

A Brief History of the NFL

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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The National Football League is celebrating its 75th Anniversary this season, and unlike the alleged 125th Anniversary of Baseball, this anniversary has some basis in history. First named the American Football Association and founded in 1920 by sportswriter Joseph Carr, the league changed its name to the National Football League in 1922.

Carr remained league president until 1939 and presided over a league that for the most part struggled to survive. Largely ignored by sportswriters and considered a pariah by the colleges, the NFL labored in small cities with small payrolls. One exception was the Bears in Chicago where George Halas was owner and coach beginning in 1921. Then the Chicago Cardinals appeared in 1922 and in 1925 Tim Mara, a bookmaker, and Billy Gibson, Gene Tunney's manager, put a franchise in New York City. Perhaps the most prosperous franchise however was in Green Bay, Wisconsin, under the direction of Curley Lambeau.

The one moment of glory and notoriety in the early years came in the mid-20s when Red Grange, the Galloping Ghost from the University of Illinois, left school early to join the Chicago Bears. Making a guaranteed \$10,000 per game and an estimated total income of nearly a million dollars in the first six months as a pro, Grange brought new fans to the pro game.

But for the most part the NFL struggled through the 20s and the depression years of the 30s, which were followed by the disruption of World War II.

After the war the NFL was challenged by the new All-America Conference, whose Cleveland franchise sent the NFL franchise in that city off to Los Angeles. In 1949 the two leagues merged as Cleveland, San Francisco and Baltimore joined the NFL. The late 40s also saw an increasing number of college players moving on to professional football.

The other key event was the appointment of Bert Bell as commissioner in 1946. Bell unified ownership for economic purposes, which was particularly significant in dealing with the new technology of television. The League made the contracts with the television networks, not the teams. Some have argued that this unity was due largely to the fact that NFL owners were drawn from the world of the outsiders in America--the immigrant-

Catholic community--which understood the need for unity in the face of a hostile WASP world.,

The NFL television consortium was challenged in the courts but in 1953 a Federal District Court ruled that professional football was a unique kind of business which would be destroyed by classical economic competition.

The arrival of television in American society in the 1950s was a key development for the NFL. Not only did it bring truckloads of money, but professional football was the perfect game for the imperial urban post-industrial society. It was the game of the faceless mass moving violently and anonymously over the territory of the enemy, and the para-military vocabulary fit the Cold War Era. No wonder it became a threat to assume the title of National Pastime.

The single most important televised event for the league was the 1958 Championship game between the Baltimore Colts and the New York Giants. The game went to sudden death overtime and the nation's sports fans were enthralled by the precision passing of Johnny Unitas to Raymond Berry that produced the 23-17 victory for the Colts.

Football's television policies were further legitimized by the Sport's Broadcasting Act of 1961 legalizing the ongoing practice of the regional televising of games with exclusive territories, the home game blackout practice, and league contracting for all teams.

A second quantum leap came in the Sixties with the formation of the American Football League under the sponsorship of Lamar Hunt and ABC television. The success of the AFL led to a merger of the two leagues facilitated by the Football Merger Act. Senator Russell Long and Congressman Hale Boggs, both of Louisiana were key figures in the passage of the act, and nine days later New Orleans was awarded an NFL expansion franchise. The coming of instant replay was also a godsend.

Going into the Seventies the television ratings continued to climb, Monday Night Football was invented by Roone Arledge of ABC, and the money just kept rolling in. Aided then by Congress, the Courts, and the rise of television the National Football League had reached such a level of success by the late 70s that Oakland owner Al Davis said, "Any dummy can make money operating a pro football club." And many did. It is amazing what the free enterprise system can accomplish. Happy Anniversary!

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