★ ★ ★ ★ CHAPTER 1 ★ ★ ★ ★

The Cardinals: Not the Way Football Is Supposed to Be

I vividly remember my introduction to the National Football League. I had played football at the University of Arkansas from 1949 to 1951, doing well enough to participate in the college all-star game, and in my last year of school, the Detroit Lions picked me in the fourth round of the NFL draft. Before this opportunity arose, I had done some thinking about a career coaching high school ball and teaching history or whatever they assigned me to teach. But I also knew in the back of my mind that I wasn't tired of playing football yet and wanted to continue to play if I could. So I took the Lions' offer . . . only to be injured early in the 1952 season. I was benched, and by the next year, they had traded me.

When I signed with the Chicago Cardinals in 1953, I was aware that they had played in NFL championship games in 1947 and 1948, winning the championship in l947, so I figured they were pretty good. You have to realize that back then pro football was not "America's game" by any means; it was basically an afterthought and didn't get much media or television coverage, and even when it did, not everyone in America had a television of their own to watch it on. The sports of the day were college football, baseball, horse racing, and boxing. So even though I was an avid football player and fan, I didn't know every statistic about NFL teams the way people do nowadays.

I went into my pro career with a naive idea of what it would be like to play in the NFL, but by the end of my first day, the unvarnished reality of pro ball had wiped out my silly fantasies as completely as the first sustained nuclear chain reaction, under the stands in the stadium where we practiced, had changed the world. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The Cardinals' training camp was held in the facilities at the University of Chicago, and they put us up in the nearby Piccadilly Hotel. The second I walked through the hotel doors, I understood that a couple of championship games and a championship hadn't exactly secured the Cardinals' fortunes. The Piccadilly was on the gritty South Side of Chicago, and it had once been grand, housing a three-thousand-seat theater in the 1920s. But when people lost interest in vaudeville, they lost interest in the hotel, too, and now the place definitely qualified as a dump. The lobby was a musty, red velvet monument to another era. The elevator was the old-fashioned kind that you had to get in and operate yourself. This was nothing like the luxury NFL players take for granted today.

When I showed up at the University of Chicago for practice, I went straight to the locker room. The first person I saw when I walked in the door was Plato Andros, an All-American from Oklahoma, sitting in the hot tub, casually smoking a cigar, and reading the *Daily Racing Form*. The locker room was just as dirty and despondent as the hotel. Some of the lockers stood ajar, their metal doors too bent to fit their frames. The floor was sticky with something I was glad I couldn't identify, and I was sure it hadn't felt the touch of a mop in months. I thought, "This is not the way football is supposed to be."

Plato took his cigar out of his mouth and sneered at the look on my face. "Big leagues my ass," he said with a laugh.

No kidding.

Out on the field, I looked up at the stands during a break in practice and noticed that they were covered in what seemed

to be tarpaper and had little smokestacks coming up out of the bleachers. I turned to fullback Johnny Olszewski, who was a good player and one of the friendlier guys.

"What the heck is that? Why are those little smokestacks sticking out of the bleachers?"

He gave me a look and told me that the atomic bomb had been developed in the stadium. During World War II, the University of Chicago football team had been disbanded so that chemists and other scientists could work here on the production of a controlled and self-maintaining nuclear chain reaction using uranium. I was too shocked to reply or to do anything but reel from the knowledge that a lethal nuclear weapon had been developed right where we were tossing a pigskin around as casually as kids.

After practice was finished, we went to Comiskey Park, the regular-season home stadium of the Cardinals, for a meeting. And there, yet again, I met with a stark reality. At Arkansas and Detroit, we may not have been pampered, but at least everything we had was clean and acceptable. Here the chairs were bent and uncomfortable and the locker room was dirty. The equipment and uniforms were ill-fitting and made with poor-quality materials, and I had to share a locker (if you could call it a locker) with another teammate. I guess I didn't get a private locker because I joined the team late, but even if they *had* given me my own, I doubt that it would have been much of an improvement. The locker I shared was just a stall with two nails: he had a nail and I had a nail, and that's where we hung our gear.

We did not have any offices or private rooms, like players have in modern football stadiums, either. The training room and taping facility were all part of the locker room. Players, trainers, the equipment manager, and the coaches all dressed and went about their respective businesses together—there were no offices for coaches or rooms for the trainers or equipment manager.

And since there were no media following the teams, there was no need to have a room where the players could get away from the journalists, as is necessary today. There also was no separate cafeteria for lunch. Basically, the defensive unit would go in one corner of the locker room and the offensive unit would go in another, and if you wanted lunch, you brought a brown bag.

