

# CARD-PITT: THE CARPITS

By James Forr

Pittsburgh Steeler owner Art Rooney called it the worst team in NFL history.

Steeler co-owner, Bert Bell, said, "The season couldn't have turned out any worse then this one."

They were referring to the infamously lamentable wartime amalgam known as Card-Pitt.

For the Steelers, joining forces with the Chicago Cardinals was repayment of a debt, of sorts, to the NFL. Pittsburgh found itself in particularly dreadful shape prior the 1942 season, with the death of all-league guard Bill Simington and the loss of NFL rushing leader Bill Dudley and a number of others to the armed services. The league assented to the Steelers' request to join forces with the Philadelphia Eagles for the 1943 season. The "Steagles," as they were known, posted a respectable 5-4-1 mark.

The Keystone State teams agreed to go their separate ways following that season. However, NFL Commissioner Elmer Layden had a problem. With the Boston Yanks joining the league, and the Cleveland Rams re-joining the league after finding themselves unable to field a team in 1943, the NFL had 11 teams. The league found it impossible to come up with a schedule that would meet the approval of all teams. So Layden called in his marker with Rooney and Bell and requested that their team merge again in 1944.

Rooney apparently wasn't thrilled with the idea but felt obligated to Layden. He agreed to join forces with another club on the condition that at least half of the team's home games were played in Pittsburgh (during the 1943 season, the Steagles played just two games at Pittsburgh's Forbes Field). Finding a merger partner proved challenging. Prior to the NFL's annual meetings in April 1944, rumors had Pittsburgh joining up with either Cleveland or the Brooklyn Tigers. Cleveland would have been a logical geographic choice; however Layden didn't think it was fair to the Steelers to ask them to merge with a team that had been defunct a year earlier. Rooney rejected a proposal to team with Brooklyn, and he also was cool to the idea of merging with the new kid on the block, Boston. Finally, on April 22, Rooney agreed to combine his Steelers with the Cardinals, who had gone winless in 1943. The jointure would compete in the tougher Western Division, which included perennial powerhouses Green Bay and the Chicago Bears.

Training camp began August 15 in Waukesha, Wisconsin under the direction of the team's co-coaches, Walt Kiesling of Pittsburgh and Phil Handler of Chicago. The two men quickly found that they had something in common beyond football—a fondness for playing the horses. Rooney, who was known to place a wager or two himself, sometimes wondered which sport his coaches considered more important. In his later years, Rooney recalled that Kiesling, specifically, "carried the *Racing Form* more than the playbook."

Prior to the start of camp, the coaching staff made the questionable decision of going with a 'T' formation offense. Some of the Steeler players had been exposed to the 'T' a year earlier with the Steagles; but the Cardinals had used it very little. Moreover, Card-Pitt lacked a solid quarterback, which the coaches recognized. "We'll sink or swim with the 'T,'" insisted Kiesling, "and if we don't come up with a quarterback soon there's a chance that we might just sink." But, betting men that they were, Kiesling and Handler were willing to take that chance.

37-year old Walt Masters went into camp as the #1 quarterback. The peripatetic Masters was an interesting man. A fine pitcher, Masters enjoyed brief stints in the major leagues with the Washington Senators, the Philadelphia Phillies and the Philadelphia Athletics. His NFL career had consisted of two games with the Eagles in 1936 and seven games with the Bears in 1943. In the interim, he had played and coached both baseball and football in Canada. Oddly, in the offseason between 1943 and 1944, Masters managed to age four years. "No one believed me last year when I said I was 33," joked Masters in training camp, "so I might as well tell the truth."

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Despite the unsettled quarterback situation, those close to the team were not without optimism, at least on the surface. Rooney promised a solid, competitive team. Ed Prell of the *Chicago Tribune* predicted that Card-Pitt's huge line, led by 260-pound Chet Bulger and veteran Conway Baker, would be among the best in the league. And Card-Pitt also boasted a promising young running back named John Grigas from Holy Cross, who had enjoyed a fine rookie season for the Cardinals in 1943.

