

The “Tom Thumb” Game: Bears vs. Spartans, 1932

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Several championship games stand as landmarks on the topography of the National Football League, marking at once precedential play and the fans' perception of their significance. In the championship game of 1940 between the Chicago Bears and the Washington Redskins, the Bears, employing a refurbished T-formation, demolished the Redskins 73–0. Demonstrating finesse and power, consequently the T rapidly supplanted the single-wing as the dominant offensive formation in professional football (and in intercollegiate and high school football).¹ Nearly two decades later, in 1958, the New York Giants and the Baltimore Colts met for the league title, with thirty million fans transfixed in front of television screens as Johnny Unitas led the Colts to a dramatic victory in the first overtime championship game in the history of the NFL. The game gave a massive momentum to professional football, so much so that it soon rivaled baseball as the national game.² Memorably important, too, was the New York Jets-Baltimore Colts meeting for the league championship in 1969. The Jets had been a charter franchise of the American Football League, the new league organized in 1959 that had challenged the dominion of the NFL, until the two leagues merged in 1966 as the National Football League, the teams of the AFL composing the American Football Conference, the teams of the senior league the National Football Conference. In the first two playoffs for the league title, the “Super Bowls,” between the champions of the conferences, the teams of the National Conference won convincingly, the American teams appearing as half-brothers hardly worthy of respect. Then in 1969, with Joe Namath, their colorful quarterback promising victory, the Jets of the American Conference defeated the Colts, almost instantly giving the fledgling conference credibility and the entire league greater integrity.³ But for significance—and peculiarity—none of these

1. By the end of the 1940s, 250 of 350 collegiate teams were using the T. All but one team in the National Football League had installed it. By the 1970s, only a few colleges here and there, appearing almost as fossiliferous pieces in a museum, were running from other formations. It was an astonishing turnaround in American sports history. As late as 1940, Fielding Yost, one of the “grand old men” of American football, had declared that “there are no longer any distinctive systems in football” and that “there was only one formation that's any good and it is the single wing.” For an explanation of the T of 1940 and its influence, see Ron Fimrite, “A Melding of Men suited to a T,” *Sports Illustrated*, 47 (September 5, 1977), 90–100.

2. Benjamin G. Rader, *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Spectators* (Englewood Cliffs, 1983), 255.

3. *Ibid.*, 258.

games equaled the title game of 1932 between the Chicago Bears and the Portsmouth Spartans.

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The Bears came into the game seeking to restore its sheen as one of the pioneer teams and national champions of professional football. Organized in 1920 by George Halas as the Decatur Staleys for his employer, A. E. Staley, owner of the Staley Starch Company in Decatur, the Staleys claimed the first championship of the American Professional Football Association that year.⁴ The next year, Staley, facing a financial crisis, turned the Staleys over to Halas, who moved the team to Chicago as the Chicago Staleys.⁵ Relying primarily on the T. Halas, now a co-owner, along with Ed “Dutch” Sternaman, led the Staleys to the league championship. In 1922, he persuaded owners to change the name of their league to the National Football League and renamed his team the Bears. Through the remainder of the decade, the Bears were a source of some stability in the league as franchises were coming and going through a revolving door of low entrance fees, more than thirty cities entering and exiting the NFL in the decade. Halas gave the Bears and professional football unaccustomed national attention, indeed notoriety, in 1925 when he signed Red Grange to a contract one day after Grange played his last game for the University of Illinois: Grange played out the season for the Bears and on a nineteen-game barnstorming tour, the “Grange Tour,” in the east, south, and west that brought out large crowds everywhere. Halas and Sternaman realized a profit from the tour, as they did in every Season’s play in the decade.

The Bears were doing reasonably well on the field, of course. From 1922 through 1927, they finished second five times and third once in a league numbering as many as twenty-two teams. Late in the decade, though, they faltered, winning but seven of thirteen games in league play in 1928 and but four of fifteen games in 1929 when they finished ninth. Their decline stemmed from several interrelated factors. As the only NFL team using the T, the Bears had, by its singularity, some advantage over defenses usually facing the single-wing. But Halas ran a T devoid of deception. He had the line, except for the ends who were split a yard from the tackles, and the backfield tightly spaced, a formation designed to drive ahead. As he put it, the “objective then was power, power, power. Power in a tight backfield. Power in a tight line.”⁶ As the decade wore on, defenses fathomed the T and ridiculed it as an anachronism. An aging Bears’ lineup rendered it even creakier. Moreover, Halas and Sternaman were squabbling over offensive strategy, Halas arguing for an “open” game, Sternaman for

