

When Pro(?) Football Came to Ypsilanti

BY STEVEN J. RAMOLD

The Man with a Plan

Ever since the Portsmouth Spartans moved to Detroit in 1934 and became the Lions, professional football has enjoyed popular support in southeast Michigan. As the Lions and other teams of the National Football League (NFL) gained popularity in the decades after the Second World War, invariably new leagues appeared to challenge the NFL's dominance of the nation's fanbase and associated profits. Rival football leagues have come and gone (such as the USFL, XFL, and UFL in recent years), but the lure of professional football dollars has always enticed city leaders, investors, and fans to contest the NFL's dominance.

Such was the case when Los Angeles lawyer Gary Davidson announced the new World Football League (WFL) in October 1973. Davidson appeared to be the ideal instigator of a new league to challenge an existing one. He had established two other operating professional leagues: the American Basketball Association and the World Hockey Association. What no one knew at the time was that, except for a few merged franchises, both of these rival leagues would succumb to the dominant National Basketball Association and National Hockey League by 1979. The WFL's fatal flaw was that Davidson rushed it onto the field too quickly, preventing the orderly establishment of franchises and rosters.

Davidson initially planned for play to begin in 1975, but a possible player strike in both the NFL and Canadian Football Leagues (CFL) meant Davidson saw an opportunity to sign well-known players who might be available. Davidson's hopes came to nothing, however, when both leagues settled their labor disputes before their regular seasons began. Already committed, the WFL launched prematurely with franchises struggling to organize before the league's first games, scheduled for July 10, just nine months after Davidson announced the new league.

The Detroit Wheels

Despite the haste with which the league began, cities were eager to obtain franchises. Regions with established NFL teams, such as Florida, New York, and Philadelphia, gained franchises, as did regions without NFL teams, such as Birmingham, San Antonio, and Portland. For its inaugural season, the WFL played its first season with twelve teams divided into two regional divisions. On December 13, 1973, Davidson confirmed that Detroit had received a franchise, to be named the Wheels, with the enthusiastic endorsement of newly-elected Mayor Coleman Young. Like many elected officials, Young saw professional sports as a means of alleviating urban problems and threw his support behind a proposed downtown stadium for the new team. Unable to use city money, Young had organized a group of potential investors to raise the \$500,000 franchise fee charged by the WFL. The original backers did not have funds to operate the team, however, so additional investors joined the ownership group to fund the franchise and hopefully recoup their investment from a successful team.

In this regard, the haste with which the WFL was organized continued to cause problems. Generally, a professional franchise has a majority owner, who provides a single leader and vision for the organization, and some minority owners with only minor decision-making power. The hurried establishment of the Wheels, however, prevented the creation of such an ownership model. As additional investors joined the organization, with each contributing various amounts between \$15,000 and \$50,000, the number of owners ballooned to more than thirty, with none owning enough of the team to hold majority control. Some notable members of the Wheels ownership group included singer Marvin Gaye, Motown Records executive Esther Edwards, and entrepreneur Mike Ilitch, who was later the majority owner of the Detroit Red Wings and Detroit Tigers. The rest of the ownership group represented a range of business experience (attorneys, physicians/dentists, real estate/construction, automobiles, and even a funeral home director), but none in sports management. The ownership proudly announced they had amassed \$3 million to begin operations, but it was more promised money than collected funds, and the team was always badly undercapitalized. Moreover, the unwieldy ownership situation created an unwieldy system with owners opting to pay expenses as they arose rather than entrust a pool of funds to its executive committee.

The lack of knowledge among the owners was reflected in the team's leadership, with experience at the college, but not pro, level. In February 1974, the Wheels hired Sonny Grandelius as the team's general manager. An All-American halfback for Michigan State earlier in his life, Grandelius had brief experience as an assistant coach in the NFL and as head coach at the University of Colorado, but he had left that job under a cloud of recruiting violations. Two days later, the team had a president and a head coach. Louis Lee, a standout defensive end at the University of Michigan and graduate of the University's Law School, became team president, becoming the first African American

hired to the front office of any professional sport. The head coach, Dan Boisture, held the same job at Eastern Michigan University, where in seven years he never had a losing season and took the team to one bowl game, but who also had no pro experience.

A Home in Ypsilanti

Now that the city had an organization, it needed a home, but its options were limited. The obvious choice was Tiger Stadium because of its mid-city location and experience hosting the NFL Detroit Lions. Unfortunately, the Lions had an exclusive use contract with the stadium, and, although they would move to their own facility in Pontiac in 1975, would not share Tiger Stadium with the Wheels. The only other option in Detroit was Wayne State University Stadium (now Tom Adams Field), but the 12,000-seat facility was too small. The University of Michigan rejected inquiries to play at Michigan Stadium, leaving the 20,000-seat Rynearson Stadium at Eastern Michigan University as their only option. Rynearson Stadium was not an ideal location for the Wheels. It was nearly an hour from downtown Detroit and the team had to spend \$400,000 to install lights for night games, a considerable expense for a team that anticipated only a short tenure there.

