

# NFL's unparalleled parity was born at a cigarette-burned desk in Philadelphia

Sam Fortier, *The Washington Post*

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Bert Bell was the son of Philadelphia blue bloods who rejected his given first name, de Benneville, and the high society into which he was born. He was a World War I medic whose unit's heroism in France earned official commendation from a top general. He was a Rose Bowl quarterback and a playboy gambler, and he loved women and ponies and poker. Once, his father offered him \$100,000 to marry a local debutante. Bell took the money, lost it all at the Saratoga racetrack and at breakfast the next morning told his dad, "I ain't marrying that broad!" (Bell later settled down with a famous actress.)

But nothing compared with Bell's contributions to pro football. He loved the game, much to the chagrin of his father, a wealthy lawyer and one-term Pennsylvania attorney general who, like many in the 1930s, thought football belonged in college. Too small to make it as a player, Bell became the worst coach in NFL history. His winning percentage of .179 still stands as the low mark among 196 qualified coaches. But Bell's ownership of the Philadelphia Eagles, co-ownership of the Pittsburgh Steelers and reign as the NFL's second commissioner from 1946 to 1959 cemented him as a figure critical to the league's early survival and sustained success. In the foreword of a 2010 biography, Hall of Fame coach Don Shula wrote, "We don't realize how much Bert Bell did for professional football."

Bell's vision was for every team in the league to be as competitive as possible. He was fond of saying, "On any given Sunday, any team can beat any other team." It was a radical idea. In the early days of the NFL, a few big-market teams dominated a rotating cast of weaker franchises that lost games and money until they folded or were sold. But Bell pushed the notion that the league was only as strong as its weakest link, and he got other owners to buy in. Two of his most important innovations - the draft and a balanced scheduling system - proved instrumental in achieving what the NFL now proudly calls competitive balance.

That balance is essential to the NFL's product. There are many components to the league's cultural dominance - including marketing, pace of play and watchability on TV - but competitive balance heightens the importance of each game, tightens scores and gives fans realistic hope that, even if their team isn't good now, it can be in a season or two. The drama keeps tens of millions of Americans engaged for hours and hours, year after year, especially during the playoffs, which continue Sunday with the conference championship games.

During the 2022 regular season, the average margin of victory was 9.70 points, the lowest over a full season since 1932 (9.13). More games than ever were within one score in the fourth quarter (75 percent) and finished within one score (57 percent). Eighty-five times this season, teams that trailed in the fourth quarter pulled off comebacks. And the Jacksonville Jaguars won the AFC South, meaning that, for the 18th time in the past 20 seasons, at least one team jumped from worst to first in its division.

Over the decades, the NFL has changed many rules and regulations but stuck to the spirit of Bell's mission, said former NFL executive Joel Bussert, who spent 40 years with the league before retiring in 2015.

"The principles that [Bell] established, they have certainly stood the test of time," Bussert said.

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## Infinite football

Religious scholar James P. Carse argued life has at least two kinds of games: finite and infinite. "A finite game is played for the purpose of winning," he wrote. "An infinite game for the purpose of continuing to play."

In an essay for the Atlantic, Derek Thompson critiqued the data revolution that has remade many facets of American culture. Thompson argued analytics had solved baseball like an equation and said when "universal smarts [lead] to universal strategies," such as players chasing more strikeouts and more home runs, the product becomes more homogenous and boring.

"Winning the World Series is a finite game, while growing the popularity of Major League Baseball is an infinite game," Thompson wrote. "What happened, I think, is that baseball's finite game was solved so completely in such a way that the infinite game was lost."

Football has been harder to solve. The most obvious gains of the growing analytics movement - more passing, more aggression on fourth down - have arguably made the sport more exciting. Michael MacCambridge, author of "America's Game: The Epic Story of How Pro Football Captured a Nation," said competitive balance has helped the NFL's finite and infinite games.

"Maybe the analogy is the NFL can be both at the same time," he said.

In 1933, Bell was a new owner of the Eagles and took a train from Philadelphia to Minneapolis. He wanted to sign standout Minnesota fullback/linebacker Stan "King Kong" Kostka. Bell offered Kostka \$4,000, more than any other team in the league, but Kostka said he had to think it over. Bell suspected Kostka wanted to phone other teams to see if they would outbid the Eagles. An hour later, Kostka told Bell he was still undecided. Bell upped the offer to \$6,000. Kostka waffled; Bell left.

