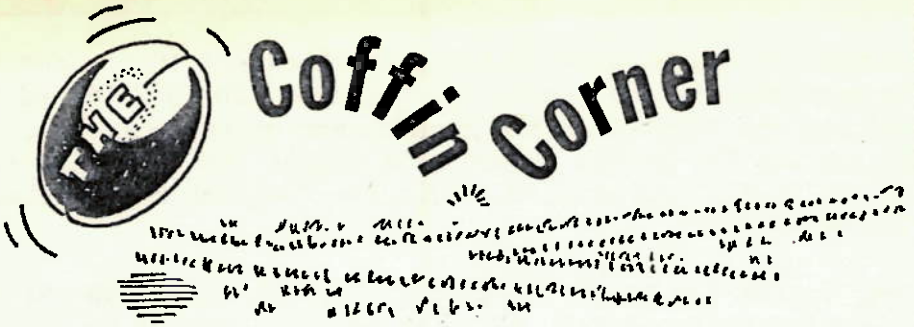

Vol. I, No. 2 April, 1979

A ROSE BY ANY OTHER ....

We have a name! Or, at any rate, we have a working title. How does Professional Football Research Association of America strike you? The suggestion comes from Bob Van Atta, and I think it covers the subject.

Of course, I was holding out for Several Non-Official Observers of the Pro Scene. Then we'd have the acronym S.N.O.O.P.S.

But, seriously, folks, I want to thank everybody for the encouraging letters. More than anything else, they confirmed the need for just such a group. Hopefully, The Coffin Corner can serve as a catalyst.

The question of money has come up. Several asked and some sent. Although I appreciate the sentiments, at present, we have no costs. The Hall of Fame has kindly agreed to take over the printing and mailing for the time being. Any money already sent will be held until we need something. I'll let you know.

MAIL CALL

Let's get to some points raised in your letters:

Bob Braunwart: "One question, though -- would there be any need to restrict the organization to pro football researchers? I haven't any particular interest in amateur football in the United States, but I would think that before 1920 the two areas would be closely related. I know that is the case with Canadian football."

Dear Bob: I agree that the two are closely related; in fact, the college researcher and the pro researcher are often the same person. However, I have the feeling that there are thousands of people out there who research their own college history. We could be awash in Podunk Tech stories. Perhaps we should have a by-law indicating the aim of the organization as a pro group.

* * * * *

Bob Van Atta: "The only suggestion that I have to offer as far as membership is that it should be a researchers' organization rather than a fans' club. The exchange of information among bona fide historians-researchers can become too great a burden if too many persons get involved and add to the correspondence burden, for example."

Dear Bob: Good point. I don't think any of our charter members (all those guys named in the last issue) want to get bogged down in idle chit-chat. On the other hand, I'd hate to see the definition of researcher drawn too fine. If pushed to the wall, I'd have to characterize myself as a fan, albeit one who digs around.

* * * * *

Jim Stewart: "I half-heartedly tried to check out that coach for the Cards in 1920. From a paragraph in the 1947 Press Guide -- 'In 1917 the (Cards) became big-time when they for the first time had a coach and classy uniforms. Marston Smith of the U. of Chicago was the coach. However it didn't last long due to the war and a flu epidemic. Following Armistice Day 1918 the team was re-organized and in 1919 presented a strong club.'"

Dear Jim: Thanks for the information. The next question is: which is the mis-print -- Marston or Marshall? And, was he still around in 1920? The U. of Chicago reference tells us where to look.

* * * * *

Milt Roberts: Milt sent a fascinating clipping in which Park Crisp (a pre-1920 Akron player) recalled a meeting held at the Fort Pitt Hotel in Pittsburgh in 1919 during which a league was planned, thus giving some credence to Roger Treat's assertion that the N.F.L. actually began a year earlier than they say.

Dear Milt: I checked the Pittsburgh Press for July, August, and September of 1919 and could find no mention of such a meeting. That, of course, proves nothing. I want to check another paper. The Pittsburgh meeting site makes good sense. No doubt everyone would have wanted Jim Thorpe to be present, and Jim spent the summer playing baseball (with Boston and New York). Therefore, a convenient place for a meeting of Ohio football men would have been Pittsburgh when Thorpe's baseball team visited the Pirates.

