

1943 - THE NADIR

By Stan Grosshandler

The season of 1943 may well have been the lowest point in the history of the National Football League. The United States was totally involved in World War II and over 60,000 Americans had lost their lives by the beginning of the year. Names like Casablanca, Sicily, the Aleutians, Salerno, Tarawa, and the Bismarck Sea, places most American had never heard of, now achieved world prominence.

The league met the first of April and made some significant decisions. The Cleveland Rams were allowed to disband for the duration of the war as their owners Fred Levy and Dan Reeves were in the service. They would maintain control of their players and draft picks until the team was reactivated. Available players were lent to other teams. As it turned out, the Rams' laid out only one year, returning in 1944 and winning the championship in '45.

The big question was where the players would come from. By the time the 1943 season started, 376 players who had appeared on NFL rosters during the previous three years would be in military service. Two would have been killed in action -- Brooklyn's Don Wemple and Washington's Keith Birlm.

Free substitution was allowed though not completely accepted by all. The league adopted the revolutionary rule largely as a hedge against the manpower shortage. With so many regular players absent, teams would have to get by with many players of limited ability. The active roster was cut back from 33 to 28 per game. Helmets became mandatory, and a ten game schedule, one less than the previous year, was adopted.

In June Philadelphia and Pittsburgh combined for the season. The Phil-Pitt Combine was popularly called the "Steagles" and has been a staple of trivia games ever since. That gave the league its fewest active teams since 1932. Ted Collins, manager of popular singer Kate Smith, was granted a franchise for Boston to become active the next year. Not granted franchises were actor Don Ameche on behalf of Los Angeles and sports promoter Charley Murray from Buffalo. Collins was represented at the league meeting by William A. Shea of New York. (Yes, the same one the stadium is named for.)

During the April meeting, the 1943 draft was held. In reality it had little impact on the season as few of the players were immediately available. The first choices were predominantly backs as Brooklyn chose Paul Governali, the Bears Bob Steuber, Cards Glenn Dobbs, Rams Mike Holovak, Eagles Joe Muha, Steelers Bill Daley, and Washington Jack Jenkins. The Giants took Steve Filipowicz who had a brief baseball-football career. The Lions gained the only player who was to have a significant role during the season, the Heisman Award winner Frank Sinkwich. The Packers took the only lineman chosen on the first round, Minnesota tackle Dick Wildung. Dobbs and Daley would never play in the NFL, opting for the rival All America Football Conference after the war.

The annual Chicago All-Star game was played August 25th at Dyche Stadium, in Evanston, Illinois, with 48,437 in attendance. The champion Redskins under their new coach Dutch Bergman were most inept and lost to the collegians 27-7. The All-Stars included many destined to have successful NFL careers. The starting lineup had Pete Pihos, Al Wistert, Vic Lindskog, Buster Ramsey, Dick Wildung, Otto Graham, Bob Steuber, and Pat Harder. Replacements included Don Currivan, Dick Barwegan, Tommy James, Charley Trippi, and Steve Filipowicz. Harder, Graham and Steuber supplied the dynamite in the demolition of the champs.

In the Eastern Division Steve Owen remained in charge of the Giants while Greasy Neale and Walt Kiesling handled the hybrid Steagles. Pete Cawthorn at Brooklyn was one of four rookie coaches in the league. Notre Dame alumni were well represented as Dutch Bergman took over at Washington and Gus Dorais at Detroit. The fourth rookie coach was Cardinal Phil Handler. Curly Lambeau remained at Green Bay while George Halas' trusted triumvirate of Luke Johnsos, Hunk Anderson, and Paddy Driscoll ran the Bears.

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The Redskins started out like a rocket, winning six of their first seven games and tying the other. Then they came crashing to earth, losing their last three games forcing a playoff with the Giants, the first Eastern Division playoff ever.

Despite having 33 players in the service, Washington still had a strong lineup, with Sammy Baugh at tailback, Andy Frakas and Bob Seymour at full, Wilbur Moore and Jenkins, the first draft pick, at wingback with Ray Hare blocking. Moore along with ends Joe Aguirre and Bob Masterson were experienced receivers for Baugh's passes; while the blocking came from tackles Willie Wilkins and rookie Lou Rymkus who scored twice on fumbles. The guards were the experienced Dick Farman, Clyde Shugart, and Steve Slivinski.

Sammy Baugh posted a phenomenal season leading the league in punting, pass interceptions (11), and passing. Oddly his total rushing for the season was a minus 42 yards.

Steve Owen's Giants still had the services of such established stars as Mel Hein, Al Blozis, Vic Carroll, Frank Cope, Frank Umont, Tuffy Leemans, Ward Cuff, Leland Shaffer, Will Walls, and Frank Liebel.

The unexpected star was rookie Bill Paschal whose 572 yards led the circuit. What was so unusual about Paschal is that his college career consisted of two minutes on the Georgia Tech freshman team. He had dropped out of school to support his family and blossomed into a top pro star. Ward Cuff playing both wingback and fullback finished right behind Paschal with 523 yards.

