Fall 2013

Run to Glory and Profits

David George Surdam

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THE ECONOMIC RISE OF THE NFL DURING THE 1950s

DAVID GEORGE SURDAM

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS
LINCOLN AND LONDON

Portions of chapter 9 originally appeared as the author's "A Tale of Two Gate-Sharing Plans: The National Football League and the National League, 1952–56," *Southern Economic Journal* 73, no. 4 (April 2007): 931–46. This content appears with the permission of the Southern Economic Association, © 2007.

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Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Surdam, David G. (David George)
Run to glory and profits: the economic rise of the NFL during the 1950s / David George Surdam.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-8032-4696-6 (cloth: alk. paper) 1. National Football League. 2. Football—Economic aspects—United States. I. Title.
GV955.5.N35S87 2013
796.332'64097309045—dc23
2013011615

Set in Minion by Laura Wellington.
Designed by Nathan Putens.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always, writing the acknowledgements is one of this author's favorite tasks. Many people have assisted me in the preparation of this book.

George Rugg, curator of the Joyce Sports Collection at Notre Dame University, was instrumental in providing team scorecards and other information. Jon Kendle, researcher at the Pro Football Hall of Fame Archives and Information Center in Canton, Ohio, supplied me with minutes of National Football League and American Football League meetings, as well as other information. Their assistance made this book stronger.

I offer my grateful appreciation for the Pro Football Hall of Fame Archives and Information Center's permission to use archival material in this book. I also thank the *Southern Economic Journal* for their permission to reprint large portions of my article on gate sharing in Chapter Nine.

The University of Oregon and Notre Dame University microfilm sections staff helped in locating *The Sporting News* on microfilm. University of Oregon archivists helped me located information on Joe Lillard, an early pioneer of integration in the NFL. Graduate students Ashley Fewins and Nadya Shumilova downloaded and printed key *New York Times* articles. In addition, both were attentive students and a joy to work with.

Alicia Pecha, Nathan Mackey, and Kayla Gump, undergraduate student assistants in the Economics Department at the University of Northern Iowa worked on processing the note cards for this book. Their efforts on a rather tedious task were greatly appreciated.

Farzad Moussavi, dean of the College of Business Administration, and Fred Abraham, head of the Economics Department at the University of Northern Iowa, gave unstinting financial support and encouragement. The University of Northern Iowa generously granted me a summer research grant during the writing stage. The College of Business Administration gave funds for two research trips to Canton, Ohio, as well as financing the index.

Janine Goodwin copyedited the manuscript under the direction of Sabrina Stellrecht at the University of Nebraska Press. Their efforts improved the final version, and I enjoyed working with them.

Sarah Statz Cords compiled the index and, as usual, was a pleasure to work with.

Professor Kevin Quinn of St. Norbert College gave the book a thorough reading early in the process. Two anonymous referees provided useful comments for improving this manuscript.

I also acknowledge three more members of the University of Northern Iowa community. Rosie Lang, dining unit manager at Rialto Dining Hall, has supervised hundreds of delicious meals for a hungry bachelor, as well as being a good friend. Students Jen Bolden and Danielle Enderson proved inspiring with their dedication to scholarship and their friendliness. Ms. Boden will one day join the academy; Ms. Enderson earned a CPA and various honors while rooting for the New England Patriots. I'm sorry there isn't more about your favorite team, Danielle, but they came late in the story.

I thank the surviving members of my dissertation committee, Professors Robert W. Fogel, Nobel Prize winner in economics, and David Galenson for their encouragement over the past twenty-five years. While the NFL is a far cry from my Civil War dissertation, they have maintained an interest in my work. For the sake of Bob, who is a Chicago Bears fan, I trust I have not unduly maligned the Bears in any way.

RUN TO GLORY AND PROFITS

INTRODUCTION

The National Football League (NFL) has longed reigned as America's favorite professional sports league, having surpassed Major League Baseball (MLB) and prevailed against the National Basketball Association (NBA). Success may have spoiled the NFL, as the league has exhibited pompous and arrogant behavior. During the 1976 bicentennial celebrations, the NFL sponsored an essay contest for the schoolchildren of America on the topic "The NFL in American History." Leading historians — including Henry Steele Commager, who retorted, "It has no importance whatsoever" — scorned the league's chutzpah.[1] The league's historical videos are renowned for their overly dramatic narration and unsubtle musical cues.[2] One would think the narrator was describing the titanic struggle between the Red Army and the Wehrmacht instead of the Packers and Chiefs in the retroactively dubbed Super Bowl I. The league's use of Roman numerals to denote Super Bowls has also taken its share of ridicule.

NFL owners, though, have reason to be proud of their league. They collect huge sums of money from television networks. The Super Bowl (at least it is not named the "World Series") is a national — and now a worldwide — event. More Americans watch the game than vote in Presidential elections. The current owners, however, rarely reflect on the league's humble beginnings and adolescence. Even in the 1950s, after thirty seasons of operation, the NFL lacked the glamour and the profits of Major League Baseball. NFL owners barely survived the German- and Japanese-inspired disruption of their league. After World War II, the onset of peace seemed to provide a promise of prosperity as the demand for leisure pursuits increased, but that hope was dissipated when a new set of owners formed a rival league, the All-America Football Conference (AAFC).[3] As late as 1949, famed sportswriter Grantland Rice wrote, "Pro football can never compete with college football. No pro teams can ever match the drawing power of Notre Dame, Michigan, Southern California, SMU, Army and Navy, Minnesota, Stanford and California and Texas, and too many others to mention."[4]

Despite Rice's dismissal, even Presidents of the United States began paying attention to the NFL. The league cheered the news that President Truman would see some contests in the upcoming 1945 season. Now, of course, a presidential phone call to the Super Bowl champions is de rigueur.[5]

The NFL's ascent from obscurity to the front pages of the sports world during the 1950s raises many questions. How did the league achieve prosperity after years of struggle? How did the league defeat the rival AAFC? Sports historians and observers frequently cite television and the league's superior competitive balance (in comparison with Major League Baseball's competitive balance) as critical factors that triggered the league's rise. The league's revenue-sharing, player draft, player reserve clause, and television policies were intertwined with competitive balance issues and are often credited with improving the league.[6] The answers to these questions comprise the subsequent chapters of this book.

The NFL owners' and players' actions are amenable to economic analysis. The owners and players possessed scarce resources (such as capital, labor, and stadium dates) that had alternative uses. All involved had to allocate their scarce resources among the alternative uses in ways that best served their interests and helped fulfill their goals.

While owners, like most businesspeople, were politic enough not to claim they were trying to maximize profits, profit maximization or cost minimization could never be far from their minds given their sometimes slender capital reserves. An owner might, of course, jettison some profits if he thought he would win a championship. In this way, he might be thought a sportsman, the image so beloved by the owners and a number of sportswriters.

Owners almost seemed to take pride in their announced losses. They seemed to espouse the view that there were few more enjoyable ways to lose money than by owning a sports team (which was preferable, apparently, to owning a slow racehorse). The issue of profitability in professional team sports is, to quote Winston Churchill, "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." Owners had good reasons to be reticent about profits. They did not want players to have a reason to agitate for higher salaries, and they were wary of attracting and emboldening potential upstart leagues. The drawback to pleading poverty was that such depictions might dampen potential suitors' interests and thereby suppress franchise values.

NFL owners, though, would have had to be spectacularly inept if they failed to make profits, given adequate demand. They held two huge advantages over the run-of-the-mill business owner. Because the league granted territorial rights — barring competition in an owner's territory — an owner could set his ticket prices and behave monopolistically. Such price-setting power should have bolstered profits. Territorial rights afforded protection only within a league; no other league team could enter another team's territory without approval or compensation. Teams in other leagues, though, might enter an occupied territory and risk the legal wrangling. The owners, through their reserve clause and reverse-order draft of collegiate players, squelched competitive bidding for players, thus allowing themselves to suppress player salaries. Both of these advantages, territorial protection and the suppression of the rights of labor, ran counter to the spirit, if not the letter, of U.S. antitrust policies.

If an owner was in a market where the demand was inadequate, these two advantages of price-setting power over ticket prices and superior bargaining power over player salaries might not avail him profitability. Inadequate demand might arise if an owner had too much competition (a rival team contesting the same territory); an inept set of players and coaches; ticket prices that were set too high; an inadequate population base; or if his area had insufficient consumer purchasing power.

The NFL faced competition from the All-America Football Conference and the American Football League, whose owners did not respect NFL territorial protection. Some NFL owners found themselves with rival teams in town, reflecting that western cliché, "This town isn't big enough for the two of us." The owners in the new leagues increased bidding for the limited number of talented players. The NFL owners' profits were thereby doubly squeezed, as their previous advantages became less effective.

While it is understandable that NFL owners would not welcome AAFC and AFL newcomers with open embraces, there was no reason to approve their tactics in combating the new entrants. Antitrust questions arose, so Congress decided to investigate, a backhanded tribute to the league's growing success and popularity.