* * * * *

Van Atta again: "I am now working on a detailed Greensburg history of the 1890's, as a followup to my earlier Latrobe history of the 1895-1910 era. While I can furnish copies of the Latrobe history to any researchers who want it, I want to finish the Greensburg research and make a composite before duplicating the whole thing."

Dear Bob: The news that your Latrobe article is available to researchers is great. I've told you before how much I admire it. For those who haven't had the privilege, Bob's article makes fascinating reading and is packed with new information. For example, he has definitely established that Dr. John Brallier, the first admitted pro, was nearly 19 years old when he signed his pro contract with Latrobe in 1895. Every reference I've ever seen mistakenly gives his age as 16! I'm placing my order for Bob's Greensburg article right now. (For Bob's address, see last month's issue.)

* * * * *

This month's research article comes from Bob Braunwart. It's exactly the kind of article I'd like to publish in The Coffin Corner because Bob writes informally and freely admits where there are gaps in his account. Hopefully, this will inspire some of us to write to Bob (see last month's issue for address) with fresh information and/or disagreements.

Speaking of disagreements, I have to quarrel with Bob on two points.

First, he says that the N.F.L. recognizes some of these A.F.L.'s as major. Actually, the N.F.L. wouldn't recognize the twelve apostles. It would be more accurate to say that "some historians" recognize these A.F.L.'s as major leagues.

My second quibble is that Bob gives the impression that he and I shared this research equally. Actually, my contribution was minimal, and Bob deserves full credit.

ALL THOSE A.F.L.'S:
N.F.L. COMPETITORS, 1935-41

By Robert Braunwart

Between 1935 and 1941 there were five (or four, or three, depending on what you count as a new league and what as a merger) professional football leagues in competition with the N.F.L. which had some not totally illegitimate claim to major-league status. (The N.F.L. today recognizes two of them -- the American Football Leagues of 1936-37 and of 1940-41 -- as major leagues.) There was also an avowed minor professional league, the American Association, which included a number of N.F.L. farm clubs. And, in addition, several relatively strong teams played one or more of these years as independents, scheduling games with N.F.L. teams, A.F.L. teams, and other independents. There was also expansion in the National Football League during this period, with the Cleveland Rams entering the N.F.L. in 1937.

The account which follows is tentative in spots because newspaper coverage of the various leagues and seasons was highly uneven. (I have tried to indicate which parts are educated guesses.) Nevertheless, it represents the best information and speculation that Bob Carroll and I have been able to come up with. If anyone else has additional information or hypotheses, we would appreciate hearing.

The Mid-West Football League was established in 1935 with George J. Heitzler as president and James C. Hogan as Secretary-Treasurer. (These men were to retain their positions at least through the 1939 season.) Three teams finished in a tie for first place at the end of the 1935 season -- the Louisville Tanks, Cincinnati Models and Indianapolis Indians. There were no playoffs.

I do not know the other members of the league or the final standings in 1935, but this must certainly have been a minor, regional league. It will figure more prominently, however, later in this account.

The M.W.F.L. continued in 1936, with the Louisville Tanks, coached by Harry M. Reed and with William H. Goepper as business manager, the undisputed champions. Again, there were no playoffs.

Also this season the second (after the 1926 attempt, which was unrelated) American Football League was formed. Bob and I have compiled the complete regular-season results for this league, and the standings in 1936 were:

Boston Shamrocks	8	3	0	.727	133	97
Cleveland Rams	5	2	2	.714	123	77
New York Yankees	5	3	2	.625	75	74
Pittsburgh Americans	3	2	1	.600	78	65
Syracuse/Rochester Braves	1	6	0	.143	41	113
Brooklyn/Rochester Tigers	0	6	1	.000	58	82

This is one of the leagues recognized by the N.F.L. as "major", and game results were well reported in the New York Times. Nevertheless, both attendance and finances must have been troublesome, because the league appears to have been not particularly successful.

The Brooklyn Tigers were "moved from ~~Syracuse~~ ROCHESTER at the start of the season" according to the Times. (I do not know what league, if any, they came from.) Shortly after an October 25 game at Boston the Syracuse Braves moved to Rochester, hoping (no doubt) for improved attendance. Apparently they did no better there, because they played only one more game (at Rochester) before disbanding. Then after a November 8 game at Cleveland, the Brooklyn team (the one which had apparently played in Rochester in 1935) decided to move back. They finished the season there, losing to Boston and Cleveland in home games.

