

## A NEW LEAGUE WITH NEW OPPORTUNITIES

The history of African Americans in professional football began when Charles Follis took the field for the Shelby (Ohio) Athletic Club in 1904. Follis was a halfback who played for only two years before injuries forced him out of the game after the 1906 season. Over the next thirteen years in this pre-NFL era Charles “Doc” Baker, Henry McDonald, and Gideon “Charlie” Smith were the only other African Americans to play professionally. In 1920, under the leadership of George Halas—manager, coach, and player of the Staley Starchmakers—the American Professional Football Association was founded. The league, made up of eleven teams, was renamed the National Football League on June 24, 1922. From 1920 until 1933 only thirteen black players played on NFL teams. After the 1933 season a color barrier was established, lasting until 1946. Kenny Washington and Woody Strode of the NFL’s Los Angeles Rams began the reintegration of pro football in March 1946; they were joined that same season by Bill Willis and Marion Motley of the Cleveland Browns, in the newly formed All-American Football Conference (AAFC).

The reintegration of the NFL was a slow and meticulous process that was not complete until 1962, when the last all-white team, the Washington Redskins, finally relented and added black players. This did not happen voluntarily; it took pressure from the U.S. secretary of the interior, Stewart Udall, who threatened to withhold access to the newly built RFK Stadium before Redskins owner George Preston Marshall finally integrated

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his team. This threat forced the Redskins to add Bobby Mitchell, John Nisby, Leroy Jackson, and Ron Hatcher in 1962. During the reintegration process NFL teams added primarily black players who had played on teams at white schools. Of the 173 identified African American players who played in the NFL between 1946 and 1962, only 42 attended historically black schools. What is more interesting is that from 1946 to 1960 no player from a black school was drafted higher than the fourth round. Many were forced to make NFL rosters as undrafted rookies who came out of schools such as Florida A&M University, North Carolina Central University, Virginia State University, and Grambling State University. This despite the fact that Southern University (1949 and 1950), Texas Southern University (1952), Prairie View A&M University (1953), Grambling State University (1955), Tennessee State University (1956), and Florida A&M University (1957) all had undefeated seasons during the 1950s. NFL teams clearly viewed this level of talent as largely inferior and below the competitive standard necessary to justify drafting significant numbers of these players.

The AAFC was the first professional football league to extend opportunities to players from historically black schools. Motley was the first when he joined the AAFC from South Carolina State University, followed by Morgan State University's Elmore Harris, who played for the Chicago Rockets in 1947. John Brown of North Carolina Central University played in 1947 for the Los Angeles Dons, as did Ezzert Anderson from Kentucky State University. Tom Casey joined the New York Yankees in 1948 from Hampton Institute, followed by James Bailey of the Chicago Hornets from West Virginia State University and Ben Whaley of the Dons from Virginia State University in 1949. The AAFC "merged" with the NFL after the 1949 season. Although it was called a merger, only the Browns, San Francisco 49ers, and Baltimore Colts were allowed to join the NFL. The other teams disbanded, and some of their players were added to NFL teams. So although the AAFC was in existence for only four seasons, its teams clearly saw talent at HBCUs that NFL teams in existence since 1920 did not.

The first player to play in the NFL from a historically black school was fullback Paul "Tank" Younger from Grambling. No NFL team drafted Younger when he graduated in 1949, but he was signed by the Los Angeles Rams as a free agent for \$6,000. During his collegiate career he scored sixty touchdowns, primarily by running opponents over like a tank. At 6'3" and 230 pounds, Younger played nine seasons with the Rams and one with the Pittsburgh Steelers. He gained 3,640 yards, averaging 4.7 yards per carry, and scored thirty-four touchdowns during his NFL career,

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but more importantly he opened the door for players from historically black schools to receive the same opportunity. One year later the New York Giants made fullback Bob Jackson from North Carolina A&T University the first player from a historically black school to be drafted in the NFL when they selected him in the sixteenth round. Jackson played two seasons with the Giants; significantly, of the 391 players selected in the 1950 draft, he was the only one from an HBCU. Only five other African American players entered the NFL with Jackson that season, four with the Rams and one selected by the Browns. As difficult as it is to believe, no new black players were added to NFL teams in 1951, although ten were added in 1952, including Ollie Matson (University of San Francisco), who was the first African American to be drafted in the first round when he was chosen by the Rams. Of those ten, only guard Jack Spinks, who joined the Pittsburgh Steelers from Alcorn State University, was from an HBCU. And over the next two years some seventeen black players were added to NFL rosters, but only five of them played at HBCUs.<sup>1</sup>

In 1955 the Green Bay Packers drafted Charlie Brackins from Prairie View A&M University in the sixteenth round. Brackins was a quarterback, the first drafted into the NFL from an HBCU. At 6'2" and 200 pounds he was big for a quarterback; as a three-year starter from 1952 to 1955, Brackins led Prairie View to thirty-three victories in thirty-seven games. On October 16 Green Bay head coach Lisle Blackbourn inserted Brackins in a game against the Browns which the Packers were losing 41–10. With a few minutes left in the fourth quarter he threw two passes, both incompletions, and did not play again. On November 7 the Packers gave Brackins his unconditional release. Arguably Brackins was not given a real opportunity in Green Bay, and much speculation can be offered as to how the history of the NFL might have been vastly different if he had been.

