

CLEVELAND'S 1ST TITLE

By Joe Horrigan

The people of Cleveland, Ohio, have been witness to professional football for many years, even before the organization of the National Football League in 1920. It wasn't, however, until 1946 and the birth of the Cleveland Browns of the All-America Football Conference that pro football found a permanent home in Cleveland. (Ed. Note: The article was written in 1980.)

Although the Browns provided their followers with a league title in their first year of operation, it wasn't a first for the city of Cleveland. That came in 1924, when the Cleveland Bulldogs were awarded the NFL's pennant.

The Cleveland Bulldogs were a team surrounded by almost as much controversy as talent. They were owned by a Cleveland sports promoter named Sam Deutsch, who was involved in both minor league baseball and boxing in the city. In 1923, he had been awarded the Cleveland NFL franchise vacated a year earlier by Jim O'Donnell who had operated football's Cleveland Indians in 1920 and 1921.

Deutsch kept the name of Indians for his 1923 team, but displayed a better brand of football for Clevelanders than they had witnessed in O'Donnell's earlier attempts. Going into the final game of the '23 season, the Indians boasted an undefeated record of 3-0-3. Their final opponent, the Canton Bulldogs, came into the game, however, with an even more impressive 10-0-1 mark.

A crowd of nearly 17,000 fans showed up in Cleveland for that final game, only to see their Indians overwhelmed by a 46-10 score. The Bulldogs scored seven touchdowns, all of them on the ground, with two in each of the first three quarters and one in the fourth. Canton's team work and ability to score almost at will, impressed Sam Deutsch in a way that changed football history in both Canton and Cleveland.

Canton's season-ending victory over the Indians, gave Canton not only its second consecutive title, but also its second consecutive undefeated season.

The Bulldogs were a gridiron success, but a financial disaster. High salaries and traveling expenses and adverse weather conditions had put Canton's famous team in debt. The *Canton Repository*, on August 3, 1924, reported that due to losses of approximately \$13,000, the Canton Athletic Company had sold the Bulldogs to Cleveland Sam Deutsch, "and will henceforth compose the Cleveland team, with a few additions."

In a statement to the *Repository*, C.A.C. spokesman Lester Higgins said, "Some time ago letters were sent out to Canton merchants and manufacturers, informing them of the financial situation and the probability that the Bulldogs would hardly be continued without assistance in a substantial way." Higgins further stated, "The letter brought very few favorable responses and but few promises of aid. Hence the decision to give up the ghost, Deutsch was the only bidder for the team and his offer of \$2500 was accepted by telephone Saturday night to clear up the whole matter."

The sale of the Bulldogs caused considerable consternation to the Canton fans. The public outcry caused the C.A.C., a mere three days after the sale, to announce that it was reconsidering. A public meeting was called for by C.A.C. spokesman Lester Higgins: "If only a few of the followers are kicking on the sale, there will be no Bulldogs for Canton this season, as those who backed the team last year will allow the sale to Deutsch to go through. But, if the Chamber of Commerce hall is jammed and packed to its full capacity

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tomorrow night, then it will be apparent that the football bugs of this city want to retain the Bulldogs for another season at least."

According to Higgins, there existed a legal technicality that could block the sale of the Bulldogs to Deutsch. The Canton loyalists and Deutsch both were quick to respond to Higgins' remarks. The Canton fans responded with an overflow turnout at the meeting while Deutsch responded with threats of legal action.

William B. Quinn, a C.A.C. stockholder and lawyer, contended that a quorum was not present at the meeting at which the sale was approved and that Deutsch had purchased only the players -- not the franchise and uniforms as Deutsch was contending. Deutsch, meanwhile, fired back that he had acted in good faith and that his prestige as a sports promoter was at stake. He vowed not to give up the Bulldog team without a fight.

Threats of legal action from both sides were exchanged and for the next few days the Canton papers were filled with rumors of compromise and possible solutions. Finally, ten days after the initial call for public support, the matter was resolved. The Canton Bulldogs were no more. The C.A.C. stockholders were told by Quinn that, after a lengthy investigation, it was his opinion that, "Deutsch's purchase, while presenting a few technicalities, had no flaws in it worthy of a defense in a court fight," and hence was considered valid.

With the ownership debate over, Deutsch once again began putting the pieces of his dream team together. Although ten former Canton players were invited to report to the Cleveland Bulldog team, only seven accepted. Harry Robb, Larry Conover and Wilbur Henry chose to desert the NFL to play instead with the independent Pottsville Maroons.

With seven Canton stars, a few holdovers from the 1923 Indians and two rookie sensations, Hoge Workman and Dave Noble, the Cleveland Bulldogs were an instant powerhouse.

The '24 season began to shape up just as Sam Deutsch had hoped. Reminiscent of the Canton Bulldog team that had so impressed Deutsch, the Cleveland Bulldogs went undefeated in their first six games. Their first loss came at the hands of the NFL's newest franchise, the Frankford Yellowjackets. The 'Jackets, who also had tied the Bulldogs earlier in the season, remained, along with the Chicago Bears, in the thick of the '24 pennant race till the end.

On November 30, the official end of the 1924 season, the standings showed the Bulldogs with their 7-1-1 on top, followed by the Bears at 6-1-4. Based on existing league rules, Cleveland was the new NFL champion. However, the Bulldogs played one more game after the season's end, against the Chicago Bears.

When the Bears defeated the Bulldogs, 23-0, they claimed along with the victory the 1924 title. Both teams, they insisted, had agreed that the game was to be played for the championship.

The Cleveland Bulldogs, who seemed to be right at home with controversy, again found themselves in the thick of it. This new dispute was only resolved by a vote of league owners at their annual meeting in January. There, a motion was made and carried that, "The pennant for 1924 for the National Football League, be awarded to the Cleveland club on the basis of the games played before and including November 30, and that post-season games, wherein agreements are made between teams to play for a championship is positively forbidden, and to insure conformity to this resolution, the season is extended to December 20, for the season of 1925."

So with the help of the league owners, seven former Canton Bulldog stars and a local sports promoter, Cleveland had its first NFL title.

