

Two more that didn't make it

Indianapolis, Washington failed 1933 bids to join the NFL

By Bob Gill

A recent Coffin Corner article ("Requiem for the Nighthawks," Vol. XIV, No. 5, pp. 5-8) detailed the short, unhappy story of the Milwaukee Nighthawks, who saw their hopes of an NFL franchise sink in a sea of red ink during the 1930 season. Milwaukee, however, wasn't the only city that tried to break into the NFL in the early '30s. Convinced that his league needed a larger population base, commissioner Joe Carr continued to encourage the ambitions of promoters in big cities.

His offer was always the same: Get a team together, we'll send some of our teams in to play you, and we'll see how things work out.

The most successful of these experiments came in 1936, when the Los Angeles Bulldogs went 3-2-1 against NFL teams and drew impressive crowds in the process. Unfortunately, the expense of traveling to the West Coast proved fatal to L.A.'s bid for a franchise.

Usually, as in the case of Milwaukee, the reason was a lot simpler: The teams a) failed to win, b) failed to draw, c) failed to finish the season, or d) all of the above. Such was the case in 1933, when the NFL gave "tryouts" to not one but two cities – Washington and Indianapolis.

Using the multiple choice method, it's easy to explain why both teams fizzled. Washington: a and b. Indianapolis: d.

The Indianapolis Indians may have seemed a better bet to succeed, if only because they had an experienced football man to run the team: C.A. Sumner, who had served as manager of the Kokomo American Legion, the Indiana semipro champs for most of the 1920s. He and coach Joe Dienhart assembled a squad dominated by players from Indiana schools. Two of them – the Fisher brothers, George and Walter – had played a couple of seasons with Kokomo.

The Indians opened the season Sept. 13, hosting the Portsmouth Spartans at Perry Stadium. A Wednesday night crowd of 2,500 turned out despite a light rain to see the locals drop a 19-0 decision. Ace Gutowsky's touchdown run and two field goals by John Cavosie gave Portsmouth a 13-0 halftime lead, and the outcome was never in doubt.

Not satisfied with the team's debut, Sumner and Dienhart picked up reinforcements before the following Wednesday: fullback Roger "Red" Kirkman and guards Ralph Maddox and Dustin McDonald.

1933 INDIANAPOLIS INDIANS

Sept. 13	H	0	Portsmouth Spartans	19	2,500
Sept. 20	H	0	Chicago Cardinals	2	2,500
Sept. 27	H	0	New York Giants	21	4,500
Oct. 4	H	--	Cincinnati Reds	--	(can.)

Player	Pos	Ht	Wt	Age	College
James Allen	?				Butler
Bill Boyd	?	5-11	175	26	Westminster
H.J. Buttner	T		195		Purdue
Merl Chambers	QB		160		Indiana State
-- Chapman	?				Manchester
Roy Cogan	?				Detroit
George Fisher	?	6-0	230	28	Indiana
Walter Fisher	?		215		Indiana
Frank Gennicks	E		170		Indiana State
Frank Gibson	?				Illinois
Maurice Hosier	HB		185		Butler
Fritz Humbert	FB		185		Illinois
Merlyn Jahr	?				North Dakota St.

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Player	Pos	Ht	Wt	Age	College
Ray Jennison	?	6-3	210	25	South Dakota St.
Roger Kirkland (Red)	FB	6-1	195	27	Wash. & Jeff.
-- Lonsberry	?				Wabash
Ralph Maddox (Red)	G				Georgia
Tom Mahaffey	?				Notre Dame
Dustin McDonald	G		200		Indiana
-- Miller	HB		170		Millikin
Harry Painter	G		210		Indiana
Bill Rehm	T		210		Indiana
Carroll Ringwalt	C	6-0	225	25	Indiana
Stan Saluski	HB				Indiana
Walt Schoenfelder	T				North Dakota St.
Bill Shields	E		195		Indiana
-- Taylor	?				Wabash
John Tonetti	G		220		Rose Poly
Abe Yourist	E	6-2	210	22	Heidelberg

Moreover, just before the next game the team got a new owner – or rather, two of them. On Sept. 19, Conrad Ruckelshaus and former Yale tackle John Joss bought controlling interest in the team from William Clauer. The new bosses talked enthusiastically of the “prospects of a bright future for pro football in Indianapolis,” according to the *Indianapolis Star*.

