won the Eastern Division championship twice and the NFL championship once in the three years I played and the most I ever got was \$350 a game. I made more money in the off-season. I quit in 1938 and took a coaching job at Washington and Lee (University) for a lot more money. But we had it good because some of those fellas down in Philadelphia were playing for \$60 and \$70 a ball game."

The 1936 season opened in Chicago with the September 2 College All-Star Game between the defending NFL champion Detroit Lions and the College All-Stars. The All-Star starting lineup was made up of eleven players who had been selected in the draft and featured first-round picks Berwanger, Smith, and Shakespeare in the backfield. The All-Stars proceeded to prove that they could play with the best of the pros by holding the Lions to an embarrassing 7-7 tie and outgaining them in total yards 184 to 124. Of the eleven All-Star starters, only Smith and Wayne Millner (Redskins eighth-round) and guard Vern Oech (Bears fifth-round) chose to play in the NFL.

In fact, when the regular NFL season began only twenty-four of the eighty-one players drafted were on NFL rosters (four played the following season and three played in the American Football League), despite the fact that the roster limit had been increased from twenty-three to twenty-five players. The drafted rookies could have no doubt made the teams because more than fifty free-agent rookies played that season. In short, almost a third of the NFL players were rookies. When this was mentioned to Riley Smith recently, he said, "That's about right for that time. There wasn't any money in it (the NFL) so people didn't go in and if they did they didn't stay long."

The Redskins got the most immediate help from the draft, going from the next-to-last team in the NFL in 1935 to the Eastern Division champion in 1936. They signed four draft picks: backs Riley Smith (first round, Alabama), Ed Smith (third round, New York University), Don Irwin (seventh round, Colgate), and end Wayne Millner (eighth round, Notre Dame). In addition to the draft picks, the Skins signed seven free-agent rookies. They won five more games in 1936 than in the previous season and that's doing something in a twelve-game season.

Despite the fact that Halas failed to sign Berwanger, the Bears built a future on the 1936 draft. Granted the Packers (10-1-1) won the Western Division championship over the Bears (9-3) in 1936, but the Bears did improve by three wins over the 1935 season and had the second best record in the NFL. Over the next seven seasons, the Bears won five Western Division championships and three NFL titles, including the 73-0 crush of the Redskins in the 1940 title game. To a great extent that success was due to tackle Joe Stydahar, the Bears' first pick, and guard Dan Fortmann, the ninth round selection. Stydahar was All-Pro from 1937-40 and Fortmann from 1938-43.

Actually Papa Bear's success was due to both shrewdness and luck. He picked eight linemen (real cheap) while the other teams drafted well-publicized backs. He was lucky, however, because rumor has it he selected Fortmann only because he liked the sound of his name, and Fortmann signed only so he could go to medical school in Chicago. Fortmann completed his medical studies and was a practicing physician before he retired from the Bears in 1943.

The Packers' championship 1936 team was largely built around veterans Arnie Herber (tailback), Don Hutson (end), and Clarke Hinkle (fullback). The Packers did sign two of their first three draft choices,

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Russ Letlow (guard), Bernie Scherer (end), and fifth round pick Darrell Lester (center) joined them the following year.

One way that coach Curly Lambeau scouted college talent was to attend the annual East-West Shrine Game in San Francisco. That was where he signed Clarke Hinkle in 1932 and first saw both Letlow and Scherer.

The booby prize in the 1936 draft went to Bert Bell and the Philadelphia Eagles who failed to sign any of their eight draft picks. In desperation, Bell signed twelve free-agent rookies, five from local Philadelphia colleges, presumably because they could live at home and play for a low salary. It didn't work. The Eagles won their home opener 10-7 over the New York Giants and then proceeded to lose their next eleven in a row. The Eagles 1-11 record did give them first choice in the 1937 draft which Bell promptly traded to the Bears.

