

The Foolish Club

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In January of 1959, Lamar Hunt, a young and earnest Dallas oilman, decided that what the country needed was a second professional football league. It made sense. Having achieved a truce in Korea, and not yet fully engaged in Vietnam, the United States was between wars.

The idea wasn't exactly new. The All-America Football Conference had perished as recently as 1949, and some of its owners still could be observed, from time to time, fishing for dimes through manhole covers.

But sometimes a great notion clutches us by the ear and won't let go. Hunt had tried for months to purchase the Chicago Cardinals and move them to Dallas. He had been frustrated in his dealings with Cardinals owner Walter Wolfner and his family. Wolfner was willing to sell up to 49 percent and keep the team in Chicago. He made it clear that the franchise had other suitors.

Flying back to Dallas from a final meeting in Miami, the winter home of the Wolfners, Hunt accepted the fact that the Cardinals could not be bought on terms that made sense to him. He sat there, staring out the window of the aircraft, monitoring the engines, when a thought began to take form. "It was like a cartoon with a light bulb flashing on," he says. "I thought, 'Why wouldn't a second league work? There was an American and National League in baseball, why not in football?' All the basic information I needed had been supplied by the Wolfners, in the four or five months we had tried to negotiate a sale. They had dropped the names of Bud Adams in Houston, Max Winter in Minnesota, Bob Howsam in Denver. Here were a bunch of people on the outside wanting in... Why not start a new league?"

Why not, indeed? A year earlier, Hunt had approached the commissioner of the National Football League, Bert Bell, seeking an expansion franchise. The NFL then consisted of 12 teams in 11 cities, and the self-made men who ran the league, men such as George Halas, Art Rooney, the Mara brothers, and George Preston Marshall, were just coming into modest profits after hard years. There was zero sentiment to expand the membership.

Hunt telephoned K.S. (Bud) Adams, flew to Houston, and made his case over dinner. Although both were in oil, the sons of wealthy men, living in cities an hour apart by air, they never had met. They were, however, strangers with a common itch. Adams still was sore over his own failure to land the Cardinals for Houston. "We valued the club at a million and a half bucks," he said. "One percent of a million and a half is, what... let's see... \$15,000. We came that close. I was willing to settle for fifty percent, but the Wolfners didn't want to sell more than forty-nine and the deal fell through."

Adams told Hunt to count him in. There were now two.

They could not have been a less likely pair, as revolutionaries go. Hunt was what some would call a contradiction in terms: a modest Texan. He was shy, quiet, and frugal, in appearance almost a ringer for Wally Cox, then the star of a television series called "Mr. Peepers." Everything about him seemed to deny his status as one of the sons of H.L. Hunt, whose fortune was beyond calculation.

Lamar, then 27, had majored in geology at Southern Methodist University; he had tried out for the football team and was a fourth stringer behind three ends who made it to the pros. One of them, Willard Dewveall, jumped from the Chicago Bears to Houston when the signing war broke out.

Compared to Lamar Hunt, and possibly to anyone else, Kenneth S. (Bud) Adams was a robust character, edging up to flamboyant. He wore full-length leather coats when hardly anyone else did outside of the Wehrmacht. He was an overachiever: Culver Military Academy, Menlo (California) Junior College, Notre Dame, and Kansas. He was a blocking back in college and a Naval officer in the Pacific during World War II.

From Texas, Hunt went forth across the land, if not exactly on a mission for God, at least persuaded that his cause was just. "I felt it was important that Houston and Dallas had a rivalry," he recalls. "From that point on I was trying to recruit people. I went to Denver and Minneapolis. Nobody turned us down. So now we had four cities. The original thought was to field a six-team league and include New York and Los Angeles. You needed them from an image standpoint. Television wasn't that big a deal then."

Nothing about the new league--what there was of it--had yet leaked to the public. Hunt quietly dispatched an emissary to Bert Bell. His choice was Davey O'Brien, a legend in Texas football circles--an

All-America quarterback at TCU (in 1938), close friend of Sammy Baugh, and a starter with the Philadelphia Eagles despite his size-5 feet 8, 155 pounds.