A little more than 24 hours later, their team experienced its finest moment. Unfortunately, it was another loss – but a close one this time. Before another turnout of 2,500, the Chicago Cardinals edged the Indians by the unusual score of 2-0, when George Rogge blocked a punt for a safety. Of course, the Cards were the NFL’s worst team in 1933; but at the time it appeared that the Indians were on the right track.

It took only seven days to disprove that theory.

The Indians’ next opponents were the New York Giants, destined to win the Eastern Division title that season. So it wasn’t surprising when the visitors took a 14-0 lead into the dressing room at halftime – in fact, considering the relative strength of their opponents, the Indians were probably playing just as well as they had a week earlier. And the attendance of 4,500 was somewhat encouraging, too. Maybe too much so.

The start of the second half was delayed 25 minutes when the Indianapolis players refused to return to the field until they got paid. Their ploy succeeded, but in the process they infuriated Ruckelshaus, who withdrew his backing immediately after the game.

Joss talked bravely about keeping the Indians together for their next game, against another NFL team, the Cincinnati Reds, but within a few days the three-week-old team went belly-up. A few of the players hooked on with other teams, most notably Kirkman, with the Philadelphia Eagles; but most of them simply went home.

Halfback Maurice Hosier probably took it best – he had suffered the same fate three years earlier with Milwaukee.

Meanwhile, in Washington, owner A.G. Dezendorf and coach Ray Smyth had organized their own prospective NFL team called the Passers. The roster was loaded with hometown players from George Washington University, but the team’s best player was Texas quarterback Jimmy Bankhead.

Washington didn’t play its first game until Oct. 1, four days after Indianapolis played it last. The Passers opened the season on the road, playing a scoreless tie with the Orange Tornadoes, a good independent club. It wasn’t a win, but it wasn’t anything to be embarrassed about, either.

The next game was a different story. Opening their home season with a Wednesday night game (shades of Indianapolis!) against the might Chicago Bears in Griffith Stadium, the Passers were completely outclassed in a 48-7 loss. Bankhead scored the home team’s lone touchdown and booted the conversion, but the best news for the locals was the fact that the game attracted a pretty good crowd of 8,000.

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A week later, the Passers posted their first win against the Bridgeport Pros. But the poor showing against the Bears, combined with the lack of a name opponent, resulted in a drastic drop at the turnstiles. Only 1,500 fans were on hand to see Bankhead score all the points in a 19-6 victory.

1933 WASHINGTON PASSERS

Oct. 1	A	0	Orange Tornadoes	0	---
Oct. 11	H	7	Chicago Bears	48	8,000
Oct. 18	H	19	Bridgeport Pros	7	1,500
Oct. 25	H	7	New York Giants	32	3,000
Nov. 1	H	--	Philadelphia Eagles	--	(can.)
Nov. 5	A	2	Shenandoah Presidents	18	800
Nov. 8	H	0	Brooklyn Dodgers	20	3,000
Nov. 12	A	13	Baltimore Irvingtons	13	---
Nov. 19	A	7	Charlotte Bantams	10	---
Dec. 3	A	7	Baltimore Irvingtons	0	---