This would be confusing enough, but some modern publications have made matters even worse. In some listings of the standings the two lowest finishing teams are given as the Rochester Tigers (with the Braves' W-L-T record) and the Brooklyn Tigers (with the Tigers' record). I don't know precisely what sort of confusion this is; there was a team called the Rochester Tigers both in 1935 and for the final two games of 1936 (the same team, in fact), but it never played any of the Syracuse/Rochester Braves' games for them.

Roger Treat (who, incidentally, does not make the error referred to above) lists the A.F.L. head coaches and rosters, and as far as I have been able to determine, these are accurate. There were no playoffs in 1936 and the Boston Shamrocks won the championship outright on standings. As far as I am aware, no American professional football league adopted any sort of playoff system before 1939, except for the N.F.L. and its affiliated minor league, the American Association.

A few other notes on the 1936 A.F.L. season: Boston played at Fenway Park, New York at Randalls Island and Yankee Stadium, and Brooklyn at Ebbets Field. Ken Strong played for the Yankees in 1936 and 1937. Exhibition results of interest in 1936 include:

Los Angeles Bulldogs 13, Chicago Cardinals 10
Philadelphia Eagles 10, Los Angeles (Bulldogs?) 7

In 1937 the Louisville Tanks again won the M.W.F.L. championship, with the same coach and business manager, but I do not have the standings.

The 1937 A.F.L. standings were:

Los Angeles Bulldogs	8	0	0	1.000	219	69
Rochester Tigers	3	3	1	.500	94	115
Cincinnati Bengals	2	3	2	.400	102	89
New York Yankees	2	3	1	.400	57	115
Boston Shamrocks	2	5	0	.286	76	98
Pittsburgh Americans	0	3	0	.000	7	69

The Bulldogs were the first West Coast professional football team in a coast-to-coast league which did not play all of its games on the road. The final three games of the season were played in Gilmore Stadium, Los Angeles. The team had played as independents in 1936.

The Shamrocks were owned by Bill Scully. The Rochester Tigers were (presumably) the same team that had moved there from Brooklyn the previous season. In 1937 the N.F.L. admitted the Cleveland Rams, but the team apparently had no relationship to the 1936 A.F.L. Rams. Four of the players (according to Treat) were the same, but these may have been Cleveland natives or simply unemployed football players stranded in Cleveland.

Here are some 1937 exhibition results:

Brooklyn Dodgers 26, Cincinnati Models 0
Brooklyn Dodgers 35, Dayton (?) 6
Brooklyn Dodgers 33, Louisville Tanks 6

By 1938 the second A.F.L. had folded, although some of its teams continued to play as independents. The Mid-West Football League continued play but changed its name to the "American Professional Football League", since that name was currently vacant. The 1938 A.P.F.L. standings are listed below.

Chicago Indians	5	1	0	.833	87	26
St. Louis Gunners	4	3	1	.571	31	73
Louisville Tanks	4	3	0	.571	67	40
Nashville Rebels	2	2	1	.500	46	61
Cincinnati Blades	3	5	0	.375	53	11
Dayton Rosies	1	5	0	.167	7	80

The W-L-T records above are those reported for the teams at the end of the season. The points for and points against, however, are tentative. Bob and I have checked newspapers for the entire season from every league city and from several other cities and there are still several unanswered questions. First, the Cincinnati team disappeared after winning their first three games. The Blades folded (for reasons which are not very clear) in early October, and the Cincinnati Bengals (of the 1937 A.F.L.) were asked to complete the Blades' schedule. (There really was an A.P.F.L. schedule, with dates and everything, antedating the start of the season.) The Blades, who were playing as an independent pro team this year after the collapse of the previous year's A.F.L., declined, claiming prior scheduling commitments themselves.

Thereafter none of the newspapers mention any Cincinnati A.P.F.L. team. The most reasonable assumption (but we have no confirmation whatsoever) is that Cincinnati's five losses were by forfeit. The above final standings assume that the ~~Blades~~ Bengals lost each of their final five league games 1-0.