There has been a great deal of debate regarding the opportunities that African American players from black schools received when the American Football League began play in 1960. What cannot be debated is the fact that from 1920 until 1949 no black players from HBCUs played in the NFL, but in the AFL they were allowed to play from the time the league was founded. The AFL has been characterized as extending more opportunities to this population of players than the NFL did, but this characterization is not totally accurate, since both leagues stepped up their efforts to draft these players in the early 1960s. However, the AFL's Kansas City Chiefs were the first team to draft a black player from a historically black school with the first overall draft pick. The selection of defensive end Buck Buchanan in 1963 was historic for this population of players, and

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his play immediately validated the talent among players at these schools. Buchanan was not selected in the NFL draft until the 265th pick, and this difference epitomized the value the two leagues placed on these players. In essence, AFL teams from their inception had African American players on their rosters from black schools, which helped facilitate a stronger identity with this population of athletes.

The new league began to take shape in March 1959 when Lamar Hunt met Bud Adams at the Charcoal Inn restaurant in Houston, Texas. The two wealthy sons of businessmen talked for a couple of hours about their futile attempts to secure a professional football team. Hunt's father, Haroldson Lafayette Hunt, was the founder and CEO of Hunt Oil and one of the richest people in America; in 1935 he established a trust for his son of more than \$500 million, which allowed the younger Hunt to be, as he put it, "self-employed." Adams was the son of K. S. "Boots" Adams, chairman of the Phillips Petroleum Company, and like Hunt had offered to buy a controlling interest in the woeful Chicago Cardinals from owner Walter Wolfner. Arguably Wolfner played a vital role in the formation of the AFL when he provided Hunt with the names of several wealthy businessmen who had approached him about buying the Cardinals. Hunt realized that a new league was possible if he could establish a cornerstone rivalry, which he had decided would be Dallas vs. Houston. While flying on American Airlines to Houston to discuss his plans with Adams, Hunt sketched out on the airline's stationery possible cities for franchises and a potential schedule. When the two men returned to his hotel after dinner, Hunt asked Adams if he would join if Hunt could get four other cities to sponsor teams in a new league. Without hesitation Adams replied, "Hell, yes!"<sup>2</sup>

Born in 1932, Hunt graduated from Southern Methodist University in 1956 with a degree in geology; he was a member of the football team, though his career was not distinguished. He was a third string end, well behind starter Raymond Berry, and saw only twenty minutes of action over his three years on the varsity, not enough to earn a letter. Armed with the financial security of his father's trust fund, Hunt was determined to bring pro football to Texas, and he spent two years after graduation traveling and learning the specifics of financing football and baseball teams. In early 1958 he called NFL Commissioner Bert Bell to inquire about procuring an NFL expansion franchise. Bell told Hunt that expansion was not an option for the league but that he should check with the owners of the Chicago Cardinals, who might be willing to sell the team.<sup>3</sup>

The lowly Cardinals had lost one hundred games and nearly \$1 million over the last ten years. The downtrodden club, once owned by the late

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Charles Bidwell, now belonged to his widow, Violet, and her new husband, St. Louis businessman Walter Wolfner. Over the course of a year, Hunt talked with Wolfner about buying the Cardinals, but he was willing to sell only a 49 percent share in the team, which Hunt found unacceptable. The 1958 NFL championship game was the defining moment for Hunt and his quest to own a professional football team. Like millions of other Americans, he watched on television as the Baltimore Colts defeated the New York Giants in Yankee Stadium 23–17 in overtime on a touchdown plunge by fullback Alan Ameche. This December game captivated the country, and Hunt was convinced that he had just seen a glimpse of the future, stating in an interview, “This sport really has everything. And it televises well.” Buoyed by his insight, in February 1959 Hunt flew to Miami to visit the Wolfners one last time in an effort to buy the Cardinals and move the team to Dallas. Again Wolfner did not budge, but he tried to emphasize to Hunt that his refusal was not personal. He noted that Houston millionaire Bud Adams and several other suitors had approached him about buying the team but he had turned them all down. Hunt headed to the Miami airport and boarded a plane for the long flight to Dallas, but by the time he stepped off the American Airlines plane he had decided to approach several of the people Wolfner had mentioned about starting a new league.<sup>4</sup>

Before Hunt met with Adams, he had mapped out prospective profit and loss statements, provisions for owners, and a rough estimate of the costs of equipment and the revenue from ticket sales. He also had drawn up a tentative schedule for the first season, going so far as to sketch out the likely weekends the regular season would begin and end. With a commitment from Adams, Hunt now began to recruit other perspective owners, among them Bob Howsman, who had tried for years to bring a sports franchise to Denver. Howsman ran the Denver Bears minor league baseball team, which was a member of the Pacific Coast League, and he had overseen the expansion of its downtown stadium from 8,100 seats to 17,500, which routinely sold out. Howsman thought he had positioned Denver to be a part of major league baseball’s expansion, but he watched as the Boston Braves relocated to Milwaukee in 1953 and as the Brooklyn Dodgers and New York Giants moved to Los Angeles and San Francisco in 1958. Pro football looked like the only reality for Denver in 1959, so Howsman agreed to join Hunt’s proposed league.<sup>5</sup>

Another name Wolfner mentioned was Max Winter, onetime owner of the Minneapolis Lakers of the National Basketball Association. Winter had been part of a group of investors who were unsuccessful in luring the Cardinals to Metropolitan Stadium in Bloomington, a suburb of Min-

