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'The League' Review: Single Wing and a Prayer

A small handful of men, including a bookie, a bettor and a brash laundry mogul, took the NFL from dull obscurity to national success. Edward Kosner reviews "The League" by John Eisenberg.



NFL owners Art Rooney and Tim Mara. PHOTO: NY DAILY NEWS ARCHIVE VIA GETTY IMAGES

By Edward Kosner
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It's halftime on NFL Sunday, so turn off your 62-inch UHD TV and time-travel back to the monochromatic football days of leather helmets, clunky cleats, toothless grins and teams like the Canton Bulldogs and the Pottsville Maroons. Look—there's Jim Thorpe galloping down the field for the Bulldogs! And there's George Halas calling the plays for the Chicago Staleys!

That was pro football at the start—a harum-scarum game played on scraggly fields mostly in the industrial heartland. The crowds were sparse and the salaries pathetic, and teams moved, merged and disappeared with alarming frequency. Major League Baseball ruled the sports world. Pro football was a sideshow.

In "The League," John Eisenberg tells the story of the initial transformation of this penny-ante enterprise into the gazillion-dollar extravaganza we know as the National Football League. It turns out that Jerry Jones and his fellow billionaire owners and the multimillionaire players like Aaron Rodgers and Odell Beckham Jr. essentially owe their good fortune to a bookie, a gifted horseplayer, a racist laundry mogul, a Czech immigrant's brainy son and the playboy spawn of a starchy Philadelphia lawyer. They are the founding fathers of the NFL, and real fans will recognize the family names: Mara, Rooney, Marshall, Halas and Bell.