"I sent Davey to Bert Bell," Hunt says, "to inform him there was going to be a new league and that we wanted him to be the commissioner of both. I told myself I didn't want to go into this if it meant some kind of battle. Of course, this was one of the more naive thoughts in the history of sports."

O'Brien brought back Bert Bell's regrets. Bell did not regard a new league as feasible, but he wished them luck.

"I was still pondering what our next step should be," Hunt says, "when Bell called. He had to appear in Washington on July 28 to testify before Congress. A committee was holding hearings on pro football, looking into antitrust violations, into monopolies, and Bell wanted permission to mention our league. I'm sure he felt it would be helpful to him if he could. I agreed, but asked that he not mention any names or cities. I flew up to Washington and sat there in the back of the audience and the news created an incredible stir. Bell was a colorful guy and I still remember his testimony.

"Right off, Bell said, 'I want to tell you fellows about this new league. I can't tell you any of the details, but there are going to be eight or nine cities.'

"At that point no one had put up a penny and I had no commitments from anybody in New York or Los Angeles. But Bert Bell, the NFL commissioner, had announced it, had said we were in business."

On August 2, his birthday, Hunt flew to Houston, and the next day the American Football League held its first press conference in the basement office of Bud Adams's oil company. That description hardly does justice to Adams's office, one of the biggest in a business known for offices the size of football fields. It is an underground-some would say a subterranean-office, complete with barbecue pit, lily pond, and a desk as long as a bowling alley. Hunt and Adams were revealed as the first two franchise holders in the new league. Lamar assured the 30 sportswriters in attendance that the others would be identified shortly.

Within two weeks, Hunt had lined up four other owners. Each had agreed to contribute \$25,000 to the league's bank account and to post a performance bond of \$100,000. They held their first formal meeting in Chicago on August 14.

The original owners, men of assorted distinction, were:

In Denver, Bob Howsam, who was a respected operator of a minor league baseball team and stadium.

In Minneapolis, Max Winter, the president and general manager of the pro basketball Lakers, and another frustrated bidder for the Chicago Cardinals. His group soon would create a crisis by defecting to the NFL.

In Los Angeles, Barron Hilton, of the hotel family, who once had Zsa Zsa Gabor for a stepmother and Elizabeth Taylor as a sister-in-law.

In New York, Harry Wismer, the jolly sportscaster whose voice was known to millions.

Buffalo became the seventh member, the franchise going to Ralph Wilson, who made his money in trucking and insurance. Wilson lived in Detroit and wanted to own a team in Miami, where he kept a winter home. He was blocked there by the Orange Bowl people, who felt they owed it to the college game to keep the Hessians out.

Boston completed the lineup, or so they thought, with ownership going to William J. (Billy) Sullivan, who had been coach Frank Leahy's publicity director at Boston College and at Notre Dame.

Alas, at a meeting in Minneapolis on November 22, the first time all eight teams had been assembled, where the league's first draft would be held the next day, Max Winter announced that his group was pulling out. They had accepted a franchise in the National Football League. In an obvious power play, the NFL had expanded into Dallas and Minneapolis. The scene that took place that day was wild and stormy. Winter and his partners still were in the meeting when Wismer burst into the room carrying an armload of local newspapers, heralding the arrival of the NFL.

Sullivan recalls wondering if he had spent a lifetime of scrambling and scratching to climb aboard a sinking ship. He was proud of the fact that he was the only man in the room who could not be described as "independently wealthy." Adds Sullivan: "Or, for that matter, even dependently wealthy. At the time I had \$8,000 to my name, not all of it in cash. I had hustled around to come up with the \$25,000 the league required.

"I had tried for two years to get a franchise in the NFL.

I visited Bert Bell and was told there was a chance one of the teams might transfer. Everyone knew it was the Chicago Cardinals. Bell encouraged me to go out and raise the money.

"In October, I was in my car on a Sunday, listening to an NFL game, and I heard Bert Bell had dropped dead from a heart attack while watching the Eagles and the Steelers in Philadelphia. I observed the proper amount of mourning, then called the Maras in New York. I knew the family [which owned the New York Giants franchise in the NFL].

"I made an appointment with Tim Mara [the Giants' founder]. At La Guardia Airport I called the Giants' offices to say I was going to be late. His secretary told me not to hurry. Tim had died the night before.