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neapolis. When their negotiations with Wolfner broke down, the investors applied for an NFL franchise but were turned down. Winter accepted Hunt's invitation, so the new league now had four cities. Hunt's original plan was to have six teams, and he decided that for the league to have a national image it would need teams in New York and Los Angeles. He contacted William Shea, who was seeking financing for a new stadium project in New York City's Flushing Meadows. Shea put Hunt in contact with Harry Wismer, the director of sports at ABC and one of the nation's leading sportscasters. Wismer owned a 26 percent share of the Redskins in 1959 when Hunt contacted him with the idea of a new league; Wismer now made the fifth commitment.<sup>6</sup>

After meeting with Wismer, Hunt contacted Barron Hilton, son of hotel magnate Conrad Hilton. Hunt had to convince Hilton that his idea could work, which was more of a challenge than his other meetings because Hilton did not follow football at all. "I didn't know a field goal from a three o'clock checkout," Hilton said. But within an hour of meeting with Hunt, Hilton had vowed to join his new league. Now Hunt had to decide how to introduce the new league to the public, and he also wanted to try to get the NFL to consider expansion one last time. He met with George Preston Marshall, owner of the all-white Washington Redskins, in June 1959. Marshall was chairman of the NFL's expansion committee and the owner of the only NFL team with no African American players. A very inflexible man, Marshall met with Hunt for ninety minutes and listed several reasons why expansion was not about to happen in the NFL. Shortly after this meeting Hunt met with Commissioner Bell, who reiterated that the league had no plans for expansion. This was exactly what Hunt wanted to hear, for if NFL owners were firmly against expansion, then his new league would go unchallenged in the majority of their cities. In early July, Hunt asked Davy O'Brien, a former Texas Christian University star who was a friend of Bell's, to tell the commissioner about the new league. The meeting was cordial, but most importantly it set the stage for Bell to break the news about the AFL. Called to testify in Washington, D.C., before a Senate Judiciary Subcommittee as he looked to clinch antitrust legislation for the league, Bell needed ammunition to prove the NFL was no monopoly. On July 28 he told senators that a new league was being formed and would likely field six football teams during the 1960 season, including one in New York, and that none of the twelve NFL owners objected.<sup>7</sup>

The next day, newspapers across the country headlined Bell's bombshell announcement. Bell's testimony brought Hunt's fledgling league to



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the forefront of the American public's attention, and within a week he and Adams agreed to formally announce the new league at a press conference in Adams's Houston office. During this press conference, on August 2, it was announced that league play would officially begin in the fall of 1960. Twelve days later, on August 14, 1959, the first league meeting took place in Chicago. Each team was required to pay \$25,000 to join, and memberships were awarded to Dallas, Houston, Denver, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis–St. Paul. Rival leagues had been created before—in fact, in 1926 the first AFL was started by football star Red Grange's agent C. C. Pyle, but economic challenges caused the league to fold after one year. A second AFL was founded in 1935 and operated for two seasons in 1936 and 1937 before disbanding. Over the course of its two-year existence there were eight teams, but only the Cleveland Rams were allowed to join the NFL in 1937. The third challenge to the NFL was the All-American Football Conference, which was organized by sports editor Arch Ward and began play in 1946. As a league, it too struggled financially, but there were several teams that were individually successful, specifically the Cleveland Browns, who were led by standout African American players Willis and Motley. The AAFC and NFL became bidding enemies over the rights to several players; subsequently a merger was worked out that ended the AAFC but allowed Cleveland, the 49ers, and Colts to join the NFL in 1950.<sup>8</sup>

The four-year experiment that was the AAFC had cost the NFL an estimated \$5 million in player signing wars. In 1959 many owners still had bad memories of battling the AAFC and had no desire to see another league begin. Deep pockets had not helped either the first two AFLs or the AAFC, but what Lamar Hunt possessed which the other leagues had lacked was timing. Suburbs were expanding across the country in the 1950s, along with the leisure time of their new residents. Mobility improved as scores of newly built highways let people travel freely, and pro football was growing just as the country was. The NFL started the 1950s with a dozen teams drawing about two million fans. By 1959 those same teams drew nearly three million spectators. The most significant factor in increased fan participation was not the automobile but television. In 1951, for the first time, the NFL championship game was televised coast to coast, by the DuMont Network, which bought the rights to the game for \$75,000. This allowed people across America to watch the Los Angeles Rams defeat the Cleveland Browns 24–17. In 1956 CBS began broadcasting regular-season games to select markets, allowing fans to get their first glimpses of NFL stars from other cities. In 1955 NBC was the first net-

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work to buy the rights to the NFL championship game, agreeing to pay the league \$100,000, and this allowed the 1958 championship game to be seen live in an estimated 10,820,000 homes. Arguably this game facilitated the marriage of major network television and pro football. Hunt clearly recognized the vast possibilities of both pro football and television, and he was determined to make the new league a success.<sup>9</sup>

Hunt's determination would soon be tested by the NFL. Before their August 29 preseason game George Halas, owner of the Chicago Bears, and Art Rooney, owner of the Pittsburgh Steelers, announced their plans for league expansion, which included awarding franchises in January and beginning competition in 1961. When asked about likely cities, they cited Houston and Dallas, a clear message that the NFL intended to have an adversarial relationship with the newly founded AFL. Halas and Rooney exemplified the arrogance of many owners in the NFL. They realized that Hunt and the other AFL owners had deep pockets, but did they have the necessary fortitude for a fight? By placing a team in Dallas, Hunt's home turf, Halas and Rooney clearly intended to intimidate Hunt, perhaps leading to the failure of the AFL itself.