That optimism lasted until the first quarter of the first exhibition game. In a quagmire at Shibe Park, with Babe Ruth in attendance, the Eagles ripped off three first quarter touchdowns and slogged their way to a 22-0 victory. In the aftermath of the debacle, Steeler co-owner Bert Bell must have wondered what he had gotten himself into. Not mincing words, Bell told the press that Card-Pitt was the worst team he had ever seen. The following week, with Steeler veteran Coley McDonough emerging as the team's top QB, the new 'T' formation offense continued to sputter as Card-Pitt lost 3-0 to Washington. However, it was an impressive performance by the Card-Pitt defense against a team that had been favored by nearly three touchdowns.

On the heels of that competitive showing against the Redskins, Card-Pitt opened the regular season portion of its schedule September 24 at Forbes Field against the Cleveland Rams, led by former Steeler head coach Buff Donelli. A crowd of nearly 21,000 watched the Rams jump out to an early 16-0 lead. But Card-Pitt struck back in spectacular fashion just before the half. Bobby Thurbon fielded a Cleveland kickoff on his own 20 and raced 65 yards to the Cleveland 15. As he was being tackled, Thurbon lateralled to tackle Eberle Schultz, who was trailing the play. Schultz took it the rest of the way for Card-Pitt's first score of the season, giving the team momentum heading into the intermission.

Those first Card-Pitt points opened the offensive floodgates. As if by magic, the 'T' started to click in the second half. In the third quarter, McDonough fired a 35-yard touchdown pass to Eddie Rucinski to cut the Rams' lead to 16-14. On Cleveland's next possession, Johnny Karris fumbled on his own 13. That set up a short seven-play drive, capped by a Grigas one-yard touchdown run, giving Card-Pitt its first lead, 21-16. Early in the fourth, the Rams responded, as Jim Benton (who would finish with 108 yards receiving and three touchdowns) made a tumbling catch of a Tommy Colella pass in the end zone, putting Cleveland back on top 23-21. However, Card-Pitt showed some resilience of its own on the next drive, as McDonough eluded pressure and hit Johnny Butler with a 67-yard touchdown pass for a 28-23 lead. It was a moment to remember—Card-Pitt would hold a lead only once more the rest of the season.

With four minutes left, Card-Pitt's Bernie Semes intercepted a Colella pass at the goal line and fell forward to the one-yard line. At this point Card-Pitt, seemingly in command of the game, had several options. They simply could have run their offense and taken time off the clock. Or, worried about operating in the shadow of their own goalpost, they could have taken a safety and backed up the Rams with a free kick. However, Handler and Kiesling made the fateful decision to punt immediately, on first down. Apparently, they didn't want to risk a turnover near their own goal line. But what happened next was just as bad. In what would become a leitmotif of the season, Johnny Martin shanked a nine-yard punt, and the Rams took over first-and-goal. Three plays later Albie Reisz found Benton for the winning score. Cleveland won the game 30-28, and Card-Pitt had blown what would be its best chance all year to win a game.

The next week featured another exhibition game, this time at Forbes Field against the Giants. New York took command early and built a 16-3 lead (one of the Giants' touchdowns was set up by a 12-yard punt by the beleaguered Martin). But Card-Pitt again showed resilience, mounted a comeback, and pulled off a surprise 17-16 victory against the eventual Eastern Division champs. The win was almost solely attributable to a Herculean effort by John Grigas. He rushed 22 times for 238 yards, which would have set an NFL record had it occurred during a regular season game. With 2:20 to go, he carried Giant tacklers along on a 14-yard run that tied the game. Conway Baker's extra point won it. Nonetheless, with the exception of Grigas, the offense was stagnant. McDonough struggled as Card-Pitt completed just two of 17 passes. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* sports editor Harry Boyle labeled the Card-Pitt passing game "putrid." He might have been right. But it would get even worse.

On October 6, two days prior to Card-Pitt's second regular season game at Green Bay, McDonough was inducted into the army. Although his performance had been less than stellar, he was the best quarterback Card-Pitt had. According to Kiesling, McDonough was just beginning to master the T-formation. "I'd rather lose two players than McDonough at this point," sulked Kiesling. McDonough was replaced in the lineup by a prematurely gray, pint-sized 155-pound rookie named Johnny McCarthy from St. Francis College near Pittsburgh.

