

THE BEST OF THE REST: PART ONE

By Bob Gill

Today there are upwards of 1200 players in the NFL, more than ever before. But even so, the United States Football League managed to locate a decent number of qualified players not already on an NFL roster (the number of NFL-caliber athletes in the USFL varies depending on which observer you consult, but most agree that there are at least 50). It would seem, then, that even in its present expanded state, the NFL still doesn't exhaust the country's pool of top football talent.

Of course, in the past the NFL employed significantly fewer players. As we've heard a lot lately, in comparisons between the USFL and the 1960 AFL, in the late 1950s the NFL included only around 400 players, thus making it much easier for the AFL to find talented but unsigned players with which to stock its teams.

There was a time, however, when the NFL employed an even smaller number of the nation's best football players. From 1927 to 1946 -- the birth of the AAFC -- the NFL usually operated with around ten teams, with rosters limited to 25 or fewer; thus the league consisted of around 250 players in a given season. Even if we allow for today's athletes being better trained and better physical specimens, we have to concede that there can't be five times as many major league-caliber players available now as there were back then. For the sake of argument, let's say that in the 1930's there were annually 500 players comparable to today's major leaguers. That means that each year 250 of those -- half the total -- were not in the NFL.

Where were they, then?

Well, the answer isn't a simple one. Some, like Dutch Clark in 1933 and Cliff Battles in 1938, found college coaching jobs that paid more, and offered more security, than pro football; others, like the famous Jay Berwanger, found even the Depression-era business world more to their liking. But many -- most, in all probability -- chose to continue their football careers, if not in the NFL, then elsewhere. As a result, the years preceding World War II were the glory years for football's minor leagues. A number of the strongest circuits fielded teams that were capable of holding their own against the NFL, as were several independent clubs that formed during the period as well. In those days, then, minor league football bore little relation to the modern variety.

The point of all this, for now, is a simple one: Since all of the best players weren't in the NFL in those days, the annual All-Pro teams named by the league don't necessarily give the total picture of whom the top stars were in any given year. With that in mind, I think it appropriate to offer a supplement to the early NFL All-Pro teams listed in recent issues of the Coffin Corner: minor league all-star teams of the same era.

The list begins in 1934, with an excellent league called the AFL (get used to that name -- it got a lot of use over the next decade). This league operated for just the one year, but attracted a lot of newspaper coverage in the South, where all of the teams were located, and in fact it had a working agreement of sorts with the NFL. The circuit was of sufficient importance to prompt the selection of two all-league teams. The first, and most widely publicized, was chosen by Associated Press writers in league cities:

End Dutch Kreuter, Charlotte
Tackle Hugh Rhea, Kansas City
Guard Win Croft, Kansas City
Center Popeye Wager, Louisville
Guard Gordon Reddick, Charlotte
Tackle Jess Tinsley, Louisville
End Burle Robison, Memphis
QB George Grosvenor, Kansas City
HB Red Tobin, Memphis
HB Fred Hambright, Charlotte
FB Tony Kaska, Kansas City

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The Kansas City Blues, who began the season in St. Louis, won the championship, going undefeated in eight games; Memphis and Louisville were the runners-up. (Charlotte, despite three players on the honor squad won only three games.

The league's two top stars were Grosvenor and Kaska, both destined to play several years in the NFL. Grosvenor enjoyed two fine seasons with the Chicago Cardinals as a rusher and passer, while Kaska became an NFL blocking back. Louisville center Popeye Wager was a veteran from the Portsmouth Spartans, but when that team moved to Detroit for 1934, Wager apparently chose to remain in nearby Louisville rather than accompany his former club. Another ex-Spartan, John Cavosie, likewise joined the Louisville team. This was not an uncommon occurrence at the time; since the NFL was not very highly publicized, a player might well choose to play elsewhere if it meant keeping a good off-season job or playing before the hometown fans.

