

ALL FOR ONE...

The Minor Leagues' "Big Three" Make History in 1946

By Bob Gill

Besides its many far-reaching and well-chronicled effects, the advent of World War II nearly destroyed pro football's minor leagues, which had been thriving in the years 1936-41. The two longest-running of these, the American Association and the Dixie League, ceased operations in 1942 until the war's end. And it's not unlikely that to many contemporary observers "closed for the duration" looked like a euphemism for "kaput."

But it didn't prove to be. The war was barely over when Harry Howren, owner of the Dixie League's Norfolk Shamrocks, went public with plans for reorganizing his circuit. Speaking in late September, he alluded to a planned December meeting between the AA, also reorganizing (but under a new name--the AFL), and the Pacific Coast League, which had gone on alone during the war.

"We want full recognition by the National League and its assistance in the protection of players," Howren said.

Before long the three top minor leagues had hammered out an agreement. On March 24, PCFL president J. Rufus Klawans announced the formation of the Association of Professional Football Leagues.

What did the association entail?

"It involves recognition of player contracts so there will not be any 'jumping' of players," explained Klawans, who had been elected chairman of the group (with AFL president Joe Rosentover as vice chairman). "It also involves recognition of territorial rights of all member leagues.

This was good, but without the participation of the NFL the agreement would fall quite a bit short of achieving what the three leagues had in mind. Klawans, whose league's territory had just been invaded by the NFL in Los Angeles--not to mention the AAFC in L.A. and San Francisco--knew this better than anyone. Thus, he added:

"We hope the National as well as all new football leagues, such as the All-America conference...will join our association for the good of professional football."

NFL commissioner Bert Bell seemed receptive to the idea, and said he was sure his league would "gladly join in the association." Apparently that prophecy came true: A number of provisions were soon established involving the NFL and the minor leagues' "big three."

For instance, the NFL agreed to make some concessions to the PCFL to resolve scheduling conflicts. Another result of the agreement was the stipulation that the three minor leagues would uphold a five-year ban on players who had jumped contracts with NFL teams. This measure was aimed at the PCFL, which had employed several such players in 1945. But it had little effect on the East Coast leagues, since they'd gone four years without fielding any teams at all.

More important for them was the chance to establish working agreements with NFL teams--a concept that never caught on in the PCFL. Before long, most Dixie League and AFL teams had lined up NFL "sponsors." This was nothing new in the AFL, which had similar arrangements before the war; but it meant a lot to the Dixie League, which hadn't had any such provisions before.

Apparently in an effort to prevent the stockpiling of talent by the strongest teams, NFL clubs were allowed to farm out players only once. For instance, if the Washington Redskins sent a player to the Wilmington clippers for the 1948 season, in 1949 they had to either keep him or make him a free agent. Of course, players often re-signed with the same minor league team after being set free, but in that case they were

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no longer subject to recall by the parent club and could catch on with any NFL team that might be interested.

Despite these successes, though, the new association proved ineffective in protecting territorial rights. And that failure cost the life of the Dixie League.

Early in the 1947 season, the financially troubled Long Island Indians of the AFL announced that they were closing up shop. Before you could say Benedict Arnold, the Richmond Rebels, the Dixie League's second-best team, bought the Long Island franchise and jumped to the AFL to finish the season. The Dixie League, which had already lost two of its 1946 members in the off season, was left with only three teams.

And a three-team league is less than a losing proposition-- it's no proposition at all.

Dixie League president Tom Hanes protested to Bell, who agreed that he hadn't approved the shift, but added basically that it wasn't really any of his business, which, according to the set-up of the association, it wasn't.

The trouble was that the three minor leagues had agreed, in essence, to police themselves, and invited the NFL along for the ride. But now, when the territorial encroachment came not from the NFL but from one of its own, the association found itself powerless to do anything. And the Dixie League paid the price.

But the two remaining leagues didn't fare all that much better. The PCFL died after the 1948 season, and the AFL followed suit two years later.

So the Association of Professional Football Leagues wasn't an overwhelming success. Still, it was unquestionably a good idea, and it did accomplish something. In the end, though, the concept of a football counterpart to Organized Baseball was probably ahead of its time.

As it would be today.