Finishing 6-3-1 the Giants forced the Redskins into a playoff game by beating them in the last two regularly scheduled games: 14-10 at New York and 31-7 at Washington. Steve Owen's men seemed to be peaking at just the right moment, but the Redskins pulled themselves together, and behind the able Baugh thrashed New York in the playoff at the Polo Grounds, 28-0. Slingin' Sam completed 16 passes for three TD's and Farkas scored three times.

The Pitt-Phil combo posted a 5-4-1 season beating both the Giants and Redskins once each. It marked the first winning season in Eagle history, and only the second for Pittsburgh. A T-formation team, the Steagles had Roy Zimmerman and future outstanding coach Allie Sherman at QB. Tommy Thompson, who was to trigger the Eagles' post-war champions was in the service. In the Phil-Pitt backfield were some hard running backs in Jack Hinkle, a rookie free agent, who was but a yard behind the leader Paschal, Ernie Steele, Johnny Butler, and Bob Thurbon.

In the line, Ted Doyle, Bucko Kilroy, Elbie Schultz, Vic Sears, and rookie Wistert were an impressive fivesome. Veteran end Bill Hewitt came out of retirement and had to wear a helmet for the first time in his Hall of Fame career, but he was of little help to the team.

The Dodgers obtained the veteran center Bill Conkwright on Rams' lend-lease but had little else save the great tackle Bruiser Kinard in the front line, as they went 2-8-0 to start their slide to oblivion by 1945. Brooklyn struggled through its first four games without scoring a point. Tailback Dean McAdams failed to throw a TD pass with a 48% completion average. His rushing total was -38. Ken Heineman managed three TD passes as he completed only 33%; but at least was able to gain 126 yards rushing. Pug Manders at full and Merl Condit on the wing carried the brunt of the rushing. Kinard handled the placekicking, making eight of nine PATs and kicking the only field goal the team made all year.

In the West the Bears maintained some of their greats. Bulldog Turner remained at center flanked by the two future Hall of Fame guards: Danny Fortmann and George Musso. Sid Luckman, whose 28 TD passes led the league, remained at QB. Sid had a terrific year. On November 14th in a 53-7 rout of the Giants he threw an unheard of 32 passes for 453 yards and seven six-pointers. His seven TD passes broke a record of six Baugh had set only two weeks earlier, and his yards gained broke Cecil Isbell's mark of 333 set the previous year. Luckman was to throw at least one scoring pass in every game.

The cast of running backs included Harry Clark, Dante Magnani, a prize from the Rams, Gary Famiglietti, Ray Nolting, Scooter McLean, and Bill Osmani. The end corps had George Wilson, Hamp Pool, Connie Mack Berry, John Siegal, and Jim Benton, another great gift from the Rams. Legendary fullback Bronko Nagurski came out of a six year retirement at age 34 to play tackle, only returning to the backfield in the title game.

The Bears opened with a 21-21 tie with the Packers and then lost only to Washington taking the division.

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Lambeau was able to field a reasonably good team at Green Bay with Charley Brock anchoring a line that still had Baby Ray, Chet Adams from the Rams, Buckets Goldenberg, and Pete Tinsley. Tailback Tony Canadeo was the top rusher and passer; however rookie Irv Comp was an excellent replacement. Wingback Joe Laws also contributed to the ground game.

As usual Don Hutson dominated, leading the league in receptions, TDs via receptions, field goals (3), and total points. He tied with Bill Paschall for most TD's (he returned an interception for one, caught 11 touchdown passes, and even threw a TD pass himself) and was second to Bob Snyder in extra points. By now, he played defensive halfback, as star blocking back Larry Craig took over the end spot on defense; Hutson was third in interceptions with eight to Baugh (11) and team mate Comp (10).

Buckets Goldenberg enjoyed telling of the time he was having dinner with Vince Lombardi and a stranger came to the table and asked the famous coach if Don Hutson would make his championship team. Lombardi roared, "If I had Hutson, no one would beat me!"

Unfortunately, even with Hutson, the Packers could not beat the Bears - a loss and a tie - so they finished second 7-2-1.

The Lions had a pleasant surprise in Frank Sinkwich (deferred from the draft with flat feet) who proved to be a strong tailback; but they had little else, finishing 3-6-1. The great Alex Wojciechowicz was at center and guards Riley Matheson from the Rams and Augie Lio were about the only major leaguers in the line. Famed as a placekicker, Lio hit on but two of eleven field goal attempts.

The Lions led in laterals, a stat no longer kept and judging by their record a desperation move, with Ned Mathews and Chuck Fenenbock throwing the most and Harry Hopp and Jack Matheson receiving the most.

The Cards found a place in history as one of the all time bad teams going 0-10. Two of their three tailbacks -- rookie Ronnie Cahill and Walt Masters, who pitched in the Major Leagues, had negative rushing yardage. The one bright spot was rookie Johnny Grigas, the team's top rusher with 333 yards. Buddy Parker, later to become a fine coach, was a blocking back and linebacker on this team; and tackles Chet Bulger and Gil Duggan were among the best at their position. Vet Eddie Rucinski and rookie Don Currivan played well at ends in this losing cause.