Unfortunately for Hunt and the AFL, this was just the beginning of what would escalate into a full-scale war. NFL owners were committed to causing the collapse of the new league, and their next act was to facilitate dissent among the AFL's owners. In October 1959 Ralph Wilson, a shareholder of the Detroit Lions, signed on to start a team in Buffalo, and Hunt also met with several businessmen in Jacksonville, Florida, who were interested in putting a team together. This never materialized. Instead, William H. Sullivan paid the necessary franchise fee to start a team in Boston. Now the league had eight teams and was ready to initiate its first draft, which only caused NFL owners to try more unscrupulous strategies. First, Halas contacted Hunt and offered him 50 percent of the new Dallas franchise. Hunt would share ownership duties with Clint Murchison Jr., the son of an oil millionaire, but he politely declined the offer. Next Hunt was offered the entire franchise by Murchison, but again he said no, reiterating that he was firmly committed to his fellow AFL owners.<sup>10</sup>

Hunt felt that Commissioner Bell could ultimately help the two leagues to coexist. During one of their early meetings in July, Bell told Hunt, "All of you will enjoy this and all of the owners will get to become good friends down through the years. However, there is one thing that will separate you: when you start to fight over players." Bell was a prophet, but unfortunately he did not live to see his prediction come true: while attending a game in Philadelphia between the Eagles and Steelers in Octo-



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ber, he collapsed and died after suffering a massive heart attack. A new commissioner would not be elected until the annual meetings the following January, and Hunt realized that without the leadership of the man who had guided the league over the last fourteen years, NFL owners were surely going to step up their efforts to end the AFL.<sup>11</sup>

NFL owners had an obvious strategy to dissolve the upstart league, force the exodus of two or three teams, and cause the entire AFL to fold. On November 22, as AFL owners met in Minneapolis to begin their first college draft, a story was published that the Minnesota group had been in secret negotiations for an NFL team. As the owners sat in the banquet room of the Cedric Adams Hotel, Harry Wismer came in with a newspaper that had reported the possible move. Someone asked Wismer if he was ready for dinner, and he shouted, “Yes. And this is the last supper!” Pointing to Max Winter of the Minneapolis group, he added, “And he’s Judas!” The draft was conducted amid the hangover of the possible Minneapolis defection as teams began with “territorial” selections. Houston took LSU’s Billy Cannon, and Dallas selected SMU quarterback George Izo. The thirty-three-round draft that followed was not so much a draft as a lottery. Since some teams had not even begun to hire personnel departments, it was decided that a committee of personnel men would get together and pick a master list of players, which then would be drawn by lot.<sup>12</sup>

Right after the draft, the AFL made two major announcements: first, that the league would have a cooperative television plan that would allow all the teams to share revenue equally and, second, that its new commissioner was Joe Foss. Foss, a U.S. Marine Corps pilot during World War II, and his squadron, who had shot down 135 Japanese planes, were known as “Joe’s Flying Circus.” Credited with shooting down 26 planes himself, Foss was viewed as a clean-cut hero with leadership qualities. He was given a \$30,000-a-year contract for three years and became the squadron leader for the league now known as “The Foolish Club.” As commissioner, Foss made several important decisions during his tenure, and one of his best was hiring Milt Woodard as assistant to the commissioner. Woodard was a sportswriter for the *Tacoma News Tribune* and *Chicago Sun Times* and also served as the beat writer for the Chicago White Sox. Memos, letters, and league correspondence were primarily generated by Woodard, who in essence served as the AFL’s executive secretary.<sup>13</sup>

When league owners met on January 26, 1960, the first order of business was the election of Lamar Hunt as league president. The next day owners approved the withdrawal of the Minneapolis franchise, and this

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facilitated an immediate search for a replacement team. Barron Hilton wanted a rival team for his Los Angeles Chargers, and he was adamant that if it did not happen he would withdraw from the league. As a result of his strong stance Oakland was granted a team on January 30. Oakland's franchise, made up of an eight-man syndicate headed by Y. C. "Chet" Soda, inherited the Minneapolis draft list and was given permission to select five players from each of the other teams. With eight teams on board, league owners adopted revolutionary rules. They instituted the first fourteen-game schedule in pro football history (the NFL had a twelve-game schedule), and they adopted college football's two-point conversion rule after touchdowns. Owners Barron Hilton and Robert Howsman recommended that all AFL teams place the names of players on the backs of uniforms, with the idea that it would assist television viewers in becoming acquainted with players. The AFL made the game clock the official timekeeper, while the NFL kept two clocks—one on the field for fans and one kept by officials, a practice that was confusing, particularly at the end of games. Now fans could feel the excitement build during drives at the end of games. The league also gave the media a free hand in game coverage. Cameras would be allowed to show disagreements and fights between players.<sup>14</sup>

The AFL was poised to begin its inaugural season with new rules and with Oakland replacing Minneapolis, but just as the fight with the NFL seemed to slow, it was announced on January 28 that the expansion Dallas franchise planned to play in 1960 rather than 1961, as originally suggested. This news infuriated the AFL brass. Commissioner Foss warned of open warfare and congressional investigations if the NFL moved into Dallas, "the heart of our league." In March, Commissioner Foss asked the Justice Department to file an antitrust suit against the NFL based on the league's placement of a team in Dallas, but the Justice Department refused. Although Foss wanted government intervention to take place between the rival leagues, it did not; competition for players and fans would ultimately lead to the formation of modern football after several years of "open warfare."<sup>15</sup>

