

WELCOME TO L.A.

By Ray Schmidt

The history of professional football before 1960 is filled with the tales of colorful teams and players. One of the most interesting periods came immediately after World War II when the All-American Football Conference (AAFC) rose up to challenge the National Football League.

One of the most interesting and competitive teams throughout much of the four year history of the AAFC was the outfit known as the Los Angeles Dons. With plenty of individual talent, the Dons certainly had the charisma that would have earned them a spot in the merger of the two leagues prior to 1950, except for the fact that the NFL had challenged the AAFC for control of the rapidly growing fan base of Los Angeles by relocating the defending champion Cleveland Rams to the West Coast for the 1946 season.

The Los Angeles Dons were organized in 1946 under the structure of Southern California Sports Inc., with the popular movie actor Don Ameche being installed as the team president. Solidifying its ties to Hollywood, the principal stockholders of the team - always a source of publicity for the Dons -- included such recognizable names as Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, Pat O'Brien, and Louis B. Mayer. In the football offices could be found Edward "Slip" Madigan as the general manager, with "Dud" DeGroot installed as the head coach for 1946.

Dudley S. DeGroot had earned a Phi Beta Kappa key while playing football at Stanford -- later receiving his Phd from the same school -- and he entered coaching upon his graduation in 1923. After several assignments at smaller schools, DeGroot took over as head football coach at San Jose State in 1932 and during his final three seasons there (1937-39) the Spartans were amongst the nation's highest scoring teams while compiling an overall record of 35-3-1. After four seasons at Rochester University, DeGroot had served as head coach of the Washington Redskins in 1944 and 1945.

Madigan had been something of a coaching legend on the Pacific Coast during his lengthy stay at St. Mary's College, but since leaving the Oakland-area school in a financial dispute he had moved through a variety of less noteworthy positions. Always a high-profile individual, things were no different for Madigan as the Los Angeles Dons readied for their first season.

Faced with the challenge of the newly-minted Los Angeles Rams, Madigan set out to recruit the best of the new talent coming into pro football in 1946. One of the high profile names that pre-season was Tommy Harmon -- former All-American tailback at Michigan -- and Madigan was quickly in a bidding war against the Rams. When the WW-II hero chose to go with the NFL team, Madigan bitterly referred to Harmon as actually being "too old."

Much more visible on the national scene was the battle for the services of Angelo Bertelli -- a Heisman Trophy winner while at Notre Dame and another returning serviceman. Based on his collegiate career, Bertelli was projected to be a top-flight passing quarterback in the pro ranks. Madigan managed to get Bertelli's signature on an AAFC contract in March 1946, and word was soon circulating that the Dons had given the ex-Notre Dame player a \$10,000 bonus.

Somewhere along the way Bertelli reconsidered his decision, and in early summer 1946 he signed a contract with owner Ted Collins of the NFL's Boston Yanks for two years at \$10,000 a season plus a \$2,000 bonus. Bertelli then returned the Dons' bonus money to Madigan, which he later testified as being only \$1,000. The Dons immediately filed a lawsuit against the Notre Dame man and the Boston club, and obtained a temporary restraining order that allowed him to play only with the Los Angeles team. In July Bertelli filed a counter-suit against the Dons at Springfield, Massachusetts, charging the L.A. team with "fraud and misrepresentation" in obtaining his signature on a contract, and claiming that the AAFC pact was "unenforceable."

On the same day Bertelli filed suit on the East Coast, Madigan announced the Dons' selection of Ventura, California as the site of their pre-season training camp -- a seaside town 65 miles north of Los Angeles -- and on August 3 the 75-man squad (sans Bertelli) reported to Coach DeGroot.

The Dons had been pursued by the Ventura Chamber of Commerce, yet, while Madigan was well satisfied with the facilities at the local junior college, the town's relative remoteness from Los Angeles insured that the big city's newspapers would carry only brief dispatches from the Dons' camp. Meanwhile, the Rams were becoming the media darlings of the city -- facilitated by their relatively nearby training camp at Compton, along with all the publicity about the exhibition rematch of the 1945 NFL title game

against the Washington Redskins which was slated for September 6 at the L.A. Coliseum.

But up in Ventura the Dons were big news, and after the team posed in their flashy red, white, and blue uniforms for picture day, the squad settled into the usual two-a-day practices with major stories in each day's local *Star Free-Press* newspaper. Intersquad games at Ventura and San Luis Obispo were well attended, and it was quickly becoming clear that the Dons had the potential to be a very competitive pro team, with players such as Charley O'Rourke, Joe Aguirre, John Kimbrough, Andy Marefos, Bob Reinhard, and Lee Artoe.

