

Belly Up in Dallas

By Joe Horrigan

The Dallas Cowboys are one of the most respected and successful sports franchises to emerge in the last two decades. From the front office to the playing field, the Cowboys accomplishments are remarkable. However, Dallas' first venture into the world of pro football, the 1952 Dallas Texans, was much less a success.

Seemingly born of failure, the Texans were actually a transplanted version of another faux pas, the New York Yanks. When Yanks' owner Ted Collins, decided that eight years of red ink and losing teams was enough, he sold his franchise back to the NFL. A few weeks later, league commissioner Bert Bell surprised the sports world when he announced that the team had been sold to a group of Dallas investors headed by Giles Miller, a young Texas millionaire.

While some questioned the league's decision to place a pro team in an area so devoted to the college game, others questioned Miller's sanity in attempting to do so with the likes of the Yanks. More generous critics called Miller's move "courageous."

Whether crazy or courageous, Miller was absolutely confident. "There is room enough in Texas for all kinds of football," he prophetically announced. Unfortunately, the only place in Dallas to prove that there was "room enough" for pro football was the 75,000 seat Cotton Bowl. In their brief stay in Dallas, the largest crowd the Texans managed to draw was 17,499 curious spectators on opening day.

The regular season began for the Texans on a weekend in which the Cotton Bowl had already hosted two major college match-ups. On Friday night, SMU met Duke, and on Saturday afternoon, Texas A & M played Oklahoma A & M. By the time the Texans took the field on Sunday against the New York Giants, all but a few Dallas fans had had their football appetites satisfied.

The game actually began on an optimistic note – the Texans scored first. Just minutes into the game a Giants defensive back fumbled a punt return and two plays later the Texans scored. Sequence photos of the scoring play show that the nearest Giants defender was the same New York defensive back who had set up the drive with his fumble – none other than present Dallas Cowboys coach Tom Landry. The extra point attempt failed (something the Texans would do six more times during the season) and the Giants went on to a 24-6 victory.

From there things got worse. The team continued to lose and crowds got smaller with each week.

The Texans were not without some bright spots, however. After all, their roster did include future Hall of Famers Gino Marchetti and Art Donovan and the potentially explosive backfield duo of Buddy Young and George Taliaferro.

Potentially more explosive than the Texans' backfield was the fact that Dallas still had segregated seating laws and both Young and Taliaferro were black. "Anticipating heavy demand for tickets from Negro fans," a national publication reported, "the Texans have set aside reserved seats and general admission sections for them."

Whether resulting from pressure from the Texans' management or a lack of ticket requests in general, a minor blow for social justice occurred when segregated seating never materialized. "The Texans knocked out Jim Crow," Buddy Young would remark some years later. But realistically it was more like a TKO than a knock out as pro football in Dallas came to a screeching halt after just four home games.

Unable to meet his financial obligations, Giles Miller was forced to return the Dallas franchise to the league. With five games remaining, the Texans were made wards of the league.

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The last two scheduled home games were against the Chicago Bears and the Detroit Lions. It was decided that the Lions would serve as hosts to the Texans in Detroit, while the Bears would meet the vagabond team in Akron, Ohio.

The Akron game was actually the second half of a football double header with a high school morning game outdrawing the pros. There were so few fans in the stands that in his pre-game remarks Texans coach Jimmy Phelan suggested that rather than introducing the players on the field, they should "go into the stands and shake hands with each fan." Phelan had not lost his humor and his team had not lost their will to win, as the Texans stunned the George Halas-led Chicago Bears with a 27-23 victory.

"We had a good time in spite of everything," insists Art Donovan, "mostly because of Phelan." He was a likable Irishman and popular with his players. Perhaps part of his popularity was a result of his disdain for practice. "Once," as Donovan recalls, "we ran a couple of plays without fouling up. Phelan stopped practice, loaded everybody on a bus and took us to the racetrack. Jimmy loved the races."

Another popular Phelan story is how he fired Don Klosterman after missing a field goal attempt in the opening game against the Giants. Klosterman, who'd led the nation's passers in 1950 at Loyola, had joined the Texans fully expecting a fair shot at the quarterback spot. When Phelan released him, he was understandably irate. "Hell, I was a quarterback, not a kicking specialist," Klosterman recalled. "The ball hit the upright and bounced back. And the next day I got cut."

Weeks later, while preparing to face the Giants again, the Texans were reviewing the game films. When Klosterman's kick came up, Phelan stopped the film and ran it back a second time. "There," he announced, "who says I didn't give him a second chance?"

Ironically, Klosterman, who went on to have a highly successful career as an NFL administrator, is now the man charged with trying to salvage today's pro football disaster, the USFL's Los Angeles Express.

Just why the Texans failed, earning them the dubious distinction of being the last NFL team to do so, was a combination of bad management and bad luck. As Jimmy Phelan put it, "We got all the breaks and they were all bad."

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A Sorry Texan Tale!

Exhibitions:

Aug. 29	H+	Philadelphia Eagles	7-24	L
Sep. 5	H\$	Washington Redskins	27-14	W
Sep. 12	H	Detroit Lions	14-21	L
Sep. 20	H@	Chicago Cardinals	0-10	L

+ - at Odessa, TX

\$ - at San Antonio, TX

@ - at Houston, TX

Regular Season:

Sep. 28	H	New York Giants	6-24	L
Oct. 5	H	San Francisco 49ers	14-37	L
Oct. 12	A	Chicago Bears	20-38	L
Oct. 18	H	Green Bay Packers	14-24	L
Oct. 26	A	San Francisco 49ers	21-48	L
Nov. 2	A	Los Angeles Rams	20-42	L
Nov. 9	H	Los Angeles Rams	6-27	L
Nov. 16	A	Detroit Lions	13-43	L
Nov. 23	A	Green Bay Packers	14-42	L
Nov. 27	H#	Chicago Bears	27-23	W
Dec. 7	A	Philadelphia Eagles	21-38	L
Dec. 14	A	Detroit Lions	6-41	L

- at Akron, OH

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Team Leaders

Passing: Frank Tripucka - 186 att., 91 com., 809 yds, 3 TD, 17 int.

Rushing: George Taliaferro - 100 att., 419 yds, 4.2 avg., 1 TD

Receiving: Dick Wilkins - 32 rec., 416 yds, 13.0 avg., 3 TD

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Scoring: Buddy Young - 30 pts.