4. George Vass, *George Halas and the Chicago Bears* (Chicago, 1971), 26–35; *Halas by Halas: The Autobiography of George Halas* (New York, 1979), 54–66. “Claimed” is probably the right word. As one biographer has noted, the Akron Indians had a better record than the Staleys and played the Staleys to a scoreless tie in a game for the national championship. See Vass, 34. In his autobiography, Halas suggested that because the Staleys were scored on but once in the season, they could claim the championship. *Halas by Halas*, 66.

5. Vass, 36; *Halas by Halas*, 70.

6. *Halas by Halas*, 137.

a “tight” game. One player remembered that “we had two offenses, one devised by George and one by Dutch. Nobody knew what to expect on any play. People were running into each other on the field.”⁷ Later, Halas admitted that the two men were “miscoaching.”⁸

Finally, they agreed to turn over the coaching to a new man, Ralph Jones, who, probably more than any other tactician in the game, modernized the T. An assistant coach under Bob Zuppke when Halas played at the University of Illinois, Jones had gone to Lake Forest College near Chicago as head coach midway in the 1920s and there began to experiment with the T. For the Bears, Jones developed a split T spreading the defense and creating in it cavities vulnerable to attack. He split the ends two to five yards from the tackles, the tackles, guards, and center a yard from one another and moved the backs two to three yards from one another.⁹ He then introduced his distinctive signature to the T: the man-in-motion. As the quarterback awaited the snap from center, a half-back ran laterally toward the sideline, able at the snap to take a lateral, block, or receive a pass. A defender following him thus might take himself out of the area becoming the point of attack.¹⁰



Jones had a batch of new players to complement his rehabilitated T. Only seven men who had played for the Bears in 1929 were with them in 1930, among them Red Grange and George Trafton, the long-time center. New players included Bronko Nagurski, a pile-driver of a fullback who was soon performing legendary feats in power-running, and Carl Brumbaugh, who had played for the Portsmouth Spartans in 1929 and had come to the Bears as halfback.¹¹ In the second game in 1930, Grange and Brumbaugh gave the man-in-motion a distinctive and effective twist. As usual Grange ran in motion to the right but then reversed and ran in motion toward the left sideline, opening a gap in the defensive secondary.¹²

The renovated T and fresh talent turned the Bears around. They finished third in the NFL in 1930 with nine wins and four losses and third again in 1931 with eight wins and five losses. Then in 1932, they ended the regular season tied for first with the Portsmouth Spartans with a record of six wins, one loss, and an incredible number of ties, six, a record for a league team. Relative to the number of teams in the league, eight, and the number of games played, forty-seven, the

7. Quoted in Richard Whittingham, *The Chicago Bears: An Illustrated History* (Chicago, 1979), 71.

8. One may read of the “miscoaching” in *Halas by Halas*, 132, 136; *Vass*, 82; and *Whittingham*, 85.

9. Descriptions of Jones’ line spacing vary somewhat. See *Halas by Halas*, 139; and *Vass*, 85.

10. A brief but useful explanation of the man-in-motion appears in Harold Claassen, *The History of Professional Football* (Englewood Cliffs, 1963), 355–356.

11. Howard Roberts, *The Chicago Bears* (New York, 1947), 81.

12. For a description of what the reverse did initially, see *Halas by Halas*, 140; and *Vass*, 86.

ten tie games played by all teams also set a record (in 1929 twelve teams played ten ties out of seventy games). Commonplace, the ties derived largely from the low scoring of the period. Defenses generally contained offenses, which had not integrated "wide-open" play and passing into their attacks.¹³ And from 1930 through 1932, low scoring became even lower, the average points a game falling from about twenty to sixteen.¹⁴ Probably more than any other factor, the movement of the goalposts late in the 1920s to the end lines accounted for the slippage.¹⁵

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Unlike the Bears, the Portsmouth Spartans were "Johnny-come-latelies" in the NFL. Portsmouth, a city of about 30,000 on the Ohio River, had seen a succession of semi-professional and professional teams in the 1920s, the Smoke House, the Shoe-Steels, the Presidents, compete with other independent teams in the Tri-state area, a segment of the Ohio Valley where Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia have nearly coterminous boundaries. None of the teams representing Portsmouth had been able to play on even terms with the Ironton Tanks, the dominant team in the valley through nearly all the 1920s.