An additional problem with the table is that four of the twenty league games resulted in scores that were reported differently in newspapers in different cities. The table involves our (fairly arbitrary) determination as to which reports were most trustworthy. Indeed, under one account Dayton ended the season with the truly bizarre record of 1-5-0, 1 PF, 80 PA.

At the conclusion of the regular season the A.P.F.L. adopted a "Shaughnessy-style" playoff, which involved elimination from playoff competition of all but the top four teams and pitting them first against third and second against fourth. In the event, Louisville defeated Chicago 13-0 and St. Louis eliminated Nashville 19-13. In the championship game December 4, Louisville won 3-0, making them champions of the M.W.F.L./A.P.F.L. four years in a row (counting the 1935 three-way tie).

A few other miscellaneous bits of information on this season are: The Louisville team was sponsored by the Standard Sanitary Manufacturing Co. of the same city. The Chicago team was known as the "Indians", "Steelmen" and "Panthers", and was variously described as playing for Chicago, Calumet, Indiana Harbor, and East Chicago. There may have been more than one team involved, the league having

found a replacement for a disbanded team that would assume the earlier team's won-lost record, but there is no hard evidence for this. Indeed, the Chicago Tribune never mentioned any of the local team's games except for the first.

Stan Mondala of Chicago won the 1938 scoring championship with seven touchdowns, four extra points and a field goal. "Cowboy" Bartlett of Louisville was the leading rusher with 375 yards. Dayton's Alex Rado was the leading passer (13 completions for 138 yards) and Rocky Reed won the receiving title (8 receptions good for 116 yards).

The 1937 A.F.L. Rochester Tigers and Pittsburgh Americans presumably dissolved permanently. The New York Yankees appear in news stories in 1939, but what they were doing in 1938 (if anything), I have no idea. The Los Angeles Bulldogs, Cincinnati Bengals, and Boston Shamrocks, however, played the 1938 season as independent professional teams.

Among the independent teams the Cincinnati Bengals compiled a 7-2-1 record (these are all tentative -- some games may be missing), the Los Angeles Bulldogs were 5-2-2, and the Boston Shamrocks were 4-5-0. The latter team played two games in Boston and then went on a seven-game road trip which ended at Louisville November 6. There the Shamrocks lost a 34-0 contest with the Louisville Tanks and dissolved. Several of their players, including player-coach Joe Zapustas, stayed in Louisville to play with the Tanks.

Games this season involving A.P.F.L. or independent teams versus N.F.L. opponents included:

Chicago Bears 29, Chicago Indians 6
Washington Redskins 18, Louisville Tanks 0
Cincinnati Bengals 17, Chicago Bears 13
Cincinnati Bengals 27, Pittsburgh Pirates 0
Cincinnati Bengals 14, Chicago Cardinals 14
Chicago Bears 14, Los Angeles Bulldogs 12
Los Angeles Bulldogs 14, Chicago Cardinals 14
Los Angeles Bulldogs 17, Pittsburgh Pirates 6
Los Angeles Bulldogs 14, Pittsburgh Pirates 14
Los Angeles Bulldogs 28, Cleveland Rams 7
Pittsburgh Pirates 15, Boston Shamrocks 6

(It should be noted that the Bengals' 7-2-1 record included a 2-0-1 record versus N.F.L. teams. The Bulldogs were 2-1-2 against the N.F.L. and the Shamrocks were 0-1-0.)

In 1939 the A.P.F.L. (formerly the M.W.F.L.) continued play. The 1939 standings are listed below.

Los Angeles Bulldogs	7	1	0	.875	223	85
Cincinnati Bengals	6	2	0	.750	117	85
Columbus Bullies	9	4	0	.692	235	81
Chicago Indians	4	3	0	.571	55	51
St. Louis Gunners	5	6	0	.455	141	164
Dayton Bombers (Rosies)	2	5	0	.286	45	167
Kenosha Cardinals	2	7	0	.222	97	105
Louisville Tanks	2	9	0	.182	51	226

Bob and I have complete scores for this season, with a high degree of confidence. Note particularly that the Bulldogs and the Bengals, independent teams the previous season, finished 1-2 in 1939 after their admission to the A.P.F.L. Louisville, league champions the previous four years, finished dead last in 1939. Both Los Angeles and Cincinnati, let it be remembered, had played in the 1937 A.F.L. and the Bengals had been invited to join the American League in 1938.

