

1960s

After Forty Years, **a New Beginning**

Head coach Vince Lombardi and his Green Bay Packers bridged the AFL-NFL merger with four consecutive NFL Championships from 1964 through 1967.



NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle (center) chats with Baltimore Colts head coach Don Shula prior to Super Bowl III on January 13, 1969.

Quarterback Len Dawson (16) of the Kansas City Chiefs breaks the huddle in a regular season AFL game against the Buffalo Bills.

By Craig Hodgkins

As the 1960s dawned, the National Football League found itself in a powerful but increasingly uncomfortable position.

Launched in 1920 as the American Professional Football Conference with a roster of four Midwestern teams, the league had already survived an early revolving door of franchises, countless mergers and moves, two wars and a competitive post-WWII threat from a rival league: the All American Football Conference (AAFC).

Forty years later, the stakes were much higher. Attendance was spiking

and regionally televised games, complete with local “blackouts,” were also on the rise. The NFL had finally become a fan rival to Major League Baseball.

Business was good; so good that the league, which had grown to 12 franchises by adding three former AAFC teams—the Baltimore Colts, the San Francisco 49ers and the Cleveland Browns—chose to expand the NFL season from 12 to 14 games beginning in 1961.

But there were new challenges afoot.

In August of 1959, a group of businessmen—some of whom had been denied NFL franchises—met in Chicago to estab-

lish the rival American Football League, with franchises in Minnesota, Dallas, Houston, Denver, New York and Los Angeles. Two months later, on October 11, longtime NFL Commissioner Bert Bell, who’d first taken the reins in 1945 and led the league into the modern era, suffered a heart attack while attending an Eagles-Steelers game and died later that day.

When NFL owners assembled for their annual meetings in Miami Beach in January 1960, the first order of business was to select a new commissioner.

The final decision came on the twenty-third ballot of the meeting, when

Pete Rozelle, the 33-year old general manager of the Los Angeles Rams, became the third commissioner of the National Football League.

Rozelle’s priorities were clear; to build on the league’s growing popularity while holding off any potential competition from the AFL.

It would have been a tough task for a veteran leader. The new league had money to spend, and AFL owners wasted no time in going after some of the best college players in the nation, including Alabama’s Joe Namath and LSU star Billy Cannon, and forced aggressive

bidding wars for some top NFL stars.

While few would argue that an AFL squad could hold its own against any NFL franchise—let alone the highly disciplined teams such as Vince Lombardi’s Green Bay Packers or George Halas’ Chicago Bears—the new league was home to a wide-open style of football featuring more passing and scoring, and fans were beginning to notice.

Something had to give.

After a half-decade of competing in some of the same cities and on television (the NFL was broadcast on CBS and the AFL had a deal with NBC), the

rival leagues finally reached a truce.

On June 8, 1966, the two announced in a joint agreement that the nine AFL teams would join the NFL (paying a combined \$18 million over a twenty-year period for the privilege), Rozelle would become commissioner of both leagues, a common draft would be held, and interleague play would begin in 1970.

In addition, it was determined that a “world championship” game between the winners of the two leagues would be played following the 1966 season.

The Super Bowl era had begun.

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COMMISSIONER - TONY TOMASE/GETTY IMAGES; CHIEFS TEAM - JOHN VANWATER COLLECTION/DIAMOND IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES