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THE ALL-STAR GAME: GOOD WHILE IT LASTED (42 YEARS)

By William N. Wallace

It was probably the foremost sports promotion ever --- in terms of enthusiasm and endurance. Born of hokum to enhance a world's fair and a newspaper, the College All-Star Game had a life of 42 years, much of it glamorous.

And then sudden death, victim of a 30-minute rainstorm ending a lengthy illness.

Recognizing the intangible debt that the National Football League owed the Chicago Tribune for inventing and staging this event, Commissioner Pete Rozelle insisted the annual August amusement continue well past its zenith. The actuaries on both sides, NFL and newspaper, had wanted it over and out. But history persevered.

The concept was catchy. Which was the better --- a team of top players from well-established college football or the champion of the cruder commercial league, the NFL? In 1934 no one knew.

Enter Arch Ward. He was ostensibly the sports editor of the Chicago Tribune --- the self-proclaimed "Worlds Greatest Newspaper" --- but in reality a brilliant impresario.

The busy fellow had a daily notes column in the paper titled "In the Wake of The News," which most of the time was written by someone else but under Ward's by-line. No one complained.

In 1933 the city had put on a world's fair entitled "A Century of Progress." It was successful enough that the fair was extended into the next year.

As one of the 1933 features, Ward had persuaded major league baseball to stage an all-star game between the best performers of the American and National Leagues and the exhibition was played at Comiskey Park.

It went well and the natural extension then was a football game.

George Halas, coach and majority owner of the hometown Bears, the 1933 NFL champions, was as promotion minded as Ward and he eagerly went along. Pro football, in 1934, had no stature comparable to college football and so this was viewed as a coup for the professionals.

Ward would have the fans vote for who would be the All-Stars and who would coach them. The Tribune, with its considerable clout, lined up newspapers across the country to help with the voting (by mail) and there were 165,000 ballots the first time out. (The total jumped to 737,000 in 1935.)

How do I know? Because it says so in the book, "Football's Stars of Summer: A History of the College All-Star Football Game Series of 1934-1976," by Raymond Schmidt.

The author is our major domo of the College Football Historical Society and this book is a treasure.

All the names are there, Hunk Anderson to Bob Zuppke.

The first game had a pleasing attendance of 79,433 at Soldier Field and 120 press credentials were issued. And the result, a 0-0 tie, left the good question unanswered --- who's better, the college kids or the pros?

So let's play it again, in 1935. The Bears, even though no longer the NFL reigning champion, would come back and Ward knew he was on to something. So did the Tribune with its "Charities" now the sponsor.

Before a crowd of 77,450 the Bears won the second game, 5-0. Like the first one it was no thriller.

One of the 43 chosen stars, guard Herman (Gunny) Gundlach of Harvard, told me years later that the All-Stars could have won the game if the coaches had used the right players. It's likely similar beefs were common down through the years.

For awhile the game was competitive, the All-Stars winning seven and tying two of the first 22 through 1955, always against the previous season's NFL championship team. However they lost all but one of the last 17.

The crowds dwindled even though the Tribune Charities gave away tickets like confetti. The media coverage held up because the sportswriters from all over loved to come to Chicago for All-Star week.

There were the annual conventions of the writers and the friendly college publicist groups; the NFL's lavish party, never-closing night spots.

At nearby Evanston, where the All-Stars assembled, the pre-game stories were easy to come by.

The balloting having disappeared, the stars were negotiated-selected now by volunteer coaches such as hall-of-famers Curly Lambeau, Otto Graham, Willie Davis, John McKay. These admirable men were "paying back" the sport they adored.

By the 1970's trouble had loomed. The player agent, a newcomer to the mix, was corralling college football's best players who had done well in the NFL spring draft. These were the logical All-Stars. The first-time bonuses/salaries for the neophyte rookies were escalating big-time.

Their agents were whispering to the lads that they should "take it easy" lest they get hurt; that they really did not need the College All-Star game. So some began to skip it and others to shame it.

Here had been a memorable moment --- one molding friendships forever for forty football guys from all over.

Money had now made that all mud.

The desecration came clear to me one time when I, a reporter in desperate search of a midweek story, went out to Evanston to pal around. There was the classy Orrington Hotel, where the Tribune Charities put up their guests, the athletes, in splendor most had never known before.

One cat told me that the bed check was a farce; that the favored exit was a window at a ground-floor suite. From there one easily hit the street and went "downtown," probably to Chicago's active Rush Street.

The thought occurred to me years after that it might first have been named the Roger Staubach suite, later the Deion Sanders suite.

The end. July 23, 1976. The mighty Pittsburgh Steelers vs. the lambs, the All-Stars.

Arch Ward is long gone. The esteemed Cooper Rollow, my friend, is the Tribune sports editor and allegedly in command of the event.

The gigantic old but delicious Soldier Field is 2/3's full. The game is sluggish, the Steelers toying with the All-Stars. The Midwest summer weather report ominous.

Rain comes lightly by halftime and then heavily as the sides resume play. Next a torrential downpour, limited visibility as to field markers. The officials stop the game. A brief pause possibly until the rain eases.

The two teams go to their locker spaces beneath the stands. So do Chicago's finest, the police with

the famous/familiar black-white checkered wrap-around emblem on their caps.

The wind/rain does abate. Dozens of youths amid the crowd rush the empty field and roar about, splash, splash.

Rollow tries to get the game back. The teams will play when the officials call them back. But the officials cannot let the game resume until the police clear the field of the kid clowns.

I am up in the press box. Down on the field, in blue blazer, khakis, memorable white summer shoes, is tall admirable Rollow, urging the police to come out from their hidden caverns beneath the huge old

stadium. And do their duty. Surely the powerful Chicago Tribune will prevail.

It does not. Chicago's finest squat. Rollow has to cave. So do the game officials, the teams, the players, the wet spectators, Pete Rozelle, the works.

It's over.

NOTE: William N. (Bill) Wallace is a retired sportswriter in Westport, CT. and a long-time CFHS member. He wrote about college football for New York newspapers for 50 years, the last 35 with the Times, and is the author of "Yales's Ironmen: A Story of Football & Lives In The Decade of The Depression and Beyond."