Despite the fact that the owners didn't scout much and could not pay the draftees a competitive salary, some gems were selected and played. For example, Alphonse "Tuffy" Leemans (New York Giants second round) led the NFL in rushing with 830 yards in 1936 and was the only rookie named to the All-Pro team that year. Leemans, along with Millner, Stydahar, and Fortmann currently represent the 1936 draft class in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Looking back over the years it is safe to say that the player draft has helped the NFL survive and prosper by maintaining a competitive balance, but in 1936 there was a lot of confusion about how the draft would operate. A final example of that confusion was the attempt to sign Nebraska All-American Bernie Scherer months before the draft was held. When recently asked how he felt about being drafted in the third round by the Packers in 1936, Scherer replied, "What draft? The draft didn't start until the following year. I know because I was sent contracts from the Bears, Giants, Dodgers, and I think Pittsburgh after the end of our season, but I didn't sign them. I played in the East-West All-Star game in San Francisco on January 1, 1936, and on the train from San Francisco to Los Angeles after the game, Curly Lambeau signed me to a Packer contract."

1936 NFL DRAFT BY ROUND

Teams drafted in order of their finish in the 1935 standings. Although Detroit won the 1935 Championship Game, New York had a better seasonal record and drafted last. The Bears and Cardinals tied with the same won and lost mark. They flipped a coin for the fifth draft position. The Cards won and drafted fifth on the first round. Thereafter, they alternated.

	Team	No	Player	Pos	College	Pro career
ROUND 1	PHI	1	Jay Berwanger	B	Chicago	DNP
	BOS	2	Riley Smith	B	Alabama	36 BOS;37-38 WAS
	PTT	3	Bill Shakespeare	B	Notre Dame	DNP
	BKN	4	Dick Crayne	B	Iowa	36-37 BKN
	CHC	5	Jim Lawrence	B	T.C.U.	36-39 CHC; 39 GB
	CHB	6	Joe Stydahar	T	West Virginia	36-42,45-46 CHB; 43-44
ms; ALL-						
	GB	7	Russ Letlow	G	San Francisco	NFL:37-38-39-40; HOF:67 36-42,46 GB; 43-45 ms;
ALL-NFL:38						
	DET	8	Sid Wagner	G	Michigan State	36-38 DET
	NYG	9	Art Lewis	T	Ohio U.	36 NYG; PC38,39 CLE
ROUND 2	PHI	10	John McCauley	B	Rice	DNP
	BOS	11	Keith Topping	E	Stanford	DNP
	PIT	12	Len Barnum	B	W.Va. Wesleyan	38-40 NYG,41-42 PHI, 43-
	45 ms					
		BKN	13	Bob (Babe) Levoir	B	Minnesota
	CHB	14	Ed Michaels	G	Villanova	36 CHB; 37 WAS; 43 P\P; PHI; (47 CFL)
44-46						
	CHC	15	Gomer Jones	C	Ohio State	36 CLE (AFL)

