

# *The First N.F.L. Franchise on the West Coast* Why Los Angeles was Chosen Instead of San Francisco

Jerold M. Strong  
Napa, CA

In 1946 the Cleveland Rams moved to Los Angeles to become the first N.F.L. franchise west of the Mississippi River. This paper presents reasons why Los Angeles appeared as a more favorable city than San Francisco to Reeves and other N.F.L. Owners.

Minor league professional football existed in California from 1926 to 1948. Leagues that were formed during that period always included teams from both Los Angeles and San Francisco. However, professional football was far more successful in Southern California with regard to wins and losses and paid attendance. Three major reasons exist for this difference in success.

First, in the late 1920s, St. Mary's College head football coach, Slip Madigan, initiated a change from Saturday to Sunday games for the three Catholic Universities: St. Mary's, Santa Clara, and the St. Ignatius Colleges (University of San Francisco, or USF) located around the San Francisco Bay Area. In Los Angeles, football fans did not have the strong loyalty to a college team that was playing on Sunday. This left the door open for professional football to cultivate a following. Starting in 1936 professional football did in fact develop a very strong and loyal following in Los Angeles through 1945 (in 1946 the Los Angeles Rams and San Francisco Forty Niners started playing).

Second, in 1935 the Los Angeles American Legion-sponsored professional football league arranged for its champion to meet the N.F.L. champion in a post season game. This meeting, won handily by the N.F.L. Detroit Lions, led to a second arrangement for the 1936 season in which the American Legion professional league would play a schedule among themselves during the first half of the season, and then form an all star team to play a schedule of N.F.L. teams throughout the second half of the season. Before the season started, however, the American Legion decided they

could be more competitive if they formed just one team from the beginning, forgoing their intra-league schedule over the first half of the season. The team formed was named the Los Angeles Bulldogs. So, in 1936 Southern California fans witnessed legitimate games against real N.F.L. opposition. The Bulldog's accomplishments set a standard of excellence for teams that followed from 1940 to 1945. Such standards were never established in Northern California, and teams in that region were constantly faced with poor management and insufficient monetary capital. The result was a low image, meagre, if not negative media coverage, and insufficient gate receipts.

The third reason was the appearance of former N.F.L. coach Paul Schissler in Los Angeles. Schissler further contributed to the standard of excellence of Southern California professional football. Forming and coaching various all star teams in 1938 and 1939, he was instrumental, in 1940, in the forming of the Pacific Coast Professional Football League (PCFL). His team was PCFL champion in 1941 and 1945, and on many Sundays Schissler's Bears drew crowds of 15,000 to 18,000 spectators in Gilmore Stadium, often filling the stadium to capacity. In comparison, in the north, teams such as the Oakland Giants, San Francisco Packers, and later the Clippers, seldom drew over 4,000 playing customers.

Professional football teams in Northern California never attained the level of excellence and thus popularity and paid attendance of the Los Angeles-based teams. If it is assumed that the overriding motive for the placement of a professional sports team is that of monetary income potential, these reasons would explain the choice of Los Angeles over San Francisco as a city to put the first West Coast franchise.

Sources for this research included 65 taped interviews with men who played professional football in California from 1934 to 1948, as well as material derived from the Los Angeles Times, the San Francisco Chronicle, and the Oakland Tribune.