The whole ride home, Bell thought about the situation. When he bought into the NFL, the league awarded him the remnants of the Frankford Yellow Jackets, a team from Philadelphia that won the championship in 1926 but went bankrupt five years later. In that era, four teams - Chicago, Washington, Green Bay and the New York Giants - dominated on the field, at the gate and in signing new players.

By the time he got home, Bell had decided the league wouldn't survive unless each team had an even chance to bid for talent. In May 1935, the Eagles had a record of 7-12-1 over their first two seasons of existence, and their owners were on their way to losing roughly \$90,000 (about \$1.9 million today). At the league meetings, Bell gave a speech that was later recounted in "On Any Given Sunday," a Bell biography.

"Gentlemen, I've always had the theory that pro football is like a chain," Bell told the other owners. "The league is no stronger than its weakest link, and I've been a weak link for so long that I should know." He suggested a draft of eligible

college seniors in inverse order of the standings. Many protested, but a few powerful owners realized a stronger league would ultimately help their clubs.

"It was an idea that I think had come of age," said Joe Horrigan, a historian who spent 42 years with the Pro Football Hall of Fame. "If both Pittsburgh and Philadelphia had failed again, the league would have been failing, at least in the eyes of the public."

Over the next decade, Bell fought to keep his team afloat, sometimes needing loans from friends. In 1940, he sold the Eagles and became a co-owner of the Steelers with close friend Art Rooney. In 1946, after a dramatic day of politicking at a hotel in New York, NFL owners ousted the first commissioner, Elmer Layden, and voted in Bell.

"I'm delighted with the job," Bell told the Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph. "I expected it, and I will be a strong-arm guy."

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### Setting the course

In 13 years as commissioner, Bell became a one-man clearinghouse for NFL affairs. He moved the league office to Narberth, a Philadelphia suburb, and often worked behind a desk pockmarked with cigarette burns. His sons, Bert Jr. and Upton, remembered the phone ringing at all hours. Bell praised, criticized, cajoled, negotiated and gave numerous interviews. If he got frustrated with owners, he would sometimes cry to gain sympathy or would say, "I do not wish to behave like a czar" before imposing his will.

"Bell himself ran the whole God-d--- league out of his kitchen," CBS executive Edgar Scherick recalled in "America's Game." "He'd call me up every morning, just as I was soaping myself up in the shower, and we'd work out our arrangements by telephone."

Early in his tenure, Bell faced a string of crises, including a game-fixing scandal and the All-America Football Conference, which challenged the NFL for players.

Teams hemorrhaged money, owners fought endlessly, and the league teetered on the edge of implosion.

One of the bitterest points of contention was the schedule. Ticket sales were the most important source of revenue for every team, and owners battled for the best dates and draws. At one point, seemingly exhausted, they suggested Bell do it.

The commissioner's philosophy was to start off the weak teams against other weak teams and the strong against the strong. It would keep teams in contention for as long as possible and help sell tickets. Bell sat at his kitchen table for hours, gridding cardboard placards and filling out potential schedules. The work paid off. Upton remembered his father returning home on Sundays to proudly tell his mother: "Guess what? It's Week 4, and they're all still in the race."

In 1956, the DuMont Television Network, which broadcast NFL games, went out of business. Bell started negotiating a new deal with CBS. The network didn't want to pay Green Bay because it was a small market and a struggling team. Bell pushed back. "He understood how important it was for everybody in the league to have TV money and the ability to compete," Bussert said.

On Oct. 11, 1959, Bell and his children attended an Eagles-Steelers game at Franklin Field. Bell, at 64, had grown tired of the commissionership and, according to MacCambridge, had arranged a secret deal to buy back the Eagles at the end of the season. But near the end of the game, sitting in the bleachers, Bell had a massive heart attack and died.

During Bell's time as commissioner, the NFL overcame enormous challenges and established itself as a serious, solvent league. It captured the hearts and minds of Americans and strode past college football and baseball in popularity.

"Through it all," MacCambridge wrote, "Bert Bell presided over the game, the cheerful ambassador and the tough policeman who, through sheer force of will, made sure that pro football would be in a position to thrive in the years ahead."

Over the next six decades, the NFL grew and changed in dramatic ways. The league office moved to New York, and Pete Rozelle, who succeeded Bell as

commissioner and came from the world of public relations, used television as a jetpack to reach new heights.

It's easy to imagine, if Bell were alive today, his delight at the state of the league. Every franchise essentially prints money. It was a banner year for competitive balance. Sportsbooks expect close games in the conference championships. There will be a clash of stars for the Super Bowl and, after the end of this finite game, another will start anew.

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