

Doing Economic and Labour History: Professional Football in Post World War II America

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The papers in this forum have in common their focus, from various perspectives, on the economics of professional American football. Mel Adelman's is primarily concerned with methodology, with how one can write economic history in the absence of published data and despite NFL (and AAFC) clubs' protectiveness of their financial secrets, using the Cleveland Browns and New York Giants of 1946 as his case studies. Philip Suchma documents a specific period in the later history of the Browns, exploring the ways that Art Modell used his position as NFL owner in the 1960s and 1970s to leverage a series of profitable deals with the city. Finally, Michael Lomax does not directly address NFL finances but rather the labour conflict that complicated them beginning in the 1970s.

Adelman's and Suchma's papers serve as useful background for Lomax's in this regard. It was easy to accuse the striking players in 1974 of being greedy since their salaries were published (or misreported) in the press, while owners' profits were a carefully guarded secret. The figures reported in the press, of course, all came from the League. On 7 June, the Management Council released data claiming that the twenty-six clubs in 1973 earned \$162 million in gross revenues, averaging \$472,500 in after-tax profit (\$945,000 before taxes, with taxes assumed to be 7.6 percent). An economist for the NFLPA claimed that the clubs averaged \$2.3 million in pre-tax profit, but the League's figures were the ones that were widely published and repeated throughout the strike. Red Smith of the *New York Times* was perhaps the only sportswriter to challenge the League's claims, noting that the salaries drawn by owners and their relatives were counted as costs, not profits, and that the clubs likely paid no taxes at all after depreciating their players' contracts. But Smith as a sportswriter only had access to the data made available by the NFL. He could challenge the most obvious distortions but not the basic figures. NFL clubs in 1974 could not distort their financial status as radically as they could in 1946, but in some ways the same situation persisted.

Lomax's paper, in turn, thus opens up a new perspective on Adelman's and Suchma's. Adelman is chiefly concerned with demonstrating that professional football was much more highly profitable in the late 1940s than the owners, and the press, claimed. Suchma uncovers how one owner, Art Modell, turned his investment in football to profits that would never appear on the team's balance sheet. Lomax's paper reminds us of the consequences of high

profits veiled in secrecy. The owners effectively presented themselves as sports-loving, public-spirited citizens defending the basic structure of a game loved by millions of fans, with small financial reward for themselves. The players, on the other hand, misled by an arrogant and radical Ed Garvey, were threatening its very existence.

The need for what Mel Adelman calls 'inferential economics' seems to me irrefutable, and his account of how he arrived at a profit figure of \$240,000 for the Cleveland Browns in 1946, as opposed to the \$3,000 or \$5,000 reported in the press, is convincing. What also comes through in the Adelman's paper is the challenge that inferential economics poses for historical narrative. This is a piece of a much larger work on the history of the All-America Football Conference from 1946 through 1949. Readers of that history will want to learn the financial realities of the rival league and its impact on the NFL, that is, they will want to know what conclusions Adelman has drawn by inferring the finances of the eight clubs in the AAFC over a four-year period from scattered and highly-incomplete data. They will want to feel assured that Adelman's conclusions are sound, that the data in its incompleteness is at least sufficient to warrant the inferences he draws. But readers will *not* want to follow Adelman through each piece of information and the ways he used, each calculation replicated dozens of times to arrive at overall financial portraits of each team, the league as a whole, and the National Football League in competition with it.

The value of inferential economics for the historian, as I say, seems irrefutable. But what inferential economics means for the actual writing of sport history remains uncertain to me. A relatively brief text followed by an enormously long series of appendices suggests one solution, though by no means a completely satisfying one. In some ways, this problem, or challenge, is common to various kinds of sport history. Any history of professional football during any period entails the stories of between ten and thirty-two separate teams; a history of college football could deal with hundreds. Historians are always determining how much detail is necessary to make larger claims. But the economic history of football (whether professional or intercollegiate) seems to me particularly vexed, because in addition to the paucity of hard data there is, if not an abundance, at least a steady small stream of erroneous data reported in the press that over time acquires the status of fact. Adelman has to refute a common understanding that the war between the AAFC and the NFL in the late 1940s nearly bankrupted the clubs in both leagues. To say that the Browns made \$240,000 in profits in 1946, instead of \$3,000 or \$5,000, is not to revise received wisdom but to explode it. To succeed, his evidence must be highly credible. But he must also make his narrative readable. That is the challenge.