Weary of the Tanks' domination, made more galling because Ironton was only half the size of their city, a group of business and professional men organized the Portsmouth Football Association in 1928, resolving "to turn the town upside down with a really good football team."¹⁶ The association named the team the Spartans, an invocation of ancient valor and prowess.¹⁷ Though not dramatically changing the personnel of the squad known as the Shoe-Steels in 1927 (coached by Jim Thorpe), the association fielded a good team in 1928: the Spartans won nine games, lost three, one to the Tanks, and tied two, both with the Tanks.¹⁸

13. The curator of the Pro Football Hall of Fame believes that defensive play in the period was improving more rapidly than offensive play. Interview (telephone) by Carl Becker with Joe Horrigan, Curator, the Pro Football Hall of Fame, November 29, 1994. Halas saw wide-open play resulting in higher scoring as the primary way to reduce the number of ties, *Whittingham*, 86.

14. I derived these figures from a survey of scores reported in the *New York Times*. Admittedly, they do not include every league game played: but they do represent about 80 percent of the game, played in these years. Even with their improved offense, the Bears averaged only eleven points a game in 1932. The departure of several very weak teams from the NFL in 1931 and 1932 may have had some slight effect in the reduction of scoring: the Minneapolis Red Jackets, no longer in the league, gave up thirty-four points in one game in 1930; and the Frankford Yellowjackets, also gone, yielded fifty-three points in one game that year. The eight teams in 1932 probably had a greater degree of parity in defenses than those in 1930.

15. According to records at the Pro Football Hall of Fame, the change occurred in 1927. The same year appears in David S. Neft, *et al.*, *Pro Football: The Early Years* (New York, 1978), 13. But in his autobiography, Halas indicated that the year was 1930. *Halas by Halas*, 170. Evidently he was wrong. Thus the argument on the movement of the goal posts loses some of its strength. The slight reduction of the short axis of the football in 1929 and the slight lengthening of the hall in 1931 may have adversely affected drop-kicking.

16. *Portsmouth Times*, August 28, 1928.

17. The association conducted a city-wide contest to find a name for the team. Besides suggesting valor, the name Spartans corresponded with the name of the high school team in Portsmouth, the Trojans, but was not used by any business firm in the city. *Portsmouth Times*, September 7, 1928.

18. One may read a brief history of the Spartans in C. Robert Barnett. *The Spartans and the Tanks* (n. p., 1983), 19ff.

The next year, scouring midwestern and southern colleges for new players, the association brought some truly outstanding players to Portsmouth. Roy "Father" Lumpkin, a picaresque figure coming from Georgia Tech, was a bruising running and blocking fullback. Complementing Lumpkin in the backfield was Brumbaugh, the "Florida Kid," a speedy and shifty halfback who had finished second nationally in collegiate scoring at the University of Florida in 1928. Among the new linemen were Claire Randolph, a mobile center out of Indiana University, and Ernie Jessen, a big tackle from the University of Iowa. Also from Iowa was the coach, Harold Griffin, a hulk of a tackle. Of the thirty-three men who had been with the Spartans at one time or another in 1928, nine had no experience playing in intercollegiate football; of the thirty-one with the Spartans in 1930, only one had not played for a college or university.¹⁹ Buoyed by the new men, the Spartans gave Portsmouth supremacy in Tri-state football. After losing to the Green Bay Packers in their opening game and to the Tanks in the fourth game, the Spartans tied a game and then won nine in a row, defeating the Tanks twice, the second time by a score of 38-0, the worst defeat ever suffered by the Tanks.

Success heady wine, the association, reorganizing as the Portsmouth National Football Corporation, with Harry Snyder, a local contractor, serving as president, sought and received a franchise in the NFL in 1930, the last "small-town" franchise granted by the league. The corporation strengthened the roster for the first season in the "big" league, signing at least six men who often appeared in the starting lineup in 1930, among them five linemen.²⁰ Undefeated in their first five league games, the Spartans could win but one more game, finishing, though, with a respectable record of five wins, six losses, and three ties. One of their victories was over the Bears.