The other AFL all-star team named in 1934 was selected by the league coaches:

1st Team
End Cliff Ashburn, Kansas City
Tackle Champ Siebold, Memphis
Guard George Mougine, Charlotte
Center Homer Hansen, Dallas
Guard Danny McMullen, Memphis
Tackle Hugh Rhea, Kansas City
End Burle Robison, Memphis
QB George Grosvenor, Kansas City
HB Ted Saussele, Memphis
HB Casey Kimbrell, Louisville
FB Tony Kaska, Kansas City

2nd Team
End Dutch Kreuter, Charlotte
Tackle Charles Zunker, Dallas
Guard Cliff Norvell, Memphis
Center Art Koeninger, Memphis
Guard Win Croft, Kansas City
Tackle Nap Nisonger, Memphis
End (none)
QB-tie Frosty Peters, Memphis
Johnny Branch, Charlotte
HB Earl Clary, Charlotte
HB Dick Frahm, Kansas City
FB Ross Hall, Tulsa

Kansas City and Memphis dominated the coaches' picks, with Louisville almost completely shut out, and Charlotte again well-represented for an also-ran. Notice that six of the players on the AP team didn't make either the first or second squad as chosen by the coaches. Mougine and Saussele, first-teamers here, weren't even on the AP list of honorable mention. The discrepancies between the two all-star squads may have made for some good arguments in the South that winter.

In 1935, with the demise of the AFL, there were no significant minor leagues in existence. But in 1936, four important new leagues were organized. One of these, another AFL, is considered by most observers (including the NFL's own Encyclopedic History) a major league, and featured such star players as Ken Strong, Harry Newman, and Hank Soar. Unfortunately, the AFL didn't name an all-league team that season. The other new leagues were all less important, at least for the time being. They included the Dixie League, made up of teams along the South Atlantic Coast in Maryland and Virginia; the Midwest League (MWFL), covering Ohio and a few neighboring cities like Louisville; and the American Association (APFA), a northeastern league centered around New York and New Jersey. All of these leagues became important before their eventual demise, but in 1936 they were all in the formative stages, except perhaps the Dixie League (its champion, Washington, beat the APFA champs from Brooklyn for the championship of the Atlantic Seaboard, or some such title). But even though the Dixie did name an all-league team, the circuit contained few players of NFL caliber, so I've not included its selections.

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For 1937, the AFL did name an all-star team, probably chosen by the coaches, as was the custom at the time:

End Bill Moore, Los Angeles
Tackle Bill Steinkemper, Cincinnati
Guard Pete Mehringer, Los Angeles
Center Lee Mulleneaux, Cincinnati
Guard Alex Drobnitch, New York
Tackle Harry Fields, Los Angeles
End Red Fleming, Boston
QB Harry Newman, Rochester
HB Don Geyer, Cincinnati
HB Al Nichelini, Los Angeles
FB Gordon Gore, Los Angeles

As you might expect from the preponderance of Los Angeles players on the team, the Bulldogs easily outclassed the rest of the league. Cincinnati, the only team that could approach them in terms of talent, managed to win only two games. Incidentally, notice that this team, like the 1934 AFL's teams, is made up largely of players who played in the NFL -- some for several seasons.

For 1937 both the Dixie League and the American Association named all-star teams, but both were still a notch below leagues like the two AFL's. Of special interest, though, was the presence of Ozzie Simmons, black star from Iowa, as quarterback on the Association's second team. The Midwest League may have been the most improved that season, but it named no official all-league team. However, a newspaper in Ashland, Kentucky, the league's newest member city and home of one of its three best teams, conducted its own poll of league coaches and published what was in essence the official team. It's not included here, though, for the same reason the Dixie and APFA teams are omitted.

The following year, 1938, was an important one for minor league football. With the demise of the 1936-37 AFL, there were more than a hundred high-caliber football players available on the open market. While the Dixie League largely failed to take advantage of the situation, the MWFL and the APFA made the most of the opportunity. The Midwest League expanded its territory to include Chicago and Nashville and changed its name to the AFL (another one!), indicating its increased scope. The American Association's changes didn't involve increasing territory, but were perhaps more important: the league, for the first time, came under the direct support of the NFL when the New York Giants bought the Jersey City franchise and turned it into a farm club, the Little Giants, with Steve Owen's brother Bill as coach and Ken Strong as the top gate attraction.

Both the MWFL and the APFA helped themselves on the field by signing a number of ex-AFL players, some of whom, like Strong, had been suspended by the NFL for jumping to the outlaw league. The result was a significant improvement in the level of play. Unfortunately, it seems that only the American Association named an all-league team for 1938. It was picked by the coaches.