The St. Louis team (for reasons that were not adequately reported) formally withdrew from the league after its eighth game, November 12 versus Cincinnati. The Gunners agreed, however, to play out the remainder of their A.P.F.L. schedule, and the league decided to count the remaining games (three of them) as league games, both for the Gunners and for their opponents. Thus the Gunner's withdrawal before their final three games had no effect on the final standings.

Exhibitions in 1939 included:

Green Bay Packers 31, St. Louis Gunners 0
Chicago Bears 26, Cincinnati Bengals 6
Cleveland Rams 22, Columbus Bullies 0
Chicago Cardinals 21, Kenosha Cardinals 21
Washington Redskins 21, Los Angeles Bulldogs 6

There was an organizational meeting in the spring of 1939 with representatives from Frankford, New York, Newark, Baltimore, Buffalo, Pittsburgh and Kansas City. At this meeting the reorganization of the 1936-37 A.F.L. was agreed upon. There followed a court battle with the ex-M.W.F.L. over the right to use the name, and when the new league actually began play in 1940 there were teams from both of the predecessor leagues. The 1940 standings are given below.

Columbus Bullies	8	1	1	.889	134	69
Milwaukee Chiefs	7	2	0	.778	180	59
Boston Bears	5	4	1	.556	120	79
New York Yankees	4	5	0	.444	138	138
Buffalo Indians	2	8	0	.200	45	138
Cincinnati Bengals	1	7	0	.125	53	187

The N.F.L. recognizes this as the third major American Football League, but it is probably more reasonable to think of it as a merger of the 1936-37 A.F.L. (which claimed to be reorganizing) and the 1938-39 A.P.F.L. (formerly the Mid-West Football League). New York and Cincinnati represented the former, and Columbus and Cincinnati the latter. The remainder were new teams. The other teams at the organizational meeting -- Newark, Baltimore, Pittsburgh and Kansas City -- apparently dropped out. (It must be remarked that this is speculative, since we have not discovered the results of the lawsuit over the A.F.L. name.)

The Yankees this season were owned by Douglas Hertz. Los Angeles, the 1939 champions, dropped out of the league to begin play in the new Pacific Coast Professional Football League, which included teams from Hollywood, San Diego, Oakland and Phoenix. Apparently the Bulldogs had all along been successful in recruiting West Coast college talent. They survived at least until 1946 -- thus overlapping with the Rams and the Dons in Los Angeles -- but we do not have the P.C.P.F.L. standings for this interval.

The Yankees returned from Columbus November 21 by air, only four days after the Packers had become the first N.F.L. team to fly.

The St. Louis Gunners still existed in 1940 -- we have some exhibition results for them but no adequate explanation for their departure from the A.P.F.L. Another question: were these the same Gunners that played for St. Louis in the N.F.L. in 1934?

The Kenosha Cardinals were also playing independently. Someone named Lance is said to have reorganized a local sandlot team known as Coopers Cardinals in 1939 or 1940, and the team seemed to have a special relationship with the Green Bay Packers. The players included Johnny Blood (who also coached) and Beattie Feathers.

Interesting exhibition game results for 1940 include:

Chicago Bears 59, St. Louis Gunners 0
Green Bay Packers 17, Kenosha Cardinals 0
Columbus Bullies 51, St. Louis Gunners 0
Kenosha Cardinals 13, Columbus Bullies 7
Columbus Bullies 20, Kenosha Cardinals 7

Nineteen forty-one was the second year for this version of the American Football League. The final standings for this season are given below.

Columbus Bullies	5	1	2	.833	142	55
New York Americans	5	2	1	.714	116	73
Milwaukee Chiefs	4	3	1	.571	105	84
Buffalo Tigers	2	6	0	.250	72	172
Cincinnati Bengals	1	5	2	.167	69	120

Boston was out and the Buffalo Indians were replaced by the Buffalo Tigers. (I do not know the relationship -- if any -- between the two Buffalo teams.) The New York Americans replaced the New York Yankees. A group headed by William D. Cox took over from Douglas Hertz, Yankees' owner in 1940. The new owners changed the team name to "Americans", whereupon Hertz started another team, which, of course, he named the "Yankees".