Since a key element for an owner's success rested upon adequate demand, owners sought ways to increase demand individually and collectively. To boost demand, owners could improve their playing talent, if it didn't cost too much. What was beneficial for one owner might prove injurious to the collective interests of all of the owners, so the league implemented rules ostensibly designed to curb untoward competition for players. These rules pertaining to the reverse-order draft of college players and revenue sharing were not as straightforward as fans and pundits believed. NFL owners are to be congratulated for successfully cloaking exploitive behavior under the guise of "competitive balance" and cooperation.

Other attempts to increase demand were more benign and benefited fans: innovations to distinguish the pro game from the college variety, for instance. NFL owners, while resistant to reintegrating the league with African American players in the late 1940s and early 1950s, eventually tapped into the deep and, initially, cheaper pool of such players. If these players incidentally boosted demand for NFL games, so much the better. In retrospect, television was a major boost to the demand for NFL games, but owners struggled to learn how to effectively harness the new medium.

Players, too, were beginning to act collectively to improve their situation. They, of course, hoped to maximize their earnings while improving working conditions. During the period covered in this book, they had yet to form an effective union, one creating a monopoly of labor.

The NFL's past reverberates today. Owner-player strife has long-standing precedence; for so many years, owners held the whip hand in dealing with players. When players began gaining bargaining parity, owners were seldom gracious about the process. Owners may have believed their own myths about League Think and cooperation, but their actions continued to betray a more accurate depiction of them as a Hydra of conflicting self-interests. Owners pursued their self-interest in multiple ways, from moving their franchises despite opposition by fellow owners to refusing to share more than a pittance of their luxury box revenue. Fans remained loyal despite repeated provocation, because the NFL's product remained so alluring.

It was a good thing that NFL games were such an attractive product; the games have had to continue to enthrall generations of fans despite the exasperating shenanigans of owners and players.

The NFL's rise to prosperity was not inevitable, given the league's struggles against the AAFC and AFL. While the AFL mimicked many of the AAFC's experiences, the new league had a decisive asset that ensured survival: a five-year television contract. The new league's adroit use of its television contract proved an ironic twist. According to most observers of the NFL, its owners' prosperity during the 1950s was due, in large part, to their lucrative television arrangements. Many of these same owners had initially been suspicious of television.

Television loomed large in the December 1958 championship game between the New York Giants, long a power in the league, and the upstart Baltimore Colts. The game has been hailed as, among other things, "The Greatest Game Ever Played." The game was undoubtedly exciting, and it was the first overtime in championship play. Millions of Americans watched the game, and in the days following the game, it remained a topic of conversation. Sportswriter Tex Maule was quick to label it, "The Best Football Game Ever Played." NFL commissioner Bert Bell simply commented, "I never saw two clubs with the pitch of desire and inspiration shown by the Giants and the Colts. Neither have I ever witnessed such tremendous crowd enthusiasm as the fans displayed in the Stadium."[7] Imagine Bell's pleasure upon getting the results from the television returns. Maule's explanation of the game's significance, though, is of value. "The classics of the pretelevision era have been perpetuated only in the minds of the spectators on hand and by the newspaper accounts; this, for the first time, was a truly epic game which inflamed the imagination of a national audience."[8] This, then, was the game's significance. A generation or two of football fans could say, with meaning, "Where were you when Ameche plunged into the end zone?"

By the 1950s, the NFL was winning its struggle to gain public attention, not only in league cities but throughout America. The mass media of radio and television, along with greater newspaper coverage and the introduction of national sports publications, helped to create new legions of professional football fans. Pro football, long the ignored stepsibling of college football, began to rival, if not surpass, the amateur game. League commissioners Joe Carr and Bert Bell worked diligently to publicize the game, but both lacked the promotional ability of later commissioner Pete Rozelle; then again, Rozelle had a higher-quality product to peddle than did Carr and possibly Bell. According to David Harris, Rozelle eventually marketed the game as "an experience." Michael MacCambridge summed up the NFL's enormous burst of popularity in the late 1950s; "the confluence of elements — the Giants' stature, the '58 title game, the Packers' mystique, Rozelle's vision and [Jim] Kensil's [the league's publicity man] implementation of it, the sport's appeal to Madison Avenue — all contributed to pro football moving toward center stage of American sports."[9]

These events are in sharp contrast to the league's first thirty seasons. Early in the league's history, George Halas was ecstatic to read in a newspaper "that his Chicago Bears had beaten the Chicago Cardinals for the championship of the NFL before a thousand or so diehard fans. It was the second sentence, though, which had the Halas heart doing flippity-flops. In unexpectedly extravagant language came the critical appraisal: 'It was a very fine game.' There was no third sentence. That was the entire newspaper account." Halas worked hard, touring "newspaper offices to leave press notices — which never were printed — and complimentary tickets — which no one wanted — even for free."[10]

By the late 1950s, Major League Baseball was nervously watching the NFL's rise. Branch Rickey, who knew quite a bit about making money in baseball and quite a bit about losing money in football, noticed that interest in pro football spilled over into the preseason training camps and encroached upon baseball's former monopoly on summertime sports sections. "Unless we're on our toes, pro football and pro basketball will pass us in both fan interest and at the gate."[11] College football, too, took notice of the NFL's popularity, with Edward "Moose" Krause, Notre Dame athletic director, admitting, "Don't tell me the pros aren't winning the fans away from the college games, because they are. For years the college people have been appealing to fans to attend their games out of loyalty. That's fine. But now we have to offer them something more for their entertainment dollar."[12]

Perhaps a telltale sign of the NFL's prosperity was the now-ubiquitous "economic impact" studies used by proponents of publicly financed stadiums. By 1964 NFL owners Art and Dan Rooney and Pete Rozelle could claim that the NFL pumped real money into cities. Rozelle

> revealed that the Giants, paying the Yankees a percentage rental for Yankee Stadium, paid $90,000 in rental "for just one game" — the 1962 championship game. "You can see," he went on as a low whistle ran over the room, "how football can help pay off your new stadium." He told how pro football can make other businessmen richer. An Atlanta study, he said, found that the average out-of-town visitor to a football game spends $50 on the weekend. Assuming that half of a capacity crowd in Atlanta's planned 57,000-seat stadium would be from out of town, he said, "Visitors would pour $1,425,000 into the bloodstream of that community in one weekend." That was rich enough for Pittsburgh's bloodstream. When Rozelle finished, the businessmen applauded and at the table where Art Rooney sat with members of the Stadium Authority, there were smiles.[13]

Perian (pronounced Perry-Ann) Conerly, who was married to New York Giants quarterback George Conerly, wrote newspaper columns about life in the NFL. She recalled the changing attitude toward her husband's work. "It concerns tone of voice. 'Your husband plays professional football?' has been the stock opening line of new acquaintances since our marriage in 1949. It remains so in 1960. But the exclamation today bears not a trace of pity."[14]

The postwar period was less sophisticated, which is not to say innocent. Perian Conerly recalled Roosevelt Grier's foray into show business. He went on the Dick Clark Show to perform his record release: "Moonlight in Vermont" with the flip side "Smoky Morning."[15] No "Super Bowl Shuffle" or rap at that time. Grier later costarred in "Daniel Boone" with Fess "Davy Crockett" Parker (since Parker sported the same duds, who could tell the difference between Davy and Daniel?).

While Brooklyn priests exhorted their parishes to pray for baseball slugger Gil Hodges during a horrendous slump, the bishop of the "San Francisco diocese granted a special dispensation for the Colt Catholics to eat meat on Friday evening. 'I shouldn't, after what you did to us in Baltimore,' he said gruffly, 'but I will because I don't want your boys to collapse after our boys whip them.'"[16]

In another example of the ways in which the cultural mores of the 1950s and early 1960s differ from those of today, when the Dallas Texans of the American Football League took a flight to Buffalo, the flight attendant ("stewardess" as they were known then) altered the welcoming remarks: "The beautiful blonde and shapely one is me. The other girl is Sherry Hansen. My name is Betsy Lockhart and if we can do anything for you like holding your hand or sitting on your lap, just let us know. And we both will kiss the first one to make a touchdown." After the game, players and the accompanying sportswriters returned to the plane, whereby a sportswriter sprinted up the steps and announced he had scored the first touchdown. No one knew whether the rightful owner of the two kisses, running back Johnny Robinson, witnessed the swindle.[17]

Even the United States' erstwhile foe, the Soviet Union, took note of professional football, though it did not join the fans. The Soviet press had been pillorying Major League Baseball for its violence and mistreatment of blacks. During the early 1950s, the Soviet press addressed American "futbol." According to a *New York Times* article, the Soviets claimed, "futbol" was

> designed to brutalize American youth and prepare it to take its place in an "army of bandits and haters of mankind" under the United States' policy of militarization. The newspaper *Soviet Sport* said that American college "futbol" was one of the chief instruments for inculcating American youth in the spirit of "beastly psychology and racist hatred for other peoples." *Soviet Sport* said that nowhere in American sport was achieved such a measure of "racism, corruption, swindling, defrauding of the spectators, boorishness and harshness" as on the playing fields of American colleges.[18]

Apparently the Washington Redskins were unknown to the Soviets.