1st Team

End Harry Kline, Jersey City
Tackle Ed Franco, Union City
Guard Tom Jones, Paterson
Center Bob Baltzell, Paterson
Guard Nat Pierce, Clifton
Tackle Jack Moffitt, Jersey City
End Jimmy Ippolito, Paterson
QB Floyd Sexton, Brooklyn
HB Vince Renzo, Paterson
HB Bill Karr, Union City
FB Ken Strong, Jersey City

2nd Team

End Al Floyd, Danbury
Tackle Ed Marinowski, Clifton
Guard Jerry Shaw, Brooklyn

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Center Ray Otlowski, Newark
Guard John Bateman, Jersey City
Tackle Al Sadusky, Paterson
End Bob Cox, Paterson
QB Jack Thompson, Danbury
HB Howie Yeager, Jersey City
HB Joe Lillard, Clifton
FB Tony Sarausky, Union City

Jersey City and Paterson were probably the league's strongest clubs, as is apparent from the coaches' picks. But Danbury actually finished second, behind Jersey City, and did field a good team, though the coaches were evidently not impressed. For the second straight season the all-league team included a black player, this time former NFL'er Joe Lillard. And, by the way, Strong, who ran away with the scoring title during his year in exile from the NFL, wasn't the only future Hall of Famer in the APFA: Jerry Shaw's running mate at guard on the Brooklyn Eagles, a fellow named Lombardi, also went on to make a great name for himself in football circles.

While we're on the subject of all-star teams, there was another especially interesting development in 1938 -- actually in January 1939 -- when the first of the post-season NFL all-star games took place in Los Angeles. The game matched the champion New York Giants against the best players from the rest of the league -- but with a few notable additions.

For example, if you look at the starting lineups for the game, as listed in the NFL's Encyclopedic History, you'll find Ernie Smith of the Packers at one tackle position for the all-stars. However, Smith didn't play for the Packers in 1938; David Neft indicates that he was voluntarily retired. In fact, he was playing for the Hollywood Stars, a strong Pacific Coast club. Three other non-NFL players made the all-star squad, all from the nationally-known Los Angeles Bulldogs: end Bill Moore, guard Pete Mehringer, and back Gordon Gore. In addition, Bulldog coach Gus Henderson assisted Ray Flaherty in coaching the team.

Certainly one reason for including these outsiders in the NFL's game was to make the event a better draw in Los Angeles. But the fact still remains that the league recognized the players involved as top-notch athletes, whether or not their affiliation was with the major league. Thus even the NFL realized that some of the best players were playing elsewhere.

Moving on to 1939, we find the same two strong minor leagues in operation. The AFL expanded once more, this time taking in the Los Angeles team and becoming more "major league", in terms of territory covered, than the NFL itself. Though a few clubs had financial difficulties, the season was a successful one, with the Bulldogs edging out another new team, the Columbus Bullies, for the title. Once again, though, the AFL evidently chose not to name an all-league team, and it's too bad, since the list would have included several notable football names, including Tommy Thompson of St. Louis, later the Philadelphia Eagles' star quarterback.

As for the APFA, 1939 marked its best year to date. The season brought a second official farm team to the Association, with George Halas buying the Newark Tornadoes and re-christening them the Bears. The league split into two divisions, with Newark winning the championship game from Paterson, after surviving a playoff with newly-admitted Wilmington for the Southern Division title. The league's honor roll of its top players was again picked by the coaches:

1st Team
End Charlie Heileman, Newark
Tackle Leslie Lane, Union City
Guard Bernie Kaplan, Jersey City
Center Tex Coker, Wilmington
Guard Ed Michaels, Wilmington
Tackle Joe Yurcic, Jersey City
End Jack Ferrante, Wilmington
QB Walt Masters, Wilmington
HB Fella Gintoff, Providence
HB Ozzie Simmons, Paterson
FB Rudy Choborda, Newark

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2nd Team
End Bob Cox, Paterson
Tackle Al Sadusky, Paterson
Guard Joe Zeller, Newark
Center Ray Otlowski, Newark
Guard Bernie Moore, Jersey City
Tackle John Janusas, Union City
End Tod Goodwin, Wilmington
QB Andy Karpus, Union City
HB Dick Schweidler, Newark
HB Harry Mattos, Jersey City
FB Ray Allen, Paterson

The league's four strongest teams -- Newark, Wilmington, Jersey City, and Paterson -- dominated the selections, with Union City and Providence, the best of the also-rans, filling out the squad. Notice the number of top players the APFA added when it admitted Wilmington to its ranks. The Clippers were particularly strong at end, with Tod Goodwin, former NFL leader in receptions, and Jack Ferrante, outstanding end on Philadelphia's great teams of the late 1940s.