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The *Pittsburgh Press* predicted that Card-Pitt stood "little chance of winning" against the Packers. The accuracy of that forecast quickly became apparent. The Card-Pitt defensive secondary was helpless against one of the greatest receivers of all time, Don Hutson. Green Bay took a quick 7-0 lead on Irv Comp's 55-yard touchdown pass to Hutson. Soon after, Comp and Hutson hooked up four times on an 83-yard drive, capped by Ben Starrett's one-yard run. Another touchdown pass to Hutson, who leaped over three defenders to make the catch, made it 21-0. Card-Pitt would score a meaningless touchdown late on a 34-yard option pass from Grigas to Butler, although even that play was something of a gift (the Packer defense quit on the play because it expected a motion penalty to be called against the offense). The 34-7 pasting dropped Card-Pitt to 0-2. Hutson dissected the Card-Pitt defense with seven receptions for 117 yards. McCarthy, however, provided a glimmer of hope, managing at least to keep his head above water at quarterback despite his inexperience. "I thought I'd be so scared I wouldn't be able to throw the ball," McCarthy said. "But I felt so calm I surprised myself." Furthermore, his 35 yard-per-punt average against Green Bay emboldened Card-Pitt to release poor Johnny Martin.

Next was a Wrigley Field showdown against an unlikely fellow-denizen of the Western Division cellar, the defending champion Chicago Bears. Injuries and war had ravaged the Bears' roster, depriving them of MVP quarterback Sid Luckman, not to mention coach George Halas. Chicago's starting quarterback was 35-year-old Gene Ronzani, who had retired six years earlier. At least the Bears had history on their side. They had never lost to the Steelers and were 34-7-6 versus the Cardinals.

The Bears had superior talent on their side, too, despite their patchwork roster. It was a pitiful showing by Card-Pitt, described by the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* as twice as bad as their performance against Green Bay. The defense did make some big plays early, forcing a Bob Margarita fumble, which ended a drive deep in the Card-Pitt territory. Later in the first, Bill Perko fell on another Margarita fumble at the Bear 24, but a holding penalty pushed the offense back, and Marshall Robnett's 43-yard field goal attempt was no good. Still in the first, Johnny Butler picked off a Ronzani pass and returned it to the Chicago 35. But three penalties and George Wilson's sack of McCarthy ended that threat.

Meanwhile, the Bears took advantage of their opportunities. With McCarthy momentarily shaken up, Walt Masters came in at quarterback and promptly threw an interception, which was returned to the Card-Pitt 36. Moments later, Scooter McLean's 8-yard run put the Bears up 7-0. Then, after a McCarthy fumble, Johnny Long and end Connie Berry hooked up on a 50-yard scoring pass to make it 14-0 late in the first quarter. Following another botched Card-Pitt punt, this one by McCarthy, Ronzani connected with Berry on a 20-yard touchdown, making it 21-0. Card-Pitt was finished. The offense eked out just four first downs and 115 total yards in a 34-7 embarrassment.

Irate over the woeful display in Chicago, Kiesling and Handler fined Butler, Grigas, and Schultz \$200 apiece for "indifferent play." The players, already fed up with the coaches' strict, dictatorial style, rallied around their teammates and basically went on strike, refusing to practice on Tuesday until the fined players received a fair hearing. That evening, players and coaches met in the team offices in Pittsburgh. Butler didn't attend, Grigas told his side of the story then left, and Schultz stayed throughout. Conway Baker, appointed as a team spokesman, argued that the fines were unjust but Kiesling was having none of it. According to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* he suggested that anyone who didn't want to practice could leave. Some took him up on that offer. Those who remained suggested a meeting with Art Rooney. Six players, including Schultz and Grigas, met with Rooney the following afternoon to air their grievances. Exactly what was said in that meeting isn't clear, but the upshot was that Grigas and Schultz agreed to pay their fines and returned to practice. The recalcitrant Butler was suspended indefinitely, and eventually waived, to be claimed by Brooklyn. Later, Rooney would agree to rescind those fines (except for Butler's), despite his spirited public statements to the contrary.

