

## **A Missed Opportunity: The 1917 Pro Football League**

by Bill Wagner

Perhaps past experiences with organizing and maintaining baseball teams had dulled the adventuresome spirit of Frank Navin and Charles Comiskey. Having been founding owners in Ban Johnson's American League, both, of course, well-remembered the hardships, anxiety and red ink the lean starting out years offered. Now, in 1917, somewhat satisfied, and, one might say, petrified by their successes, the thought of starting again, particularly in such an untested venture as a professional football league, gave each man cause to think.

Navin was the more wary of the two and reacted instantly. He had invested too much time and energy and money in building his Detroit Tigers to take a risk on schemes. A Professional football league? Stability, if any, years away? No thank you. In the interest of making a dollar or two, however, he did announce Navin Field would, as in years past, be available for rental by pro football clubs, including this new venture.

Comiskey, on the other hand, without committing himself, considered the idea from a pragmatic point of view. "If they can show me where there is any money in the professional end of the college game," he stated in a press wire out of Chicago dated January 3, 1917, "I will go to it."

That same press wire further stated that the idea for the new league had come from an unnamed agent representing an unnamed pro football club out of Detroit -- possibly the Wolverines. The agent had apparently contacted Navin, left him to think about it, then journeyed to Chicago hoping to enlist Comiskey's support.

The plan outlined by the Detroit representative called for a league modeled after and backed by major league baseball, with teams in Chicago, New York, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Indianapolis, Cleveland and Columbus. Teams would begin play immediately after the close of baseball season and continue as long "as the weather is favorable." To build name recognition, those baseball players with sufficient football skill would be featured on league rosters with the remaining slots filled by ex-collegians. Furthermore, games would be played in the empty baseball parks -- Comiskey Park, Polo Grounds, Navin Field, Forbes Field, etc.

The latter idea proved to be a smart suggestion. Comiskey, for one, was intrigued. In his initial statement, he told reporters, "If pro football can be made to pay it will be an answer to a problem that has confronted baseball owners since the game started. For years we have been going along using our ballparks three months in a year, only to see the property lie idle the other nine months." Comiskey decided to take a week and think over the proposal.

Even with an owner of Comiskey's stature seriously considering investing, the idea of a pro league received scant notice in the press. Only the Philadelphia Inquirer and Los Angeles Times did more than reprint the initial press wire. Leading their January 4, 1917 report, the Inquirer declared the idea "no good in Philadelphia" and supported their conclusion by citing a similar idea of fifteen years earlier, which was "long remembered as a failure. College football is too big and will always win (draw a bigger crowd) in a clash."

Five days later, the pros and cons surrounding a pro football league were discussed in the Los Angeles Times, albeit briefly. Harry A. Williams, writing in his January 9 sports column, outlined the reasons such a league could succeed -- though he noted that because "people (back east) won't risk freezing to death to watch football," the Pacific

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Coast Baseball League would be the wiser organization to launch the pro game. Williams thought the game as it had existed ten years earlier, with its "massed play," made "too much work for the ambulance," and few could take "the backbreaking ordeal" a pro schedule would require. Rule changes, he said, made in the ensuing years, altered the game enough to make a weekly or twice weekly schedule possible. There would be no problem finding players, he added, as there are many "who still yearn for another sniff of the tan bark."

The one problem such a league would encounter, that of thin fan interest compared to the level enjoyed by college ball, represented only a temporary obstacle to Williams. It was not fair, argued Williams, to write off the pro game based on current fan support. "The pro game so far is nothing, because it represents nothing. There is no spirit." The proposed league would, however, build that spirit. "All the necessary hatred," Williams said, "would be there in a short time. Los Angeles against San Francisco would fill any stadium."

Not a chance, countered Warren Bovard in a short rebuttal the following day. Bovard, the Graduate Manager of the U.S.C. football team, declared pro football "impossible." Baseball works because it is "tailored to fit its place in America. Football is tailored for colleges. Its success is founded on loyal alumni support, college tradition, and the ambition of red blooded youth for battle." The pro game would have to rely on all-star games, which draw well at first, but fail to hold interest. Just why a pro football league could not build its own following and rivalries, as had baseball, and as Bovard felt rugby and soccer could, the rebuttal does not explain.

There the trail ends. All mention of the new league disappears from the papers after Bovard's article, leaving only conjecture as to the decision reached by Comiskey.

The most likely scenario involves the choice of timing. The First World War, then stalled in the trenches of France, grabbed most of the media attention. A newspaper did not roll off the presses that failed to discuss possible American involvement -- and the corollary issue of the fate of professional sports in war time. If war came, all of professional sports faced possible suspended operations, players lost to the military, and at the very least, diminished attendance. Comiskey must surely have recognized the situation and concluded now was not the time for new sporting ventures.

In the end, pro football had to wait until 1920.