The championship game was played December 26 at Chicago with the Bears lusting to revenge the defeat of the previous year that had ruined a perfect season. There were 34,320 in attendance.

After a scoreless first period Andy Farkas went over from the one; however Harry Clark and Bronko Nagurski who returned to fullback to log 84 yards both scored, making it 14-7 at the half. Bronko's three-yard smash in the second quarter was the last six pointer of his magnificent career.

Dante Magnani took two Luckman passes in the third and Farkas caught a Baugh pass for the second Redskin TD. Baugh had been kicked in the head and until this pass was on the bench. The photo of Sammy Baugh crying on the Redskin bench in pain and frustration following his injury is one of sports' all-time famous pictures.

In the fourth quarter, Luckman threw scoring passes to Jim Benton and Harry Clark with Baugh finishing the scoring on a pass to Joe Aguirre. The 41-21 victory earned each winning Bear \$1,135.81. Each Redskin received \$754.60.

Some of the more interesting stats on the season were that only five men carried the ball 100 times or more -- Bill Paschal, Harry Clark, Johnny Grigas, Andy Farkas, and Jack Hinkle, a cousin of Hall of Famer Clarke Hinkle. Four men scored three TD's in a game -- Paschal, Harry Hopp, Wilbur Moore, and Hutson, the seventh time he had pulled a hat trick.

It is rather interesting to note two teams, the Bears and Phil-Pitts, ran the T, the Giants had the A-formation, and the Packers used the Notre Dame Box. The rest used the wing formations. Of the six teams employing tailbacks, three had tailbacks who rushed for negative yards. Part of the reason, of course, is that there was no separate "yards lost attempting to pass" statistic. Whenever a passer was sacked, the yards came off his rushing total.

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The Official NFL MVP (the Joe Carr Trophy) was Sid Luckman who was also the quarterback on the All-League Selections. The first team All-League Selections:

		AP	UP	PFI	NYN
E	Don Hutson, GB	1	1	1	1
	Ed Rucinski, Cards	1	1	2	2
	George Wilson, Bears	2	2	1	2
	Joe Aguirre, Was	-	-	-	1
	Walt Masterson, Was	2	2	-	-
	Bill Fisk, Det	-	-	2	-
T	Al Blozis, NYG	1	1	1	1
	Baby Ray, GB	-	2	1	1
	Vic Sears, Phil-Pit	2	1	-	2
	Bruiser Kinard, Bkn	1	-	2	-
	Chet Adams, GB	2	-	-	2
	Chet Bulger, Cards	-	2	-	-
G	Dan Fortmann, Bears	1	1	1	1
	Dick Farman, Was	1	1	-	1
	Eberle Schultz, Phi-Pit	-	-	1	-
	Augie Lio, Det	2	2	2T	2
	Riley Matheson, Det	-	-	2	2
	Frank Cope, NYG	-	-	2	-
	Clyde Shugart, Was	-	2	-	-
	Steve Slivinski, Was	2	-	-	-
C	Bulldog Turner, Bears	1	1	1	1
	Charley Brock, GB	2	-	2	-
	George Smith, Was	-	2	-	2
B	Sid Luckman, Bears	1	1	1	1
	Sam Baugh, Was	1	1	1	1
	Harry Clark, Bears	1	1	2	2
	Tony Canadeo, GB	1	2	2	1
	Ward Cuff, NYG	2	1	1	2
	Bill Paschal, NYG	-	2	1	-
	Frank Sinkwich, Det	-	-	-	1
	Andy Farkas, Was	2	-	2	2
	Jack Hinkle, Phi-Pit	2	2	2	-
	Wilbur Moore, Was	-	-	-	2
	Ernie Steele, Phi-Pit	-	2	-	-
	Roy Zimmerman, Phi-Pit	2	-	-	-

AP = Associated Press
 UP = United Press
 PFI= Pro Football Illustrated
 NYN= New York News

It certainly couldn't have been the quality of play, but the average attendance at NFL games jumped by a third in 1943, up to 24,228 per game. That was a new per-game record (and the best until post-war 1945), but the total attendance of 969,128 for 40 games was down from the million-plus years of 1939-41 when the league played 55 games a season.

The 1943 season certainly was not spectacular for many obvious reasons. The teams were still reluctant to switch to the T-formation and few had either the personnel or desire to platoon. Generally, they stuck to the old formula of having the starters play both offense and defense until they were replaced by a second team that also went both ways. During the 1941 season the teams averaged 221 pass attempts. This was raised to 318 in '42; but dropped to 216 in '43. The pass was becoming more of an offensive weapon; but the lack of good passers and possibly poor protection from weaker lines limited its use.

Successful field goals were still few and far between.

Pat Harder, one of the best kickers of his time, stated they really didn't have much time to practice the field goal, plus when a team was near the goal line the object was to score the TD, not a FG.

The NFL still was not as popular as the college game. Several colleges -- Notre Dame, Purdue, Michigan, Duke, and Navy -- had service programs enabling them to assemble powerful football squads, some players with professional experience.

To the good fortune of the world, USA, and the NFL the War was only to last less than two more years and from then on it was all up hill for the professional game.