That week, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* sports editor Al Abrams helped slap the team with a fitting, memorable nickname. In his column, Abrams quoted a disgusted fan as writing, "Why don't they call themselves the Car-Pits? I think it's very appropriate as every team in the league walks over them."

In the wake of the off-field chaos, Card-Pitt headed to the Polo Grounds to meet the Giants, whom they had defeated in an exhibition game just three weeks earlier. It was a good game for a while. In the words of the *Pittsburgh Press*, "For one quarter and almost one half, [Card-Pitt] looked like professionals." At the half, the Giants led 9-0, thanks to a safety on (what else?) a blocked punt, and a touchdown run by defending NFL rushing champion Bill Paschal. Card-Pitt threatened in the second quarter when Coley McDonough, making a cameo appearance while on furlough from the army, led the offense to the New York five-yard line. But the Giants' Ward Cuff dashed those hopes when he intercepted a McDonough pass in the end zone. New York

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salted it away in the third quarter, recovering a Bernie Semes fumble at the Card-Pitt four and scoring on another Paschal scamper. Twice in the second half, Card-Pitt got inside the Giant 35, but they could move no further. The final was 23-0, as Card-Pitt fell to 0-4. Following the game, the quarterback shuffle continued. McDonough went back to Uncle Sam, while Walt Masters was given his pink slip, leaving McCarthy no real backup. Days later, the team signed former Pittsburgh-area college standout halfback Johnny Popovich, just back from the army following a medical discharge, and grabbed halfback Frank Martin from Brooklyn. But they were either unable or unwilling to sign another competent passer to backup McCarthy.

Card-Pitt, which had been wearing Chicago Cardinal uniforms for the entire season, inexplicably unveiled blue jerseys for what would be a bizarre and violent October 29 game in Washington. Following the obligatory partially blocked punt on Card-Pitt's opening possession, the Redskins took a 7-0 lead when the NFL's leading passer, Frank Filchock, connected with huge end Joe Aguirre on a 57-yard touchdown. With McDonough back in the army, Johnny McCarthy was back at QB, and he was the central figure in a bizarre first quarter sequence that would typify Card-Pitt's tragicomedy of a season. After the offense marched deep into Redskin territory, McCarthy's pass was intercepted by Wilbur Moore at the 13-yard line. But on the next play, Cliff "Cactus Face" Duggan blocked Sammy Baugh's quick kick, and suddenly the Card-Pitt offense was again threatening to score. McCarthy promptly dropped back to pass, looked for an open receiver in the end zone...and fired another interception into the waiting arms of Andy Farkas, who downed it for a touchback.

In the second quarter, McCarthy led the offense deep into Washington territory once again, but again his pass was intercepted, this time at the three-yard line. At this point, the frustrations of a terrible season perhaps began to boil over. On the ensuing drive, with 2:00 left in the first half, Card-Pitt's Duggan brawled with Washington's Jim North. Both players were ejected. Moments later Filchock, undeterred by the mayhem, would come up with another big play, finding a wide-open Aguirre for a 48-yard touchdown and a 14-0 lead.

After Card-Pitt got the ball back, end Tony Bova squared off against the 6-foot-4, 230-pound Aguirre after, Bova claimed, Aguirre tried to sucker punch him. Both Bova and Aguirre were asked to leave. As the dust was settling from that tussle, McCarthy dropped back to pass, only to be drilled on a brutal hit by Redskins' rookie Doug Turley. The Card-Pitt QB was hauled off the field on a stretcher with what were thought to be two broken ribs. Although McCarthy's numbers on the day were nothing terribly special (7-14 for 81 yards and 3 INTs), he was the only remaining player on the Card-Pitt roster with significant quarterbacking experience. Card-Pitt pressed Grigas into service at QB for the remainder of the game.

