

# Joe Carr's VisionU

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By Chris Willis

One of the major issues facing the National Football League today is that of franchise stability. We constantly hear how team owners hold their cities hostage by making demands on what they want. Since 1995 four NFL franchises have moved to other cities, Los Angeles Raiders to Oakland (1995), Los Angeles Rams to St. Louis (1995), Cleveland to Baltimore (1996) and Houston to Nashville (1997). Also many other cities without NFL teams try to recruit these unhappy owners and get them to move to their cities by offering what the owners want.

But for the NFL it wasn't always like that. In the beginning teams were located in small eastern and mid-western towns with franchises coming and going every season. The NFL was a some-what disorganized league, that struggled for recognition and acceptance. It was in serious need of a leader.

Joseph F. Carr, a former sports writer and promoter from Columbus, Ohio, saw the potential for professional football not only to be a great spectator sport but also to become a successful business venture. Carr envisioned pro football being just as popular as major league baseball. After being elected President of the new American Professional Football Association (the forerunner for the NFL) in 1921, he came up with a vision to change the sport of professional football.

He thought in order for the NFL to prosper it had to have franchises located in the largest cities in the United States, similar to baseball. So by using his great leadership skills he put into motion a plan to move the National Football League franchise from its small town roots to the big city. Consequently one man's vision reshaped the NFL into what we see today.

On September 17, 1920, the first legitimate professional football league was formed, the American Professional Football Association (APFA). That first year the APFA fielded 14 teams and elected the biggest name in football as its President, Jim Thorpe. But Thorpe didn't have the leadership skills to make the league better. He was only hired because of his name. The league was still in need of some guidance.

Following the season at the owners meeting in April, the APFA voted to elect Joe Carr as its new President to replace Thorpe. Carr gladly accepted the position

and its impressive salary of \$1,000 a year. He set up the league office in his hometown of Columbus, Ohio and he set forth a plan to change pro football and the NFL forever.

Joseph F. Carr was born on October 22, 1880 in Columbus, Ohio. His formal education consisted of five years at St. Dominic's Elementary School. Then at the age of 13 he went to work at a local machine shop to help support his struggling family. Seven years later (at the age of twenty) he was hired as a journeyman machinist at the Panhandle Division of the Pennsylvania Railroad. At about the same time Carr became the assistant sports editor of the Ohio State Journal, one of the three major newspapers in Columbus at the time. His love of sports shined through in his writing, especially his well known boxing stories.

In 1901 Carr expanded his horizons by organizing and promoting a baseball team, and his flair for the dramatic showed from the beginning. By using employees from the railroad Carr fielded a team and called them the "Famous Panhandle White Sox." How a team can be named "Famous" in its first year is still unclear, but it did grab the public's attention. Three years later in 1904, Carr tried his hand at football, again organizing a team through the railroad. This time it didn't take off and the team played just two games. But Carr didn't give up, he tried again in 1907 and the Columbus Panhandles were born and existed as a franchise until 1922.

While organizing his football team Carr recruited the most unique family ever to play professional sports, the Nesser family. All told, eight family members played professional football, six brothers Al, Frank, Fred, John, Phil, Raymond and Ted, with the seventh being Ted's son Charles. Over the next two decades the Nesser family became the backbone of the Panhandle franchise. From 1907 to 1922 the Panhandles compiled an unimpressive record of 72-91-13, a 43 % winning mark. Despite the Panhandles mediocre record, Carr had two sure ways of keeping the team afloat and in the black for 16 seasons.

First, since all his players were employees of the railroad, Carr scheduled mostly road games. His athletes would simply use their passes to ride the train for free. They would just hop on the train Saturday night, play on Sunday, and ride back all night just in

time to punch in for work on Monday morning. Carr saved the team money on travel expenses and stadium rental by just playing road games.

Second, Carr used the Nesser family as a way to promote his team for those road games. He would take out ads by describing his Panhandles as the toughest professional team in football, led by the famous Nesser brothers. This was done to attract interest from local fans so they would want to come out and cheer their hometown heroes. Consequently, the Panhandles became a big draw for home teams, and team owners went out of their way to schedule Carr's tough Columbus boys. So while many early pro football teams struggled to stay alive from year-to-year, the Panhandles survived behind Carr's strong leadership and the great Nesser family.

In 1920 the Columbus Panhandles joined the newly formed American Professional Football Association (APFA), and Carr was involved in its formation from the beginning. He turned down being President of the league so they could hire Jim Thorpe because the new league needed a big name for publicity. With help from the Panhandles the APFA fielded 14 franchises that first year and crowned the Akron Pros as its champion with an 8-0-3 record.

But after the season Carr saw he needed to be more involved. At the owners meeting in April he replaced Thorpe as President. The following year he helped change the name of the league to the National Football League (NFL). Now Carr was set to reshape professional football and the NFL into a big city, big time sport.