As the era neared its end, even the nascent counterculture paid attention to football. San Francisco 49ers quarterback Y. A. Tittle and his receiver, R. C. Owens, devised their "Alley-Oop" pass. The beatniks (forerunners of hippies) considered the play "a sort of mystical experience with the ball being 'the center of a focus of unity' between passer and receiver."[19]

All of the league's success broke up the tight coterie of owners who had struggled to make the league viable. In a telling anecdote, long-time NFL observer, Beano Cook, reflected with Pete Rozelle in 1987: "At one time, a handshake was all that was needed in the NFL. Credit the nuns. Most of the owners were Catholic. They fought like hell with each other but when a deal was made, that was it. A handshake. No lawyers. You know that when Art Rooney gave his word, that was it. Same with the Mara brothers. Now nobody cares except for a few owners. In many ways, the NFL reminds me of the Roman Empire."[20]

Between 1946 and 1960, then, the NFL had been transformed from a league with a modest but growing following in the northeast quadrant of the nation to an enthralling sport entertaining millions of Americans across the nation.

1

THE USURPERS

THE AAFC CHALLENGE

NFL owners could congratulate themselves for having survived World War II intact, if just barely so. The 1945 championship game garnered the top gross gate receipts in the history of the championship with 32,178 fans contributing $164,542.[1] Although NFL owners claimed chronic losses, the pent-up wartime demand for entertainment induced hopes for better days. Economic profits or the anticipation of such profits inspire envy, and envy triggers entry. The incumbent owners, naturally, were not pleased with the prospect of fighting for fans and for players.

As the war wound down, entrepreneurs began speculating that postwar America would be hungry for professional sports entertainment. Many leagues and franchises were called; few were profitable. Several prospective owners petitioned the NFL for franchises even before the war ended. Major League Baseball and professional basketball owners also faced a clamor for more teams. The NFL owners found themselves battling a formidable challenger in the All-America Football Conference.[2]

A rival league was nothing new for the NFL. The league had survived challenges from fledgling leagues throughout its existence, with "Cash and Carry" Pyle's American League being a typical example. Pyle and George Halas had engineered the lucrative professional debut of Red Grange after his spectacular college career. Pyle wanted part ownership of the Bears, but Halas refused. In retaliation, Pyle formed his American League, drenching all the owners in red ink and bankruptcy. Halas's team barely survived the upheaval.[3]

Many writers have chronicled the inception and demise of the AAFC. Beyond a cursory description of the league's experience, we shall focus on how the NFL battled the new league. Successful companies often face competition, and much of antitrust law concerns the legitimate and illegitimate behavior displayed by incumbents.

The Postwar American Economy

The victorious Americans eagerly looked forward to the end of World War II. While some worried that the transition from a wartime to a peacetime economy might trigger a relapse into another recession or depression, the economy adjusted admirably.

Gross National Product (GNP) seemed to fall and then rebound between 1945 and 1947, but when it is adjusted for changes in the price level, the real GNP fell in both years. Thereafter, real GNP rose continually except for brief, shallow downturns in 1954 and 1958. The general price level rose quickly because of the postwar boom in consumer spending and because of the relaxation of price controls. By the early 1950s, though, the changes in the price level as reflected by the commonly used Consumer Price Index (CPI) stabilized. For the period 1952–56, the index was almost stagnant. The drop in real GNP in 1946, though, was a reversal of a "good news, bad news" joke. The "bad news" was that real GNP dropped (largely because of reduced spending on defense), but the good news was that consumers spent more. The pent-up demand for leisure and consumption began to be satisfied in 1946. Nominal and real spending on spectator recreation jumped in 1946. Motion pictures enjoyed prosperity in 1946 as well. Real spending on sports experienced a burst of enthusiasm in the late 1940s before lapsing into stagnation. Americans began switching from public to private forms of recreation expenditures. Instead of going out to movies and ballgames, Americans chose to remain at home watching television or watching their children play. The demographic changes wrought by the baby boom reduced the number of young single men and women. Reflecting this family emphasis, the only part of the movie industry that did well was the drive-in sector.[4]

Americans purchased automobiles and houses in suburbs in greater numbers. The automobiles gave them mobility and made living in the suburbs more feasible. The growing distance between middle- and upper-middle-class homes and the downtown areas, where many ballparks were located, created a demand for easy freeway access and convenient parking once suburbanites reached the ballpark. The migration of African Americans to northern cities continued after the war, too, changing the racial makeup of many cities. Table 1 shows characteristics of the cities with National Football League teams in 1950, as well as some later NFL locations. These cities typically had SMSA (Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area) median incomes above the national average, so their residents should have been better able to afford tickets to professional sporting events.

The AAFC's Birth

When the NFL rebuffed several prospective owners' applications, Arch Ward, *Chicago Tribune* sportswriter (and later sports editor), encouraged the prospective owners to form a new league. Because of the wartime-imposed limits on many entertainment options, there was a great yearning for entertainment just waiting for the war to end before cascading throughout the industry. Because the war had disrupted the normal transition of players from college to pro careers, there was also a backlog of talent available. Many players, even former NFL players, had ambiguous contractual status. Bert Bell denied that these players were free agents.[5] Owners could also hope that the hike in college attendance caused by the GI Bill would improve the quality and quantity of college talent graduating in the years to come. A visionary such as Paul Brown could quickly build a powerful team from the pool of available players. The new league, indeed, hoped to avoid a bidding war with the NFL over players. They also hoped to stage a game between the champions of the two leagues that would be akin to baseball's World Series.[6] Sports historian Michael MacCambridge believes the NFL's decision to continue operations during the war proved a key element in its struggle against the AAFC, giving the older league the necessary continuity and tradition.[7]

By early 1945 AAFC owners were hiring coaches and signing players in anticipation of debuting in the fall of 1946.[8] They also sought stadium leases.[9]

AAFC owners were, in many cases, wealthier than their NFL counterparts. Hollywood stalwarts Bing Crosby, Louis B. Mayer, and Don Ameche (no relation to the Colts' Alan Ameche) owned the Los Angeles Dons.[10] They attempted to get Bert Bell to form a franchise, and Bell admitted he was tempted. George Halas convinced him that the NFL would make him commissioner, so Bell stayed with that league and became an implacable foe of the AAFC. AAFC commissioner James Crowley, a member of Notre Dame's famed "Four Horsemen," later released information about Bell's interest in owning an AAFC team.[11]

As with their NFL peers, AAFC owners did not own stadiums. While most Major League Baseball teams owned stadiums and could legitimately deny the use of such facilities to potential rivals, NFL owners could not be certain their landlords wouldn't lease stadiums to new teams. The AAFC had access to several large stadiums, and Arch Ward later boasted that AAFC teams played in stadiums with a larger combined capacity than did the NFL teams.[12]

The AAFC exposed some fissures in the NFL's structure. Cleveland Rams owner Dan Reeves was perturbed that his 1945 championship team lost money overall. He was eyeing the burgeoning Los Angeles market for his team. Dan Topping, owner of a dormant Brooklyn franchise that was temporarily merged with Ted Collins's Boston club, was chafing at his inability to field his team in his Yankee Stadium, as he was the sole NFL owner who owned a stadium.[13]

The NFL owners' initial response to the AAFC's announcement of its intention to play in 1946 was ridicule. Outgoing NFL commissioner, Elmer Layden, another of Notre Dame's "Four Horsemen," perhaps viewing the AAFC as akin to the patsies that his Notre Dame team used to play, retorted, "New league? Why they haven't even got a football."[14]

Unfortunately for Layden's prescience, the AAFC may not have had their footballs yet, but they scored a huge publicity coup when disgruntled Dan Topping dropped his team in the NFL to field a new one in the upstart league. Even though the Giants' owners, the Maras, had finally acquiesced to his playing in the Stadium, Topping claimed dissatisfaction with the playing dates assigned to him.[15] Topping announced that his new team, the cleverly named Yankees, would play in Yankee Stadium. Because Topping owned the stadium with his baseball partners Larry MacPhail and Del Webb, the team would earn concessions revenue. Topping gladly paid the $50,000 AAFC membership fee, although some reporters thought that the other AAFC members enticed him with cash contributions. These owners knew that having a franchise in New York City gave their league credibility, as AAFC commissioner Jim Crowley stated: "We were ready to go, anyway, and I think we would have done very well, but getting New York in the league certainly has boosted our stock. . . . Several of our people right now could sell their franchises for considerably more than they paid for them."[16] Topping ungraciously blasted the NFL upon his departure: "[The NFL] is no league at all, it is a racket. I ought to know, I was one of the 6 stooges for the big 4 until I got some brains and pulled out."[17]

The remaining NFL owners derided Topping for being a poor owner who lost considerable money in operating the Brooklyn franchise. Topping's defection left NFL owners reeling. Some observers believed that Ted Collins, owner of the Boston Yanks, might join him in the new league. In the meantime, Topping's defection left the fate of the Brooklyn team in limbo; eventually the Boston and Brooklyn teams merged and remained in Boston for the time being.[18] George Preston Marshall, owner of the Washington Redskins, actually thought it a good thing that Topping switched leagues, as it clarified the NFL's "New York problem." Marshall also sounded conciliatory about the AAFC: "If the other league proves itself, there is that possibility [of a championship between leagues]. If the All-American [sic] Conference is a sound success it will help professional football all around. If it is a failure, it will not hurt anybody but them."[19]