Player	Pos	Ht	Wt	Age	College
Alenti, Joe	HB		185		Georgetown
Baker, Johnny	QB		185		Geo. Washington
Bankhead, Jim	QB		185		Texas
Benson, Harry	G	5-10	225	23	Western Md.
Berner, G.	HB				
Berner, Milt	FB	6-2	210	27	Syracuse
Blackistone, Frank	C		205		Geo. Washington
Bordeau, LeRoy (Ox)	HB		190		Georgetown
Buckler,	G		185		Washington State
Diaz, Doc	HB				none
Fenlon, Johnny	HB		175		Geo. Washington
Galloway, Bob	E		212		Geo. Washington
Gurneau, Sam	E	6-2	200		N. Carolina State
Haines, Hoot	C		185		Texas Tech
Hasty,	G				
Haycraft, Joe	FB		190		Minnesota
Hoffman,	?				
Holmes,	?				Minnesota
Ingram,	G				Geo. Washington
Keenan,	HB				Maryland
King,	T				
Lamborn,	HB				none
Lawrence,	HB				Western Md.
Lee, John	T		210		Oklahoma
Leventhal,	?		198		
Logan,	?		185		Nebraska
McCarver, Nig	HB		180		Geo. Washington
Mulvey,	E		190		Geo. Washington
Neilson,	G		190		Geo. Washington
Pearce, Hardy	T		210		Geo. Washington
Pease, Al	E		202		Maryland
Reynolds,	T				Boston College
Scully,	G				Fordham
Slaird, Willy	T		215		Geo. Washington
Wells,	HB		175		Maryland
Zulick,	T-G		235		Maryland

Bankhead was the only bright spot in the following Wednesday's game, a 32-7 loss to the New York Giants. Returning a punt 74 yards and kicking the extra point, he averted a shutout and gave the crowd of 3,000 something to cheer about. Owner Dezendorf, though, found little encouragement in the attendance, and cancelled a Nov. 1 game with the Philadelphia Eagles.

Next the team traveled to Pennsylvania's coal mining region for a Sunday game against the Shenandoah Presidents, for years a top independent team. Rain and sleet kept the crowd down to a season-low 800, and the Passers' offense was equally depressed in an 18-2 loss.

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Resuming their Wednesday night schedule, the Passers came home for a game with the Brooklyn Dodgers. But again they flopped against NFL opposition, despite the fact that Brooklyn's Benny Friedman didn't make the trip to Washington. The Dodgers didn't miss him as they rolled to an easy 20-0 win before 3,000 fans.

By this time, the lack of improvement at the gate had pretty well scuttled Dezendorf's dream of an NFL franchise. In an effort to save money, he arranged for the Passers to finish the season on the road. On Nov. 12, traveling all the way to Baltimore, they played a 13-13 tie with a team called the Irvingtons. Bankhead continued to dominate the offense, running for one touchdown and kicking an extra point.

Two days later, the Passers got a new lease on life. The owners of several high-class teams throughout the South – in Memphis, St. Louis, Oklahoma City, Tulsa and Charlotte – announced that a new circuit called the American Football League would open for business in 1934.

One of the cities included in the AFL's ambitious plans was Washington – assuming, of course, that the Passers could survive until then.

A week later the team got a taste of its possible future when it traveled to North Carolina to play the Charlotte Bantams, another team slated to join the AFL. The Passers played probably their best game of the season, but it wasn't quite enough, and the result was a 10-7 loss. Milt Berner, a midseason pickup from the Cincinnati Reds, returned an interception for the Washington touchdown.

The Passers were idle on the last Sunday in November, but on Dec. 3 they returned to Baltimore and ended the season with a 7-0 win in a rematch with the Irvingtons. Two long passes from Bankhead to Joe Alenti set up the game's only score, and the 210-pound Berner, a center converted to fullback with the Passers, crashed over for the touchdown. Bankhead's conversion gave him 41 points for the season – not a bad total, considering that the team scored only 62.

Unfortunately for the Passers, that win over Baltimore was their swan song. Though the AFL did operate in 1934, it did so without a team in Washington. Pro football didn't take hold in the nation's capital until 1937, when the Redskins came to town.

On the other hand, the fans in Indianapolis had to wait until 1984 for the arrival of big-time football. In fact, considering the Colts' performance since deserting Baltimore, some would say they're still waiting.