The Dons opened their exhibition slate on August 24 with a 17-7 defeat against the San Francisco 49ers at Balboa Stadium in San Diego, and a week later they played another practice game against the highly-regarded New York Yankees before 18,000 fans at Hollywood's Gilmore Stadium. Madigan had intended to move the team's training camp to Los Angeles immediately after the Yankee game, but the city was already overcrowded in the first wave of post-war economic growth, and so, unable to arrange living accommodations for a full week, the Dons had to return to Ventura for an extra week of training.

When the date of the season opener finally arrived the Dons were ready to share the mammoth L.A. Coliseum as their home field with the Rams, U.C.L.A., and Southern Cal. At last the *Los Angeles Times* gave the AAFC team some decent coverage, as the Dons announced that for each home game they would offer 40,000 reserved seats at \$2.50 each, along with 15,000 unreserved at \$1.50 and eight thousand kids' seats priced at sixty cents each. The *Times* reported that the AAFC team held the honor of playing the first regular season professional game ever played at the Coliseum, and the Dons responded with a resounding 20-14 win over the Brooklyn Dodgers before 18,995 fans. Bernie Nygren scored the first touchdown in Dons' history when he hauled in a 60-yard scoring pass from quarterback Charley O'Rourke.

Three days later a court in Boston ruled that Angelo Bertelli could play professional football in 1946 and 1947 only for the Los Angeles Dons, after which owner Ted Collins of the Boston Yanks conceded the loss and the ex-Notre Dame player announced that he would immediately join the AAFC team. Bertelli told reporters, "I hope there are no hard feelings. I'm just anxious to play ball." The L.A. papers expressed immediate skepticism about what shape Bertelli might be in.

Meanwhile, the Dons put together a solid effort that included two TD passes by O'Rourke and six-pointers by four different players on the way to a 30-14 win over the Miami Seahawks before 22,000 at the Coliseum. A week later the Dons played their first road game ever as they fought to a 21-21 tie against the Buffalo Bisons. After a pair of tallies in the fourth quarter gave Buffalo the lead with six minutes to play, the Dons earned the tie when Joe Aguirre made a finger-tip catch of O'Rourke's 48-yard scoring aerial.

The team spent the next week encamped in Chicago where they practiced at Soldier Field while waiting for the matchup against the Chicago Rockets -- a team already beset by coaching turmoil after the firing of Dick Hanley a week earlier. Bertelli had seen limited action against Buffalo and was having difficulty learning all the plays, yet DeGroot announced that he was planning to incorporate a system of three different backfields. Bertelli wasn't really needed in Chicago though, as the Dons rallied for a 21-9 win over the Rockets in a Saturday night game.

Returning to the Los Angeles area, the Dons set up their regular practice facilities at suburban Pasadena's Brookside Park -- right next to the Rose Bowl stadium -- where the visiting teams would also conduct their workouts. For their next home game against San Francisco, the Dons had to move over to Gilmore Stadium in Hollywood because the Saturday night date conflicted with U.C.L.A.'s use of the Coliseum. A crowd of 12,460 turned out to watch the Dons tumble to their first loss of 1946 by a score of 23-14. The badly bruised team then chartered to Cleveland for its first meeting with the powerful Browns -- a flight that was grounded in Denver by bad weather before the DC-4 finally arrived near Lake Erie the next day.

The Browns were undefeated behind a powerful offense that featured Otto Graham, Marion Motley, and Edgar "Special Delivery" Jones, and a gigantic crowd of 71,134 showed up at Cleveland's Memorial Stadium -- the largest crowd in pro football history according to Associated Press. Dons players would later say they were "stunned" at the size of the gathering, but they could not have been too overwhelmed as they jumped on top in the first quarter with a 67-yard drive; capped off by O'Rourke's 18-yard touchdown pass to Bob Nowaskey. Dominating the first half, the Dons allowed the Browns only a 48-yard field goal by Lou Groza before halftime.

The Dons could no longer hold off the high-powered Browns' attack in the second half though, as Cleveland scored in the third quarter and then tacked on three long distance touchdowns in the fourth quarter that included scoring gallops of 49 and 68 yards by Motley. The Dons compiled a pair of nice marches with O'Rourke's TD run capping off one, but at the gun the Browns had a 31-14 win despite the L.A. team's edge in total offense. The hard-hitting battle had taken much out of both teams, and the following weekend the Browns suffered their first loss of the year by a score of 34-20 against San Francisco, while the Dons fell to the New York Yankees in L.A. by a count of 31-17.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 25, No. 6 (2003)

On November 3 the Browns showed up for the rematch at the Los Angeles Coliseum with a somewhat disappointing crowd of 24,800 fans on hand. The Dons struck quickly on the first play from scrimmage as Charley Fenenbock swept around right end and dashed 75 yards to the touchdown, and the Browns then answered minutes later with a 25-yard field goal by Groza. Cleveland took command in the second quarter with a pair of touchdowns, but Groza unbelievably missed the PAT attempt after the first tally and so the Browns led 16-7 at halftime.