After taking office as President of the NFL, Carr's first order of business was to clean up the problems plaguing professional football. Within the next four years Carr introduced a standard player's contract (with a reserve clause like baseball) so players couldn't jump from one team to another. He set a deadline for the season to be completed and a minimum number of league games to be played in order to win the league championship. Gone were make-shift schedules and playing non-league teams to pad the win column.

More importantly in the spring of 1926 after College All-Americans Red Grange and Ernie Nevers went pro after their last collegiate games, he established a rule prohibiting college players to sign with professional teams until after their class had graduated. These decisions gave the NFL credibility and much needed support from the colleges and universities across the country.

After helping clean up the problems facing the NFL, Carr went to work on the most glaring problem, franchise stability. In Carr's early years as President, NFL franchises came and went as quickly as the sun rises and sets. From 1920 through 1932 more than 40

NFL franchises went through the league (only two teams started and stayed with the league, the Chicago Bears and the Chicago Cardinals) as 19 teams lasted one year and 11 teams lasted two years.

At this time Carr envisioned the day the NFL could compete with major league baseball as America's favorite spectator sport. While nobody really took him seriously, he thought in time it could happen and devised a plan to make it happen.

First, Carr believed the NFL's success rested on franchise stability and second, those franchises had to be located in the biggest cities, just like major league baseball. In 1920 the average city population for an APFA franchise was 560,803 (14 franchises in 13 cities), and the average city population for major league baseball was 1,248,843 (16 franchises in 11 cities). That is more than double the population of football. So by using baseball as an example, Carr started to move his league to the big city and went out of his way to recruit financially-capable owners to run those teams.

He started his plan in the biggest city of them all, New York. After turning down several prospective owners, Carr was introduced to Tim Mara, a successful bookie from the city and for five hundred dollars Carr convinced Mara to purchase an NFL franchise. Therefore, in 1925 the New York Giants were born. Finally Carr had placed a team in the country's largest city, and selected an owner whose family still owns part of the team 78 years later.

Throughout the next decade Carr was determined to recruit stable owners and eventually placed teams in larger cities such as Brooklyn (in 1930 moved franchise from Dayton, Ohio), Pittsburgh (1933), Philadelphia (1933), Detroit (in 1934 moved franchise from Portsmouth, Ohio), Cleveland (1937), and Washington (in 1937 moved franchise from Boston). Early team owners include Art Rooney, who paid \$2,500 for the Pittsburgh franchise in 1933, and after 70 years of football the team is still owned by the Rooney family.

The Philadelphia franchise was originally bought by Bert Bell and Lud Wray for \$2,500 plus payment of 25% of the Frankford franchise which disbanded after the 1931 season. Bell went on to own the team for 8 years (1933-40), then after a stint as co-owner of the Pittsburgh Steelers he was elected as Commissioner of the NFL in January of 1946, a post he held until his death in 1959, a span of almost three decades being involved with the NFL. Carr recruited future owners very well which assured that his franchises would last more than a couple of seasons.

As the 1930's roared by the population of cities which housed NFL franchises went up. Carr's vision was starting to come true as professional football was

beginning to resemble major league baseball. He reduced the NFL from 21 fledging franchises in 1921 (his first year as President) to a more successful 10 franchises in 1937. By then the National Football League and Major League Baseball were almost identical, with 9 out of 10 NFL franchises in MLB cities.

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|-------------------------|----------------|
| 1)Brooklyn              | 6)New York     |
| 2)Chicago               | 7)Philadelphia |
| 3)Chicago (second team) | 8)Pittsburgh   |
| 4)Cleveland             | 9)Washington   |
| 5)Detroit               |                |

10) Only Green Bay didn't have a major league baseball team.

Also, by 1940 the average city population of NFL franchises had caught up with and surpassed the average city population of major league baseball. The average for NFL franchises (10 franchises in 9 cities) was 1,774,833, with baseball average being (16 franchises in 11 cities) 1,555,617.

The National Football League was now a big city sport and was making strides into becoming a successful business for team owners. Carr's vision was now complete. By placing teams in big cities the NFL gained the stability it needed and established a game plan for a bright future.

Joseph F. Carr remained league President until his death from a second heart attack on May 20, 1939 in his hometown of Columbus. He was 58 years old. Although small in stature, Carr continually stands above the crowd as professional football's greatest leader, by reshaping a rag-tag localized game played by so-called "criminals" in front of a few people and moving the game to America's biggest cities to play in permanent stadiums in front of thousands of new fans. In 1963 Carr was inducted as a charter member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame. His dedicated leadership and incredible foresight will never be forgotten and are seen every fall in what we know today as the National Football League.