Suchma's paper, in effect, places the problem addressed by Mel Adelman, how to determine the actual finances of NFL clubs with minimal data available, much of it unreliable, in a crucially important context: the question of who benefits and to what extent through the financial arrangements between

franchise owners and their communities. Hovering over Suchma's account of Art Modell's financial dealings in Cleveland from 1961 through 1978, of course, is our realization that Modell will abandon Cleveland in 1996 for a sweeter deal in Baltimore. There is therefore a pervasive irony in the recounting of Modell's long career as one of Cleveland's first citizens and primary benefactors. The question that the essay raises is a final accounting: just how much wealth did Art Modell extract through his extraordinarily advantageous stadium lease, along with the other deals his position as the owner of the Browns and the manager of Municipal Stadium made possible for him? Modell bought the Browns for about \$4 million in 1961, then sold 22 percent of his shares for that same \$4 million in 1971 (that percent of his former Browns franchise, now the Baltimore Ravens, for about \$600 million). The numbers are dizzying, and Suchma attempts to lay out a clearer trail for part of that story. But after Modell has used revenue promised to the city to pay off the stadium's previous debts instead, and after he has used much of the money he promised toward needed renovations to build luxury boxes and an ad-generating Scoreboard instead, and after he has paid virtually no taxes to the city (less than \$1,000 in 1977 out of \$5 million in profits), after all of this, what is the final tally? How much did Art Modell take out of Cleveland and how much did he bring into the city? Is something akin to 'inferential economics' necessary for the 1970s as well as the 1940s? One piece of the puzzle that even Adelman's inferential economics overlooks is the question of taxes. I assume that discovering how much privately-held corporations pay in federal or local taxes is very difficult, but it is another piece of information that the economic historian wants to know.

I have a personal interest Michael Lomax's topic, as my own NFL career began with the brief strike of 1970, when I was one of the College All Stars caught in the middle, and ended with the prolonged one of 1974. I would say up front that my personal experience gives me no more authority to interpret the 1974 strike than Lomax has an historian who was a child in 1974. What advantage I might have through personal experience can be offset by the narrowness of that experience – I was a member of one team among twenty-six – as well as personal bias.

In his account of the 1974 strike, Lomax downplays the players' lack of solidarity in concluding that the strike failed for three reasons: 1) the players naively believed that the owners would bargain in good faith; 2) the union had too many active players, instead of labour pros, in key positions; and 3) Ed Garvey failed to be a shrewd bargainer. I'm not sure about #1, but I would agree that the union was consistently outmaneuvered by the owners, and that as union leaders the players were amateurs. (Had Bernie Parrish succeeded in 1968 in having the Teamsters represent professional football players, the history of labour relations in sports would have been very different.) It seems clear that Ed Garvey antagonised the owners and unified them as they had

never been unified before. On the other hand, remove Garvey and the freedom issues would have disappeared as well, at least in the final agreement that might have been reached. The players would have settled in 1974 as they did in 1970 on whatever terms the owners offered them.

I do not believe that a strike over the freedom issues could have been won in 1974 under any circumstances. Paternalism was still the reigning model in the NFL; the owners regarded the players essentially as children who should be grateful for what was given them. The owners were not willing to surrender their monopolistic power until a series of court cases threatened to take away that power altogether. The great irony of the 1974 strike from our perspective today, is that everything the players were demanding, which the owners termed 'anarchy' and a threat to the very existence of professional football, is now part of the collective bargaining agreement between the owners and the union that guarantees unprecedented prosperity for the owners.

If the strike was doomed to fail, however, the manner in which it failed, I believe, was due to a greater degree than Lomax claims on the players' lack of solidarity. I respect and understand Lomax's reluctance to judge harshly the players of the past. As one of them, perhaps I can do it more easily, or more self-interestedly perhaps, since I was among the casualties of the strike. The strike was a national campaign on twenty-six fronts, and in each NFL city the strike played out differently. Teams in Denver, Minnesota, Washington, and Kansas City remained strongly on strike. But in Cincinnati, twelve veterans reported on the first day of training camp, to be followed by a steady trickle over the next three weeks. In Miami and Dallas, big-name, highly-paid veterans abandoned the strike one or two or three players at a time. Newspapers reported each key defection, as when three top quarterbacks (Bob Griese, Terry Bradshaw, and John Hadl) reported on the same day, and kept a running tally of the number of veterans in camp (courtesy of the NFL Management Council). Stars, starters, and marginal players had different stakes in the strike. Veterans on the picket lines in Houston, or San Diego, or Cleveland, or wherever, were most affected by that actions of their own teammates, but they also read the newspapers and saw the strike steadily eroding, their own position as strikers growing ever more precarious. The strike, as I say, was doomed, but it was the players who determined how it failed.