"I went to see Jack Mara, the eldest of Tim's sons. I asked him what he thought of my chances of getting an NFL franchise. He said slim and none. I told Jack, in that case, I was going to get a team in the AFL. He said, 'You've got to be an idiot. It will never get off the ground.'

"So I walked into the meeting in Minneapolis and I sat down next to a mild-looking man who turns out to be Lamar Hunt. He was not at all what I pictured. He has one shoe up on the table and there is a hole in the bottom of it. He couldn't help but notice that I was staring at it. He raises his other leg and crosses his ankle and this shoe has a hole in it, too. He looks at me and says, 'I do twice as well as Adlai.' There had been a famous photograph of [Democratic Presidential candidate] Adlai Stevenson during the 1952 election with a hole in one shoe. I wasn't sure how to take it. Stevenson had lost in a landslide."

In January, the franchise abandoned by the Minneapolis group was relocated in Oakland, where eight investors included two who would play continuing roles, Wayne Valley and the late Ed McGah.

The members of the fledgling league called themselves--not right away, but later, when it was safe to look back--The Foolish Club.

"It was actually Wayne Valley who gave us the name," Hunt says. "I sort of picked up on it. I was an amateur photographer then and had taken some color pictures of several games [during the 1960 season]. I had a montage of eight photographs, each three by five, showing each team in action, and I sent them out as Christmas gifts one year. At the top was hand-lettered the phrase, 'The Foolish Club.'"

Of all the original owners, Harry Wismer clearly was the best known and the hardest pressed. He had to fight the Giants in New York, and he had to do so with tight money and a personal style that can best be described as blustery.

A plump, engaging man, Wismer did not have an office as big as a football field. In the early days, the staff of the New York Titans worked out of Wismer's apartment. The AFL held one of its first meetings there, and the newness of the members, their wariness toward one another, was reflected in the fact that Wismer had the room bugged.

Wismer had a slightly paranoid streak. When he learned that Hunt and Adams were meeting with a representative of the NFL on a visit to New York, he had a private detective follow them. But the Texans held firm, and resisted overtures to merge with NFL groups in their cities. Wismer had no apology to offer. "I had to make sure they wouldn't fold," he said. "I don't have a private fortune behind me. I'm in this up to my neck."

In the early years, the pressure was constant and the reactions unpredictable. At one meeting, Wayne Valley got into a fist fight with another owner. At the next meeting, there were eight sets of boxing gloves on the table.

Yet there developed a bonding, a fellowship, that may have been unique in professional sports. It carried them over many a hump, and through a river of red ink, and is reflected today in the fact that half of the original eight owners--Hunt, Adams, Wilson, and Sullivan--still control their teams. Matter of fact, so does Max Winter. Barron Hilton remains a stockholder in the Chargers, and Ed McGah was a general partner in the Raiders until his death last September.

Adams remembers flying into New York with the Oilers, in one of those first few madhouse seasons, and learning that Wismer could no longer pay his bills.

It is safe to say that Harry talked a better game than his team played. The Titans were in deep trouble from the start, drawing as few as 2,000 customers to the decrepit-now extinct-Polo Grounds. On game days television crews had to use canned cheers to provide crowd noise.

After the game, Adams dropped by Wismer's office upstairs at the stadium. "The heat was turned off," he recalls. "It was cold and drafty and the floor was uncarpeted. I stood there in my overcoat and I reached into my pocket and handed Harry \$10,000 in cash. Ten \$1,000 bills. I told him I wanted the draft rights to a defensive back from LSU. I didn't want it to seem like a gift, so I made the offer as a business deal. I knew Harry needed the money."

Adams also knew that he had as little chance of signing the player as Wismer did of getting free heat from the gas company. The player, Jerry Stovall, already was under contract to St. Louis.

Why cash?

"Had to," Adams says. "If I had given Wismer a check, and he had run it through his bank, creditors would have pounced on it. I wanted him to use the money whatever way he needed. Harry could be very dramatic. He looked at me and said, 'The ship is sinking into the water, and you are the only one who has come forward to help.' Then he put his arms around me and started to cry."

