

TEX SCHRAMM

By Don Smith

For years, Clint Murchison Jr., a prominent Texas oilman, had tried without success to bring a National Football League team to Dallas. In November 1959, rumors began circulating that the NFL at last was planning to award an expansion franchise to that city, where the new American Football League already had placed a team.

Texas E. (Tex) Schramm, a 39-year-old CBS television assistant sports director, let some of his pro football friends know he would be interested in running the new team. The Chicago Bears' George Halas had been impressed with Schramm's work during his 10-year tenure with the Los Angeles Rams and was one of several who recommended Tex to Murchison.

Murchison and Schramm hit it off right away and Tex was hired as general manager of a team that did not yet exist. Thus started the saga of the Dallas Cowboys, destined to become one of the most spectacularly successful of all professional sports franchises over the next three decades. Schramm, who was elevated to the dual role of president and general manager six years later, served both the Cowboys and the NFL with such distinction for so long that, in 1991, he was accorded pro football's most coveted honor, membership in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Building a Winner

"I'd always wanted, as far back as I can remember, to take a team from scratch and build it," Schramm said. "So this was an opportunity I couldn't pass up even though we didn't know for sure that Dallas would get a team."

By the time the franchise was formally awarded on January 28, 1960, Schramm had hired two key people, Tom Landry as head coach and Gil Brandt as personnel director, who would serve as a superb management troika with Schramm for the next 29 years.

With Murchison's unqualified backing, Schramm clearly defined everyone's duties. Schramm would have complete authority over the everyday operation of the team, the promotional, business and financial aspects of the club. Landry would have sole authority on everything regarding the team and its personnel. Both Schramm and Landry would rely heavily on Brandt for drafting recommendations but Landry would have the final decision.

Schramm firmly believed the Cowboys should be built through the annual college draft and the signing of free agents. Even before the franchise was assured, he signed 28 free agents to contracts that would be voided if Dallas did not get a team. Then he was forced to acquire 36 veterans, three from each of the 12 teams, in the expansion draft. That filled out his first squad but the 1960 season was a disaster -- one tie and 11 losses.

From that season on, Schramm stuck to the philosophy of avoiding aging veterans, except in unusual circumstances, and building the Cowboys with young players. Tex's first blockbuster trade did not come until 1977, when he swapped four high-round draft choices for the right to draft Heisman Trophy winner Tony Dorsett.

Dallas climbed over the .500 mark for the first time in 1966 but, during the building period, fans and press alike grew dissatisfied, particularly with Landry. Schramm, with Murchison's full approval, answered the criticism by giving Landry a then-unheard-of 10 year contract extension. Thus the stability of management that became the hallmark of the Cowboys was indelibly reaffirmed.

America's Team

The Cowboys won their first NFL Western Conference titles in 1966 and 1967 before losing last-second decisions to Green Bay in NFL championship games each year. That started an unprecedented string of 20 straight seasons in which the Cowboys won more than they lost. During that period, the Cowboys

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were in the playoffs 18 times and they won 13 divisional championships, five NFC titles and Super Bowls VI and XII. Dallas also played in Super Bowls V, IX and XIII.

Through it all, Schramm's player procurement policies were being constantly vindicated. After failing to make the playoffs in 1974, the Cowboys added 13 rookies to their regular squad in 1975 and were back in championship contention again. Only three players -- Roger Staubach, Cliff Harris and Jethro Pugh -- started for Dallas in both Super Bowl victories.

While recognizing that winning was the best promotion of all, Schramm also knew that a team's image was important. Ever since the Cowboys first division championship in 1966, fans across the nation had been climbing on the Dallas bandwagon.

"Once our popularity got started, we wanted to keep it going," Schramm explained. "I think we were probably more image-conscious than most other teams. We tried to do every thing first class, from top to bottom."

Schramm did not invent the "America's Team" tag that became the Dallas trademark for many years but he was quick to recognize the promotional value of the term that NFL Films used for the title of the Cowboys 1968 highlight film. Among other things, Tex immediately distributed 100,000 souvenir calendars stamped with the term "America's Team."

The Dallas Cowboys Newsweekly, a publication about the Cowboys, became another image maker with a circulation that soon reached 100,000. Cowboy-related souvenir items such as pennants, hats, T-shirts, decals, posters and glasses immediately surpassed the souvenir sales of all other NFL teams. In 1970, Schramm introduced the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders to the NFL. He recruited a bevy of young, pretty Texas women and dressed them in scanty, but appropriate outfits. The squad, which had its own director and became a big fan favorite, over the years has been featured at Super Bowls, on network television shows and even on international tours.

The Cowboys also developed the largest radio network of any sports team. In 1979, for instance, their games were broadcast on 225 stations in 19 states. Their Spanish-speaking network included 16 stations in seven states and Mexico.

Schramm also implemented Murchison's controversial plan for building 65,000-seat Texas Stadium in the suburb of Irving and then selling stadium bonds to potential season-ticket buyers to finance the project. Cowboys season sales reached 45,000 and Texas Stadium was sold out for 24 straight regular-season and playoff games in the 1970s.