The American Football League was now more than an idea on American Airlines stationery. It was an eight-team league made up of the Dallas Texans, Houston Oilers, Denver Broncos, New York Titans, Los Angeles Chargers, Buffalo Bills, Boston Patriots, and Oakland Raiders. The teams were organized into two divisions, the Eastern Division, which comprised the Oilers, Titans, Bills, and Patriots, and the Western Division, which comprised the Chargers, Texans, Raiders, and Broncos. All eight teams had

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hopes of winning their division and playing for the first championship. With that in mind, AFL owners hired front office personnel and coaches with NFL experience, Canadian Football experience, or college experience. The Texans chose as their coach Hank Stram, a stocky disciplinarian who had served as an assistant coach at the University of Miami (Florida). The Oilers hired Lou Rymkus, a former All-American at Notre Dame who had spent seventeen years in the NFL, first as a player for the Redskins and then as an assistant coach for the Green Bay Packers and Los Angeles Rams. Denver chose Frank Filchock; the former standout quarterback at Indiana University had played for the Redskins and Giants, and after his career was over, he coached the Saskatchewan Rough Riders for ten years until joining the AFL. Harry Wismer wanted a high-profile personality in New York and chose Sammy Baugh, the former All-American quarterback from Texas Christian University who had joined the Redskins in 1937. “Slingin’” Sammy led the NFL in passing six times and took the Redskins to two NFL titles. When Wisner called, Baugh was the head coach of Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas. The Chargers did not have to look far for their coach—Hilton selected Sid Gillman, who was a graduate of Ohio State University and had played end for the Cleveland Rams in 1936. Gilman, whom many viewed as an offensive innovator, had coached at Miami University (Ohio) and the University of Cincinnati, and was the head coach of the Los Angeles Rams from 1955 until he resigned at the end of the 1959 season. The Bills went with Garrard “Buster” Ramsey, who had been a member of the Chicago Cardinals title teams in the 1940s; by 1959 he was an eight-year veteran of the Detroit Lions defensive staff. In Boston, Billy Sullivan hired Lou Saban, a former All-American at Indiana University and a defensive captain for the Cleveland Browns. In 1959, before joining the Patriots, he led Western Illinois University to an undefeated season as head coach. The Raiders chose Eddie Erdelatz, who had guided the Naval Academy to national prominence with eight successful seasons. In 1955 Navy beat Southeastern Conference champion Mississippi in the Sugar Bowl, and in 1958 it defeated Southwestern Conference champion Rice in the Cotton Bowl.<sup>16</sup>

Although league owners had begun to put organizational infrastructures together that included general managers, head coaches, and assistant coaches, they still needed access to stadiums. The Texans had to share the 75,000-seat Cotton Bowl with the NFL’s Dallas Cowboys. The Oilers had trouble finding a suitable stadium. Unable to land Rice University, Bud Adams turned to Jeppesen Stadium, a high school field, for home games. Adams added 14,000 seats to the 22,000-seat venue, and for

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a mere thirty-eight dollars you could purchase a season ticket to all seven home games; single-game tickets sold for two dollars. The Broncos played in Bears Stadium, which was initially used by the Denver Bears of the Pacific Coast League. It had a seating capacity of only 17,000 for baseball but was expanded to 34,000 to accommodate the Broncos. Harry Wismer's Titans played in the Polo Grounds, which seated 54,500. It had been abandoned since 1957 after the New York Giants moved to San Francisco. The Los Angeles Chargers played in the biggest stadium in the league, the 94,000-seat Los Angeles Coliseum, and the Buffalo Bills played in War Memorial Stadium with a capacity of 46,500. Billy Sullivan was able to secure use of historic Fenway Park for the Patriots, who played for six years in the 38,000-seat stadium, and the Oakland Raiders were forced to play their first season in San Francisco at Kezar Stadium, which was also the home of the NFL's San Francisco 49ers.<sup>17</sup>

With stadiums in place, the AFL now needed television for exposure and revenue. The decision that AFL owners made in terms of how revenue would be distributed helped to change pro football forever. Lamar Hunt pushed the idea of equalizing television revenues as a means of equalizing competitive opportunity. This policy would be adopted by the NFL one year later by newly appointed commissioner Pete Rozelle, who borrowed the idea from the AFL. Rozelle was a compromise selection as commissioner in January 1960; after twenty-three ballots cast over nine days, he was elected with a 7–4 vote. The former general manager of the Rams stated that “borrowing” the television policy of the AFL was “the most important thing I have done as commissioner.” The AFL had approached both CBS and NBC, which turned them down, but ABC, which was without a sports division and was a distant third among the major networks, was willing to negotiate. The AFL and ABC eventually hammered out a five-year, \$8.5 million deal that would pay each team \$1,785,000 for the first year. Included in the deal was a contingent package protecting ABC with sliding scales for ratings and sales slippage. It was estimated that ABC actually paid only \$400,000 for first-year rights to AFL games. The deal also contained an explicit provision that each team would get the same amount from an overall league deal, regardless of how many of their games reached “national” audiences. Before the ABC deal was signed, Milt Woodard sent out a memo to the owners addressing potential contracts with radio stations. Woodard indicated that Jay Michaels of the Music Corporation of America had requested that individual teams withhold arranging radio rights for their games until national and regional TV coverage had been assigned. Michaels expected that most of the sponsors