With the season looming, the team began to hunt for players. Like the NFL, the WFL conducted a draft of college football players, but the Wheels failed to benefit from the process. Despite the uncertain labor situation, recent college graduates still looked to the established NFL for careers, rather than the new upstarts. The Wheels drafted several players, but most shunned the new league in hope of a career in the NFL. Of the thirty-three players drafted by the Wheels, only three signed contracts. The WFL also looked to sign NFL free agents. Several teams were very successful following this path, but the Wheels managed to sign only two players via free agency. The biggest problem with obtaining talent was the sparse salary offered by the Wheels ownership. The badly under-capitalized team set its maximum salary at \$10,000 per player, which meant the Wheels paid about as much in team salary as it cost to install lights at Rynearson Stadium. In that year, the NFL's minimum salary was \$12,000 and the average salary was \$56,000. The players would also make less per game. NFL teams played a fourteen-game season, but, in a bid to woo season ticket sales, the WFL planned a twenty-game season. Not surprisingly, few NFL and CFL players found signing with the Wheels an attractive proposition. Instead, the team filled its roster with a mix of undrafted college players and former NFL/CFL players either released from their contracts or unsigned when their contracts ended.

As the players assembled for training camp, the first signs of the team's financial instability began to appear. Practicing at Rynearson Stadium, one of the owners suggested the team could stay in tents there rather than costly hotel rooms. The team bought supplies as needed, rather than purchase them in advance. Players were told to wait a day or two before cashing their first paychecks to ensure the team had enough to cover the cost.



The Wheels take the field for their first home game at Rynearson Stadium on July 31, 1974.

A Truncated Season

Despite these initial concerns, the team enthusiastically looked forward to its first game, an away contest on July 10 against the Memphis Southmen. In front of 30,000 fans (Elvis Presley was in the building), the Wheels lost by a tally of 34-15. The game established a trend that continued for the rest of the Wheels' truncated season, particularly the offensive line's inability to protect quarterback Bubba Wyche, who was frequently sacked and forced to hurry passes.

The strength of the team was its defense, which kept the Wheels in many close games. Of the team's thirteen losses, Detroit lost seven of them in the last two minutes of the game. Undaunted, a week later the Wheels hosted the Florida Blazers at Rynearson Stadium. In front of only 10,600 fans because the Wheels media director had sent out the wrong start time, the Wheels lost a tight game 18-14. Hoping a change of venue might reverse their fortunes, the team looked forward to its next game, in Honolulu against the Hawaiians, but lost by a 36-16 score. And the losing did not stop there, as the Wheels dropped their next seven games, one of them a "home" game played in London, Ontario, in a bid to expand the fan base but that sold only 5000 tickets.

On September 11, against the Blazers in Orlando, the Wheels finally came out on top by a score of 15-14. After losing ten games, the win over Florida was especially sweet as the Blazers were one of the best teams in the league, losing in the championship game at the end of the season. The victory, however, was too little and too late. A week earlier, Commissioner Davidson had taken direct control of the team, citing its financial

weakness and unpaid debts for everything from printing programs to the team's laundry. By that point players were unsure if their medical insurance was valid, and several had moved their families into shared housing in case their paychecks bounced.



Wheels QB Bubba Wyche pitches the ball to RB Sam Scarber against the Chicago Fire.

An Abrupt End

Davidson gave the ownership group one month to find a solution or he would revoke the franchise. Rumors circulated that some of the ownership group would buy out the small stakeholders to keep the team in Detroit, some claimed that a new single owner would buy out the ownership group, and there was serious discussion about selling the franchise to an owner who would move the team, either to Charlotte, North Carolina, or Shreveport, Louisiana. The talks came to nothing, the ownership group could not reach a consensus, and no hero arrived to save the Wheels. They lost the next three games to fall to 1-13, and on October 3, one year and one day after Gary Davidson announced the new league, the Wheels filed for bankruptcy, citing debts of more than \$1.5 million.

The continuing losses certainly harmed the Wheels' bottom line, but the team might have done better financially if they had made more of a local effort. The Wheels made it plain that their presence in Ypsilanti was only a temporary one by placing their promotional efforts in Detroit. Consequently, the Wheels never developed a fan base in Ypsilanti, as reflected in the anemic ticket sales for home games. The 0-4 Wheels managed

to sell almost 15,000 tickets for a July 31 game against the Birmingham Americans, but then ticket demand plummeted as the losses continued, with only 6000 in attendance for the 0-10 Wheels' last game at Rynearson Stadium, on September 6 against the Southern California Sun.

The Detroit Wheels were history, and the World Football League did not last much longer. Davidson stepped down as commissioner at the end of the season in hopes someone else could revitalize the league, but despite fielding ten teams, the WFL itself declared bankruptcy at the end of the 1975 season. The absence of a successful rival to the NFL in the decades since the WFL underscores the difficulty and great expense that a successful league entails, a problem made worse by both the WFL's hasty creation and the Wheels' amateurish existence.

A Note on Sources

There is a lot of coverage of the Wheels in the Detroit newspapers, but for this project I relied upon the *Ypsilanti Courier* and *Eastern Echo* to emphasize the local view of the Wheels. I tried to interview a Wheels fan, but considering the sparse ticket sales and the number of years that have passed, my search was in vain. The best study of the Wheels is Mike Speck's *Nothing but a Brand-New Set of Flat Tires: The Sad, Sorry Saga of the 1974 Detroit Wheels of the World Football League* (Haworth, NJ: St. Johann Press, 2018). All images are the property of the author.

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