Believing that Griffin had given the team inconsistent and ineffective direction, the corporation hired a new mentor in 1931, George "Potsy" Clark, who had coached at the University of Kansas and Butler University. Again management, with Clark playing a decisive role, effected a wholesale change in personnel. Only six or seven men who had been with the Spartans in 1930 appeared on the roster at any time in 1931; and at times, the starting lineup had but one carry-over. Two of the new halfbacks were remarkable players. Glenn Presnell, who had played for the University of Nebraska and the Tanks, was an excellent runner, passer, and kicker and wits a good defensive back.²¹ A rookie from Colorado College, Earl "Dutch" Clark, almost immediately became one of the premier running backs in the league.²² Maury Bodenger, Harry Ebding, and Grover "Ox" Emerson all were first-rate linemen. With Clark and Presnell leading

19. I derived these figures from a review of Bob Gill, "Rosters of the Ashland Armcos, Ironton Tanks, and Portsmouth Spartans, 1926-1930." (Typescript in my possession).

20. *Ibid.*

21. For an account of Presnell with the Tanks, see C. Robert Barnett and Linda Terhune, "When the Tanks Were Tops," *River Cities Monthly*, 1 (September, 1979), 14-20.

22. Clark is the subject of an essay in Myron Cope, *The Game That Was* (New York, 1979), 83ff.

the way. the Spartans became serious contenders for the league title in 1931, winning eleven games and losing but three. Had Green Bay been willing to meet Portsmouth in the final game of the season as tentatively scheduled earlier in the year, the Spartans could have tied the Packers and then won the championship in a playoff game.²³

The Spartans of 1932, their lineup essentially the same as in 1931, continued to win, a quirky schedule and computation of the standings placing them in a tie with the Bears at the end of the regular season. In league play, the Spartans won six, lost one, and tied four; the Bears won six, lost one, and tied six. Since ties did not count in the record, the small-town team finished in a tie with the great metropolitan team. Now the mudsill was as high as the mountain.

The stage was ready for peculiarity: for an hourly vigil over weather; for a site of play requiring jerry-built rules; for a tense game decided by a controversial play. Together, these elements profoundly affected the course of professional football.

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Probably even before the end of the regular season, Halas and Snyder had agreed to a playoff game for the championship on Sunday immediately following conclusion of the schedule. Never before in the league's history had teams ended scheduled games in a tie, but the owners had always "understood" that a playoff game would follow should that happen.²⁴ Whatever the rules or precedents, both clubs needed a good payoff game. The Bears, turning a profit year-in, year-out, were in the red in 1932 by \$18,000 as the Great Depression cut attendance throughout the league. Even before the close of the season in 1931, the Spartans had been unable to meet their payroll, and a subsequent subscription sale of corporate stock and reorganization of the corporation still left them facing a deficit.²⁵ Apparently no one seriously questioned the choice of Chicago as the host of the game. Obviously the city provided a tremendously larger market than did Portsmouth, and the Bears had much greater prestige than the Spartans. Nonetheless, Spartan players demanded that Halas post a bond assuring each a payment of \$100 for the game.²⁶ Perhaps Portsmouth, which had drawn crowds as large as 15,000, would have been as satisfactory as Chicago for location of the game, especially in view of the problems in staging the game there.

The urgent question was the site of the game in Chicago. In the season's final game against archrival Green Bay, a crucial game that would determine

23. One may follow the course of the dispute over this proposed game in several issues of the *Portsmouth Times*: "Green Bay Game 'Up in Air': Snyder Explains Situation," December 2, 1931; "Green Bay 'Pikers': 'Cheese Champs.'" December 8, 1930; "Green Bay Afraid," December 8, 1931.

24. Interview (telephone) by Carl Becker with Joe Horrigan, January 4, 1994.

25. See the following articles in the *Portsmouth Times*: "Fans Rallying to Save Spartans for City," December 18, 1931; "Renew Drive For Subscriptions To Save Spartans," December 21, 1931; "Save Spartans Drive To Be Launched January 12, 1932," January 3, 1932; "Spartan Solicitors Are Still At Work," June 16, 1932.

26. "Dutch Clark Unable to Play in Bears Game," *Portsmouth Times*, December 13, 1932. Glenn Presnell, who has a vivid memory of circumstances surrounding the game, does not recall that the Spartans made such a demand. Interview (telephone) by Carl Becker with Glenn Presnell, November 29, 1994.

where they would finish in the standings, the Bears, playing on a snow-swept frozen field with a temperature at zero, drew only 5,000 spectators at Wrigley Field, Snow continued in the hours after the game, and the temperature remained at an arctic level. Halas, fearing that again only a small crowd would brave the elements, proposed that should the frigid weather continue the game be moved indoors, to the Chicago Stadium, where the Bears and the Chicago Cardinals had played an exhibition game in 1930. Joe Carr, president of the league, and Harry Snyder gave their consent to the proposal; and Bill Veeck, Sr., owner of Wrigley Field, agreed to release the Bears from a contract requiring them to play all home games at Wrigley Field.²⁷ As late as Wednesday, a ground crew was preparing Wrigley Field for the game.²⁸ Then on Thursday, three days before the game, Halas reached a final decision "Huddling" with Clark, who had arrived in Chicago with the Spartans, and enduring the wintry blasts still striking the city, he decided to go to the stadium.²⁹ According to the Chicago *Tribune*, players on both teams gave their "unanimous" approval to the decision.³⁰

Opened in 1929 on the near west side as a hockey and boxing arena, the Chicago Stadium could accommodate about 16,000 spectators.³¹ Beyond seating capacity, it was hardly a suitable site for a football game. At its greatest length, it was barely eighty yards long, at its width fifty yards. As it turned out, a punt could reach its ceiling rafters, and the cement floor below obviously required some kind of protective cushioning. Fortunately, only a few days before the game, a circus had given a benefit performance for the Salvation Army necessitating the spreading of about six inches of dirt over the floor. Halas trucked in tanbark, wood shavings, and sod to cover the dirt.³² Though affording protection to the players, the dirt was so loose that they could not get traction or quickly change directions while running.

To render the stadium even remotely receptive to football, the Bears and Spartans had to force the field into its inflexible confines. They laid out the field sixty yards from goal line to goal line, with yard markers lined out every five yards, the thirty-yard line becoming in effect the midfield stripe. Surrounding the arena was a twelve-foot wooden fence running straight down the sidelines and in an arc through the corners at the end zones, which thus became half-

27. Howard Roberts, "Bears Play Title Game in Stadium"; Chicago *News* December 15, 1932; Roberts, "Bears to Play Title Game in Stadium," Chicago *News*, December 16, 1932.

28. "Spartan Mentor in Town: Plans to Scout Bears," Chicago *Times*, December 14, 1932; "Presnell to Lead Spartans Attack Against the Bears," Chicago *Times*, December 15, 1932.

29. Roberts, "Bears Play Title Game in Stadium"; Wilfrid Smith, "Bears' Battle With Spartans Moved Indoors," Chicago *Tribune*, December 16, 1932; "To Play Tilt Under Roof," Portsmouth *Times*, December 16, 1932.

30. Smith, "Bears, Spartans Find Stadium Perfect As Grid," Chicago *Tribune*, December 17, 1932.

31. One may read of the various athletic events held at the stadium in Robert Markus, "And, now, the end is near," Chicago *Tribune*, April 10, 1994. Markus refers to the Spartans as the "Clippers."

32. Many contemporary and secondary sources describe the physical preparations for the game. See, for example, Roberts, "Bears to Play Title Game in Stadium"; Barnett, "The Spartans Live On (In Detroit)," *The Coffin Corner*, 2 (October, 1980). 6+; Roberts, *The Chicago Bears*, 92.

moon in their shape. Because the fence directly abutted or even was in the end zone, the goal post—only one went up—was placed on the goal line.³³ Despite the reduction of field to about forty-seven yards in width, the fence was only about fifteen feet from the sidelines.

Obviously the teams had to play under rules dictated by space. Giving Halas, Snyder, and Clark instruction was the Bears-Cardinals game played at the stadium in 1930, a charity contest intended to raise funds for distribution to the unemployed in Cook County.³⁴ Kickoffs in 1930 came from the goal line: now they could come from the ten-yard line. As in 1930, players could not attempt drop-kicks or place-kicks for field goals. In 1930, to make the field theoretically one hundred yards long from goal line to goal line, after a team received a kickoff, it had to move the ball back twenty yards, and after reaching the midfield stripe it had to move it back another twenty yards. The Bears and Spartans set the rule aside.³⁵ Evidently rules in 1930 and 1932 governing punts were about the same. The rafters of the stadium ninety-four feet above the playing surface, Halas and Snyder did not expect punted balls to reach them. In the event that they did, as with touchbacks, the ball would be placed at the ten-yard line. As a matter of fact, during the pre-game practice, a Portsmouth punter struck the organist perched on a rafter with a punt, and during the game Dick Nesbitt of the Bears punted a ball nearly straight up into a rafter.³⁶ The wooden fence along the sidelines called for an improvised rule of lasting import, one not employed in 1930. Ordinarily, following a play the ball was placed where the play ended; and when a play went out-of-bounds, the ball then went to a point one yard from the sidelines. To reduce the danger of players’ colliding with the fence, the stadium rule called for the ball to be moved fifteen yards in-bounds, with the loss of a down, following an out-of-bounds play, thus creating an