But even though there were offensive and defensive meetings, there were no meetings after practice or special-team meetings. If you were on the kickoff team, as I was, you just were on the kickoff team. No one talked to you about staying in your lane or what portion of the field you were to cover. The coaches for the defensive and offensive units ran their meetings, and that was it.

Our head coach was Big Joe Stydahar, who had led the Los Angeles Rams to NFL championship games, winning in 1951, and then was hired by the Cardinals. He was the only man I ever knew who could chew tobacco and drink whiskey at the same time, and I think he often did both while he was coaching. He didn't have much of a staff: maybe four or five people, none of whom had the teaching ability I was later exposed to when I went to the Giants. They pretty much had you line up and play your positions. There was very little teaching or work on technique.

The plays were very minimal—like our facilities, they left something to be desired. Of course, plays don't have to be complicated to be good, but I started to feel suspicious when I realized we had only a few plays that looked like they even had a chance of being successful. I was a three-way player: I was a kicker, a defensive end, and an alternate on offense, and I got to know the "defensive strategy" like the back of my hand. And that, truth be told, didn't take much effort. We stayed in the same defense all the time; there was no zone, no man-to-man, nothing like that. You had a man to cover, and you stayed with him, plain and simple.

Unfortunately for my teammates, the general lack of motivation on the Cardinals was catching. The players ended up reflecting back the same disinterest that the management showed them. They were a depressed, unhappy bunch of guys. Any potential they had was sapped by the atmosphere of the place, and I couldn't see in them any remnants of the 1947 and 1948 championship team I had remembered. The only player left from that time was Charley Trippi, an All-American and an outstanding rookie in 1947. I had seen him play in college in the Georgia-Florida game and knew what a reputation he had. I also knew the college reputations of some others on the team, but none of those reputations seemed to have any staying power in Chicago. Trippi had already seen his best days by the time I got there. Yet he was still the foundation the Cardinals rallied around. The other players were good people and good friends, but they either didn't have the skills or didn't have the motivation to rise above our environment and to succeed even without teaching.

I realized right away that the atmosphere was not conducive to being a championship-quality team. It was an existence more than a profession. I was paid $5,500 and, as I said, I was both a kicker and a regular on defense, as well as an alternate on offense, so they got their money's worth out of me. At the time, though, I thought the pay was pretty good. I remember I got up to $7,500 during my fourth year and thought I was in the chips.

When I joined the team, the kicker the Cardinals had was drunk most of the time, which was probably why they were scouting me. His attitude was the attitude of most of the players. They all had the outlook of "We're not going to win many games anyway, so why should we try?" Well, we didn't win many games, that was for sure. Our '53 season was 1–10–1. What's more, the fans were never that supportive, though that was typical of most NFL fans at the time. On a good day, we had ten or eleven thousand—twenty thousand or more if we were playing

the Bears—at Comiskey Park, which easily could have seated fifty-five thousand. It was almost like the audience was attending a private scrimmage; when the fans booed you, you could hear what they were saying, and it could get pretty personal. Some of the players even got into arguments with the people in the stands.

Our single win was against the Bears at the end of the year. Before the game, our coach took all of our checks, wrapped them in a rubber band, threw them in the middle of the locker room, and said, "Fight for 'em, you assholes."

He told us that if we didn't beat the Bears, none of us would get paid. He also gave us each a little commentary on our performance in the previous game. "You have no ability." "You're gutless." "Why are you in the NFL?" I suppose this was his last-ditch effort to motivate us. I do know that it certainly struck fear into our hearts.

Back then, there were only twelve teams in the league, and the player limit for each team was thirty-three men. If you were on a team that had trouble making ends meet, like the Cardinals, players were cut so there were fewer people to pay. If there were two players of equal talent, but one was getting a higher salary, you can bet that the higher-paid player would be released. Economics dictated cutting as many players as possible, so each of us really had to play our position and earn our keep. Finishing the season with twenty-five players was considered being in good shape. A team would have two quarterbacks, backup linemen on both sides of the ball, a backup defensive back, and a backup running back in addition to the eleven who started, and that just about made up the whole team. Today some teams have twenty assistant coaches. That's how radically the game has changed.

If somebody got hurt, he often had to play through it, unless the injury was grave. In one instance, our offensive tackle Len Teeuws hurt his ankle at Comiskey Park. He was lying on the

ground in agony. The trainer came out; actually he was not a trainer, but a podiatrist by trade. Len had been abusive to the trainer in the locker room, so before he would shoot Len with painkiller, the trainer said, "Are you going to give me any more shit in the locker room?"