Hertz's new Yankees played a few games as an independent team, but in October they joined the American Association as a replacement for the Providence Steam Roller, which had folded. The A.A. was the minor league with N.F.L. farm clubs referred to in the introduction. The Yankees signed Joe Lillard and Hugh Walker, both blacks, this year.

The American Football League voted at the end of the 1940 season to "draft" fifty college players (by the league, not the individual teams). One of the inducements to sign with the A.F.L. was to offer prospective players a choice of teams within the league. I do not know whether this draft was ever held.

The Columbus Bullies won the A.F.L. championship and the Los Angeles Bulldogs the P.C.P.F.L. championship, both on standings. The Bullies then traveled to Los Angeles and lost 7-0 to the Bulldogs in what was billed as the championship of the small professional leagues.

Some exhibitions in 1941:

Winnipeg Blue Bombers 19, Columbus Bullies 12
Columbus Bullies 6, Winnipeg Blue Bombers 0
Columbus Bullies 31, Winnipeg Blue Bombers 1
Columbus Bullies 20, Kenosha Cardinals 6
Green Bay Packers 65, Kenosha Cardinals 2
Cleveland Rams 34, Kenosha Cardinals 0
New York Giants 34, Kenosha Cardinals 7
Philadelphia Eagles 35, Kenosha Cardinals 6
Kenosha Cardinals 18, Winnipeg Blue Bombers 16
Kenosha Cardinals 35, Winnipeg Blue Bombers 6
Kenosha Cardinals 21, Chicago Cardinals 21

(The Winnipeg team, playing in the Western Interprovincial Football Union, was an amateur team.)

Beginning in 1936, the N.F.L. had an associated minor league, called the American Association, which included a varying membership of six to nine teams in the Northeast. Two of the more successful teams were the Jersey City Giants and the Newark Bears, which were farm clubs for the N.F.L. teams of the same names. We have the standings (but not the game results) for 1937-39. The playoff history for this league is given below.

1936	Washington (Dixie League) 13, Brooklyn Parkways (American Association) 6
1937	White Plains 3, Newark 0
1938	No playoffs; Jersey City won on standings
1939	Newark Bears 27, Paterson Panthers 7
1940	Jersey City Giants 17, Wilmington Clippers 7
1941	Wilmington Clippers 21, LongIsland Indians 13
1942-5	League suspended operations
1946	Jersey City 14, Akron 13
1947	Plans were made to play this season, but I don't know whether play actually occurred

The Pacific Coast Professional Football League also played at least through the 1946 season. That year the Los Angeles Bulldogs won the Southern Division championship with a 9-2-1 record, and the Tacoma (Washington) Indians, a first-year team, won the Northern Division at 7-4-0. The Bulldogs won the championship game January 19 in Los Angeles by a score of 38-7. The Indians had disbanded a few weeks earlier, thinking their season was over, and had to bring their players back from as far away as Minnesota.

Other teams in the league in 1946 included the Hawaiian Warriors, Hollywood, San Diego, San Francisco, Sacramento, Salt Lake City and Oakland. The Warriors were around at least through 1948, when they played two exhibition games with the Los Angeles Rams. I do not know if 1946 was the final P.C.P.F.L. season.

FINAL NOTES

Most of you wrote to say that you had passed the extra copy of the first issue on to another researcher. If he is interested, please encourage him to write and we'll put him on our mailing list. Remember, it's in all our interests to increase our membership with legitimate researchers.

Write: Bob Carroll, 12870 Route 30, N. Huntingdon, PA 15642.

* * * * *

And, now, about our first convention. As I mentioned before, I think it's important that as many of us get together as possible to chart our course.

What I plan to do is spend three days in Canton, hopefully in June. I'll be bringing as much of my own research as I can cart along. And, as many ideas as I can, too.

So, this is an appeal to any and all serious researchers to come in, even if only for a few hours, and give us the benefit of your expertise, experience, and ideas.

Tentative dates (subject to change at the discretion of the majority of the membership): Thursday, Friday, and Saturday; June 21, 22, 23.