33. Lynn Wittenburg, “Spartans Bow To Bears On Tiny Gridiron,” *Portsmouth Times*, December 19, 1932.

34. For explanations of the rules of the charity game, see “Bears And Cards Renew Rivalry in Indoor Charity Game,” *Chicago News*, December 15, 1930; Arch Ward, “Charity Gets \$20,000 If Pro Game Fills Stadium Tonight,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 15, 1930; “Shorter Field, Special Rules, In Tilt Tonight,” *Chicago News* [?], undated clipping in Archives, the Pro Football Hall of Fame; Smith, “10,000 See Bears Win Stadium Game, 9 to 7,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 16, 1930.

35. Probably the confusion attendant to the rule accounted for the decision. Wade Franklin of the *Chicago News* reported that the officials were continually moving the ball in the charity game. Wade Franklin, “Bears Beat Cardinals: 10,000 See Indoor Football Game,” *Chicago News* December 16, 1930. Recalling the game, Marvin McCarthy of the *Chicago Times* asserted that had the rule been used in 1932, the head linesman would have had to take a “head splitting” course in mathematics. Marvin in McCarthy, “This ‘N’ thaT,” *Chicago Times*, December 16, 1932. Writing for the *News*, Howard Roberts recalled the rule as one confusing fans. Roberts, “Bears to Play Title Game in Stadium,” In his history of the Bears, Roberts also noted abandonment of the rule of 1930. *The Chicago Bears*, 92. Years later, though, an annalist of the game stated that officials assessed the offensive team a twenty-yard “penalty” when it reached midfield. The annalist’s name does not appear in his typescript article, “Out of Bounds,” a copy of which I obtained from the Portsmouth Public Library. And in a recent official publication of the NFL, a writer makes the same assertion. “The Tom Thumb Gridiron,” *NFL Exclusive: Official Guide for the NFL Season Ticket Holder* (1944), 45. But in their coverage of the championship game, Roberts and Wilfrid Smith reported no compensatory movement of the ball. Roberts, “Bears Annex Pro Title on Tabloid Grid,” *Chicago News*, December 19, 1932; Smith, “Bears Win, 9–0; Pro Football Champions,” December 19, 1932. And Presnell, who played in the game, never remembered subtractions of yardage to lengthen the field. Interviews by Carl Becker with Glenn Presnell, October 19, 1992, and November 10, 1993.

36. Roberts, “Bears Annex Pro Title On Tabloid Grid.”

imaginary hash-mark.³⁷ No rules could deal with the odor left by the circus. One spectator complained that it “was a little too aromatic, what with the horses and elephants that had traipsed around there a few days before the game.”³⁸ But he could also have noted that he was close to play on the field, that, as one reporter wrote, “it was the difference between sitting ringside at a heavyweight fight or in the last rows of the upper deck. All of the sounds of human beings smashing other human beings were right there and very real.”

The Bears and Spartans equally faced the same rules and conditions. Roberts and a writer for the *Times* thought that as a lighter team the Spartans reduced the advantage that the heavier Bears would have had on a frozen field.³⁹ But the Spartans entered the game under two distinct handicaps. Before the season began, Dutch Clark had accepted the position of head basketball coach at his alma mater, Colorado College, with the understanding that he would take up his duties as soon as the Spartans had played out their schedule. The president of Colorado insisted that Clark meet his contractual obligation; Clark complied and did not come to Chicago. Lumpkin declared, nonetheless, that “we’ll beat them without Clark.” Additionally, because of injuries and expenses, the Spartan management brought only sixteen players to Chicago instead of the twenty-two permitted under league rules. Few substitutes would be available to spell weary players.