With :05 left in the half, Moore intercepted a Grigas pass and was hit out of bounds along the Washington bench. Moore's irate Redskin teammates immediately began to beat on the handful of Card-Pitt players who were in the vicinity, prompting the Card-Pitt bench to race across the field in an attempt to protect their teammates. Soon, Washington D.C. police stormed the field to break up what had become a near-riot. Coaches Kiesling and Handler found themselves in the middle of the brawl, while Rooney (who had made the U.S. Olympic boxing team as a younger man), dashed about halfway across the field, apparently ready to mix it up, before it dawned on him that for an NFL owner to get into a fight with opposing players would be a breach of protocol, not to mention potentially hazardous to his health.

With decorum finally restored, Card-Pitt attempted to mount a third quarter comeback. They recovered Moore's fumble of the second half kickoff, leading to a one-yard touchdown run by Grigas, which cut the Redskin lead to 14-7. But Moore would make amends a bit later. On a third down and 17 play, he took a handoff from Filchock, shed several tacklers, and raced 75 yards to the end zone (a run described by *Washington Post* scribe Al Costello as "scrumptious") to put Washington back up by two touchdowns at the end of the third quarter. Card-Pitt blew another great chance, losing the ball on downs at the Washington 4-yard-line, but they would regain possession and cut into the lead when Grigas passed 10 yards to Don Currihan for a touchdown. Conway Baker's extra point was no good, and Card-Pitt was within 21-13. But that was as close as they would get. Despite another Grigas touchdown run late, Washington would win 42-20. The final scoring play came when Sammy Baugh came off the bench and threw a 35-yard touchdown pass to Turley with :02 left. Not only did that play rub salt in the Card-Pitt wound, but also it likely made some gamblers happy (the betting line on the game ranged from 18-20 points). The seemingly tireless Grigas ended the day with 100 yards rushing on 30 carries. He also completed six of 16 passes for 99 yards, with three interceptions. On the day, the Redskins would pick off six Card-Pitt aerals. Card-Pitt actually outgained Washington 367-359 and also had the advantage in first downs, 19-8. But the turnovers were more than they could overcome.

NFL Commissioner Elmer Layden fined Duggan a hefty \$200 for his role in the first fight. But Rooney, irate at the officials whom he claimed had lost control of the game, volunteered to pay Duggan's fine for him. Far from being disappointed with his team's loss of composure, Rooney believed the brawls augured well for his team, predicting, "If we display that spirit next Sunday we will lick the Detroit Lions for sure."

Wishful thinking. With McCarthy on the sidelines and no other competent passing QBs on the roster, the coaches opted for a radical mid-season overhaul of the offense. The T-formation was out. The Notre Dame Box was in. "McCarthy was coming along fine...so we figured the 'T' was finally going to click," said Kiesling. "But when he got those ribs broken there was nothing to do but make a change." In the new offense, the ball would be snapped directly to halfback Grigas. Walt Rankin took over the quarterback position, but he would be merely serve as a blocker for Grigas.

Almost 18,000 fans attended the November 5 game against Detroit at Forbes Field, a game the *Pittsburgh Press* called "Chapter Number 6 in the not-too-thrilling saga of How to Lose Football Games." While the *Press* was acerbic, the *Chicago Tribune* barely even noticed, devoting a mere two paragraphs to the game in the Monday edition. The Lions' main weapon was Frank Sinkwich, the NFL's leading rusher [at that moment], who had been excused from military service because of his flat feet. But it was the Lions' air attack that quickly put the game out of reach, as Card-Pitt took what Kiesling called "a nine-minute nap" in the first quarter. Art Van Tone made a one-handed grab of a Bob Westfall 19-yard pass to stake Detroit to a 7-0 lead. After Van Tone intercepted Grigas, Westfall was on the receiving end of a touchdown pass, a 19-yarder from Sinkwich, which made it 14-0. The Card-Pitt special teams woes continued, as Dave Diehl blocked a Bobby Thurbon punt, giving the Lions possession on the Card-Pitt 18. Sinkwich took it into the end zone from two yards out and it was 21-0 Detroit after the first quarter. Card-Pitt was competitive the rest of the way, again outgaining the Lions 384-277. Grigas rushed for 117 yards, moving into second place in the league ahead of Sinkwich, who was held to just 30 yards. But that first quarter "nap" was too much to overcome. Despite a Grigas touchdown pass to Bova in the fourth quarter, the Lions would win 27-6.