Topping's defection solved a pressing problem for the AAFC, as his became the eighth team in the league, making scheduling easier. Baltimore had originally been granted a franchise but could not get organized in time for the 1946 season. The league set up a fourteen-game schedule, with each team playing a home-and-home set with every other rival, unlike the NFL and its lopsided schedule in which teams fought over the opportunity to play the Bears and the Giants.[20] Because landing a New York franchise was imperative for the AAFC, Topping's new compatriots not only provided financial inducements but also allowed him the right to select one player from each team, exclusive of the top three men named by each club. In return Topping shared the hundreds of players on the reserve list of his old Brooklyn club.[21]

AAFC owners immediately challenged NFL teams to exhibition games. NFL owners recognized the danger of playing even exhibition games with the upstarts. As John McGraw of baseball's New York Giants realized in 1904, playing a championship series with an American League team only served to strengthen the upstarts while possibly damaging the entrenched league. The NFL owners declined such invitations and passed a rule prohibiting their teams from playing exhibition games against any other circuits, aside from one of their own minor league allies, without the consent of four-fifths of the league membership. The AAFC made repeated invitations to the NFL for exhibition or championship games between the leagues, occasionally even trying to embarrass the older circuit into accepting. Later Commissioner Jonas Ingram wired Bell, while releasing the contents of the telegram to reporters before Bell received it: "Since no valid reason has been advanced for the refusal of the National Football League to accept our challenge of Aug. 25 [1947] to a world championship game between your champion and the All-America Football Conference champion, the only conclusion we can draw is that you feel your champion would be unable to defeat ours, or that you feel the All-America Conference is not well established as a major league. In answer to your first assumption, we hereby offer to play our second-place team against your champion."[22]

With Layden's quips about "owning a football" ringing in their ears, the AAFC owners decided that they needed to raid NFL rosters for players. Commissioner Jim Crowley told reporters, "We originally resolved not to tamper with National League players, but since the NFL snubbed us we can see no reason why we can't hire their players." At the time, the AAFC had 150 players under contract but only 4 were former NFL players.[23]

As the 1945 NFL season wound down, AAFC owners began their raiding in earnest. The Chicago Bears lost Edgar (Special Delivery) Jones to the Cleveland Browns. Jones signed a contract to play the 1946 season with the Browns, but he was under contract with the Bears for 1945. The Bears had surreptitiously signed Jones away from the Pacific Coast [Football] League's San Francisco Clippers, who had signed him to play for $500 a game.[24] While the anonymous reporter called Jones a "surprise backfield star," he had only appeared in one game with the Bears before NFL commissioner Elmer Layden ruled that he was suspended for the 1945 season. Cleveland owner Arthur McBride mocked Layden, saying, "Mr. Layden knows now that if we haven't got a football we at least have a player the National League would very much like to have."[25] AAFC owners attempted to entice long-time NFL quarterbacks Frank Filchock and Sid Luckman to defect, but without luck. Luckman admitted, "They [AAFC owners] have been hounding me for the last several weeks, and their offers have been fabulous."[26] Sportswriter Arch Ward wrote that, "In the All-America, these skyscraper checks certainly weren't out of line. The conference teams had to make a big splash quickly, and signing fabulous players was the most effective means to establish a following."[27]

NFL owners faced two disadvantages in battling interlopers. Major League Baseball had tight control over thousands of players, whom they could threaten with such reprisals as blacklisting. Because the NFL had few minor league affiliations, individual teams did not control hundreds of players.[28] An upstart football league could also gain instant credibility by signing top college prospects. It was easier to induce these highly publicized football players to sign contracts with a new league, whereas established baseball owners didn't have to worry much about a new league reaping much publicity by signing college All-American baseball players.

The Fight for Players

Because player salaries stagnated during World War II in real terms (adjusted for changes in the price level), player salaries were very low. The Philadelphia Eagles and Cleveland Rams claimed that their payrolls were $123,500 and $128,000 respectively. The Rams claimed that the $128,000 payroll was 25 percent higher than any previous payroll, and they expected to pay $190,000 in salaries for 1946. Sportswriter Stanley Frank reported that team payrolls were remarkably similar across teams, quoting Elmer Layden's survey showing a spread of only $19,000 across teams in 1941. The last-place Chicago Cardinals allegedly paid their thirty-three players a combined $45,000 that season.[29] Bert Bell told reporters that AAFC competition raised NFL team payrolls by an average of $100,000 per season. The AAFC owners could offer hefty percentage increases in the nominal salaries and still pay players less in purchasing power (real salaries) than they earned in 1941. Between 1941 and 1946, the Consumer Price Index rose by roughly 33 percent. The index rose another 23 percent by 1950.[30]

Although the salary increases seemed dramatic, they can easily be exaggerated unless adjusted in real terms.

AAFC teams quickly signed such NFL standouts as the Chicago Bears' Norm Standlee, Lee Artoe, Ace Parker, and Parker Hall. These signings helped bolster the new league in the public's opinion.[31] The raiding even included a coach; Washington Redskins coach Dudley Sargent DeGroot signed with renegade owner Dan Topping. DeGroot had coached the Redskins to an Eastern Conference title.[32] Historian Craig Coenen believes that the AAFC owners used their deep pockets to obtain their fair share of collegiate talent to go with the dozens of former NFL players they had signed.[33]

Desperate to stanch the flow of players to the AAFC, the NFL owners, along with their minor league allies (the Pacific Coast [Football] League and the Dixie League), reiterated their five-year ban from organized football (thus implying that the AAFC was "unorganized football") for any players who played for the AAFC. The owners cleverly interpreted the ban to be effective not upon signing a contract with the AAFC but upon actually appearing in a game, thereby allowing erring players to return to the friendly embrace of the NFL.[34] AAFC commissioner James Crowley warned AAFC players not to be duped by NFL salary offers designed to entice them back into the fold. Crowley claimed, "These offers sound fine on the surface, but most of them carry a clause which makes them cancelable on forty-eight hours' notice."[35] Commissioner Bell lifted the suspension of players banned for breach of their contract or their option clause in November 1949; his action may have been prompted by the William Radovich case.[36]

Both leagues began cloak-and-dagger operations, relying on secrecy to protect their chances of signing talented collegians. The AAFC proposed a "secret" draft. The owners tweaked the NFL by claiming their draft was superior to the NFL one. The AAFC owners planned to solicit information from college coaches as to which of their players would be interested in pursuing a professional career. An AAFC coach, Brooklyn's Mal Stevens, told reporters, "There's no sense in publicizing a list of players who have no intention of entering the professional field. The National League has conducted this draft system mainly to advance its own game by flaunting names of college stars before the public eye."[37] The NFL held its draft on

January 11, but withheld the names of the players. The owners continued hold secret drafts throughout the duration of the interleague strife.[38]

While football owners could count on losing thousands of dollars in the internecine struggle, they might have remembered that only the lawyers are certain winners in such disputes. When the NFL Boston Yanks decided to retaliate for the AAFC's raids by pursuing and signing Notre Dame quarterback Angelo Bertelli, the Los Angeles Dons quickly filed a lawsuit, just one of many filed by football owners during the AAFC-NFL struggle for players. The case drew interest because the Yanks claimed the Dons used underhanded tactics to sign the youngster. Bertelli himself claimed the AAFC team used "fraud and misrepresentation" when inducing him to sign the contract. He alleged that the Dons' agent did not divulge whom he represented (yet he signed the contract anyway). The Dons argued that Bertelli was a "unique" talent who was comparable to Sammy Baugh and Sid Luckman, and that he was irreplaceable, while the Yanks were put in the odd position of stating he was "just another outstanding passer." The Dons argued that they had given Bertelli $1,000 to sign the $10,000-a-year contract while he was still in the Marine Corps. Bertelli admitted signing the contract but returned the bonus before signing with the Boston Yanks. The court ruled that Bertelli had to play with the Dons. Rather than prolong the legal proceedings, Collins assented to the court's decision and encouraged Bertelli to play for the Dons. Under those strained circumstances, Bertelli played one full season with the Dons before playing three games with the Chicago Rockets.[39]

Both leagues considered setting up affiliations with professional teams in smaller cities. On occasion, NFL owners had discussed creating minor league systems similar to baseball's. Given the ephemeral nature of the postwar boom in spectator sports, it was just as well that they didn't invest too much in such teams. The owners' real purpose was to stash their redundant players without exposing them to teams in the opposing league.[40]

The legal threats and counterthreats occasionally led to bizarre rumors. The Cleveland Browns signed fullback Gaylon Smith and tackle Chet Adams, formerly of the Los Angeles Rams. At one point, a rumor circulated that the Browns would send Ted Fritsch back to Green Bay provided the Rams didn't sue over Adams and Smith. The Packers would send a "name" player to the Rams. Not only was the "player to be named later for a lawsuit to be dropped" novel, it was an interleague trade, something that Bert Bell quickly said was "absolutely out of the question."[41] Fritsch rejoined the Packers after telling the Browns he didn't want to play for them (maybe he saw how good Marion Motley was). The lawsuit over Chet Adams ended in the Browns' favor, although the judge's legal reasoning was of interest. Judge Emerich B. Freed "ruled the Cleveland Rams had ceased to exist as of the date of the transfer of their franchise to Los Angeles and that Adams's obligations under the contract became impossible of performance."[42] If his interpretation was correct, the ruling should have send shudders down the spine of any owner considering relocation, as it threatened to grant free agency to all of his players.

