

Back Before Bengalmania

Cincinnati's First Brush With the Big Time

by Bob Gill

Sometimes the past pops up in the darnedest places.

Last January, amid the Super Bowl hoopla that engulfed Cincinnati and all the southwestern Ohio, the Dayton Daily News (on a page headed "Bengalmania") ran a column by Bucky Albers about Cincinnati's first brush with big-time pro football: the 1937 Bengals of the American Football League.

What the column doesn't say is that from 1936 to '41 Cincinnati was a hotbed of pro football activity. It's hard to fault Albers for that, though, because it's a story that very few people know.

The tale begins with the formation of Midwest Football League in early 1936. This minor league grew from a regular circuit of teams that played each other in 1935. It included clubs in Louisville, Indianapolis, Dayton, Columbus, Springfield--and two in Cincinnati. Most were sponsored by local businesses, and the Cincinnati members were no exception. One was called the Model Shoes (Models for short), the other the Tresler Oils (or Treslers).

The Models were the important team, featuring several former or future NFL players, including John Wiethe, an all-pro in 1939 and '40. They were coached by Hal Pennington and led on the field by a diminutive halfback named Leo Sack, who was second in the league in scoring with 42 points. They finished the regular season undefeated, but the league staged a Shaughnessy-style playoff afterward (first place against fourth, second against third, winners meet for the championship), and the Models lost the title game to the Louisville Tanks by the singular score of 2-0. Really, it was a travesty of a game, played in pouring rain and several inches of mud, and the only score came on a blocked punt. A week later, back in Cincinnati, the two teams met again on a dry field, and the Models won by a convincing 19-7 score. But that didn't change the fact that the Tanks were the champs.

1936 MWFL Regular Season	W-L-T	Pct.	Pts	Opp
Cincinnati	6-0-0	1.000	149	13
Louisville Tanks	5-1-0	.833	123	26
Dayton Rosies	4-2-0	.667	69	38
Springfield Bicos	2-3-0	.400	24	59
Cincinnati Treslers	1-4-0	.200	33	84
Columbus Bobbs	0-4-0	.000	13	80
Indianapolis Leons	0-4-0	.000	0	111

The other Cincinnati team, the Treslers, won only one game and dropped out before the next season. But they continued as an independent semi-pro team at least through 1938. The Treslers' most notable player (at least from the vantage point of 1989) was a quarterback by the name of Pete Rose--that's right, the father of you know who.

While the Treslers were fading into obscurity, a group called Queen City Athletics Inc. was forming the Bengals. In 1937 the new team joined the AFL, a second major league that had played its first season the year before (and was about to play its last). The Bengals lured Hal Pennington away from the Models to be their coach.

In his Dayton Daily News column, Bucky Albers called several interesting tidbits from a brochure printed by the Bengals for their inaugural season:

Coach Pennington was quoted as saying his team had "the greatest array of football talent ever to play together on a Cincinnati eleven"--and unlike many such statements, this one was almost certainly true at the time.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 11, No. 5 (1989)

"It cost \$10 for a season box seat for the six home games at Crosley Field. A season reserved seat was \$7.50. Single game tickets ranged from 55 cents for the bleachers to \$2 for a box seat.

But Albers errs when he says Pete Rose, the elder, was on the team. Though he may very well have tried out with the Bengals, and thus got his name in the preseason brochure, Rose didn't survive the cut, and never played with the Bengals.

Albers also gives the Bengals' final record as 2-3-2, mentioning that a season-ending road game against the Los Angeles Bulldogs probably never took place. Actually it did (Bulldogs 14, Bengals 3), but again it's hard to fault Albers for the omission, since a Pro Football Hall of Fame exhibit and the Official NFL Encyclopedia make the same mistake. The correct standings for the league looked like this:

1937 AFL Standings	W-L-T	Pct.	Pts	Opp
Los Angeles Bulldogs	9-0-0	1.000	233	72
Rochester Tigers	3-3-1	.500	94	115
New York Yankees	2-3-1	.400	57	115
Cincinnati Bengals	2-4-2	.333	105	103
Boston Shamrocks	2-5-0	.286	76	98
Pittsburgh Americans	0-3-0	.000	7	69

Despite their unimpressive record, the Bengals placed three players on the all-league team: tackle Bill Steinkemper, center Lee Mulleneaux and back Don Geyer, the AFL's leading scorer. The L.A. Bulldogs had five representatives on the squad; no other team had more than one. And attendance for the six league games in Cincinnati averaged a respectable 7,500.