In a scheduling quirk, that was the first of back-to-back games against the Lions. Card-Pitt got some good news on the eve of the following week's game, when Thurbon was rejected for military service, enabling Kiesling and Handler to hold on to one of their few offensive weapons. The November 11 game at Briggs Stadium was one that, with a couple of fortuitous bounces, could have gone Card-Pitt's way. But, as would be the case all season, Card-Pitt was to get no breaks of any kind. Detroit took a 7-0 lead on a one-yard Van Tone touchdown run. In the second quarter, a Grigas pass caromed off the hands of Thurbon and into the waiting arms of Bob Westfall, who returned the interception 31 yards to the Card-Pitt nine. Moments later, Sinkwich's touchdown made it 14-0.

In the second quarter, Card-Pitt drove to the Detroit 28, and again to their 15, but lost the ball on downs each time. They also thought they had scored when Bova scooped up a blocked punt and lateralled to Bill Perko, who took it 15 yards into the end zone. But, alas, they were ruled offside. Card-Pitt finally broke through in the third quarter when Thurbon's one-yard run, on the heels of a 70-yard drive, cut the lead to 14-7. But on their possession, Sunny Liles intercepted a pass deep in Card-Pitt territory, setting up another Sinkwich touchdown run. Final score: Detroit 21, Card-Pitt 7.

It was a big game for Grigas, though. He rushed 25 times for 123 yards, taking over the league rushing lead. He also was 13-30 as a passer for 177 yards and accounted for all but 38 of Card-Pitt's yards. The Card-Pitt defense held Detroit to just 119 total yards, but, again, turnovers (five of them) did them in. Although McCarthy returned to action against Detroit (his ribs weren't broken, after all), a return to the T-formation was apparently out of the question. After the game, Card-Pitt sent Frank Martin (who had been injured since joining the team) back to Brooklyn, leaving the team with 23 players, just one over the NFL minimum. 31-year-old assistant coach Buddy Parker reportedly was prepared to suit up in an emergency.

Next, Card-Pitt took its 0-7 record to Chicago for one of its two Comiskey Park home games. Against the Rams, as Carl Hughes of the *Pittsburgh Press* put it, Card-Pitt "abandoned the one thing they had been doing right—running." The Rams jumped out to a 6-0 advantage courtesy of a 46-yard touchdown pass from Mike Kabealo to Tom Colella. Then the Card-Pitt punting game suffered yet another meltdown, as McCarthy shanked one that gave the Rams possession on the Card-Pitt 21. Lou Zontini would run it in to make the score 12-0 at the half. Card-Pitt mounted a nice drive in the third quarter, but Zontini thwarted it when he picked off a Grigas pass. That led to a 35-yard touchdown pass from Kabealo to Steve Pritko, and a 19-0 advantage. Card-Pitt would cut it to 19-6 on a 54-yard scoring pass from Grigas to Bova, but a 58-yard touchdown run by Jim Gillette put the game out of reach. The Rams, who survived a close call against Card-

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Pitt early in the season, won comfortably 33-6. Grigas was awful, completing only 10 of 31 passes with five interceptions. He was also limited to 35 yards rushing on 17 carries (which included 40 yards lost on sacks).

Card-Pitt looked much better during a Thanksgiving weekend game against division-leading Green Bay at Comiskey, played before just 7,158 fans, the NFL's smallest crowd of the season. For the first time in two months, Card-Pitt held a brief lead. Lineman Marshall Robnett intercepted an Irv Comp pass and returned it 48 yards to the Packer 2. Three plays later, Bobby Thurbon sneaked into the end zone, and Card-Pitt was up 7-0 early. But Green Bay wasted little time asserting itself. Later in the first quarter, Hutson picked off Grigas' pass at the Card-Pitt 45 and took it back to the 2-yard line. Paul Duhart's touchdown run tied the game at 7-7. In the second quarter, Duhart dashed 11 yards to give the Packers a 14-7 lead. Then just before halftime, after taking over on downs in Green Bay territory, Grigas would loft a 37-yard scoring pass to Thurbon. However, Conway Baker misfired on the extra point, so Card-Pitt had to settle for a 14-13 deficit at the intermission.

