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PETERSON, ROBERT W. *Pigskin: The Early Years of Pro Football* New York Oxford University Press, 1997. Pp. ix, 214. Notes on sources, illustrations, index. \$25.00 hb.

As a great admirer of his landmark book, *Only the Ball Was White*, I looked forward with great anticipation to the latest offering from author Robert W. Peterson, titled *Pigskin: The Early Years of Pro Football*. My enthusiasm proved to

be misplaced. To begin with, it should be clearly understood that this book falls into that vast category of sportswriting referred to as a “popular” history and is obviously aimed at the most casual readers of football history. In short, the author brings nothing new to the table concerning the pre-1959 days of professional football.

The research effort for this book originates entirely from secondary sources, laced here and there with anecdotes that were obtained in personal interviews with former players. Research work previously published by the Professional Football Researchers Association (PRFA) makes up a substantial portion of the author’s sources, with most of the remaining material available from other commercially published books.

Of course none of this by itself is reason enough to dismiss Peterson’s book, but what will get any real football historian worked up about this book is the obvious lack of concern for historical accuracy in the text. There’s a healthy dose of disconcerting references, such as stating that someone “thinks” something happened or that “tradition has it.” But the most annoying aspect of this work is the glaring mistakes of fact. For example, on page 152 we learn that Paul Brown led Ohio State to the national championship in 1942, despite their loss to Northwestern. Actually, the Buckeyes’ only loss that season was at the hands of Wisconsin, by a score of 17-7 on October 31 at Madison. On page 18 we are told that college football today plays 24-minute halves; the last time I looked, it was still playing 30-minute halves.

On page 127 the author stated that Arch Ward of the *Chicago Tribune* originated the annual College All-Star series in 1934, and assembled a panel of sportswriters from thirty newspapers around the country to select the college players for the squad. Actually, the players and coaches for the College All-Star team in 1934 were selected by a national vote of football fans that produced approximately 733,000 ballots. Within just two years, the fan voting had become so popular that there were 182 newspapers assisting in collecting the ballots, with the *Tribune* reporting that 3,419,164 votes were cast for the 1936 team. The All-Star teams would continue to be selected by a national fan vote until halted by the start of World War II.

One of the more troublesome errors occurs right up front on page 7, as the author notes that the All-America Football Conference (AAFC) spawned several of the teams of today’s NFL, including the Cleveland Browns, San Francisco 49ers, and Indianapolis Colts. The difficulty with this statement concerns the origins of the Colts. The Baltimore team that moved from the AAFC to the NFL in 1950 played one season before owner Abraham Watner folded the franchise. In 1950 and 1951 the NFL also included a team called the New York Yanks, and after the latter season, the NFL shifted that franchise to Texas. The team became the Dallas Texans for 1952. After a dismal 1-11 season in 1952, the Texans were shifted to Baltimore and renamed the Colts, and so it was actually the original New York Yanks who, years later, headed off to Indianapolis one night under the cover of darkness. After enough of these blunders, readers may find themselves starting to wonder about everything being presented.

To his credit, the author does include plenty of material about the earliest roots of professional football around the turn of the century, along with presenting the correct notion that much of pro football's origins trace back to the teams fielded by the big-city athletic clubs in the 1890s. The unexplored wilderness of metropolitan athletic club sport history remains a major area that still cries out for some serious research work. The author also provides some welcome discussion about the regional professional leagues, such as the Pacific Coast and Dixie Leagues.

But after defining 1958 as his boundary for early pro football and calling the decade of the 1950s a golden age for the NFL, the author leaves the reader with no real information about the decade by the end of the book. Virtually nothing is offered on topics as significant as the tremendous rivalry and championship game showdowns between the Cleveland Browns and Detroit Lions; the many all-time greats from the decade, such as Ollie Mattoon, Hugh McElhenny, Doak Walker, Bobby Layne, Harlon Hill, Joe Perry, and Pete Pihos; and the evolution of the New York Giants and Baltimore Colts powerhouses that would thrive into the 1960s.

As always, Peterson is a good writer, and he has effectively placed the anecdotes from former players to help produce a text that is an easy read from cover to cover. Yet, although in the preface of *Pigskin* the author mentions that one of the senior editors at Oxford University Press had suggested that this book be written, throughout my reading, I found myself continually wondering why.

—Ray Schmidt  
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