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for TV would also want to buy time on the radio, and in order to prevent “competitive sponsorship” he suggested waiting until TV commercials were sold first.<sup>18</sup>

In an interview with the *Dallas Morning News* in January 1960, Don Rossi, the general manager of the Texans, predicted that the new league would create 380 new jobs for coaches and players. NFL owners had tried several tactics to finish off the AFL before it could begin its inaugural season. In essence the AFL had been on defense during the first few months of its existence, but that soon changed with the signing of drafted college players. The AFL honored existing NFL contracts with players and lured away no players from the established league. Instead, AFL teams gained player experience by signing NFL rejects and old players who were thought to be at the end of their careers. Most of the AFL quarterbacks, such as George Blanda, Jack Kemp, Babe Parilli, Tom O’Connell, Al Dorow, and Cotton Davidson, had NFL experience. Some players from the Canadian Football League (CFL) seized on the AFL as a chance to play again in the United States. Frank Tripucka, Dave Kocourek, Goose Gonsoulin, Butch Songin, Al Jamison, and Sherrill Headrick had all been playing north of the border before signing with the AFL. But the most spectacular aspect of the player recruiting was the bidding war with NFL teams over well-known college players, particularly Louisiana State University halfback Billy Cannon.<sup>19</sup>

Cannon’s experience during the fall of 1959 would foreshadow the chaotic future years of pro football. Though the NFL had for decades lived by the agreement that it would not sign players until their college eligibility had been exhausted, the challenge from the AFL prompted many general managers and personnel directors around the country to jump the gun, secretly negotiating before the draft, and before New Year’s bowl games, to sign players to contracts. On November 30, Cannon—traveling under the alias Billy Gunn—checked into the Warwick Hotel in Philadelphia for a secret negotiation with the Rams. GM Rozelle signed the Heisman Trophy running back to a contract with a \$10,000 bonus, a \$500 check to cover travel expenses, and three one-year contracts at \$15,000 per year. They agreed the undated contract would not take effect until after LSU faced the University of Mississippi in the Sugar Bowl on January 1, but even that understanding was confidential, since signing the contract would have made Cannon ineligible for the Sugar Bowl. Bud Adams’s Oilers also had the rights to Cannon, and Adams was aware that Cannon had a commitment to the Rams, which Adams intended to substantially increase. Adams talked to Cannon on the phone and offered him a \$20,000 bonus

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and three one-year contracts at \$30,000 each year. Cannon came to Houston in December and signed a contract with Adams, but he was skeptical that Adams would really pay him. Adams drove Cannon to his house in his wife Nancy's new white four-door Cadillac. When they arrived, Cannon told Adams that his father had worked in the oil refinery business for years and that if he could give him this car it would mean a lot. Adams, worried about what he would have to tell his wife but more worried about losing Cannon, gave him the keys. After Cannon left, Adams told Nancy, "Billy's gone on and heading back home." She said, "Did he go by cab?" Adams said, "No, he's driving back." Puzzled, she asked, "How's he driving back?" Adams said, "In your car." Then, according to Adams, he received a strong tongue lashing from his wife, who was irate that he had given her new car away.<sup>20</sup>

In order to cause the NFL maximum embarrassment, Adams and the Oilers decided to have Cannon sign immediately after the Sugar Bowl, on the Tulane Stadium field in front of a national television audience. It would come at the earliest possible time that Cannon could sign after his eligibility was up. Then, if the Rams claimed they had already signed him, they would be admitting that they had done so improperly. On New Year's Day, LSU played its rematch with Mississippi in the Sugar Bowl, and when the final gun sounded, the best-known college football player in the nation walked to the end zone. There, under the goal posts, on national television, Cannon signed a contract with the Oilers. Rozelle and the Rams sued the AFL, claiming that they had the rights to Cannon. The case went before a federal judge, who ruled that the contract with the Rams was not binding. Concluding that Rams general manager Rozelle had taken advantage of a "rustic" Cannon, the judge awarded Cannon to the Oilers.<sup>21</sup>

Cannon was not the only player selected by both leagues. Others included his backfield teammate at LSU, running back Johnny Robinson. Both the Detroit Lions and Dallas Texans drafted Robinson, and half-back Charlie Flowers of Mississippi was drafted by both the New York Giants and Los Angeles Chargers. The Texans also drafted running backs Jack Spikes of Texas Christian University and Abner Haynes of North Texas State (the University of North Texas), but the Pittsburgh Steelers had the rights to both players as well. Buffalo signed Penn State quarterback Richie Lucas, the Washington Redskins' first pick, and the Boston Patriots signed Northwestern University running back Ron Burton, the Eagles' first choice. The Los Angeles Chargers scored a real coup when they



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snatched University of Southern California offensive tackle Ron Mix from the Baltimore Colts. Money was not the only reason that college players signed with AFL teams. For example, Robinson was from the South and thought that Detroit was too far away, so he signed with the Texans for the same amount of money the Lions offered. Arrogance on the part of some NFL teams caused them to lose players, none more so than Carroll Rosenbloom's NFL champion Colts, who did not rush out to sign their draft picks. Subsequently four of their first five selections signed with AFL teams. Upton Bell, son of the late NFL commissioner and a scout for the Colts at the time, stated, "We were NFL champions. We weren't going to fall all over ourselves for a bunch of rookies."<sup>22</sup>