In the third quarter, Comp and Hutson teamed up on a short touchdown pass (a familiar refrain from Week 2 of the regular season), making it 21-13. The Packers' Don Perkins put it out of reach when, on the first play of the fourth quarter, he intercepted Grigas and returned it 40 yards for a touchdown. Card-Pitt would strike again on a 72-yard pass play from Grigas to Don Currivan, but another Comp-to-Hutson touchdown set the final at 35-20.

Although his team was headed for a winless year, John Grigas nonetheless had a lot at stake during the season finale against the Chicago Bears. He still had an outside shot at winning the league rushing title. He trailed New York's Bill Paschal 625-610; however, Paschal still had two games to play. But the taciturn, insular Grigas apparently had a lot more than the rushing title on his mind. This was a man who had gone 0-for-two years in the NFL, and the losing had taken its toll. Early in the week prior to the Bears game he told teammates Baker and Lou Marotti that if the Forbes Field turf was frozen on Sunday morning, he wasn't going to play. Baker and Marotti figured Grigas was just joking, so they didn't bother reporting his comments to the coaches. On the eve of the Bears game, Grigas and roommate Currivan had plans to attend a hockey game, but Grigas said he didn't feel like it. When Currivan got back to their room at the Webster Hall Hotel later that night, Grigas met him and told him that he was going to leave the team and go home to Massachusetts. Currivan tried to talk Grigas out of it, then encouraged him to sleep on it and make a decision in the morning. But Grigas already had crossed the Rubicon. Currivan awoke Sunday morning to this a farewell note from his roomie, quoted in the *Pittsburgh Press*:

*Dear Don:*

*Did not want to wake you up.*

*Funny thing, everything seems so mixed up. I'm gone now. Can't change my plans. Take care of my bags.*

*Best of luck,  
Johnny*

Grigas also left Currivan with a vague, rambling letter to be delivered to the Card-Pitt management.

*Dear Management and Coaches:*

*My action, for what I just did, may not be the best in regard to good, ethical business. Think what you may of me but I sincerely believe in all justice it is for the best.*

*I had that desire which you so often mentioned in your lectures but how long a person can have any desire depends upon the frame of mind under which he plays. The human mind is the faculty of the soul, which is influenced by the human body. When your mind is changed because of the physical beating, week in and week out, your soul isn't in the game. My mind has been influenced this past week and I tried to stick it out but it has reached the stage where the mind is stronger than the will. In all justice to the management and myself I am leaving because I couldn't play the whole game.*

*I played every game from start to finish and never said a word because it was my job to justify my salary. Money was not my primary aim, but to play ball as a sport and have a little fun in a successful*

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*season. I don't know what the fault was because it was difficult for you as for us—we had a bad season.*

*I tried to win and worked hard but the work-horse, as I was termed by the newspapers, is almost ready for the farm.*

*In closing all I can say is I'm deeply sorry—but these are things which can't be fully explained. Good luck and may the team win just this one.*

*Sincerely,  
John Grigas*

As the game kicked off, Grigas was on a train bound for his home. When contacted by reporters, Grigas' sister Helen claimed to know nothing about her brother's plans. Grigas later refused to elaborate on his decision to jump ship.

Even with Grigas in the lineup, the Bears (with QB Sid Luckman back from the Merchant Marines) were a four-touchdown favorite. With Grigas out, Card-Pitt was helpless. A sparse crowd of less than 10,000 fans filed into Forbes Field to observe the bloodletting (Although Rooney said the fan turnout was a testament to the caliber and fervor of Pittsburgh fans. "There's not another city in this league that would have drawn 10,000 for that game.") Without Grigas, Card-Pitt was down to the league minimum of 22 players—and that was before halfback Bernie Semes went down with an injury in the first quarter. Somehow, Card-Pitt hung in with Chicago for a while, trailing just 14-7 at halftime. The lone Card-Pitt score came on a touchdown run by Thurbon. But emotion and spirit only go so far. In the second half, the Bears poured it on. Late in the game, with a 42-7 lead, the Bears rubbed it in by putting lineman Bulldog Turner in the backfield. When Turner took a handoff, the dispirited Card-Pitt defense couldn't stop him. His 48-yard touchdown run made the final score 49-7. End Tony Bova, who had never played in the backfield either in college or the NFL, filled in for Grigas. He performed gallantly, but miserably, completing just six out of 30 passes for 96 yards. The Bears outgained Card-Pitt on the day 412-94. But at least the nightmare finally was over.

Let's sift through the detritus of an 0-10 season. Card-Pitt punters averaged just 32.7 yards per kick, an NFL futility record that will almost certainly stand forever. The team was 0-2 in field goals (The field goal was apparently out of style in 1944. Four teams went the entire season without converting a field goal, and the Bears didn't even attempt one). Conway Baker was last in the league in extra point percentage, missing four of his 15 tries. Card-Pitt passers completed just 31 percent of their attempts, with eight touchdowns and 41 interceptions (a record at the time, and still the third highest total in NFL history). McCarthy threw 13 of those interceptions, and didn't throw a single touchdown pass. His QB rating was an astounding 3.0. The defense was the only one on the league with more touchdowns allowed than interceptions. They were the worst run defense in the league, and opponents outscored them 328-108.

Grigas, despite his sudden departure, was named to the *New York Daily News* all-pro team. Shouldering almost the entire offensive burden for much of the year, Grigas rushed for 610 yards (an average of 3.3 yards per carry). He completed 35 percent of his passes for 690 yards, six touchdowns, and 21 interceptions. Eddie Rucinsky and Tony Bova had decent years at end, accounting for 284 and 287 yards respectively.

The day after the season, the Chicago Cardinals and Pittsburgh Steelers agreed to go their separate ways. "The whole bunch from Chicago were fine fellows," said Rooney, "but we all know now that these combines just won't work out." Cardinals' general manager Arch Wolfe wasn't thrilled with how things panned out either. "It's the furthest thing from my mind to merge with anyone for next year," he declared.

The Cardinals would lose three more games to open the 1945 season before breaking their 29-game skid with a win over the hated Bears. Over the next three years young talent like Paul Christman and Charlie Trippi, and returning veterans like Marshall Goldberg would infuse life into the moribund franchise. By 1947, the Cardinals were NFL champions, defeating the Eagles in the title game 28-21. Sadly, owner Charley Bidwell wasn't around to see the realization of his dream. He died in April 1947. The Steelers, left with just 12 players after their divorce from the Cardinals, would endure another 30 years of futility and frustration before winning Super Bowl IX in 1975. Ironically, Pittsburgh was one win away from meeting the Cardinals in the 1947 NFL Championship, but they lost to Philadelphia in an Eastern Division playoff game.

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Although most of the Card-Pitt players were out of the league within a year or two, a few were able to cleanse themselves of the Card-Pitt stench and enjoy successful NFL careers. Eberle Schultz's fortunes turned most quickly. He went from a winless 1944 season to an NFL championship with Cleveland the following year. Grigas, after going AWOL, finished his career by spending three years with the Boston Yankees, leading the team in rushing in 1946. His roomie and confidante, Don Currivan, played alongside Grigas for those three seasons, ranking third in the league in receiving in 1947. He also saw action on the 1949 Los Angeles Rams club, which lost to Philadelphia in the NFL Championship game. Tackle Chet Bulger and center Vince Banonis would be a part of the '47 Cardinal championship team, while Banonis also would help the Detroit Lions to league titles in 1952 and '53 (teams that were coached by Card-Pitt assistant Buddy Parker).

Injuries, bad breaks, questionable coaching, discontented players, and sheer lack of talent. All these things combined to make the 1944 Card-Pitt team a symbol of NFL futility and wartime sacrifice.

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