Len promised that he wouldn't cause any more trouble and then the trainer threw some alcohol on his pants and shot him right through his uniform. The poor guy had to get up after that and keep playing. We had no backup to cover him. Today an injury like that would have taken him off his foot for three or four weeks.

Getting injured was the biggest fear. The second was that our positions would be taken away; in fact, it was something we discussed every day. Players would break down the team as a pastime, talking about who they thought would be cut next. There was very little sense of camaraderie among the Cardinals. Instead, there were cliques of guys who stayed close together. Fear brought people together, and you were careful not to make good friends with someone you knew was on the borderline. We all knew Charley Trippi was going to stay, but there was not much job security for the rest of us. The rest of the team had the mentality of "Maybe, today, it's going to be you."

I certainly didn't think when I first walked into that hotel on the South Side that I would be spending the next five years of my life with the Cardinals; there was no guarantee I would even be there from week to week. And being a kicker certainly didn't make me feel like an essential part of the team. It didn't occur to people at that time that kicking was an important part of the game. I know that today, the Dallas Cowboys send their kickers from their practice field to Cowboys Stadium daily, so they can get used to the wind currents, the target they pick out in the stands, and so on. But back then, I only practiced kicking maybe three or four times a week—and even then, it was by my own volition.

I never could get anyone to hold for me, much less snap the ball from center, so I never got to practice much. The coaches didn't assign me any help—they just told me I was the kicker. While I was practicing, I had to build myself a little dirt tee, kick the ball from it, and then run and get the ball myself—just like a little kid playing on a sandlot. Because I was playing full-time defense as well as kicking, I was often too tired to practice on my own. In those days, practically the only time I practiced kicking off was during a game.

The guys in the game who were going to return kickoffs were the backup running back, backup quarterback, and backup defensive back. They'd practice with me until they were satisfied with their own game, but if I wanted to kick fifty times, it was too much for them. I would have perhaps ten warm-up kicks from increasing distances of ten yards, maybe on one side of the field, maybe not. It's amazing that I was any good at all, especially when you consider the resources available to a kicker nowadays. All of today's kickers are soccer-style kickers, first off, and they can practice and keep practicing. Kicking off the instep of your foot doesn't take as much out of you as kicking the ball head-on, so kicking isn't as wearing on them. In addition, there are men assigned to hold the ball, catch the ball, shag it, and throw it back to the center. There's somebody whose only role is to snap the ball—there's a deep snapper on every team who usually is a backup quarterback. That kind of help for kickers simply didn't exist on most teams when I was playing in the mid-1950s.

In fact, kicking was pretty much an afterthought, much in the way pro football was basically an afterthought in American sports. Lou "the Toe" Groza, the first well-known kicker, made people start to realize the importance of kickers and how they could turn a game around. Groza kicked the winning sixteen-yard field goal in the final seconds of the 1950 NFL championship game for the Cleveland Browns against the Rams. However, the Browns' electrifying win had virtually no effect on the league.

The circumstances of the win were not highly publicized in newspapers or the radio. The game was televised, but that didn't mean so much in those days. Television was not as ubiquitous as it is now, and even if you had a set, you probably were watching something else. In fact, the first game I remember seeing on television was the Rams versus the Browns the year *after* Groza's win.

NFL coaches were probably conscious of how the game was won, but just barely. They kept the mind-set of having the kicker work on his own and did not consider kicking to be an integral part of the game, but eventually kicking did work its way into coaching strategy. Paul Brown, the head coach for the Browns, appreciated the importance of three points and how the complexion of a game could change with the success of the kicker. He even assigned a defensive back to hold for Groza. Of course, it was a little bit easier to make a field goal then than it is today, since the goal post sat directly on the goal line, but three points were still three points.

Although on that first day at the Piccadilly Hotel I wasn't sure about my future or if I had made the right choice, after the end of the '53 season I don't remember wanting to quit. During training, I had determined that I would do my best—after all, playing football wasn't out of my system—and once I made friends with some of my teammates, the sense of fellowship I felt with them and our "us against the world" stance was enough for me to be anxious to return for the next season. There was no such thing as free agency back then, so besides some new member we might gain from the draft, I knew the team would basically remain the same.

During the off-season I went back home to backwoods Lake City, Florida, where I definitely wasn't hailed as a sports star. People would ask me, "What have you been doing?" and "Where have you been?" The Cardinals' games were broadcast in Chicago,

but that was about it, and as a result, not many people in Florida knew that I was a pro football player. When they found out, they'd often ask when I was going to get a *real* job—they didn't see playing pro football as a career of any consequence. If I had told them I was playing professional baseball, on the other hand, I probably would have been welcomed like a returning war hero.