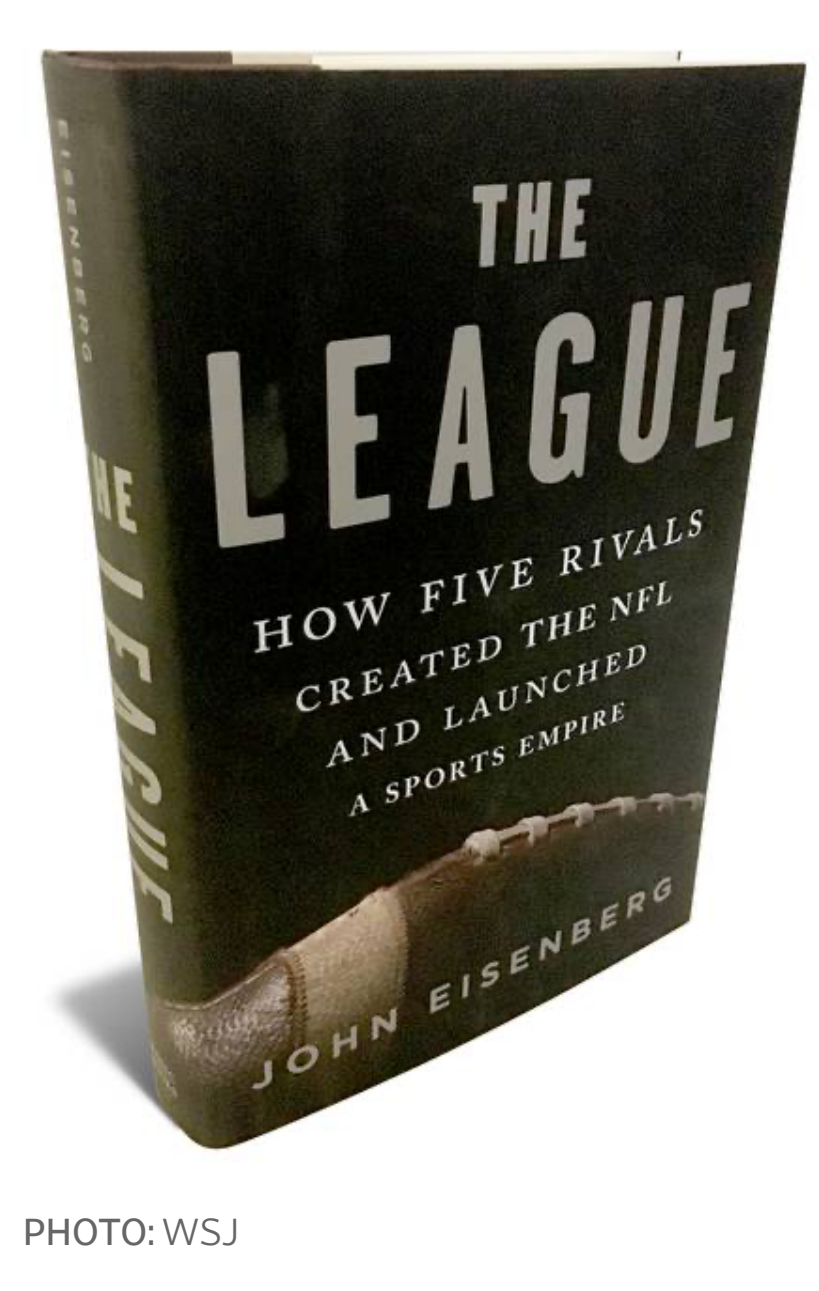


PHOTO: WSJ

THE LEAGUE
By John Eisenberg
Basic, 397 pages, \$30

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The pluck-and-luck tale of the creation and stabilization of the league is a small but exemplary chapter in American capitalism and popular culture. Still, readers had better love pro-football lore and have a connoisseur's taste for sports trivia to fully enjoy "The League." Remember the Steagles, the wartime merger of the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Philadelphia Eagles? Or Card-Pitt, the next season's mashup of the Steelers and the Chicago Cardinals? Neither do I, but they're here. Curious about the play-by-play account of the Chicago Bears' 73-to-0 stomping of the Washington Redskins in the 1940 championship game? It's all here.

Here also are original lyrics to "Hail to the Redskins," the anthem written by the owner George Preston Marshall for the marching band organized by Marshall and decked out in swathed Indian headdresses: "Scalp 'um, swamp 'um, / We will take 'um big score."

There's a compelling tale here, although it's more about seat-of-the-pants entrepreneurship than football. As Mr. Eisenberg tells it, "paid" football, as it was called—sandlot, semipro and here-today-gone-tomorrow pro leagues—had been around since the late 19th century. It was a flea on the hide of college football, which regularly drew hordes of more than 70,000 fans to the annual Army-Navy game and others. And no wonder. The pros, such as they were, routinely slogged away to scoreless ties in games dominated by running plays and drop-kicked field goals. It was hard to throw the roundish ball, and when passes were allowed, they could only be thrown from at least 5 yards behind the line of scrimmage. In 1932, teams averaged 8 points a game.

Incredibly, nearly a century after the NFL was founded, the Maras and the Rooneys still control the teams they started. John Mara and his partner, Steve Tisch, own the Giants, begun by John's grandfather Tim in 1925. Tim was a gentleman bookmaker who gave tips to his friend Art Rooney, who once ran a hot streak at two New York tracks into winnings of \$2 million in today's money. Rooney started the Pittsburgh Pirates, later the Steelers, in 1933; his grandson Art II is the team's controlling partner today.

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George Halas, whose parents were from Bohemia, was a Chicago football stalwart who started playing for the Staleys in 1920, re-christened them the Bears in 1922, and played for the team and coached it for the next 45 years. The imperious George Preston Marshall in 1937 moved his Boston Redskins to Washington, where he owned a prosperous chain of laundries and felt comfortable in the still-segregated capital. Bert (born De Benneville) Bell was a jock who squandered his father's money, founded the Philadelphia Eagles in 1933, then went on to serve as the commissioner of the league for 13 years.

They all knew one another, squabbled with one another, lent one another money and suffered together as the league struggled through the Depression and World War II. Mara began to make money with the Giants, and later so did Marshall in D.C., but the rest mostly simmered in red ink for years. The Eagles and the Steelers were perennial doormats. Bell and Rooney never gave up.

With Marshall and Bell pushing to liven up the game, the owners revolutionized football. They streamlined the oblate spheroid itself and unshackled the passing game; an annual college draft ended the costly competition to sign individual stars; unlimited substitutions meant teams could develop offensive and defensive units, run more sophisticated plays, and hold down on injuries. The players were bigger and faster than in college football. And then there was the unique selling proposition of the NFL: Pro football, writes Mr. Eisenberg, "would eventually become the more popular version of the sport, in part because of its sheer brutality. . . . Long fascinated with violence in all forms, Americans lusted to see bodies crunching, and as pro football developed, they found it hard to turn their heads away."

There's lots more—Marshall's successful decadeslong crusade to keep blacks out of the NFL, the assimilation of the rival All-America Football Conference in the late 1940s, the lucrative partnership with TV. These developments and more culminated in the 1958 title game, in which Johnny Unitas's Baltimore Colts beat Frank Gifford's Giants 23-17 in overtime—often called "the greatest game ever played." It was watched by 40 million spellbound fans on TV and sealed the destiny of the NFL.

Today, pro football still rides high, but the growing awareness of the brain trauma caused by the brutality Mr. Eisenberg highlights shadows its future. Still, in the owners' box up in football heaven, the NFL's founding fathers can only marvel at what they wrought.

Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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