

Mini-bios again: Three coaches

By Bob Gill

In these pages I've chronicled the careers of several stars who played the bulk of their careers on minor league or independent teams. This time let's look at a few of the top coaches in football's "other" leagues.

BILL OWEN

6-0, 210

**T-G
Oklahoma State**

Player: 1926 Kansas City NFL; 1927 Cleveland NFL; 1928 Detroit NFL; 1929-36 New York NFL

| | | |
|----------------------|----------------|------|
| 1938 Jersey City AA | 7- 1- 0 | 1st |
| 1939 Jersey City AA | 7- 3- 1 | 3rd |
| 1940 Jersey City AA | 6- 3- 1 | 1st |
| 1946 Jersey City AFL | 9- 1- 0 | 1st |
| 1947 Jersey City AFL | <u>5- 5- 0</u> | 3rd |
| | 34-13- 2 | .723 |

Bill Owen is best remembered as the brother of Hall-of-Famer Steve. And that's too bad, because he was plenty good in his own right.

After an outstanding 12-year career as an NFL lineman (three times a first-team all-pro), the last eight of them with the New York Giants, Owen was offered the head coaching job when Tim Mara bought the Jersey City team in the American Association and turned it into pro football's first full-fledged farm club. With help from a Hall of Fame fullback named Ken Strong, the Little Giants, as they were often called, rolled to the AA championship in their first season.

A year later the Giants started poorly, winning only one of their first five games, then caught fire and finished with six wins in a row. But even though they may have been the league's best team by the season's end, their 7-3-1 record was good for only third place in the *very* strong Southern Division.

Owen's club repeated the pattern in 1940, starting out 0-2-1 before picking up Ed Danowski and posting six wins in their last seven games, edging into first place on the season's final Sunday. The AA had inaugurated a postseason playoff that year, and the Giants beat the Newark Bears and the Long Island Indians to capture the playoff title.

Mara broke off his Jersey City connection in 1941, and Owen did too. But in 1946, when the AA reorganized as the American Football League, Mara renewed the farm club arrangement with the Little Giants. As part of the deal, Owen returned as coach. Result: Jersey City won the Eastern Division title, then beat the Akron Bears 14-13 for the championship.

The Giants slipped to third place in their division in 1947, and Owen stepped down after the season. But with three titles in five years of coaching, he quit with a record even his brother would have been proud of.

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KEITH MOLESWORTH

5-9, 165

**HB-QB
Monmouth (Ill.)**

Player: 1928-29 Portsmouth; 1930 Ironton; 1931-37 Chicago Bears NFL

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|--------------------|----------------|------|
| 1946 Hawaii PCFL | 8- 4- 0 | 2nd |
| 1947 Hawaii PCFL | 7- 2- 0 | 1st |
| 1948 Hawaii PCFL | 5- 1- 0 | 1st |
| 1949 Richmond AFL | 8- 1- 1 | 1st |
| 1950 Richmond AFL | 6- 3- 0 | 1st |
| 1953 Baltimore NFL | <u>3- 9- 0</u> | 6th |
| Minors only: | 34-11- 1 | .756 |

Keith Molesworth is another who made a name for himself as a player before becoming a coach. He

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started his career with the Portsmouth Spartans during the two seasons when they emerged as a team capable of competing in the NFL. When the Spartans entered the league in 1930, Molesworth didn't go with them – apparently because he had stolen the coach's girlfriend.

Undaunted, he moved to the Ironton Tanks and helped his new team go out in a blaze of glory with victories over the New York Giants and the Chicago Bears.

When the Tanks went belly-up, Molesworth caught on with the Bears, possibly a result of his fine showing against them in 1930. He spent seven years in Chicago, playing a major role on two championship teams.

Molesworth's coaching career began after the war with the Hawaiian Warriors in the Pacific Coast Football League. Besides playing a few downs at the advanced age of 39, he led the new team to the league's second-best record, but it was good for only second place in the Southern Division, behind the champion Los Angeles Bulldogs.

A year later his Warriors captured the title by edging the Bulldogs 7-6 in the season finale.