Meanwhile, the Models repeated as regular-season MWFL champs under player-coach John Wiethe, who took over for the departed Pennington. Seven Cincinnati players were named to the league's first or second all-star team, including Stan Haffey, the MWFL's top passer. Among their six victories was a remarkable 95-7 rout of Indianapolis, and only a 14-7 loss to Ashland (Ky). Armcos kept them from another perfect record.

Cincinnati got revenge against Ashland with a 10-0 win in the first round of the playoffs; but again the Models ran into trouble against Louisville in the finals. The Tanks registered another shutout win, this time by a convincing 13-0 score, and the Models had to settle for second-best again.

1937 MWFL Regular Season	W-L-T	Pct.	Pts	Opp
Cincinnati Models	6-1-0	.857	197	47
Louisville Tanks	6-3-0	.667	170	61
Ashland Armcos	5-3-1	.625	120	92
Dayton Rosies	3-5-0	.375	74	105
St. Louis Gunners	1-4-1	.200	50	60
Indianapolis Leons	0-5-0	.000	14	260

The next season must have been a confusing one for Cincinnati football fans. First the AFL folded, but the Bengals opted to continue as an independent team. Then the MWFL changed its name to--you guessed it--the AFL, and the Models changed theirs to the Blades. To add to the confusion, Hal Pennington left the Bengals and came back to coach his original team, the Models--uh, Blades.

With Dana King as their new coach and Xavier University Stadium as their new home, the Bengals fielded their best team ever in 1938. Only a few players returned from the 1937 squad, but new acquisitions like backs Pat Howlett and Alton Owen, plus left-footed kicker Phil Martinovich, more than made up for any losses. The Bengals' 7-2-1 record included wins over the Pittsburgh Pirates and the Chicago Bears, and a tie with the Chicago Cardinals. And attendance for six home games against NFL and AFL teams averaged 8,000.

Perhaps the highlight of the season was a home-and-home series with the Los Angeles Bulldogs, fellow survivors from the 1937 AFL. Cincinnati won the first game 3-0 on a Martinovich field goal, but two weeks later in L.A. the Bulldogs broke open a close game in the second half to win going away, 48-17.

Meanwhile, the renamed Blades won their first three games, including one over arch-rival Louisville, and seemed well on the way to their third straight regular-season title. But on October 13 Pennington made the shocking announcement that the team had disbanded as a result of what he called "dissension." The

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 11, No. 5 (1989)

league tried to get the Bengals to finish out the defunct team's schedule, but King's team declined the offer.

The Blade-less AFL finished its season with only five teams, and in the playoffs Louisville won its third straight championship. This time the Tanks didn't have to beat the Models/Blades to do it, but for good measure they scheduled a game with the Bengals and whipped the "other" Cincinnati team by a 17-7 score.

For 1939 the Bengals relented and joined the AFL, along with the L.A. Bulldogs. The AFL was really strong that year, and Cincinnati finished second (behind L.A.) with a 6-2 record, losing only to the Bulldogs and the third-place Columbus Bullies. (The league abandoned its postseason playoffs in '39.) Howlett was again a star in the backfield, and Martinovich booted three field goals in a 9-0 win over St. Louis early in the season before he was lured away by the Detroit Lions.