Ironically, most of the stadiums we played in were made for baseball, not football, which just shows how unpopular the sport was. Wrigley Field in Chicago, Forbes Field in Pittsburgh, Shibe Park in Philadelphia, Cleveland Stadium, the Polo Grounds in New York, Briggs Stadium in Detroit, Griffith Stadium in Washington, and of course, Comiskey Park were all baseball stadiums where NFL teams competed. There were only a handful of football-only stadiums in the entire NFL. Kezar Stadium, home of the San Francisco 49ers; Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, where the Rams played; and the Green Bay Packers' City Stadium were the only strictly football stadiums. What with playing in arenas often far too big or far too small, little money, no television, and not much interest, it is a miracle that the NFL was able to survive the 1950s. The Cardinals were especially lucky to survive the 1950s, too.

Our 1954 season was only slightly better than our previous season had been. We beat Pittsburgh and Washington, giving us a 2–10 record. In 1955, there was a head-coaching change: Ray Richards replaced Big Joe Stydahar. Richards was a real gentleman and very low-key, although he was in no way inspirational. He had a good knowledge of the game. He had played in the NFL, was Stydahar's assistant coach with the Los Angeles Rams, and was a coach for a while with the Baltimore Colts. He was not much of a coach, though. We finished the 1955 season with a 4–7–1 record, outclassed in talent, coaching, organization, and every facet of the game by teams such as the Browns. Nevertheless,

I remember beating the Browns, 9–7, in the first game of the 1956 season. I kicked three field goals in the game, and as I was walking back to the sidelines, Paul Brown, their legendary coach, walked next to me. Amid what seemed like the first Cardinals fans' hollering and cheering I'd ever heard, he said, "Enjoy it now, son, because it's never going to happen again." Ironically, though, we beat the Browns again at the end of the year by an even bigger margin, 24–7, giving us a 7–5 record and putting us just out of the playoffs. Even then, the wins still didn't bring out the crowds.

We finished with the second-best record in the East, and I mainly credit our success not to Coach Richards, but rather to our running back Eli Mattson. Like a lot of excellent football recruits at that time, he had just returned from the service. The other factor that contributed to our wins was the split T, a play that was in vogue in college ball. We had a quarterback named Lamar McHan, who I played with at Arkansas, who could run the split T. It was rarely used in pro football, so they weren't prepared to stop it.

In the split T, the quarterback was the option runner—he either kept the ball or pitched it out. The splits in the offensive line were wider than they had ever been in pro football. The guard was two yards away from the center, the tackle was two yards from the guard, and every team had two tight ends who were split out even farther. This spread the field out quite a bit and involved more running than the conventional T formation.

The quarterback took the ball from the center, started down the line of scrimmage, and then pitched it back to one of the running backs or kept it himself. Ideally, he would run himself and not have to pitch the ball out. The disadvantage of the play was that the quarterback did a lot of running and, accordingly, his likelihood of being injured drastically increased, which is why more of the pro teams didn't adopt the play sooner. We'd start our games

with the split T, which confused the opposing team and gave us a good head start.

Although it seemed that our losing streak was fading away, things never turned around financially for the Cardinals' ownership. The quality of the facility and our uniforms were the same, and over the course of those years, we still lived with the fear that each week would be our last. When the Players' Association was formed, I was one of the first people to join. Our captain, Jack Jennings, who was an offensive tackle, was instrumental in starting it. He was very active in the beginning of the association, as was Abe Gibron, a guard with the Browns, who later went to the Bears and then became a head coach at Tampa Bay. As a matter of fact, Paul Brown released Abe because of his Players' Association activity.

The Packers and the Browns first formed the NFL Players' Association in 1956. It was very shaky in the beginning and they were very careful not to call it a union. Being a charter member, as I was, wasn't a thing you wanted to publicize. If ownership knew, your chances of being released went up. I used to talk about the association with Jennings, about what players ought to be guaranteed in compensation and such things. Back then, you had to pay for your own shoes and for meals on Sundays, since the cafeteria at training camp didn't give dinners that night. At its conception, that's what the Players' Association was all about: dinner on Sunday nights and shoes, not health insurance or pensions.

It's amazing to think how much times have changed since then. There we were, sneaking around, trying to find a way to gently ask for a single pair of shoes, when today players practically have to fend off sportswear companies desperate to hand them free merchandise. When I was broadcasting a Dallas Cowboys game once, I looked in Emmett Smith's locker and was amazed at what I saw. He had a contractual deal with some sporting line,

and there must have been 150 pairs of shoes in his locker—box after box of shoes that had never been worn. He could have practically shod the entire Eastern Conference in my time.