Major League Baseball owners watched pro football's turmoil with interest. Some baseball owners stood to benefit from the new league, as they rented their stadiums to the new teams.[43] Baseball owners, though, worried about the potential court challenges to clauses in player contracts, especially the reserve clause.

Other Fields of Struggle

At the NFL meetings, the owners ousted Elmer Layden and installed Bert Bell as commissioner.[44] Part of the NFL owners' rationale for ousting Layden was their desire to get a hard-boiled leader. Bell might have seemed an anomalous choice, given his earlier flirtation with the AAFC, but he immediately denied that the league was interested in cooperating with the AAFC: "I've got no time to worry about the All-America Conference or any other league."[45] The NFL owners were not interested in sharing their hard-won glimmer of prosperity with a bunch of nouveau-riche owners.

Some sportswriters believed the AAFC had a good chance of succeeding and cited the league's careful preparation. NFL owners had traditionally pled poverty. As a way to discourage potential entrants, such a strategy of modesty made sense, but it didn't work. Sportswriter Stanley Frank disputed the NFL's sob stories about losses, writing, "It was inevitable that a second league would make a play for the swollen profits in pro football, given greater allure by the current sports boom." He repeated the AAFC owners' claim that they were willing to lose $300,000 over the first three years as evidence of their determination.[46] The AAFC owners attempted to ensure that talent was somewhat evenly distributed. The owners also proved visionary in negotiating a $250,000 travel deal with United Air Lines.[47]

The NFL had several weapons at its disposal. The established league could use its schedule to hamper AAFC efforts. Bert Bell, NFL schedule maker by default, could arrange to give New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles the most attractive home dates in order to encroach upon rival AAFC teams' attendance in those cities. Since the NFL never had balanced schedules, its owners easily acquiesced to the gerrymandered scheduling. The New York Giants got seven home games in their eleven-game schedule, including three on the same Sundays as the AAFC New York Yankees and another pair of games on the same weekend (the Yankees sometimes played on Saturday). In a show of bravado, Tom Gallery, Yankees official, chortled, "We will play in direct competition with the Giants, Sunday for Sunday. Let the fans decide which teams they want to see." Unfortunately for the Yankees, the Giants drew over 190,000 fans versus the Yankees' 101,000 during the four weekends; both teams won their divisions.[48] The Chicago Bears got six home games, while the Chicago Cardinals, perennial second bananas of the Windy City, received just four home games. The Los Angeles Rams only got five home games.[49] The NFL used its established publicity contacts, and the league's publicity director, George Strickler, urged team public relations men to cooperate fully with media personnel at an April meeting. Some owners groused at the AAFC's publicity successes. George Halas told his fellow owners that the Chicago newspapers and Associated Press favored the AAFC Chicago Rockets over the NFL teams in the city.[50]

At least Dan Reeves's transfer of his Rams to Los Angeles gave the NFL a chance to compete for the lucrative Southern California market. There was an existing professional team, the Hollywood Bears, competing for playing dates at the Los Angeles Coliseum. If one of the leagues had gotten first choice of desirable playing dates, they might have been able to cripple the other Los Angeles rival. The Rams struck first, signing a three-year contract calling for a rental price of 15 percent of the gate plus a $6,500 per game cleanup fee. The Coliseum commission had yet to decide whether to accept the application of the AAFC's Los Angeles Dons. The commission ruled that only six professional games could be played between the last week of September and the first week of December. The Rams got five of the dates, which essentially froze the Dons out of the Coliseum. The Coliseum Commission claimed its decision to allow just one pro team use the facility was based on its concerns for the University of Southern California and the University of California, Los Angeles football programs. Before NFL owners could congratulate themselves, the Dons' owners, Hollywood big shots with political clout, began to fight back. They eventually got five playing dates at the Coliseum without having to fall back to using Gilmore Stadium (with a limited seating capacity of twenty-five thousand) or the Rose Bowl. In the event, the Dons might as well have played in Gilmore Stadium, since the club, even with a winning record, was hard pressed to attract thirty thousand fans for any of their games.[51]

The AAFC Debuts

The AAFC opened play on Friday, September 6, 1946, when the Cleveland Browns shellacked the Miami Seahawks 44–0 in Cleveland before sixty thousand fans. The game proved a harbinger of sorts, as the Browns ran off seven wins in a row before losing back-to-back games against the California teams. The Browns became the league's marquee team and garnered national publicity. Paul Brown was hailed as a genius, and NFL owners may have privately been glad they didn't have to send their best club, the Chicago Bears, to do battle against the Browns. The Browns' last two regular-season games against the Seahawks and Dodgers demonstrated the league's weakness: the combined total attendance for the two games was less than twenty-four thousand.[52]

Despite the lopsided results, *Newsweek* reported that the league ended its first season in "fairly good shape. Only three of its teams probably will make money — the Cleveland Browns, the New York Yankees, and the San Francisco Forty-Niners — but except for the badly clipped Miami Seahawks, the others are by no means breaking their backers' bankrolls."[53] The Seahawks, in fact, were in dire straits. James Crowley reported that the team's owners had not met the league's "indebtedness clause," and that the league had to cover the last two months' payroll. The Seahawks owners failed to post the $100,000 guarantee. A week later, the league awarded (actually reawarded) a franchise to Baltimore. The terms included Baltimore paying $100,000 and posting a $250,000 guarantee.[54] The Brooklyn Dodgers were losing money rapidly, despite having a natural rivalry with the New York Yankees. Reporters estimated that the Dodgers lost $250,000 in 1946.[55] The league's championship game between the Cleveland Browns and New York Yankees in Cleveland was not as lucrative as hoped, perhaps because the Browns were 13.5-point favorites. The NFL Championship Game between the Giants and Chicago Bears pulled in fifty-eight thousand fans, some seventeen thousand more than the AAFC game. The Browns, apparently confident of their ability, had challenged the eventual NFL champions to a game, but Bert Bell push the kibosh on the idea, arrogantly stating, "The winner of [our] game is the only world champion that we recognize." Bell didn't sense the irony of how small the NFL "world" was.[56]

Arch Ward, one of the visionaries who inspired the AAFC's founding, boasted that the league's inaugural season was a "tremendous show," especially in comparison the NFL's history of franchise instability.[57] The AAFC owners anticipated losses in 1946, and he claimed that they had expected $100,000 losses per season for each team for the first three seasons. He thought Cleveland, New York, and San Francisco actually made money in 1946, with the Browns being able to pay coach Paul Brown over $50,000 for his efforts.[58]

While the AAFC got off to a reasonable start, its best hopes for survival were to reach an accommodation with the NFL and to somehow improve its weak teams. Replacing Miami with Baltimore did not improve competitive balance, but the Baltimore fans appeared more enthusiastic than those in Miami. The NFL owners, some of whom had precarious finances, maintained a solid front of opposition to any agreement with the AAFC, but neutral observers believed professional football would be best served by a setup similar to Major League Baseball. One writer said the interleague struggle was eroding player discipline: "If you don't like what I [a disgruntled player] am doing, you can be saved the trouble from now on, because I am going to the other league."[59] AAFC commissioner Jim Crowley stated that he approached Bert Bell regarding a meeting to hammer out an agreement for both leagues to respect each other's player contracts, but

Bell denied this. He might have been encouraged to do so by rumors that some AAFC signees were reconsidering and wanted to return to the NFL.[60]

The Protracted Struggle

Some NFL teams were struggling, and there were reports that Art Rooney was peddling the Pittsburgh Steelers. Since many teams were doing poorly on the ledgers, peace rumors flourished.[61]

But peace was not at hand, and team owners resumed competing for players. The NFL began raiding AAFC rosters, although not always successfully. Both sets of owners eyed Army's duo of running backs, Glenn Davis and Doc Blanchard, especially when rumors floated that the Army might allow the two players four-month leaves to play football. The AAFC, recognizing the publicity coup of signing the players, encouraged the Brooklyn Dodgers to trade their draft rights to Blanchard to San Francisco, which already had rights to Davis. The AAFC's machinations were futile, as the secretary of war denied the football players' applications for leaves.[62]

During the AAFC's second season, when reported attendance remained stable across the league and actually increased for some teams, some NFL owners took to disputing the upstart league's attendance figures. Baseball owners were notorious for issuing exaggerated attendance figures when competing with rival leagues. Tim Mara of the New York Giants called the AAFC "the biggest flop in American sports promotions." He claimed that the receipts of a Yankees-Browns game at Yankee Stadium would fall far short of the $70,000 predicted. Maher and Gill list the November 23, 1947 game between the two teams as having 70,060 in attendance.[63] Such a crowd would almost completely fill Yankee Stadium. Experienced sportswriters should have been able to ascertain whether the announced attendance was grossly inflated, although, of course, they lacked the ability to gauge how many fans attended with complimentary tickets.

Although most of the AAFC teams were stabilizing during 1947–48, the Chicago Rockets continued to limp along. The franchise was inept on the field and had trouble getting over five thousand people to attend for some of their games against other lackluster AAFC teams. The Internal Revenue Department was unhappy with the Rockets, too, as the team's unpaid withholding taxes alone reached $25,596. The league eventually assumed ownership of the franchise and began looking for new owners.[64] The Rockets' prospects were not helped by the Cardinals' brief period as a contending team in the NFL.[65]

By the end of the 1947 season, sportswriter Ed Prell wrote, "The All-America Football Conference . . . definitely has carved out a permanent place of itself in major league sports." Prell believed six of the teams were close to breaking even or making a profit, although Brooklyn and Chicago were obvious weak links. The league had a total attendance of two million for exhibition, regular-season, and championship games, although some or even many of these may have been attendees with complimentary tickets. The league's ability to generate crowds in excess of fifty thousand was impressive, though. Prell thought the Los Angeles Dons and New York Yankees were enjoying larger crowds than their NFL rivals in those cities.[66] Commissioner Admiral Jonas Ingram confirmed that Brooklyn was in good standing and that Branch Rickey was willing to take over if the current owners so desired. Rickey did, indeed, step in; he took over the team in January 1948, without responsibility for the team's indebtedness. Ingram also expressed hope that new ownership would take over the Chicago Rockets. A few months later, the league took over the Baltimore Colts when the club's president admitted the team did not have sufficient funds to guarantee operation for 1948 despite relatively healthy gates in 1947. Sufficient funding was found to maintain Baltimore, and the team was able to participate in raiding NFL rosters by signing a New York Giants running back.[67]

Rickey did show initiative in his ardent pursuit of University of Mississippi quarterback Charlie Conerly: "I offered the boy more than a $20,000 bonus, and a four-year contract at $20,000 per year. I never offered any baseball player that kind of money." Rickey admitted that he may have overbid for Conerly. Despite his lavish wooing, Rickey lost out to the New York Giants, who offered much less money. Rickey, always cash-conscious, was bemused by Conerly's decision.[68] The Giants were desperate for a quarterback after the suspension of Frank Filchock, and sent halfback Howie Livingston and an unnamed player to the Washington Redskins for draft rights to Conerly. While Conerly never achieved All-NFL status, he was a mainstay in the team's resurgence. Livingston became a journeyman running back.[69]

The AAFC and NFL manipulated their college drafts again in 1947. The AAFC tried to redress the competitive imbalance by having its top teams participate in the first round and then defer drafting for most of the remainder of the first ten rounds. The championship game participants, the Browns and the Yankees, only took four selections each in the ten rounds. The usual secrecy pervaded the draft. The NFL, meanwhile, had its plans for an early draft postponed because of a playoff game between the Eagles and Steelers.[70] The AAFC's efforts may have contributed to the Baltimore Colts' improved record in 1948, but Chicago and Brooklyn continued to languish despite additional reinforcement in the form of twenty players transferred from stronger teams to the three struggling clubs. Commissioner Ingram lauded the contributing clubs: "The determination and unselfish cooperation of the representatives of the various clubs during the meeting was impressive."[71]

Shirley Povich wrote that while the Baltimore Colts were avidly seeking quarterback Bobby Layne, many of their compatriots were not going into the player market with "much enthusiasm." In a volte-face, Admiral Ingram chided wealthier AAFC teams for not doing more to help Baltimore and Brooklyn with players. The admiral became petulant and exclaimed, "They can get a new commissioner if they don't adopt some of my suggestions for the good of the league. So far the temptation to load up with all the talent they can get and turn nothing loose to a weaker club has been too great for some of our owners. I thought I was working with smarter people."[72]

Sportswriter Herman Goldstein reported signs of improved competitive balance, based mostly on Baltimore's improvement, but Ingram's complaint about competitive imbalance was accurate. The Brooklyn and Chicago clubs had three wins between them, while Cleveland and San Francisco won twenty-six of twenty-eight games. None of the other clubs had winning records.[73]

Peace Feelers

At the end of the 1948 season, owners renewed interest in a settlement. While NFL stalwarts George Halas, George Preston Marshall, and Tim Mara remained staunch foes of conciliation, some of their peers began to waver. Philadelphia Eagles owner Alexis (Les) Thompson told *Sport* magazine writer Al Stump, "We'll either get smart and make peace with the All-America Conference—or we'll all go bust." Stump observed that the two leagues' rivalry benefited football fans and players, as it meant more games and higher pay. He worried, though, that those gentlemen funding the party had little patience and had dwindling wherewithal with which to continue. Thompson pointed out that San Francisco 49ers owner Tony Morabito averaged thirty-five thousand in attendance and still lost almost $150,000 in two years (left unsaid was how Thompson knew how well or how poorly an owner in the rival league was doing). Thompson said he purchased the Eagles in 1940, and the team sold seventy-one season tickets and attracted fewer than five thousand people per game that season.[74] He claimed that frugality limited his loss that season to $50,000. In 1947 the Eagles had a title-winning team that sold twenty thousand season tickets and averaged thirty thousand per game in attendance, but "the final figures showed an even greater *deficit* than in 1941!"[75] (italics in original) Thompson claimed that only the Bears, Giants, Redskins, and Browns earned profits in 1947. Aside from the issue of two teams competing in the same city (such as in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago), the key issue revolved around a common draft. Thompson said he proposed such a draft, but none of the other NFL owners would even second his motion.[76]

Thompson halted his peace-seeking efforts when, at a meeting between owners of each league held in his office, Dan Topping loudly proclaimed that the Giants stood to lose $200,000 during the season, a statement that enraged the Giants and Thompson. NFL owners may have felt emboldened by rumors that Paul Brown was considering resigning as coach of the Cleveland Browns. They interpreted this rumor as an indication of Brown's loss of faith in the league.[77] Another swirling rumor, contradictory to the previous one, claimed that the NFL would admit Cleveland and San Francisco while allowing the Boston Yanks to move to New York. Obviously such a move required the approval of the Giants' Maras. As rumors go, this one was actually prescient of the final outcome.[78]

A few months later, Thompson renewed his efforts to promote peace: "I'd be a fool, if I didn't try and resolve a situation in which most of us are losing money [a reported $32,000 in 1947]." His proposal again revolved around a common draft pool, but George Preston Marshall was having nothing to do with the plan. In a revealing statement, Marshall thundered, "But less than a third of our budget goes to players' salaries. Cutting them won't solve the problem. The real trouble . . . is simple: not enough people will pay enough money to see pro football."[79] The interesting aspect of Thompson's efforts was his claim of having lost $32,000 while playing in an uncontested market and winning a championship. Thompson was reputedly wealthier than many of the owners, so a $32,000 loss shouldn't have threatened his solvency. Surely he could have outlasted the flagging AAFC. Conversely, those NFL owners without a championship team and without deep pockets may well have been losing greater sums and may have been becoming fatigued.

There were signs that the AAFC owners were flagging. A Cleveland Browns official admitted that the Chicago Rockets required a $300,000 infusion of cash from Cleveland, New York, and Los Angeles in order to finish the 1948 season.[80] Despite this admission, the AAFC declared it would operate with eight teams in 1949. Los Angeles Dons owner Benjamin F. Lindheimer reported that league attendance fell by 5.4 percent between 1947 and 1948 but claimed this was "less than the average drop for sports and amusement industry as a whole."[81] A group of Dallas investors expressed interest in fielding a team if the Chicago Rockets folded. To guard against teams becoming bankrupt at midseason, AAFC officials required evidence that each team had at least $200,000 in "free and unpledged cash."[82]

Sportswriter Jimmy Powers, though, believed until late 1949 that the AAFC was viable and excoriated Tim Mara's refusal to settle with the upstarts.[83] Bert Bell said there was "no truce" between the two leagues, but on the next day he announced that the two groups of owners would meet. Alexis Thompson still advocated peace, and this time George Halas joined in by calling for a "sensible solution."[84] The meeting between AAFC commissioner Jonas Ingram, an AAFC committee, and the NFL officials foundered on the fate of the Baltimore and Buffalo teams. Both teams refused to go quietly into football oblivion. The NFL indicated it would accept only Cleveland and San Francisco. One can imagine that NFL owners coveted the San Francisco franchise as a traveling partner to the Los Angeles Rams, and the Browns' status as a premier team made them attractive. NFL owner Ted Collins wanted to relocate his franchise to New York and play in Yankee Stadium (presumably after merging ownership with Dan Topping). Other AAFC owners hoped to buy partial ownership in NFL teams. Brooklyn was not involved; as the franchise had lost heavily, it was not attractive to the NFL.[85] Sportswriter Dan Daniel attributed the failure of negotiations both to Tim Mara's antipathy toward Dan Topping and to George Preston Marshall's refusal to countenance a franchise in Baltimore, which he considered a violation of his territorial rights. Marshall reputedly shouted, "There can be no peace as long as Baltimore remains." Marshall also implied that he couldn't understand how Tim Mara could consider letting the Boston team play in New York.[86]