1939 AFL Standing	W-L-T	Pct.	Pts	Opp
Los Angeles Bulldogs	7-1-0	.875	223	85
Cincinnati Bengals	6-2-0	.750	117	85
Columbus Bullies	9-4-0	.692	235	81
East Chicago Indians	4-3-0	.571	55	51
St. Louis Gunners	5-6-0	.455	141	164
Dayton Bombers	2-5-0	.286	45	167
Kenosha Cardinals	2-7-0	.222	97	105
Louisville Tanks	2-9-0	.182	51	226

Still, despite a good showing on the field, the season was somewhat disappointing. Attendance for four home games--including a 26-6 loss in a rematch with the Chicago Bears--averaged only 3,500, and by the end of the season the Bengals were playing strictly on the road, including games in Indianapolis (against Louisville) and Kansas City, Mo. (against St. Louis).

The Bengals' management may have been looking for something new. If so, they got their wish.

In the summer of 1940 a group of eastern businessmen stole three teams from the 1939 AFL, added three new teams in Boston, Buffalo and New York, and formed their own "major" league, also christened--what else?--the AFL. The three teams from the 1939 league were Cincinnati, Columbus and Milwaukee (which had replaced L.A.). The old AFL died--and for all the success they had in the new league, the Bengals might as well have disappeared too.

Despite the presence of several holdovers from 1939, the 1940 edition of the Bengals never got going and finished the season in the basement. Among the losses was a 49-0 debacle against Milwaukee, plus a 40-13 drubbing at the hands of the New York Yankees. The Bengals' nominal home was Crosley Field, but they never played there, probably because no one in Cincinnati showed much interest in the team. One late-season "home" game was played in Charleston, W.Va., and two weeks later the Bengals had to forfeit another to Buffalo when injuries made them unable to field a team. Only one Cincinnati player, fullback Paul Shu, made the all-AFL team--the second team, at that.

1940 AFL Standings	W-L-T	Pct.	Pts	Opp
Columbus Bullies	8-1-1	.889	134	69
Milwaukee Chiefs	7-2-0	.778	180	59
Boston Bears	5-4-1	.556	120	79
New York Yankees	4-5-0	.444	137	138
Buffalo Indians	2-8-0	.200	44	137
Cincinnati Bengals	1-7-0	.000	53	186

(Point totals for New York, Buffalo and Cincinnati don't include forfeits.)

Dana King returned to the sidelines for his fourth straight year as coach in 1941, but things didn't get much better on the field, as the Bengals repeated their last-place finish of a year before. The team did show some improvement, though, as reflected in the presence of three players on the league's all-star squad: end Joe Kruse and backs Bill McGanon and Gene Tornquist. And for the first time since 1939 the Bengals played actual home games--in Xavier University Stadium on consecutive Sunday nights in October. But poor attendance caused the remaining home dates to be moved--one of them to Akron.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 11, No. 5 (1989)

1941 AFL Standings	W-L-T	Pct.	Pts	Opp
Columbus Bullies	5-1-2	.833	142	55
New York Americans	5-2-1	.714	116	73
Milwaukee Chiefs	4-3-1	.571	115	84
Buffalo Tigers	2-6-0	.250	72	172
Cincinnati Bengals	1-5-2	.167	69	120

With the coming of World War II, the AFL suspended operations just before the 1942 season; and though the league vowed to return when the war was over, it didn't keep that promise. The All-American Football Conference emerged as a new challenger to the NFL, and the strongest one yet. But the new league had no team in Cincinnati. The Queen City had to wait until 1968 for its second fling with major league football.

But at this point, as Boomer Esiason and his teammates work toward earning a return trip to the Super Bowl, most Cincinnatians would probably agree that it was worth the wait.

While we're on the subject of Cincinnati football, here's a quick quiz on the modern Bengals:

1. In their second season the Bengals had a rookie quarterback from the University of Cincinnati who led the AFL in passing. But a shoulder injury short-circuited his career, and he retired after the 1973 season having thrown only three passes since that great rookie year. Who was he?

Answer: Greg Cook.

2. In 1972 Larry Csonka and Mercury Morris made history when they each gained 1,000 yards rushing for Miami. A year later two Cincinnati backs missed duplicating that feat by a mere 15 yards--and oddly enough, neither made it to 1,000. Ken Anderson and Isaac Curtis got most of the headlines in 1973, but can you name the Bengal's other dynamic duo?

Answer: Essex Johnson (997 yards) and Booby Clark (988 yards).