

THREE-PEAT!

THE 1931 NFL SEASON

By Bob Carroll

The surest NFL bet in 1931 was that neither Newark nor Minneapolis would win the championship. Both dropped out of the league after the 1930 season. The second surest championship bet was that Green Bay would win it. After all, they'd been champs for two straight seasons. Why stop there?

As it turned out, they didn't stop at two.

The most interesting incident of the NFL's 1931 championship race came after it was over and put a small cloud over Green Bay's third consecutive title. The feat of winning three straight championships had not been accomplished during the league's first dozen years. The closest any earlier team had come was the Canton Bulldogs' back-to-back wins in 1922-23. Unfortunately, Canton's hopes for a "three-peat" went out the window when the franchise was sold to Cleveland before the 1924 season. The former Canton franchise lay dormant for a year while Cleveland owner Sam Deutsch added the cream of the Canton players to his Cleveland franchise – which he appropriately renamed "Bulldogs" – and went on to win the 1924 title. With the player transfusion from Canton and the Bulldog nickname, it sort of looked like a third straight title for the same team, but in truth two different franchises were involved as well as two different owners and a like number of cities.

Probably at the time no one quite realized just how hard it would be for any future team to go all the way three straight times. It probably seemed that the league might expect some super dynasty every dozen years or so. In fact, the trifecta has only been accomplished once in the NFL since Green Bay's 1929-31 skein, that by Vince Lombardi's 1965-67 Packers.

By adding a championship game in 1933, the league upped the odds against three titles in a row. With a game for all the marbles topping off the season, a team was forced to sustain quality play through the season, then find itself risking all against a strong opponent at the end. The innovation of a Super Bowl in the late 1960s increased the difficulty again. And the present playoff procedure has produced in effect a second season for any would-be dynasty to negotiate.

But the fact that modern teams have a harder row to hoe than the '31 Packers in no way diminishes the achievement of Curly Lambeau's great team. They were definitely the class of the league during the period. The line was filled with stars. Lavie Dilweg was certainly the best end in the league, but Tom Nash, Frank Baker, and Milt Gantenbein were not that far behind. Future Pro Football Hall of Famers Cal Hubbard and Mike Michalske were sensational at tackle and guard respectively, but they had ample support from tackles Dick Stahlman and Red Sleight, guards Rudy Comstock, Jim Bowdoin, and Whitey Woodin, and centers Waldo Don Carlos and Jug Earpe. When the Frankford Yellow Jackets collapsed in November, Lambeau acquired Nate Barrager, an outstanding center. At some time during their careers nearly every one of these men was named to an all-league team.

Cavorting behind this powerful line, the Packers had the usual suspects: Verne Lewellen, the league's top punter and a great all-around halfback; the unpredictable Johnny "Blood" McNally, recognized as the best pass receiver in the NFL and a dangerous broken field runner; Red Dunn, a clever quarterback and ace passer, a pair of strong fullbacks in Bo Molenda and Hurdis McCrary; and a pair of promising rookies in Hank Bruder and Roger Grove. Indeed, the backfield was so stuffed with talent that local hero Arnie Herber, who had made an impressive debut in 1930, hardly played at all.

The numbers tell the tale. By season's end, the Packers had outscored their nearest rival by over 100 points while allowing the second-lowest number of points. Their point-stinginess was all the more impressive in view of Lambeau's well-known disdain for defense. One longtime Lambeau player contrasted Curly's method with Vince Lombardi's: "Vince stressed defense while Curly did not care about it. He always figured if they got 100 we would just get 101. I think if we had played the Little Sisters of the

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Poor they would have scored on us. Curly remembered the 6-3 games of the past and knew the fans wanted to see scoring, so he stressed the wide-open game.”

Lambeau's '31 Packers averaged 21 points a game. No other team averaged 14. In fact, the Packers were so much stronger than any other team, it's a wonder that they ended the season with a possibility of being unseated from first place.

THE CONTENDERS

In both 1929 and 1930, the Packers' main competition came from Benny Friedman and the New York Giants. But in 1931, Friedman decided it was time to get on with his life's work. He retired from pro football to devote his time to being an assistant coach at Yale. Since entering the league in 1927, Benny had averaged a touchdown pass per game – a truly amazing statistic for the time. He was also a good runner, fair kicker, and an imaginative and daring quarterback. Taking him out of the Giants' attack was like taking the fizz out of champagne. The Giants lost three of their first four games – including a 27-7 loss at Green Bay – and were immediately out of the race.

