

The Wilmington (Delaware) Comets North American Football (NAFL) League 1965

By Jim Keil

The League:

In 1964, the AFL, having landed a new five year, \$36 million contract for television coverage, was no longer struggling for survival. Professional football had taken hold in America and appeared poised to experience growth beyond what would have been believed only a few years earlier.

Other leagues were attempted at the same time. One of these, the minor professional North American Football League, was organized in Fairfax, Va. in 1964. Bob Spitler, a veteran of other minor league pro football attempts, met with representatives of a dozen other cities in Virginia of that year, and what emerged became the fledgling North American Football League. The NAFL began in what was then considered prime cities for a strong league: Washington, PA, Wilmington, DE, Roanoke, VA, Baltimore, MD, Washington, D. C., Miami, FL and Lakeland, FL, and franchises were awarded these cities.

As the league development progressed however, the Roanoke, VA and Miami, FL Franchises became unstable, and a new Baltimore-Washington entry, which was split between Baltimore, MD and Annapolis, MD and Mobile, AL took over Miami's spot.

Spitler was named assistant commissioner of the league and former National Football League official James E. Hamer was appointed commissioner. The league grew in stature and many fine players were recruited.

During the process of its 13-game season, minor pro football fans from Pennsylvania to Florida, (the first multi-region operation of its kind), witnessed the performances of many of their former favorites NFL and AFL favorites. The Baltimore, Md., Broncos enlisted former NFL standouts Ray Bartels, Yates McCorkle and Don Warthern and Ex-American Football League performer Edward Buettner. Dr. Joseph (Doc) Bartlinski was head coach of the Baltimore club.

The Pennsylvania Mustangs of Washington, PA maintained 72 players on their roster, and their own taxi squad. Many of the 72 players were referred to head coach Phil Ahwesh's Mustangs by the Pittsburgh Steelers of the NFL.

Several former All-Americans headlined the Wilmington, DE Comets. Jack Cummings, quarterback, was honorable mention A-A at the University of North Carolina; Dick Christy was a first team All-American after establishing most of the offensive

records at North Carolina State; Jim Gillman, Ex-Tampa University end, was a Little All-American for the Spartans, and Mike Brown was a Little All-American and the University of Delaware.

M. L. Agnew, formerly with the NFL Pittsburgh Steelers and Ex-Denver Bronco of the AFL, Bob Headen, posed a formidable threat for the Annapolis, Md. Sailors who attempted extra hard to land Navy great Roger Staubach, but failed. The sailors hosted the first doubleheader ever promoted in minor professional football in the U. S. at Panther Stadium from which they donated \$26,000 to the Annapolis Adult Booster Club for renovations.

Dr. Adrian Bodet headed the Mobile, AL Tarpons which played all their home games in the league's largest stadium—Ladd Stadium (home of the Senior Bowl) with a seating capacity of 44,000. John Torok, of the University of Arizona was the quarterback.

The Lakeland team, called the Florida Brahms was coached by Larry Libertore, a former U of Florida quarterback and All American, had players like Olin Hill, formerly of the Green Bay Packers, and David Fuller, who stood 6' 7" and weighed 365 lbs.

Each club in the league had an arrangement with either a National Football League or American Football League club whereby it received roster cuts from that organization on option. Spitler was quoted as saying "We honestly believe that in five or ten years, "We will be the best minor professional football league in the country."

The Comets:

The head coach of the Wilmington Comets in 1965 was Jack Ferrante, who formerly starred for the Wilmington Clippers of Wilmington and the Philadelphia Eagles, where he played on three championship teams. Joe Fizzano was the team's president, John Brentlinger Vice President, Clarence Gunther, Secretary, and John DiGregorio (later of the Pottstown Firebirds) was Treasurer.

Marty Stern (later head Track Coach at Villanova) was General Manager, and Bill Doherty and Tony Apichella were the assistant coaches. Players included many Philadelphia area college standouts. Home games were played at Baynard Stadium where many fans took advantage of their last chance to see hometown favorite and All American Dick Christy of North Carolina State (who was tragically killed a few years later in an automobile accident), Jack Cummings, of Lower Merion H. S. and University of North Carolina, Mike Brown of Delaware, Wally Hill of SMU, and speedster Wendell Tucker, who later played for the LA Rams.

The Comets were very competitive in the NAFL's first year, played one additional year as the Wilmington Clippers, and the franchise was then moved to

Pottstown, PA to become the Pottstown Firebirds.