Shortly thereafter, though, 15 Hawaiian players were booted out of the league for gambling, including four all-PCFL stars plus the team's top passer. For a while it wasn't clear whether the Warriors would have a team for 1948, but finally a new team was assembled – and Molesworth turned in what may have been his best coaching job, leading the makeshift squad to another championship.

The PCFL folded in the offseason, but Molesworth had no trouble finding another coaching job. The Richmond Rebels of the AFL, a perennially strong team that had never managed to win it all, signed him up, and proceeded to roll to their first championship. The Rebels outscored their opponents 285-99 during the regular season and 101-14 in two playoff wins.

A year later the Rebels faced a couple of serious problems: dissension caused by quarterback Bobby Thomason's insubordination, and a league that was crumbling around them. Molesworth solved the first problem by releasing Thomason even though he was leading the AFL in passing. He couldn't solve the second, but he did manage to lead his team to the league's final championship before it died after the season.

In case you haven't been counting, that was Molesworth's fourth straight title – two apiece in two different leagues.

A couple of years later he got his shot in the NFL, with the reincarnated Baltimore Colts. Their 3-9 record wasn't too bad for a quasi-expansion team, but in the offseason the Colts replaced him with Weeb Ewbank. Picking up a few players with names like Unitas, Berry, Moore and Marchetti, Ewbank won back-to-back championships a few years later, almost literally making everybody in Baltimore forget Molesworth.

In Honolulu and Richmond, though, there may still be a few who remember. And if there ain't, there oughta be.

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PAUL SCHISLER

| | | |
|---------------------|----------|------|
| 1933 Chi Cards NFL | 7- 1- 0 | 5th |
| 1934 Chi Cards NFL | 7- 3- 1 | 4th |
| 1935 Brooklyn NFL | 6- 3- 1 | 2nd |
| 1936 Brooklyn NFL | 9- 1- 0 | 4th |
| 1938 Hollywood CFL | 4- 1- 0 | 2nd |
| 1940 Hollywood PCFL | 6- 2- 0 | 2nd |
| 1941 Hollywood PCFL | 8- 0- 0 | 1st |
| 1945 Hollywood PCFL | 8- 2- 1 | 1st |
| Minors only: | 26- 5- 1 | .839 |

Paul Schissler started his pro football career as coach of a woeful Chicago Cardinal team. After a pathetic first season he cleaned house and broke in almost a whole new squad in 1934. The rebuilding effort

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brought a significant improvement, and in 1935 the Brooklyn Dodgers lured him away in the hope that he could perform similar wonders for them. It didn't work, and in 1937 the Dodgers brought in Patsy Clark and let Schissler go.

He wound up on the West Coast, where pro football was dominated by the Los Angeles Bulldogs, who consistently drew excellent crowds of 15,000 to little Gilmore Stadium. This level of fan interest attracted Schissler's attention, and in 1938, as coach of the Hollywood Stars, he was the moving force behind the formation of the California Football League. Unfortunately, the Bulldogs chose not to join the league, which probably doomed it from the start. Schissler's team finished second to the Stockton Shippers, but the season's biggest paydays came in two games with L.A.

The CFL's failure hadn't dimmed Schissler's interest in a big-time West Coast league, and in 1940 he tried again. Signing Kenny Washington, an All-American from UCLA who was barred from the NFL because he was black, he organized another Hollywood team (this one called the Bears in honor of Washington's alma mater) and helped to form the PCFL. Schissler's Bears finished second to the Bulldogs that season; more important, the league established itself with fans in California.

A year later the Bears went undefeated to capture the PCFL title, then beat the Columbus Bullies, champions of the AFL, for what was billed as "the championship of the small professional leagues."

With the United States' entry into World War II, Schissler joined the service, where he became coach of the March Field Flyers, a top-flight team featuring many college and pro stars. In 1942 the Flyers played so many games with PCFL teams that in effect they became league members themselves – and won the "extended" PCFL crown, compiling a 5-0 record against the professional clubs.

In 1943 and '44 March Field scheduled mainly colleges and other service teams, finishing each year in the college Top 10, which included service teams during the war years.

Discharged in 1945, Schissler returned to Hollywood, where he and Kenny Washington led the Bears to another PCFL championship. It was his final season, and a fitting conclusion to one of the great "hidden" coaching careers.