Wismer also is the central character in what Lamar Hunt remembers as one of the low spots in the new league's first years. "We [the Dallas Texans] were the first visiting team in New York to have its check bounce," he says. "Harry was nice enough to tell me. We went out to dinner after the game and he asked me to hold the check, that it wasn't any good."

"I felt like I had been punched in the stomach. I also felt terrible for Wismer. When Sonny Werblin announced he was going to buy the Titans [in 1963], I thought it was the dumbest thing I had ever heard. I wanted to move the franchise."

"But that was the turning point for the league, when Sonny got involved and Shea Stadium was built and the Titans became the Jets. They averaged 48,000 a game [in 1964] the year before Joe Namath came in. People think Namath was the key. He helped. But it was Sonny's showmanship, and the income generated from our TV contract and the ticket sales that enabled Sonny to say, 'It's worth it to me to pay \$400,000 for Joe Namath.'"

When Werblin and his associates took over, they celebrated the new era by treating the players and their families to a Thanksgiving Day party, with all the trimmings. At the buffet table, Werblin encountered linebacker Larry Grantham.

Half-kidding, Werblin said, "Well, Larry, I guess under Wismer you didn't have any Thanksgiving parties."

"Mr. Werblin," said Grantham, "under Wismer we didn't have Thanksgiving."

Times were not much easier around the rest of the league as the AFL struggled for recognition and a toehold in the marketplace. Ralph Wilson recalls a preseason game between Buffalo and Denver in Rochester. The players had to dress in the boiler room below the high school gym, because the principal didn't want the pros using the locker room.

Today it is Wilson's proud boast that, "I never thought about throwing in the towel, never considered selling the team. Of course, in the first three years we lost \$1.4 million. There were times when I reminded myself I used to pay five dollars for a ticket to the Lions' games and I enjoyed myself and had no headaches. I would ask myself what I was doing here. The answer was, dumb luck."

Lamar Hunt marvels at where his airborne idea has led, the one he began to nurture on a flight from a failed meeting in Miami in 1959. It is a sad irony that his team, the Dallas Texans, wound up in Kansas City in 1963, having lost its hometown shootout with the NFL Cowboys. But Lamar has few regrets. The league he founded endured on its own for 10 seasons, touching off an explosion in sports that spread across the land. In 1970, The Foolish Club, and its newer members, moved under the NFL roof and into an era of bigness--stadiums, crowds, television monies, salaries, and problems.

Earlier, the merger had created the showcase event in all sports, the Super Bowl--a name, coincidentally, suggested by Lamar Hunt's daughter.

The American Football Conference, son of AFL, will celebrate its twenty-fifth year as a going concern in 1984. Hunt thinks back and says, "We were lucky in our timing, extremely fortunate from a TV standpoint that the game is so well suited for this medium."

"Another reason we succeeded was we had the common sense or the luck, whatever, to adopt a policy of building our own stars. If, in 1960, we had tried to raid the NFL we would have failed. We would have had to pay such enormous salaries we could not have made it. The only case I can remember of a veteran jumping was Willard Dewveall, who played out his option in Chicago and signed with Houston."

"We had the right product at the right time. We helped make pro football a national game. You have to remember, the NFL had twelve teams then, two on the West Coast. We opened the gates and the battle caught public imagination."

"People forget how hard it was for a college player to make it. We were eight teams out of twenty, so we were taking forty percent of the players. Two years before the AFL was formed, the Giants cut Buddy Dial, their number-two draft choice. Paul Brown told me that for three years in a row, when he was coaching the Cleveland Browns in their heyday, they did not have a rookie make their roster."

"So the talent was there. The cities were there. And we were fortunate in getting owners who were willing to stay committed to it. Wismer's group was the only dropout. We have had continuity. When you look at what has happened over the last twenty-five years, that is the most amazing thing."

Billy Sullivan may be the best example of how The Foolish Club outsmarted time and fate. In 1974, the Patriots' shareholders voted Sullivan out as president of the club. Over the next two years, Sullivan and his family bought out every stockholder, every share, and gained 100 percent control of the club, including Schaefer Stadium (which was renamed Sullivan Stadium in June of this year).

"That shows you how smart I am," he says, laughing. "I owned the whole thing for \$25,000, and it cost me \$11 million to get it back."