The scoreboard was still unchanged in the fourth quarter when the Browns foolishly attempted a fake punt deep in their own end, and the Dons took the ball just 23 yards from paydirt. It took five plays to cover the distance, with Dale Gentry sweeping eight yards for the TD that cut the Browns' lead to 16-14. Then with time running out the Dons recovered a Cleveland fumble at their 47 yard line, and what followed was a bruising 15 play drive down to the four -- capped off by Aguirre's 11-yard field goal with 20 seconds remaining to give the Dons the 17-16 upset victory as the Coliseum went mad.

The next weekend the Dons again ran afoul of the Yankees -- this time in New York -- and tumbled to a 17-12 defeat in a game that included a 47-yard TD pass from Bertelli to Bob Seymour, as the ex-Notre Damer was finally starting to display the passing talent that had been expected. The Dons then spent the week at a resort in Bear Mountain, before edging past the Brooklyn Dodgers 19-14 before a crowd of just 7,500 at soggy Ebbets Field. A 76-yard touchdown run by Fenenbock and a 30-yard field goal by Aguirre helped to overcome the passing heroics of Brooklyn's Glenn Dobbs. DeGroot's boys then moved down to Miami where they tallied a pair of fourth quarter touchdowns within a two-minute span for a 34-21 win over the Seahawks before a sparse crowd of 9,987 at the Orange Bowl stadium.

Back home in Los Angeles on December 1, the Dons crushed Buffalo 62-14 before a decent crowd of 27,822 as O'Rourke and Bertelli combined for five touchdown passes, while fullback John Kimbrough tacked on three TDs. The most interesting feature of the day came at halftime when famous comedian Lou Costello -- who had been seeking to organize a charity football game between the Dons and Rams to benefit his Youth Foundation -- went into the Coliseum press box, grabbed the PA microphone and announced to the entire stadium that the Dons had agreed to the game, but for some reason the NFL team was refusing to play. Costello asked the fans to bombard Vincent X. Flaherty of the *Los Angeles Examiner* with letters demanding the game.

When Madigan had originally proposed the game -- "either winner take all or for charity" -- Rams owner Dan Reeves had replied that NFL rules prohibited any such post-season games or any games against teams that employed players currently under NFL suspension -- such as those on the Dons. In the face of Lou Costello's public outburst, Reeves merely noted that the well-intentioned comedian "has been misled," and that the Rams would be kicked out of the NFL for playing the Dons.

The 1946 season ended in disappointing fashion for the Dons as they were hammered by the 49ers at Kezar Stadium by a score of 48-7, before they fought the Chicago Rockets to a 17-17 tie before 22,515 at the Coliseum to close with a record of 7-5-2 and third place in the Western Division.

For the season O'Rourke led the Dons passing attack with 105 completions in 182 attempts for 1250 yards and 12 TDs, while Bertelli completed 67 of 127 for 917 yards. John Kimbrough led the Dons rushing with 473 yards on 122 carries, while Chuck Fenenbock averaged 8.4 yards rushing with 420 yards on 50 carries and chipped in 778 yards on 33 kick returns. Center Bob Nelson was named to the all-league First Team, while Second Team spots were earned by tackles Bob Reinhard and Lee Artoe, and guard Bill Radovich. Everyone around the Los Angeles Dons looked forward to the 1947 season.

LOS ANGELES DONS 1946

7-5-2 .583 3rd AAFC-W

Coach: Dud DeGroot

Owners: Ben Lindheimer, Don Ameche, Louis Mayer, Lloyd Wright

Home Field: L.A. Memorial Coliseum

Colors: Red, White, and Blue

DAY	DATE	AT	OPPONENT	LA-OP	R	ATT
Fri	S-13	HN	Brooklyn	20-14	W	18,995
Fri	S-20	HN	Miami	30-14	W	22,000
Sat	S-28	AN	Buffalo	21-21	T	18,163
Fri	0- 4	AN	Chicago	21- 9	W	31,046
Sun	0-13	H	San Francisco	14-23	L	12,460
Sun	0-20	A	Cleveland	14-31	L	71,134
Sun	0-27	H	New York	17-31	L	15,000
Sun	N- 3	H	Cleveland	17-16	W	24,800
Sun	N-10	A	New York	12-17	L	30,765
Sun	N-17	A	Brooklyn	19-14	W	7,500

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Mon	N-25	AN	Miami	34-21	W	9,987
Sun	D- 1	H	Buffalo	62-14	W	27,822
Sun	D- 8	A	San Francisco	7-48	L	25,000
Sun	D-15	H	Chicago	17-17	T	22,515