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Red Grange and the Growth of Pro Football

Many sports writers and historians routinely proclaim that Red Grange's signing with the Chicago Bears of the National Football League (NFL) and the Bears' subsequent barnstorming tours of 1925-6 contributed substantially to the early success of the NFL and its long term growth. A few writers have stated simply that Grange was the making of pro football. This paper, based on a book length manuscript on Grange and the rise of modern football addresses questions relating to Grange's impact on pro football in both the short and long term. It discusses the pros and cons of the argument that Grange's turning pro in 1925 under intense national publicity contributed to the rise of pro football and particularly the NFL. It uses a wide variety of sources including interviews by Grange and others (mainly from the Pro Football Hall of Fame), contemporary newspaper and periodical commentary, as well as materials from the University of Illinois Archives and the Wheaton College (Illinois) Archives. It argues that Grange's impact on pro football at the time of his debut with the Bears has been exaggerated.

Some commentators have argued that the star system which Grange helped to create in the NFL in the late 1920s was detrimental to the game. The one great plus of Grange's 1925 signing and barnstorming tours was the great amount of publicity it focused on pro football and its increasing acceptance by the press. Sports writers began to give pro football more attention and space after Grange became a professional. The NFL, however, continued to remain unstable until the early 1930s. The onset of the Great Depression and the relative decline in the popularity of college football owing to economic problems and the criticism leveled at the game by the Carnegie Report (1929) contributed to the increasing respectability of the NFL, its stability, and rising attendance. Although Grange's impact on pro football was not as direct and immediate as some historians and other commentators have suggested, he did have a more subtle influence in turning media attention toward the pro game and setting the stage for a later stabilization and growth of pro football.

I also argue that Grange's brief stint as a sports writer in the early 1930s and the beginning of his career as a radio commentator on football in 1934 contributed significantly to the growing public acceptance of pro football. Grange played an important role in the acceptance of pro football as a legitimate and respectable sport in the U.S.. but not in the simplistic way that many previous commentators have suggested. Grange's sudden emergence as a pro did not suddenly rescue the NFL or pro football from disdain and obscurity. The significance of the paper is that it adds to our understanding of the critical early years in the development of pro football and the role that one of the game's first widely recognized stars had in that process.