On the eve of the game, Roberts saw it prospectively driving professional football in a profound way. The Bears and Spartans, two “great” teams with the “finest” players from the collegiate ranks, could give fans an exciting, well-played game. It would, he said, test Grange’s assumption that large crowds would attend night games.⁴⁰ Like most sports columnists, he believed that the heavier Bears would eventually overpower the Spartans in a high-scoring game, the shortened field giving the offense an advantage over the defense.

The Bears ran from their T, the Spartans from the single-wing, with an unbalanced line to the right, in a tense, hard-fought low-scoring game decided in the end by a controversial play. Defenses, as noted earlier, had been dominating professional football in recent years, scoreless ties and single-touchdown games becoming commonplace. Contrary to Roberts’ prediction, seemingly the compression of the stadium field made the Bears’ and Spartans’ defenses even stronger. Pass receivers had less room in which to maneuver, and the overhanging mezzanine may have inhibited passing. In the first half, the Spartans had at least a slight edge over the Bears. Twice they came close to the Bears’ goal line

37. Contemporary sources stated that the ball came in-bounds fifteen yards. See, for example, Roberts, “Bears Annex Pro Title on Tabloid Grid” and Wittenburg, “Spartans Bow to Bears on Tiny Gridiron.” But two later accounts had the ball coming in ten yards: Rudolph Unger, “In 1932, Bears broke ground indoors,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 10, 1986; and Jim Murray, “It Was Most Noteworthy Game Ever,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 11, 1986. Perhaps Murray relied on Unger.

38. Quoted in Whittington, 82.

39. Roberts, “Bears to Play Title Game in Stadium”; Louis Diamond, “Bears and Spartans Clash For Pro Grid Title Tonight,” *Chicago Times*, December 18, 1932.

40. Roberts, “Spartans And Bears On Edge For Title Game,” *Chicago News*, December 17, 1932.

only to be turned back. Late in the second quarter, they reached the six yard line on fourth down. Over fifty years later, Presnell still regretted but did not lament what happened: "Our favorite play was a fake end run where I would plant my foot and cut off tackle. We ran that on fourth down. Just as the hole opened up. I tried to plant my foot, slipped and fell. If we had scored then, it might have been a different game."⁴¹

The second half saw the Bears wearing the Spartans down but unable to score. Perhaps at this point Halas regretted his failure to push the Spartans harder to accept his proposal earlier in the week to play overtime until a team won the game.⁴² Then five minutes into the fourth quarter. "Ace" Gutowski, the Spartan quarterback threw a pass from deep in Spartan territory. Nesbitt intercepted it and returned it to the seven before a Spartan defender knocked him out of-bounds. On the first play from scrimmage, actually second down because the ball was brought in fifteen yards, Nagurski smashed six yards through the Spartan line, then lost one on third down. The Spartan line massed, expecting Nagurski to charge again bull-like on fourth down. And as before Brumbaugh handed the ball off to Nagurski, who ran forward, but then retreated a step or so, and lobbed a short pass to Grange in the end zone for a touchdown. Potsy Clark stormed on to the field in protest, arguing that Nagurski had not been five yards behind the line of scrimmage when he threw the pass, as required by the rules. Bobby Cahn, the referee, refused to reverse the call, and the touchdown stood.⁴³ The Bears forced a safety later in the quarter and won the game 9-0. Just after the game, Emerson, the excellent Spartan guard, ranted in complaint to sports writers that Nagurski "wasn't five yards back of the line! It was an illegal play! He wasn't five yards back."⁴⁴ Emerson had the same memory of the play more than sixty years later.⁴⁵ John "Popeye" Wager, another Spartan lineman, was still insisting decades later that he had his hands on Nagurski near the line of scrimmage when he passed.⁴⁶ Interesting enough, the sportswriter for the *Portsmouth Times*, who called the contest the "Tom Thumb" game because of the dimensions of the field, took no note of the alleged infraction in his story; and not until late in the week did more Spartan players raise the issue, and then in a muttered fashion.⁴⁷ A few days after the game, the *Portsmouth Times* reported that league officials regarded the Bears and Spartans as co-champions, that they did not view the contest in Chicago as a championship game.⁴⁸ But at their

41. Quoted in Barnett, *The Spartans and the Tanks*, 26; Interview by Carl Becker with Glenn Presnell, November 10, 1993.

42. "Spartan Mentor in Town: Plans to Scout Bears"; "Huddle Whispers," *Portsmouth Times*, December 16, 1932.

43. Smith, "Bears Win, 9-0; Pro Football Champions," See also, *Halas by Halas*, 169; and Roberts, *The Chicago Bears*, 93.