NFL executives became very frustrated with the fact that contract negotiations with players virtually changed overnight. Philadelphia Eagles general manager Vince McNally suggested in an interview that the best strategy would be to put all the players in one room and hold an open auction, "because that's what this thing has become, a rat race." McNally felt that there were now two types of players leaving college, "one who wants to play in the National Football League because they prefer its stability and they don't want to be a pioneer." The other type of player "tells you I want as much dough as I can get, I'm going to sweat you out." McNally also felt that money was not the only factor that helped make the decision for players, and that they were now seeking advice from individuals who were not football people. "These kids have more excuses than you could dream up. You meet their figure and then they say, I'll let you know. I've got to talk it over with my wife, my lawyer, my coach, my minister."<sup>23</sup>

Salaries were not the only contracts that had to be worked out between players and teams; the selection of players to appear on bubble gum cards had to be decided as well. In a memo to AFL general managers Woodward asked that teams identify at least twenty-five players and have them sign releases that would allow bubble gum manufacturers to distribute cards. Woodward wanted releases signed by May 15, virtually two months before training camps were due to open. What was interesting about this agreement was that the revenue from the sale of the cards was to be held in trust for "the player's benefit." This stipulation would be addressed after AFL players formed a Players Association, but during this inaugural season the opportunity to play pro football was simply enough.<sup>24</sup>

The AFL preseason was scheduled to begin on September 11, and owners had agreed that teams would play five preseason games. On July 8, 1960, when the first AFL training camps opened, more than 800

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hopefuls vied for 264 roster spots. These camps were made up of former NFL players, CFL players, college rookies, and amateurs who aspired to be pro football players. For example, the Oilers had Heisman Trophy winner Cannon, but they also had former schoolteacher Charlie Hennigan, who kept his teacher's pay stub in his helmet for motivation, and both ended up being great AFL players. The NFL's major criticism of the new league was that it had less-talented players, since the best players purportedly played in the more established league. The idea that the NFL could make numerous mistakes in the evaluation of its former players or college players was virtually never considered, but the AFL would, in fact, prove this over and over again.

NFL owners, general managers, coaches, and scouts overlooked many talented players, especially those who were African American. In 1960 NFL teams were well aware of the black players who were being produced by large, predominantly white schools, but black players at smaller or historically black schools were generally devalued. One year before the creation of the AFL, in the 1958 NFL draft held in December, no player from a historically black school was drafted until the sixth round, when Willie Taylor, center from Florida A&M University, was selected by the Green Bay Packers, but he was cut during training camp. Eleven other players from black schools were selected after Taylor, but only one made an NFL team: Jamie Caleb, who was chosen in the sixteenth round by the Cleveland Browns. Caleb was a halfback out of Grambling State University who played three seasons with the Browns and the Minnesota Vikings.

The AFL actively sought black college talent, and seven players from historically black schools were selected in the inaugural draft. In fact, of the eight AFL teams, only the Los Angeles Chargers appear not to have begun with a black college player. The Oilers began the 1960 season with defensive back Julian "Sus" Spence from tiny Huston-Tillotson College along with receiver John White from Texas Southern University on their roster. The Texans had defensive tackle Walter Napier from Paul Quinn College and defensive back Dave Webster, defensive tackle Rufus Granderson, and running back Clem Daniels, all from Prairie View A&M University. Ernie Barnes of North Carolina Central University played offensive guard for the Titans, and Riley Morris of Florida A&M University played linebacker for the Raiders. The Broncos had three black college players in center: Mike Nichols from Arkansas Pine Bluff (University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff), receiver Jim Greer from Elizabeth City State University, and defensive end Chuck Gavin out of Tennessee State University. The Bills had

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defensive end Leroy Moore from Fort Valley State University and defensive tackle Jim Sorey out of Texas Southern University. And the Patriots had defensive tackle Jim “Earthquake” Hunt from Prairie View along with offensive tackle George McGee from Southern University.<sup>25</sup>

African American players were on every NFL roster in 1960 except George Preston Marshall’s Washington Redskins, who remained all white until 1962. Throughout the 1950s black players had gradually been added to most teams, and several had become the best players on their respective teams. Running back Jim Brown arguably was the best player in the league; he and players such as Emlen Tunnell, Ollie Matson, Dick “Night Train” Lane, Eugene “Big Daddy” Lipscomb, John Henry Johnson, Rosey Grier, Lenny Moore, and Jim Parker were recognized as great players on their teams. Several of these players were nearing the end of their careers, and the AFL provided the opportunity for other black players to make a name for themselves and cause comparisons with their NFL colleagues. In 1960 Abner Haynes was drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers in the fifth round and the Minneapolis group that was replaced by Oakland; several players were signed by other teams, including Haynes, who was signed by the Texans. This black running back from North Texas State became a star once he arrived in the AFL.