Because peace promised financial relief, if not prosperity, both sets of owners continued to meet. The owners continued to pursue their individual self-interest as the spirited bidding for collegiate talent erupted again. Some observers felt that even if a complete accord could not be reached, a truce involving a common player draft would be an astute move.[87]

Dan Topping reiterated his plans to have professional football at Yankee Stadium in 1949, whether it was his Yankees team or another team, presumably the Boston Yanks. In the intertwined world of professional sports, Horace Stoneham, who was the landlord of the football New York Giants and the president of the baseball New York Giants, was encouraging Topping to resolve the strife, as he felt having three football teams in the city was one team too many. Both Topping and Chicago Rockets president R. E. Garn indicated that they would either fold or remain in the league, whichever would best serve their fellow AAFC owners. The Mara brothers agreed to let Ted Collins move his Boston Yanks to New York and play either in Yankee Stadium or at the Polo Grounds. Branch Rickey and his football Brooklyn Dodgers were an unknown factor. Rickey had failed to replicate his baseball success in Brooklyn with the pigskin Dodgers and was bleeding money.[88]

Scheduling difficulties had precluded an earlier attempt by a team to share New York City with the Giants. Brooklyn Tigers owner Arthur Friedlund had offered the Giants $250,000 to share the city by playing in Yankee Stadium. Because the baseball Yankees did not permit NFL games until the baseball season was over, the Tigers' proposal was not feasible.[89]

While these negotiations were taking place, Eagles owner Alexis

Thompson was fielding offers to sell his team. He wanted $250,000 and was dealing with a group of sixty buyers headed by Jim Clark, a Philadelphia politician.[90]

Rumors of peace persisted throughout January 1949. The eventual solution that was adopted after the 1949 season was essentially agreed upon, but the Baltimore-Washington situation remained unresolved, as did the turmoil in New York City. Eventually, the Brooklyn Dodgers merged with the New York Yankees (how jarring those headlines must have seemed; a Dodger-Yankee is redolent of that staple of the 1950s B movie, a scientific experiment gone horribly wrong), and the AAFC owners decided to continue for another year. The Chicago owners were undoubtedly sacrificing money for the sake of loyalty to their fellow owners. Branch Rickey, still keen on professional football, admitted, "This new team will be as much Brooklyn's as New York's. The fact that financial support was poor in Brooklyn must be traced to the poor team we gave the Brooklyn fans. . . . I'm certain they will travel to the Stadium."[91] Rickey's prediction proved chimerical.

As the peace embers flickered, owners began pointing fingers. Buffalo owner James Breuil blamed George Marshall and Tim Mara because of their refusal to accept continuation of the Buffalo Bills and Baltimore Colts. Breuil revealed that Marshall was willing to let the Colts' owners buy into the Redskins, but at a "ridiculous figure." The Maras were willing to let Breuil buy into a merged team comprised of Collins's Yanks and Topping's Yankees. Breuil turned down the offer, since he wanted Buffalo to remain in professional football. Given the weakness of the Yanks and Yankees, his decision was probably astute. Bert Bell denied Breuil's allegations and stated that Tim Mara wasn't at the meeting, nor did Marshall obstruct anything. "In accusing Mara and Marshall of blocking so-called 'peace,' Mr. Breuil is speaking strictly for Buffalo consumption."[92] The NFL owners may still have felt they had little to lose by waiting out the faltering AAFC and then bringing in the two or three most desirable teams.

When the Dodgers and Yankees merged, the putative beneficiary was the new, resurrected Chicago Hornets, formerly the Chicago Rockets. The Dodger-Yankee team took seven of the Dodgers' players and the remaining twenty-nine went to bolster the new Hornets. While the Brooklyn–New

York team went 8-4, the Chicago team staggered to a 4-8 record in 1949. The two teams occasionally had crowds of thirty thousand, but almost as often had crowds of less than fifteen thousand. Reflecting the AAFC's parlous state, the owners voted to trim playing rosters from thirty-five to thirty-two players.[93]

Sportswriter Grantland Rice, famed for the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" image of Notre Dame football, excoriated the owners for failing to come up with an agreement. Rice thought that two leagues in a setup similar to baseball's would have been good for the game. Rice quoted Steelers owner Art Rooney, who indicated he would not operate the Steelers in 1950 unless a deal was made. Rice also thought NFL owners would not be sorry to see the Los Angeles Rams (and Dons) disappear, citing the expense of traveling to Los Angeles. Another reporter, though, contested Rice's dismal depiction of Pittsburgh; Pat Livingston claimed in October 1953 that "so solidly had [coach Jock Sutherland] built the Steelers that, even during the battle between the National League and the All-America Conference, the Steelers made money each year of the costly war."[94]

The 1949 season began inauspiciously. Attendance was off, and sportswriter Harry Sheer wrote, "Gate receipts are dangerously off, wavering towards red-ridden books—and we didn't mean Joe Stalin's library. As of today, only two of the total of seventeen clubs are reasonably certain of clearing 1949 in the black [Bears and Redskins]."[95] Sheer went on to quote a football owner truism, "One bad Sunday can put you into the red for the entire year." He also listed the expenses of running a team; they totaled $600,000, including $60,000 for sundry items. He figured that NFL teams needed twenty-five thousand paid admissions per game and AAFC teams needed thirty thousand to break even and noted the importance of season-ticket receipts, of which the Bears and Redskins were the chief recipients.

The Peace Accord

"Give peace a chance" surfaced again even before the end of the 1949 season. A Chicago newspaper claimed the two leagues would merge into a twelve-team circuit, but both commissioners, Bell of the NFL and O. O. (Scrappy) Kessing, denied the rumor.[96] Paul Brown, though, couldn't resist using the rumors to castigate George Preston Marshall as the real culprit for the failure to reach an agreement. Brown claimed he heard Marshall tell struggling owners they should “get out of football”; he also said that Dan Reeves “spoke scathingly to me of what he thought of George Preston Marshall for holding up the peace, and by so doing driving other club owners to the wall.” Brown believed that Bert Bell misled reporters when he told them that nine NFL owners opposed including Baltimore in any settlement, but this may have been in response (and in resignation) to Marshall’s insistence that he would never accept a Baltimore club. In a subsequent article, Cleveland owner Mickey McBride echoed Brown’s statement, as he was certain the Tim Mara would prove reasonable. McBride claimed his payroll went from $180,000 in 1946 to $270,000 in 1949, although part of this rise no doubt emanated from the continued success of his team.[97]

Marshall’s intransigence, even in the face of the unanimity clause, should have been resolvable. Economists would suggest a side payment to him to acquiesce in the “violation” of his territorial rights, and, in fact, months later, the Baltimore owners made a payment to Marshall, although the other owners could have pooled money to placate him. In fact, Marshall himself pointed the way to a resolution. By December 1949 he was willing to negotiate with the Baltimore Colts if they would satisfy NFL admission requirements and pay the Redskins for trespassing upon his territorial rights.[98]

A week later the owners agreed to a settlement. Thirteen teams would comprise the National-American League, an unwieldy title that would quietly revert to the National Football League in 1953, along with the elimination of the American and National Conferences, renamed as the Eastern and Western Divisions. Baltimore, San Francisco, and Cleveland joined the ten NFL teams. The Chicago Hornets disappeared without a struggle. The Los Angeles Dons merged with the Rams, while the Bills’ owner, James Breuil, purchased an interest in the Cleveland Browns. Ted Collins purchased Dan Topping’s New York Yankees and merged them with his transplanted New York Bulldogs. In return for acquiescing to the Bulldogs’ invasion of their territory, the New York Giants were to receive six players from the former Yankees. The thirteen remaining teams retained rights to their current player rosters. They conducted a draft of college players from a common pool, although both leagues had drafted some players in early drafts. The fate of the players on the teams that folded remained undecided.[99]

The Aftermath

In the aftermath, some observers gave Horace Stoneham, owner of baseball's New York Giants, credit for the agreement. Stoneham, as landlord for the football Giants and potentially for the New York Bulldogs, wanted peace so that professional football would survive and gate receipts at games in New York City would increase. He summoned Bert Bell and J. Arthur Friedlund, the AAFC representative, to his office. From there, they got Marshall's assent to allowing Baltimore into the league. Marshall ignored rumors that he had blocked any agreements in the past because of his refusal to countenance a Baltimore franchise and said, "My only comment on the settlement, is that I'm glad Baltimore at last gets a chance to get into major league football." Of course he demanded and received an indemnity from the Baltimore owners, but he proved coy in responding to a reporter's query about the nominal fee: "You're from Washington. You ought to know that anything under one billion dollars is considered nominal in this town."[100] Baltimore agreed to indemnify Marshall $100,000 for "invading" his territory. After the Colts lasted just one season in the NFL, Marshall refunded $50,000 to Abraham Watner, the Colts' owner.[101]

Tim Mara explained the financial aspects of the agreement. NFL owners were concerned about the Los Angeles Dons and Chicago Hornets because of those teams' low average net ticket prices of $1.61 and $1.82 respectively. Mara claimed that teams needed to both attract large crowds and also get an average net ticket price of $2.50 to be successful. (He politely declined to state another obvious reason for not wanting the Dons and Hornets: they competed with NFL teams in those cities.) He detailed how the NFL owners warmly embraced the San Francisco franchise because it would enable owners to mitigate the cost of traveling westward.[102] Assuming the Giants had to play a fixed number of road games, though, his analysis is flawed. The owners should have been concerned only about the cost difference between going to Los Angeles and going to another league city.