Not surprisingly, many people liked the strong-minded Schramm and some did not but he was widely respected and his outstanding achievements did not go unrecognized. In 1977, he was named the NFL Executive of the Year by The Sporting News. The next year, he received the Bert Bell award for outstanding executive leadership in the NFL.

Schramm the Ram

Schramm, who was born in San Gabriel, California, on June 2, 1920, earned his degree in journalism from the University of Texas. He had a brief fling with football as a 147-pound freshman fullback. But he decided to concentrate on his sports writing, first for the student newspaper and, after a four-year stint in the U. S. Air Force, for the Austin, Texas, American-Statesman.

In 1947, he was introduced to Los Angeles Rams owner Dan Reeves, who offered him the Rams publicity director job. He was promoted to assistant to the president in 1952 and to general manager in 1956. But he became disenchanted with the power struggle going on between Reeves and his three partners and left the team in 1957 to join CBS Sports.

With CBS, his primary responsibility was the television coverage of the VIII Winter Olympic Games in Squaw Valley, California, in February, 1960. Tex originated the concept of a sports anchorman for major athletic events and he chose Walter Cronkite for the Olympics assignment.

Schramm also became intrigued with IBM computers, which were being used for scoring and timing at the Olympics. Later, he and the Cowboys would become leaders in the use of computers for scouting football player personnel.

"My years at CBS gave me the chance to reflect on what we had done, both good and bad in Los Angeles," Schramm reflected. "I realized we had great talent but that we didn't let that talent reach maturity with us. We didn't have continuity and I was determined to change that in Dallas."

One of the things that Schramm did do in Los Angeles paid off big dividends for all of pro football in the years ahead. He hired Pete Rozelle to replace him as the Rams' publicity director. Rozelle replaced Schramm as the general manager when Tex left the Rams and then was elected the NFL commissioner at the same meeting in which the Dallas franchise was awarded.

Schramm, as an influential and knowledgeable club representative, and Rozelle, as a forward-thinking league leader, became an influential twosome in determining the NFL's course first in the NFL-AFL "war" years of the 1960s and later in the post-merger years of the 1970s and 1980s.

The NFL utilized its superior resources to battle the youthful AFL in the early 1960s and Schramm was one of the most outspoken generals of the older league. But when it became apparent both leagues were on the verge of spending themselves into oblivion, Schramm with Rozelle's knowledge and approval took a leading role in bringing about a merger.

Peacemaker

Schramm and Lamar Hunt, the AFL founder whose team originally played in Dallas before moving to Kansas City, began secret meetings in the spring of 1966 to try to develop a package that owners of both leagues could accept. Such collateral factors as the New York Giants' signing of Buffalo Bills' kicker Pete Gogolak and the impending raid on NFL quarterbacks being planned by new AFL commissioner Al Davis hurried along the talks. On June 8, 1966, a merger that would be completed by 1970 was announced.

Once the merger was approved, Schramm was determined to do what he could to make it work. Realignment of the expanded league might have become a major stumbling block but Schramm helped things along with his suggestion that the league be divided into two conferences with three divisions in each. He further proposed that the champions of each division plus one wild-card team from each conference participate in the annual playoffs.

In 1966, Schramm was named chairman of the prestigious NFL competition committee, an assignment he fulfilled for almost a quarter of a century. During his chairmanship, the competition committee introduced numerous innovative new rules, mostly designed to make the game more appealing to the fans. He later became the outspoken proponent for the use of instant replay, an innovation that remains highly controversial. In 1970, Schramm was called upon to negotiate a settlement with the NFL Players Association. He wound up with a then-unprecedented four-year agreement. He later served on the executive committee of the NFL Management Council.

A large percentage of the innovations developed in the last 30 years have been Schramm inventions. That includes such things as the referee's microphone, multi-color striping of the 20- and 50-yard lines, 30-second clock between plays, extra-wide sideline borders and wind-direction stripes on the goal post uprights.

In 1984, Schramm embarked on his last major team project. It was called Cowboys Center a massive development that included the club's headquarters and training facilities, an ice arena, a sports medicine clinic and other business and residential properties. The Cowboys moved into these new quarters in 1986.

An Era Ends

But on the field, they slipped badly in the late 1980s. Their 20-year winning streak ended in 1986. In 1988, the team was dead last with a 3-13 record. In the meantime, Murchison sold the Cowboys to a group headed by Bum Bright in 1984. Four years later, Bright sold the team to Jerry Jones, an Arkansas oilman who made it clear he intended to run every phase of the team.

Early in 1989, Schramm left the Cowboys to become president and chief executive officer of the new World League of American Football. But in October, 1990, he was replaced when he and NFL officials disagreed on the direction the new league should take.

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From the very beginning, Schramm's ambition was NOT to be remembered as a great NFL leader and innovator but as the head of a great organization. He wanted the Cowboys to be like the old baseball Yankees.

"They were tops first class. That's the way we want to be," Schramm once said. "Football is such a great and emotional business and I want to look back and say I was a part of greatness."