This was Steve Owen's first full season as the New York coach. The year before, he and Friedman had replaced Leroy Andrews for the team's final two games. Eventually he would prove himself one of the great coaches in NFL history, but his start was not auspicious. Despite the presence of excellent players such as halfbacks Dale Burnett and Chris Cagle, ends Red Badgro and Ray Flaherty, guard Butch Gibson, and a rookie center named Mel Hein, Stout Steve's brains couldn't make up for the absence of Friedman.

The Giants were smart all right. They took a flyer on Hein who wrote to three teams before getting New York's offer of \$150 per game.

The Chicago Cardinals were a dangerous team to play as long as they had fullback Ernie Nevers in the lineup. The great Stanford alum was the proverbial “one-man team.” He ran, passed, kicked, played defense, called the plays, and provided inspiration. No doubt had he been asked to sell the tickets he would have done that well too. Unfortunately, whoever was in charge of tickets for the Cards was not an all-pro. And, as a confirmed money-loser, the Cards couldn't afford to surround Nevers with the supporting cast he deserved.

The Bears had the other great fullback of the time – Bronko Nagurski. But they didn't have him all the time. Injuries limited Nagurski all season and knocked him out of three games altogether. As a consequence, the Bears did about as well as possible and won only a single game less than the year before. Red Grange wasn't the fabulous player of yesteryear, but he was still an excellent halfback. Tackle Link Lyman was another effective veteran.

The major challenge to the Packers came from the Portsmouth Spartans.

Potsy Clark was brought in as coach along with a slew of new talent. Clark's was hardly a household name, so it was important that he establish his authority immediately. One day, Roy Lumpkin began clowning around at practice. Lumpkin was an outstanding blocking back from Georgia Tech who had been one of the Spartans' finer players the year before. His credentials were better than Potsy's. Undeterred, the new coach ordered old pro Lumpkin off the field. When Lumpkin went, there was no question who was in charge.

Among the new players joining the Spartans were George Christensen, a big tackle from Oregon; Ox Emerson, one of the best guards of the period; Maury Bodenger, another fine guard; veteran center Clare Randolph, picked up from the Cardinals; Jap Douds, a famous tackle; and Bill McKalip, a combative end. The offensive star of this aggregation would have been multi-talented tailback Glenn Presnell except for one thing – Clark!

Not Potsy; Dutch!

Earl “Dutch” Clark was a truly remarkable player. After winning All-America honors as a triple-threat tailback at Colorado College in 1928 when most of America didn't even know they played football in the Rockies, he sat out of the game for two years. Inducing him to join the Spartans was a real coup. He was the NFL's all-league quarterback from the moment he stepped on the field. If he wasn't quite the one-man gang Nevers was in Chicago – Clark had poor eyesight which limited his passing ability – his

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play-calling and execution were so brilliant that his team was seldom in position of needing an all-out pass attack. He was the NFL's last great drop-kicker and a nearly ungrabbable broken field runner. Perhaps the greatest measure of his talent was that he kept Glenn Presnell on the bench or sometimes out-of-position at wingback.

THE RACE IS ON

With an almost new roster and a coach in charge who knew how to win, the Spartans sailed undefeated in eight games through September and October. But, significantly, they did not play the Packers. Lambeau's charges negotiated the same period to seven wins and nary a loss.

On November 1, the Spartans invaded a muddy Polo Grounds to slog off against the Giants, a team they had bested at home in September. But one thing had changed besides the locale – Friedman was back. He'd re-joined the team for its last game in October and helped in a one-sided win over Brooklyn. His performance against the Spartans showed what a difference one man – on either side -- could make. Clark was sidelined by an injury suffered the week before, and Portsmouth's offense sputtered. The Giants, punchless a month earlier, ripped Portsmouth for two first half touchdowns before the rain and mud made the field all but unplayable. Passes by Friedman to Hap Moran set up both touchdowns.

While Portsmouth was absorbing its first loss, Green Bay visited Chicago and wore out their welcome with a 6-2 win over the Bears.

A week later, the Packers extended their undefeated record by waltzing over Staten Island 26-0. But the situation worsened for the Spartans. At Wrigley Field, the Bears handed them their second straight loss, 6-2. Clark played, though not at his best, but Portsmouth's downfall came because they couldn't take advantage of several scoring opportunities.

At this point, the Packers stood 9-0 to Portsmouth's 8-2. The race seemed over.

But on November 15 everything changed. The Packers went back to Chicago to face Ernie Nevers and the Cardinals. Nevers had one of his best days in leading the Cards to a shocking 21-13 victory. In the meantime, Portsmouth added to its record with a mid-week win at Staten Island and victory over Cleveland in a game played at Cincinnati. The Packers lead was cut to a half game. Hope lived in Portsmouth.