Mara also thought the merger was good because the players would be concentrated on thirteen instead of seventeen teams. He hoped this would result in more evenly matched teams than in the past, as he feared a repeat of the AAFC experience, in which the Browns' dominance appeared to hurt everybody's gate, even Cleveland's. He lauded Bert Bell's efforts and claimed five of the ten NFL teams were in the black for 1949.[103]

Ted Collins was excited about being able to shift his team to the Yankee Stadium, while his New York counterpart, Jack Mara, chortled, "Of course, we're happy about the 'war' being over. Now, maybe, the football writers can write football instead of finance." Topping explained that he had learned that "baseball and football could not be operated by the same organization and, as everyone knows, baseball is the primary interest of the New York Yankees." Bert Bell had to dampen enthusiasm about the agreement by stating there would be no championship game between the Cleveland Browns and the eventual NFL champion in 1949, because the league constitution barred such games.[104]

All would not continue to be sweetness and light between the New York owners, with a dispute brewing over the six players from the defunct Yankees. Topping later stated that he had long been willing to step out of football and become a football landlord at Yankee Stadium if it meant peace.[105] Collins and the Maras argued over which "six players" the Giants would get. Bert Bell finally resolved the issue by having the two teams alternate choosing players until the Giants got their six.[106]

After the Browns defeated the 49ers in the AAFC Championship Game, Paul Brown groused about the proposed conference alignments. He didn't think Cleveland would fare well at the (visiting) gate playing Detroit, the Chicago Cardinals, Los Angeles, Baltimore, and San Francisco.[107]

Brown's remark indicated that while peace was at hand, settling the details remained contentious. Owners began jockeying for the best schedule matchups. Some teams wanted to retain old rivalries. Many of the established NFL teams wanted to avoid the West Coast road trips. Because there were thirteen teams in the league, setting up balanced divisions was impossible. For businessmen with limited valuable time, NFL owners (and their newfound AAFC chums) were willing to spend hours and days haggling over relatively minor points. Brown's boss, Mickey McBride, whined, "Unless we get what we need in personnel to fill our gaps plus a place in the division with the better clubs, then we'll not be interested in the new league and we'll be out of business." His dream division lineup included the Eagles, Redskins, Bears, Giants, and Lions.[108] Bell ultimately stepped in and arranged the divisions and schedule. The Baltimore Colts were designated as a swing team, the one team that would play each of the other twelve teams. The divisional lineups were similar to those stated in the original merger agreement, and to the lineups that Bell had planned from the beginning.[109]

The owners finally settled on a method for distributing players. Bert Bell's brother, John, a distinguished jurist who might have been concerned about potential antitrust issues, advised "definitely against the distribution of, or the making of any list pertaining to the distribution of any players on the reserve list of Buffalo, Chicago Hornets, Los Angeles Dons, or the New York Yankees with the exception of those members of the New York Yankees team who had been turned over by the terms of the Agreement by Mr. Topping to the Commissioner's office."[110] The college draft would include professional players who were members of the New York Bulldogs, while other professional players who had been members of now-defunct AAFC teams or who had been cut as rosters were adjusted would be placed in a separate draft pool.[111]

The last AAFC commissioner, O. O. Kessing, could not accept reality and expressed his displeasure of the agreement, and he hinted that the AAFC would continue playing. He wanted two separate leagues that would meet in a championship game. Some of the former AAFC teams did not give up hope of joining the NFL. Buffalo fans sought to demonstrate their support for the Bills by purchasing five-dollar and ten-dollar subscriptions to fund a resurrected team. Bert Bell, while claiming admiration and respect for the Buffalo fans' enthusiasm, put off the franchise with vague promises of future consideration. His statement, "While I don't say Buffalo will get a franchise, I certainly can't say that the city won't," was a masterpiece of doublespeak.[112] Buffalo residents contributed more than $250,000, and the committee in charge of bringing pro football back to the city raised its goal to $500,000 to ensure solvency. Bert Bell announced that NFL owners would consider adding Buffalo and Houston. Glenn McCarthy, a Houston oilman, headed the group seeking a Houston club, although he also claimed that he was willing to buy the Cleveland Browns and move them to Houston. Bell's announcement included two conditions: "First, that the new franchises gain unanimous approval from the thirteen NFL owners, and second that they would fit into the schedule." He claimed that making a schedule for thirteen teams was easier than for fourteen and fifteen, and said that scheduling sixteen teams "is like 'rolling off a log.'"[113]

Bell later told Buffalo fans that it wasn't the franchise money that mattered but season ticket sales, so in a Pavlovian response, Buffalo fans signed fourteen thousand season-ticket pledges. Bell probably knew that Buffalo would not get unanimous support from the owners, particularly the New York Giants' owners; he also probably knew a blunt denial of their application could raise the ire of prominent politicians in upstate New York. The league turned down a motion, made by George Preston Marshall, to expand to fourteen teams. Some of those dissenting (Los Angeles, San Francisco, and both Chicago teams) stated they were concerned about the problems of a fourteen-team schedule, which seems disingenuous given that a thirteen-team schedule meant imbalanced conferences and bye weeks.[114]

Even with peace, AAFC and NFL participants could not resist hurling brickbats at each other. Otto Graham joked that the AAFC absorbed the NFL in the merger and that the Browns would "do all right" in the NFL, while blaming Marshall for the delay. Marshall, never one to avoid an opportunity to make an ill-humored insult, retorted that the Graham might not "be able to hold a job in the new league." Since these insults occurred at a league function, one is entitled to wonder whether the exchange was rehearsed. Sportswriter Shirley Povich had an astute reading of the situation: "If Marshall didn't [enjoy the exchange], he will start taking some satisfaction out of the episode next season when he counts the gate receipts of the Redskins-Browns game."[115]

The big losers were fans of the now-defunct AAFC teams in Los Angeles, Chicago, Buffalo, and New York City. Players were also big losers. There were now fewer roster slots among the surviving teams; in addition, the common draft meant there was less competition for draft choices. Sportswriter Stan Baumgartner noted the immediate drop in salary offerings: "Before the peace, [Leon] Hart was said to be asking $25,000 a year. Now he will be lucky to get $15,000." He predicted that players would "be thankful" to get $200 a game. Bert Bell announced, "Players' salaries will be predicated strictly on the financial condition of the clubs and the patronage of the league."[116] Bell, however, received a salary boost and a contract extension for his efforts.

Sportswriter Joe Williams sounded a note of optimism as the 1950 season opened:

> If pro football is ever to establish itself as a major sport on a sound financial basis, it would seem now is the time—granting the world does not come apart at the seams in the meantime. . . . Artistically, pro football should reach an all-time peak this season. Peace was desirable and to an extent will prove profitable at the gate, but no guarantee came with it that there no longer will be deficits. There never has been a season in 30 years of trying that pro football, as a league operation, made money. In this respect it is an operation without precedent in the history of sports.

Williams said that Tim Mara admitted that the Giants have "done little better than break even for his 26 years in the league."[117]

Even before the 1950 season began, a dubious nostalgia for the AAFC arose. George Preston Marshall lamented the demise of the AAFC because the leagues' strife had created reams of publicity. Some of the other owners agreed with him and lauded his suggestion of putting a league publicity office in New York City.[118]

How good were AAFC teams? No one knows for certain, of course. One clue rested with reporters' summation of top playing talent. For two seasons, the Associated Press named All-Pro teams. The writers named six NFL and five AAFC players for 1948. In 1949 seven NFL players were among the eleven on the "first team" and six were among the eleven on the "second team" in *The Sporting News*' postseason honors.[119] These results implied that football writers thought AAFC teams at least had some excellent individual talent.

Why the NFL Triumphed

The NFL was unable to keep the AAFC from getting sufficient numbers of quality players. Its secret draft and threats of blacklists failed to deter players from signing with AAFC teams. The NFL's attempt to use the schedule to weaken AAFC New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles franchises had limited success. While the AAFC's Chicago team staggered throughout the four seasons, this may have been because of its poor record on the field and its misfortune in having to face resurgent Bears and Cardinals. New York and Los Angeles proved contested battlegrounds throughout the four seasons.

Perhaps the NFL benefited more from AAFC defects and missteps than from any of its own stratagems. The AAFC was not helped by instability at the top; it employed new commissioners on an almost yearly basis. The NFL benefited from Bert Bell's strength and pugnacity. The Cleveland Browns' dominance, while creating national attention for the league, proved a mixed blessing. As half the teams in the league were consistently weak on the field, the viable franchises struggled to survive. If anything saved the NFL, it was Paul Brown's genius, in that the competitive imbalance weakened some of the AAFC teams. The AAFC's personnel remained proud of their efforts, as reflected in the preface to the league's posthumous publication reviewing the 1949 season: "That the performances of AAFC players and teams may be available to the present generation of writers and commentators, and that they may be preserved for future football historians, this supplement to the *1949 Record Manual* is published."[120]