Haynes was born on September 19, 1937, in Denton, Texas; he graduated from North Texas State, where he integrated college football in the state of Texas in 1956 along with teammate Leon King. Haynes walked on at North Texas State after Coach Odus Mitchell got permission from the school’s administration to allow him to join the team. Haynes quickly became the offensive and defensive star of the football team but was not allowed to live on campus. He also had several painful encounters with Jim Crow while playing for the Eagles, the worst being when the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and Chattanooga University canceled their games with North Texas State. In 1960 he chose the AFL over the NFL and led the Dallas Texans and the entire league in rushing attempts, yards, and touchdowns. He was the AFL’s first Player of the Year and its first Rookie of the Year. He captured the league’s rushing crown with 875 yards and also led the Texans in receiving, punt returns, and kickoff returns.<sup>26</sup>

Haynes was not the only black player to make a name for himself on the field that first year. Gene Mingo was the first recognized African American field goal kicker in pro football. Born in Akron, Ohio, as the youngest of five children, Mingo dropped out of school to take care

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of his sick mother. After she died, he joined the U.S. Navy in 1956 and began playing football for the Oceania Naval Air Station as a very good running back and defensive back. He was honorably discharged in 1959 and initially offered a contract by Coach Weeb Ewbank and the Baltimore Colts for \$9,000, but when he arrived in Baltimore the offer had dropped to \$5,000 because, according to Mingo, he had not gone to college. Gene declined the Colts' offer, noting, "I can go home and work in the factories and make almost that much. And I don't have to worry about being banged up." The U.S. Department of Commerce, in its 1962 consumer income report, indicated that in 1960 the median family income for two individuals was \$5,600. So Mingo's assertion that he could make nearly that much working in a factory was fairly accurate. Luckily for Mingo, the Denver Broncos had signed a fellow serviceman to a contract, so Mingo wrote General Manager Dean Griffing a letter with the help of his sister, asking for a tryout. Griffing had heard of Mingo and sent him a contract for \$6,500. He joined the Broncos in training camp, where Coach Frank Filchuck was looking for a kicker. Bill Miller, who had been in the Navy with Mingo, said, "Mingo can kick"; Coach Filchuck gave him the opportunity, and on his first try he kicked an extra point through the goal posts. This was the beginning of a career that lasted from 1960 to 1972. Mingo played for the Broncos, Raiders, Miami Dolphins, New Orleans Saints, Redskins, and Steelers. He led the AFL in scoring in 1960 with 123 points and again in 1962 with 137 points. He would go on to set several scoring records with the Broncos along with playing several positions, including kicker, running back, defensive back, punt, and kick returner.<sup>27</sup>

Abner Haynes and Gene Mingo were just two of the many African American players who were part of the AFL's inaugural season in 1960. The season officially began on the evening of July 30 in Buffalo, where the Bills took on the Patriots in the first exhibition game. Some 16,474 fans watched in newly renovated and renamed War Memorial Stadium, braving the extremely hot temperatures as the Patriots defeated the hometown Bills 28–7. The Patriots had drafted African American running back Ron Burton in the first round of the inaugural AFL draft out of Northwestern University. Burton had signed with the Patriots despite also being drafted in the first round by the NFL's Philadelphia Eagles. But the unquestioned star of this game was quarterback Butch Songin, who tossed two touchdowns to lead the Pats to victory. Boston head coach Lou Saban was so ecstatic after the game that he shook hands with every member of the team and asked them to sign an official AFL ball.

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In Los Angeles, Paul Lowe began his career by setting a record the first time he touched the ball. In the Chargers' first exhibition game against the Titans, the African American halfback returned the opening kickoff 105 yards for a touchdown. Lowe attended Oregon State University and played for the San Francisco 49ers during the 1959 preseason. The 49ers released Lowe before the regular season, so he returned to Los Angeles to help support his wife. He took a job in the mailroom for the Carte Blanche Credit Card Corporation, owned by the Hilton family. Lowe was invited to Chargers camp as a free agent and given an \$800 signing bonus. Like every other AFL camp player, Lowe noticed that players came from all walks of life. "When they had tryouts, everybody and their grandmother showed up looking for spots, plumbers, carpenters, shoeshine boys, you name it." Even though Lowe had scored an electrifying touchdown that exhibited his greatest strength—amazing speed—when the exhibition season ended he was the fourth back on Coach Gillman's depth chart. Former NFL backs Ron Waller and Howard Ferguson, along with University of Mississippi rookie Charlie Flowers, were all ahead of Lowe when the regular season began and after the first five games, but that would not be the case when the season ended.<sup>28</sup>

In the early 1960s, segregation was a way of life for African Americans, and this included pro football players. The Oilers and Titans scheduled an exhibition game on August 26 in Mobile, Alabama, and shortly after the Oilers' chartered DC-6 landed, most of the team was bused to a hotel in downtown Mobile. However, the team's two black players, John White and Julian Spence, were discreetly pulled aside by Oiler officials while arrangements were made to house them separately. White was a 6'4", 230-pound tight end from Tampa, Florida, who had come to Houston to play football at Texas Southern University. When his wife gave birth at one of the city's hospitals, he suffered the indignity of being asked to leave because Negroes were not permitted in the visitors' waiting room. Spence was a 5'10" defensive back who weighed 153 pounds, which made him the lightest player in the American Football League. Spence was not drafted after college, but he played two years in the NFL, with the Cardinals in 1956 and the 49ers in 1957. He was out of football for the next two years before he joined the Oilers in 1960. For these two black players, dealing with segregation came with the opportunity, but this did not go unnoticed by their white teammates. When he heard how White and Spence were treated in Mobile, Oilers defensive end Dan Lanphear suggested to Coach Rymkus, "Lou, if that's the way things have to be, let's not play here again."<sup>29</sup>

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This was simply a precursor for African American players; throughout the early 1960s they faced numerous challenges off the field, particularly when it came to playing in the South. One of the distinctive characteristics of black AFL players was their willingness to articulate their frustration with this treatment to each other, white players, and coaches. More importantly, this frustration eventually led to their direct action by the middle of the decade.