CASUALTIES

No hope lived in Cleveland. The fact that the game against Portsmouth was held in Cincinnati was essentially an admission that pro football was dead in Cleveland. One didn't need a magnifying glass to read that writing scrawled on the wall in red ink.

Cleveland had been a league charter member in 1920 but that team closed up shop after the 1921 season. They tried again in 1923 and even won a championship in 1924 using former Canton players, but that team only lasted one more year. In 1926, a Cleveland team started off in Grange's American Football League, but *that* team was gone with the first snowfall. Benny Friedman tried to attract fans in 1927.

He didn't.

So, in the midst of the Depression when every team was being ground down, what could be more logical than to start up yet another team in Cleveland? Perhaps hitting oneself in the head with a brick?

The idea behind the 1931 team was to put a team in Cleveland, which had this huge new stadium sometimes referred to as the "Mistake by the Lake." President Joe Carr's alter ego Jerry Corcoran was placed in charge to see if he could drum up a local backer. Corcoran had already closed down teams in Columbus and Buffalo. He kept his record intact. The new Cleveland team was the *late* Cleveland team by December.

A more shocking demise was that of the Frankford Yellow Jackets. The Philadelphia-based club had been one of the NFL's strongest members during the 1920s, consistently fielding strong teams and drawing well despite ample competition from the local colleges. But the Depression done 'em in. After winning the 1926 championship, the Jackets slipped badly in 1927 but rebounded over the next two seasons.

By 1930, however, they were in trouble. The Frankford Athletic Association, which owned the team, was not a good financial base. Whereas an individual owner like Tim Mara had his own money tied to the fate of the Giants, the F.A.A. depended on the largess of its members. Once the Depression took hold, too many found it necessary to cut back on their contributions to the club. The hired talent dropped in quality, the losses rose in quantity, and the fans, many strangled by the same Depression, stayed home. It didn't help that, as always, Pennsylvania Blue Laws forced the team to play its home games on Saturdays opposite the college teams.

The 1931 Yellow Jackets managed a scoreless tie with Providence in their second game. There wasn't another bright spot until late October when they upset the up-and-down Bears in Chicago. Two weeks later, several thousand dollars in debt, the Yellow Jackets threw in the towel.

THE SEASON GOES ON

The Giants with Friedman in the fold had been having second thoughts about the hopelessness of their title aspirations. Then, the same day the Packers lost to the Cardinals, the Bears set the Giants straight with a 12-6 win at the Polo Grounds. The Giants were dead. On November 22, the Packers completed the execution by dispatching the never-day-die New Yorkers before 40,000 Polo Grounds faithful. The Giants led 10-7 into the fourth quarter, but a Dunn-to-Bruder pass brought the Pack from behind. Before the final gun, New York drove down the field. Up to the challenge, the Packers stopped them inside the 20.

A little later out in Chicago that man Nevers was at it again. This time, his victim was Portsmouth. The big blond buzz saw scored two touchdowns and then kicked the extra point that gave his team a 20-19 victory. Portsmouth went home and defeated the Bears, but -- barring a miracle -- Green Bay had the championship wrapped up.

The miracle took place at Wrigley Field on December 6. The same Bears who had lost to Portsmouth seven days before pulled off the upset of the season with a 7-6 win over the Packers.

The weather in Chicago was cold and the field was slippery with frost. Nevertheless, 18,000 mostly Bears fans came out to watch. The game began with a bang. After receiving, the Packers chose to surprise Chicago with a first-down pass. Bears quarterback Carl Brumbaugh wasn't the least bit surprised; he intercepted at the 30. Moments later, he astonished Green Bay with a ten-yard pass to Joe Lintzenich who took the ball twenty more yards to the endzone. Cookie Tackwell kicked the conversion.

After that, Green Bay settled down. Early in the second quarter, Molenda unloaded a long pass to Johnny Blood at the five. Grange had Johnny in his sights but slipped at the last second. Blood caught the ball and zipped across the goal line. Lambeau ordered Red Dunn, his best placekicker, into the game to convert. Dunn, who had been shivering on the bench, went in cold, stiff and inaccurate. His wide placement left the Packers a point behind.

The Packers had already beaten the Bears twice in 1931, but each time they managed only a single touchdown. This game ran true to form: one touchdown, but this time it wasn't enough. Aided by the slippery surface, the Bears held on to win 7-6.

THE GAME THAT WASN'T

The Spartans had no league game on December 6. Instead, they hosted the Columbus Safety Club in an exhibition game that was certainly an exhibition of something. The Spartans won 107-7. That ego-building slaughter had barely been accomplished when word of Green Bay's loss arrived from Chicago.

