



NFL positioned to hold line as America's national game

Pro football: Growing from modest roots, sports' top league is now entrenched. That won't change anytime soon.

Pro Football

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By Ed Waldman
SUN STAFF

In 1970, Sears was the king of retail. Pan American, Eastern and TWA ruled the skies. Bethlehem Steel employed more than 120,000 people across the country. The NFL had just completed its fourth Super Bowl, with the Kansas City Chiefs defeating the Minnesota Vikings, 23-7, before 80,562 at Tulane Stadium in New Orleans. Tickets (which were the first to carry the name "Super Bowl") cost about \$15.

Thirty-five years later, tickets for next Sunday's Super Bowl between the Philadelphia Eagles and the New England Patriots, the league's 39th, have a face value of \$500. The game has become an unofficial national holiday, and nothing comes close to the hype that's generated during the week leading up to the game.

Sears, meanwhile, is being taken over by Kmart. Pan Am, Eastern and TWA are out of business, as is Bethlehem Steel.

Back in 1970, when the NFL was just starting its rise to become the most successful sports business in the nation - maybe even the world - you'd have been laughed out of any corporate boardroom if you had predicted that those five icons of American capitalism would be gobbled up or be gone.

So 35 years from now, is it even remotely possible that the NFL - and the Super Bowl - will have gone the way of Sears?

"The answer to that question is no," said Neal Pilson, a former president of CBS Sports and now a consultant to the TV industry. "Sears doesn't get 60 ratings points a week."

But former Ravens principal owner Art Modell, an early architect of the NFL's success, said there is one thing that could take the league down. "Greed," he said, "is the one element that could destroy the NFL."

To predict the NFL's future, you have to look at its past.

The league was founded in a Canton, Ohio, car dealership in 1920 as the American Professional Football Association. In the early years, its popularity was far behind that of baseball, horse racing, even college football.

When asked how the NFL came to be such a dominating presence in the culture, experts cite a number of factors, including the league's business model and gambling. And all agree that two of the most important are television and that each team plays a limited number of games.

"I think what happened is pro football figured out earlier than any other sport how to manage television and use television to its own advantage," said Michael MacCambridge, author of *America's Game: The Epic Story of How Pro Football Captured a Nation*.

MADE FOR TV

Said John Madden, analyst for ABC's Monday Night Football, which has been on the air since 1970, making it the second-longest-running TV series in prime time: "It is the perfect sport to televise. We have change of possession, and there's a timeout every change of possession, and there's a commercial. That's what pays for everything."

Even though Pilson's pedigree is in TV, he said the most important reason for the NFL's success is that every game is critical.

"In baseball, you play 162 games; in basketball and hockey you play more than 80 games," he said. "In professional football, you play 16 games. That tends to focus everyone's attention. It dramatically emphasizes the importance of each game. And when you are talking about the importance of each game, you start talking about the importance of each play."

Taking it one step further was Steve Bornstein, president and chief executive of the NFL Network, which was launched by the league in November 2003 with the mission of promoting the NFL.

"They kept the sport very special," said Bornstein, who made his mark in the TV

business as a builder of ESPN and as president of ABC Sports. "They didn't play every day of the week. They concentrate their games on Sunday; they create a scarcity of opportunity to see it."

After Modell bought the Cleveland Browns in 1961, he and NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle persuaded the league's 13 other owners to equally share the money they got from their national TV contract.

Beginning in the 1963 season, every team started each year with essentially the same amount of money. The Green Bay Packers could compete with the New York Giants or the Los Angeles Rams.

Recently, owners such as Daniel Snyder of the Washington Redskins and Jerry Jones of the Dallas Cowboys have pushed for less sharing of some locally generated revenues and more freedom to make their own deals.

According to Modell, "Revenue sharing is the key to our success.

"George Steinbrenner is a very dear friend of mine," Modell added. "I'm preaching to him all the time that baseball has to adopt some of the NFL techniques. You can't gobble up every nickel and every player. You'll wash out the little guy; you won't have the competition.

"The thing that sells sports is competition. Competition is what makes our game great."

Madden talked about free agency, another key to competitive balance. A team that's down doesn't have to stay down for a long time.

He cited the Carolina Panthers, who were 1-15 in 2001, then reached the Super Bowl and nearly won it two years later.

"A team can do that," Madden said. "You can go from being a bad team to a good team very quickly. That's a good thing."