Lomax also raises an interesting question whether the NFLPA strike in 1974 should be viewed as a continuation of the social and political protest of the 1960s. I'm not sure. NFL players had been attempting since 1956 to win some basic rights and economic benefits from the owners; their efforts long predated the Olympic boycott movement of 1968 and the campus unrest of 1968-1970. The slogan 'No Freedom, No Football' comes out of the 1960s, as does the clenched-fist on the T-shirts. Ed Garvey came out of a civil-rights and labour-activist background, and although I believe some players viewed the 1974 strike in the spirit of 1960s protest, I think that they were a minority.

Lomax points to the black players within the union leadership, John Mackey, Alan Page, Kermit Alexander, to suggest that the 1974 strike was more specifically a continuation of black athletic protest. I have been assuming that for many years, but now I am not so sure. White players like Bill Curry, Ed Podolak, and Tom Keating were also members of the executive committee, and over half of the player reps were white. The big-name quarterbacks who broke with the strikers in 1974 of course were white – Pittsburgh's Joe Gilliam was the only potential starting black quarterback in the league at the time – but among the less famous starters and so-called fringe veterans were blacks as well as whites. At this point, I suspect that a greater percentage of whites than blacks did abandon the strike, but likely not to a degree that adds a clear racial dimension to the struggle.

The final issue I would like to address crosses over all three papers, namely the role of the press. Adelman points out that the press in the late 1940s had little insight into football finances but nonetheless shaped the lasting record of the rivalry between the NFL and the AAFC, by reporting whatever the football owners passed on to them. Suchma describes a situation in Cleveland in the 1960s and 1970s in which whatever Art Modell wanted printed in the sports pages was printed. And Lomax describes the key role that public relations played during the 1974 strike, public relations managed through the press, that is, and the clear superiority of the NFL in this regard. Again, what the owners wanted published was published, because it was 'news', but such news was a tactical weapon in the conflict with the players' union.

The central role of the press, and the media more generally, in the history of American sport is a point that I completely endorse. My interest has been in the power of the press to construct the images and narratives of football that shape the understanding of the game's vast audience. One of those images through the 1970s, as these papers show, is of the NFL owner as sports-loving, public-spirit, benevolent, if sometimes cranky, patriarch and first citizen. He is in professional football not for the money but for the pride and pleasure he brings to the community. This fiction was useful to owners in maximising their profits sometimes at the expense of their players and communities.

What Suchma calls the 'booster press' in Cleveland is the extreme case of a more general arrangement. I would add one footnote to this point. The Cleveland *Plain Dealer* printed a remarkable interview with Art Modell on 14 July 1974, the day that the Browns' veterans took to the picket lines instead of reporting to camp. The interview was conducted by the paper's executive editor, managing editor and sports editor (Hal Lebovitz), and it began on page one of the Sunday sports section, took up a second page, and concluded on a third. In the interview, Modell responded to such hard-ball questions as these:

- 'Talking about money, can you give me an idea how much *these people* [my emphasis] who are seeking freedom and so on, are

making in the National Football League?'

- 'Aside from the freedom issue, Art, do you and the other owners feel that it would be a deterioration in discipline and in performance if the players' demands are met?'

The three editors are chatting with their buddy 'Art' about a situation that irritates all of them, and simply happen to be overheard by the entire readership of the city's principle newspaper. There is nothing in the coverage of the strike in NFL cities to match this toadying deference to Art Modell. It would seem that the Browns' striking players had little chance of winning public support.

As these three papers demonstrate, that image of the good-citizen owner has very real material consequences, whether for extracting greater profits from the city or for keeping the players in their proper place. To uncover the full stories of these men and their franchises is a terrific goal. Economists tend to look at entire leagues at a particular moment in time, or to trace the large forces that operate on a league-wide basis. The economic historian who can bring to light and untangle the wheeling and dealing of single franchises over the course of their history, showing us who in city government and among the local business leaders, as well as the owners themselves, gained how much in what ways, can teach us much about the economic impact of professional football.