Portsmouth was back to a game behind Green Bay. Better yet, their fans looked forward to a home game with the Packers scheduled for December 13. All their Spartans had to do was crush Lambeau's club and they'd have a tie for the NFL championship in only their second year in the league. Then, the plan went, the Spartans would beat the Packers again in a playoff to win the title. Spartans fans had it all figured out.

So did Curly Lambeau. Before the Bears game, he announced that, should his team lose, it would not play that game in Portsmouth. Or anywhere else. Should they beat the Bears as expected of course, they'd probably play the game, but the Pack would not put its championship at risk.

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Immediately, Spartans' president Harry Snyder began lobbying league president Joe Carr to get the game played. When the Bears edged the Packers on December 6, the ball bounced into Carr's court.

At first Lambeau declared he wouldn't play the game no matter what Carr decided. Later, his sanity restored by the prospect of fines and suspensions, he changed that tune. The *Green Bay Press-Gazette* explained the situation from the Packers' point:

As the Packers have not signed a contract to play Portsmouth next Sunday and the whole proposition was not verbal and tentative, the Bear game was the final of the season and the Spartan battle will not be staged. Green Bay, therefore has won her third successive National league pennant. As the contract with Portsmouth was tentative, league rules permit either team to call off the game, and Pres. Leland H. Joannes, of the Packers, has done so. The Portsmouth team refused to book Green Bay earlier in the year at Green Bay but now with everything to gain and nothing to lose sought the battle.

There was some disagreement over just how tentative the scheduling of a Green Bay at Portsmouth game had actually been. The NFL's method of scheduling since its beginning was to get team managers together and let them work out their team's schedules. Naturally, the teams that figured to draw best had little trouble finding opponents. Weak teams had to content themselves with less exciting draws. When two teams agreed on a date and place to meet, the game was listed on a big board in the front of the room. When everyone was done, the managers voted to accept the schedule. No one remembered for certain whether the Portsmouth-Green Bay game went on the board before or after the official schedule had been accepted.

No contract existed for the game, but that didn't prove anything. Many of the official games were played without contracts. Both Portsmouth and Green Bay agreed that the word "tentative" applied. But Portsmouth insisted that it only meant the game could be canceled if a serious snow storm roared in. Green Bay said it meant either team could cancel for any damned reason it pleased.

Newspaper editorials jumped into the fray. In Portsmouth and southern Ohio, the Packers were called "cheese champs" and accused of cowardice in refusing to risk their title. Up in Wisconsin they praised the Packers and couldn't see the Portsmouth side for beans. Viewed from a more cynical age, one finds a bit quaint the idea that the Packers would even consider jeopardizing their championship in a game that only could profit the Spartans.

It all came down to Carr and his decision as to whether there was a verbal contract to force Green Bay to go to Portsmouth. With all the claims and counterclaims muddying the waters, he had little choice but to rule in favor of Green Bay.

On December 13, when Portsmouth fans thought they should have been watching the Spartans beat the Packers, they got a semi-pro team out of Charleston, West Virginia, and a 33-0 sample of what they were sure their team could have manhandled Green Bay. Meanwhile, the aforementioned Packers were having their way – 21-2 – with the Ft. Atkinson Blackhawks. In the season's final game that counted, the Giants rolled over the Bears in Chicago 25-6.

The flap over the Green Bay-Portsmouth game-that-wasn't had one important repercussion. The NFL finally junked its primitive, every-man-for-himself scheduling practice. A three-man commission was charged with preparing a schedule for the whole league. No more "tentatives." Once the league accepted the commission's schedule, the games were official and would be played barring an act of God.

After a dozen seasons in being, the NFL was still growing up.

1931 NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE

Final Standings

<u>NFL</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>T</u>	<u>Pct.</u>	<u>PF</u>	<u>PA</u>
Green Bay Packers	12	2	0	.857	291	87
Portsmouth Spartans	11	3	0	.786	175	77
Chicago Bears	8	5	0	.615	145	92
Chicago Cardinals	5	4	0	.556	120	128

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NFL	W	L	T	Pct.	PF	PA
New York Giants	7	6	1	.538	154	100
Providence Steam Roller	4	4	3	.500	78	127
Staten Island Stapletons	4	6	1	.400	79	118
Cleveland Indians	2	8	0	.200	45	137
Brooklyn Dodgers	2	12	0	.143	64	199
Frankford Yellow Jackets	1	6	1	.143	13	99

Green Bay's Johnny Blood was the league's top scorer in 1931, racking up 84 points on 14 touchdowns. Eleven came on pass receptions, mostly from Red Dunn. Ernie Nevers finished second with 66 points.