44. Quoted in Roberts, *The Chicago Bears*, 96.

45. Interview (telephone) by Carl Becker with Grover Emerson, November 12, 1993.

46. Barnett, *The Spartans and the Bears* 27.

47. Wittenburg, "Spartans Bow To Bears On Tiny Gridiron," "Sports," *Portsmouth Times*, December 21, 1932.

48. "League Says Spartans Co-Champs," *Portsmouth Times*, December 23, 1932.

annual meeting the next year, the club owner awarded the championship to the Bears.⁴⁹ The game did not prove a sovereign remedy for the Bears' and Spartans' financial ills. About 11,000 spectators were in attendance, and gross receipts were approximately \$15,000.⁵⁰ With each winning player receiving \$240, each losing player \$175, and with operating expenses of the game to be met, neither club cleared enough to escape a drenching in red ink for 1932.

* * *

Never in the annals of NFL did the experience of one game find as clear expression in the club owners' meetings as did the Bears-Spartans title game of 1932. Gathering at the Fort Pitt hotel in Pittsburgh in February of 1933, the owners adopted three new rules derived from the championship game at the Chicago Stadium, all taking the game in a different direction, all giving greater strength to the offense.⁵¹ Citing in ambiguous language the rules of intercollegiate football, they approved a rule moving the ball on out-of-bounds plays to hash-marks ten yards in-bounds. The change reduced the inflexibility of play calling at the sideline. Obviously taking note of the disputed pass at Chicago, the owners voted for a rule permitting a forward pass from anywhere from behind the line of scrimmage. The rule opened up the offensive game as never before. George Halas, reminiscing on his life in professional football, asserted that it was a fundamental force in changing the game.⁵² The owners also adopted a rule placing the goal posts on the goal lines, a proposal that they had rejected in 1932.⁵³ Taken together, these changes dramatically increased scoring and significantly reduced the number of ties. Later in 1933, in July, George Preston Marshall, owner of the Boston Braves, arguing that playoff games created great interest among the fans, the "masses," persuaded the owners to organize eastern and western divisions of the NFL, the winners of the divisions to play each other for the league championship.⁵⁴

The game marked a turning point for the Bears and Spartans. Through the next eleven years, the Bears, now the "Monsters of the Midway," became the most successful team in the league. They won seven division titles and three league championships in that span and gave professional football a pantheon of legendary heroes, Sid Luckman, Joe Stydahar, Clyde "Bulldog" Turner, and others. But the Spartans moved in another direction, never again reaching the

49. Minutes, Annual Meeting, NFL, February 25–26, 1933, in Archives, Pro Football Hall of Fame.

50. Smith, "Bears Win, 9-0; Pro Football Champions"; "Chicago Bears Win Pro Football Title," *New York Times*, December 19, 1932. The *Portsmouth Times* reported that the "exact" paid admissions were 9,623 and that Annie Oakleys numbered several hundred. "Sports," *Portsmouth Times*, December 21, 1932.

51. Minutes, Annual Meeting, NFL, February 25–26, 1933. Jim Murray, the popular sportswriter, has asserted that the game may have been the "greatest" of all times for "sheer" significance. He cites a number of "firsts" for it to support his argument: the first championship game held at night, the first regular season or title game played indoors, and the first game played on an artificial surface, "It was Most Noteworthy Game Ever." In fact, though, professional teams played in Madison Square Garden in 1902 and 1903 in "World Series" games. See Bill Baron, *et al.*, *The Official NFL Encyclopedia of Pro Football* (New York, 1982), 12. The rules changes coming out of the game were more important, of course, than the "firsts."

52. *Halas by Halas*, 170; Vass, 94.

53. Minutes, Annual Meeting, NFL. February 25–26, 1933.

54. Minutes, Annual Meeting, NFL. July 8–9, 1933.

snowy heights of success. In 1933, though finishing second to the Bears in the Western Division, they posted a lackluster record of six wins and five losses. Worse yet, they descended deeper into debt. And early in 1934, George Richards, the wealthy owner of a radio station in Detroit, and other moguls of that city bought the franchise and moved it to Detroit as the Detroit Lions. Patsy Clark remained as coach, and at least twelve Spartans entered the Lions' lair. They earned a measure of retaliation against the Bears in 1935 when Presnell and Clark led the Lions past the Bears in the Western Division and on to the league championship.