The bottom line: The experts agree that the NFL was - and continues to be - more forward-thinking than any other professional sports league.

"All through the '60s, in the story of football, not just television but all other aspects, you get this sense of football trying to market itself, trying to sell itself to as many people as possible; having this zealot's desire to say, 'We have a great game, how can we make more people aware of this game,' " MacCambridge said.

"At the same time, what you saw with baseball is: 'We're No. 1, we're always going to be No. 1. It's not broke, let's not bother with fixing it.'"

Stuart Doyle, wagering director of BetWWTS.com, an Internet sportsbook based in Antigua, estimates that \$1 billion will be bet legally on Sunday's Super Bowl, more than any other sporting event in history.

Bettors' fascination with the NFL dates to the mid-1940s, according to MacCambridge, when then-commissioner Bert Bell instituted rules about the release of so-called inside information after the attempted fixing of the 1946 championship game.

"He wanted to make sure the public had confidence in the honesty of the game," the author said. "You can draw a line from that decision to what we see today. We see detailed injury reports come out, and teams get fined if they're not honest about those things."

"Here's the paradox: It increased the public confidence in the honesty of the game, but in so doing increased the confidence of people to gamble on the game. They thought they had a fair shot."

The wild growth of fantasy sports leagues has added to the gambling opportunities. According to the Fantasy Sports Trade Association, nearly 14 million adults played fantasy football last year.

Though the NFL has officially tried to distance itself from gambling over the years, Modell said it has been a major contributor to the league's success.

"There's no question in my mind, and I hate to say it in public, but I have to be honest about it, the element of wagering by the average fan in office pools, man-to-man betting, even with bookmakers, has added a tremendous dimension to our game," he said. "It's brought millions of people to the TV set if they have a buck or two on a team."

HOLDING IT TOGETHER

Doyle, not surprisingly, said the game's popularity would fall immeasurably without gambling.

"I think it's what makes football exciting; it's what makes football popular," he said.

Pilson and Bornstein, though, said they didn't think betting was critical to the sport's success.

"I think if you were able to say to the public that there will be no more gambling on NFL football, I'm not persuaded that the sport would materially suffer," Pilson said.

So, the question remains: In 2040, will we be eagerly anticipating the 74th Super Bowl, ready to wager \$1 trillion at the legal sports books that by then will surely be in operation in Baltimore?

Or will hard-charging team owners like the Redskins' Snyder and the Cowboys' Jones kill the goose that lays the golden footballs, opening the door for soccer or NASCAR or the X Games the way baseball opened the door for the NFL?

Or will it be something else?

Bornstein said it's possible that the NFL could be knocked off. But as long as the league pays attention to its fans, it won't happen.

"The most dangerous thing that we can do here is be complacent because something will replace you if you are," Bornstein said. "You can't take public support for granted, and I don't think they do around here.

"I get nothing but a sense of 'How do we make it better; how do we improve it? How do we make the fan enjoy the product more?' That's the key to the success that I see."

Modell said he sees nothing that can compete with the NFL for mass audience appeal - not the "hot kid on the block" NASCAR, or the X Games or golf or soccer.

But the greed factor worries him. If Snyder and Jones are successful in limiting the amount of revenue that is shared, "it would be the end of the party," he said. "Going it alone," Modell said, "is death."

THAT OTHER FOOTBALL?

MacCambridge said in the short term, pro football will remain No. 1. But in the long term - 50 to 75 years - he predicts it will be overtaken through no fault of its own.

"As the population patterns change throughout the next century and we become [a more diverse] society, I think one of the sports that is going to eventually challenge pro football some day is soccer," said MacCambridge, who acknowledged that he was in the minority in this thinking.

"In terms of broad strokes and long term, I can see soccer being a lot more popular in this country at the middle of this century than it is right now."

Madden doesn't see anything that can challenge the NFL. But as he flipped through his cable stations recently and got up to Channel 565, he realized that

change was inevitable.

"You just watch young people today, they can't sit there for a long time and just watch a game," he said. "They're not going to be satisfied just watching. I think they're going to be able to choose the angles they watch from, and pick plays.

"Can [the NFL] stay up against all the competition and all the things that are going to be coming through that television and that computer and that Internet? I believe that it can because there are a lot of smart people who keep adjusting and adapting. They realize it's going to change and as it changes they'd better change with it.

"And if they're really smart, they'll be ahead of it."