Not every player joined the Players' Association, obviously. I think that ownership knew what was going on, but I never got in trouble for my membership like Gibron did, though I did end up leaving the Cardinals. The truth was, even though I was making some progress with the Players' Association, I had begun toying with the idea of retiring. I'd had enough of the depressing situation with the Cardinals. I didn't have my future without football really mapped out, but teaching or coaching seemed like possibilities. And my wife, Kathy, fully supported the idea of my retiring. Life as a football wife was difficult, especially with the Cardinals, and she did not like it. About ten or twelve other players were married, and our wives always worried for us. Because we had no job security and anyone could be ousted at any time, there was a sense of attrition, as if we were in a war instead of the NFL. And since there was no security for us, there was no security for our wives.

I met Kathy in high school but didn't really get to know her until she finished college. She was four years younger than I, and when we were in high school that was a big age difference, but when I came back from college and when I visited in the off-season after beginning my career in the pros, the difference became smaller. Unlike most of the college girls I'd gone out with, she was a grounded girl, soft-spoken and religious. I saw her on occasion when a bunch of us would go water-skiing or fishing. I remember on one of those outings, my cousin Mike pointed to her and said, "That's who you ought to go out with, that gal there."

After we had been dating for a while, I asked her to marry me. I was twenty-five years old, all of my friends were married, and it seemed like the thing to do. Everyone called us an *almost* perfect couple, "almost" because we hadn't exchanged vows yet.

We enjoyed just dating and being a couple, though. We even spent a summer working at a camp together. She was a counselor and I was a lifeguard, and working together made us closer than ever.

Once I had proposed, I had to talk to her father, who was a gruff, tough military man. He asked me if I had any money, and I said I had some war bonds and a little money set aside from football. I told him that I planned to go back to training camp and get married after the 1956 season was over. He took charge, however, and said, "No. If you're going to do it, let's get on with it," so we were married before training camp.

Kathy came with me to Chicago. She didn't have a warm coat at the time, and I remember her almost freezing to death. All of us lived in the Piccadilly Hotel, and one time when I came back from practice, I couldn't find her. She was buried down in the bed, next to the radiator, trying to stay warm. When I found her that way, I knew we had to make some major adjustments. She didn't like things in Chicago at all—it was a pretty sad situation, actually. Some of the wives would get together to play bridge or go shopping. They would all go to the games together and sit by themselves in a section. And they didn't even get good seats, which was surprising when you considered how few tickets the Cardinals sold.

Of course, there weren't that many fans anyway. There was never any sort of instance where we were noticed on the streets of Chicago, unless it was for being bigger than everybody else. Even the people at the hotel, who knew we were football players, didn't give us any breaks or preferential treatment because of it. The Bears, on the other hand, were the darlings and elite of Chicago; we were the stepchildren. They got all the publicity in the papers, and their games were sold out every weekend. We were lucky if we got any mention by the media, which is why we only had those ten or twelve thousand antagonistic fans in our stadium.

What really tipped the balance for me was that Comiskey Park was in a dangerous part of town. It wasn't a place where you wanted to bring your cars or your kids. While we players were never worried for our own safety, we were definitely concerned for our wives when they came down. It wasn't easy to be married under those circumstances. There was no job security, and we had to live in two different places: Chicago during the football season and, for me and Kathy, Lake City in the off-season.

By the end of the '57 season, I'd started to wonder if my football days were over. But then, surprisingly, the Cardinals got a new head coach, a man named Pop Ivy. He came from the Canadian Football League and was supposed to have all these new philosophies about how to play the game, though I knew very little about him at the time. When the Cardinals hired Pop Ivy, he said that things were going to be different. He was going to open up the offense and run what they had run in Canada—some sort of double wing play that hadn't been seen in the NFL. I wasn't sure where I fit into that plan, so I called him and had a long conversation in which he told me that he had great plans for me as a key player and that I should consider playing some more. He assured me that I was a cornerstone, a building block, and a vital part of the team. I felt good about that, and it occurred to me that my future might be more secure than I thought—maybe even the playoffs were ahead of me. I shelved any thoughts of retirement and began to look forward to a new season and a new beginning with the Cardinals.

Of course, I never got that new beginning with Chicago. Two weeks after I received all those assurances from Ivy about my importance to the team, I was standing in the post office in Lake City, Florida, glancing at the sports pages of the local newspaper. That's when I read that I had been traded . . . to the New York Giants.