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	GB	16	J.W. Wheeler	T	Oklahoma	DNP
	DET	17	Chuck Cheshire	B	U.C.L.A.	DNP
	NYG	18	Al (Tuffy) Leemans	B	Geo. Washington	36-43 NYG; ALL-
NFL:36,39; HOF:75						
ROUND 3	PHI	19	Wes Muller	C	Stanford	DNP
	BOS	20	Ed Smith	B	N.Y.U.	36 BOS; 37GB
	PTT	21	Bobby Grayson	B	Stanford	DNP
	BKN	22	Wagner Jorgenson	C	St.Mary's (CA)	36-37 BKN
	CHC	23	Eddie Erdelatz	E	St.Mary's (CA)	DNP
	CHB	24	George Roscoe	B	Minnesota	DNP
	GB	25	Bernie Scherer	E	Nebraska	36-38 GB; 39 PIT
	DET	26	Andy Pilney	B	Notre Dame	DNP
	NYG	27	Frank (Butch) Loeb	E	Purdue	DNP
ROUND 4	PHI	28	Bill Wallace	B	Rice	DNP
	BOS	29	Paul Tangora	G	Northwestern	DNP
	PIT	30	Truman Spain	T	S.M.U.	DNP
	BKN	31	Paul (Bear) Bryant	E	Alabama	DNP
	CHB	32	Bob Allman	E	Michigan State	36 CHB
	CHC	33	Ed Brett	E	Washington St.	36 CHC; 36-37 PIT
	GB	34	Theron Ward	B	Idaho	DNP
	DET	35	Sheldon Biese	B	Minnesota	DNP
	NYG	36	Al Rose	E	Tennessee	36 NYG
ROUND 5	PHI	37	Harry Shuford	B	S.M.U.	DNP
	BOS	38	Wilson Groseclose	T	T.C.U.	DNP
	PIT	39	Wayne Sandefur	B	Purdue	36-37 PIT; 37 ROC (AFL)
	BKN	40	Bob Wilson	B	S.M.U.	36BKN
	CHC	41	Stan Riordan	E	Oregon	DNP
	CHB	42	Vern Oech	T	Minnesota	36 CHB
	GB	43	Darrell Lester	C	T.C.U.	37-38 GB
	DET	44	Kavanaugh Francis	C	Alabama	DNP
	NYG	45	Ed Jontos	G	Syracuse	DNP
ROUND 6	PHI	46	Al Barabas	B	Columbia	DNP
	BOS	47	Larry Lutz	T	California	DNP
	PIT	48	Maurice Orr	T	S.M.U.	DNP
	BKN	49	Joe Maniaci	B	Fordham	36-38 BKN; 38-41 CHB; 42-
45 ms						
	CHB	50	Ted Christofferson	B	Washington St.	DNP
	CHC	51	Ettore Antonini	E	Indiana	36 CIN (AFL)
	GB	52	Bob Reynolds	T	Stanford	37-38 DET
	DET	53	Abe Mickal	B	L.S.U.	DNP
	NYG	54	Gus Durner	T	Duke	DNP
ROUND 7	PHI	55	Jack Weller	G	Princeton	DNP
	BOS	56	Don Irwin	B	Colgate	36 SYR-ROC (AFL); 36NY
(AFL); 36						
	PIT	57	Marty Peters	E	Notre Dame	BOS; 37-39 WAS DNP
	BKN	58	Herb Schreiber	B	St.Mary's (CA)	DNP
	CHC	59	Tack Dennis	B	Tulsa	DNP
	CHB	60	Dick Smith	T	Minnesota	DNP
	GB	61	Wally Fromhart	B	Notre Dame	DNP
	DET	62	Charlie Wasicek	T	Colgate	36 SYR-ROC (AFL)
	NYG	63	Bob Peeples	T	Marquette	DNP
ROUND 8	PHI	64	Pepper Constable	B	Princeton	DNP
	BOS	65	Wayne Millner	E	Notre Dame	36 BOS; 37-41,45 WAS; 42-
44 ms						
	PIT	66	Ed Karpowich	T	Catholic U.	36-39 PIT; 40 BUF (AFL)

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	BKN	67	Bob (Bones) Hamilton	B	Stanford	DNP
	CHB	68	John Sylvester	E	Rice	DNP
	CHC	69	Ross Carter	G	Oregon	36-39 CHC
	GB	70	Wally Cruice	B	Northwestern	DNP
	DET	71	Dale Rennebohn	C	Minnesota	DNP
	NYG	72	Dick Heekin	B	Ohio State	DNP
ROUND 9	PHI	73	Paul Pauk	B	Princeton	DNP
	BOS	74	Marcel Saunders	G	Loyola (LA)	DNP
	PIT	75	Joe Meglen	B	Georgetown	DNP
	BKN	76	Jim (Monk) Moscrip	E	Stanford	38-39 DET
	CHC	77	Niels Larsen	T	Stanford	DNP
	CHB	78	Dan Fortmann	G	Colgate	36-43 CHB; ALL-
NFL:38,39,40, 41,						42,43; HOF:65
	GB	79	J.C. Wetsel	G	S.M.U.	DNP
	DET	80	B.(Choo-Choo)Train	E	Yale	DNP
	NYG	81	Phil Flanagan	G	Holy Cross	36 BOS (AFL)