

GEORGE HALAS

join the Bears. That was the move that put the NFL on the map.

“One of the best lines I’ve heard about my grandfather is that he demanded that the American sporting public pay attention to pro football,” McCaskey said. “There were a lot of people who couldn’t believe young men would accept payment to play football. It really wasn’t until he signed Red Grange that there was potential for professional football to be a great American sport.”

Halas relinquished his coaching duties in 1929, only to return to the sidelines a few years later, much to the dismay of Sternaman. And, as the case is with many business relationships, the Halas-Sternaman partnership reached its expiration date in 1932. Having much more invested in the team, Halas bought out Sternaman for \$38,000.

From that point forward, Halas guided the Bears in some fashion for the next five decades. He won a total of eight NFL championships, stepping away for military service during World War II and a brief retirement in 1956 and ’57, keeping a promise that he had made to his wife. Halas won his 324th and final game as the team’s head coach in 1967 — an NFL record that lasted until Don Shula bested it in 1993 — and he ran the team almost until his final days.

A few years after Halas’s son, George Jr., died of a heart attack in 1979, the Bears’ patriarch was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Before his death in 1983, Halas did everything he could to ensure that the Bears would not only be left in good hands but that the team would specifically remain in his family forever. So far, that has been the case.

“That was very important to him,” said McCaskey, who as the team’s fourth chairman has followed in the footsteps of his grandfather, his father and his brother. “That’s why a crucial part of his estate plan was to leave the team to his descendants and to put his daughter, and my mother, Virginia, in charge. We take that responsibility seriously. We feel that we are uniquely qualified to carry on George Halas’s legacy, and that’s what we’re trying to do. No other family can claim ownership from the beginning of the sport to the present day, and that means a lot to us. Our goal is to hang on to the Bears until the second coming.”

Like every organization in sports, the Bears have had good seasons and bad seasons in the decades since Halas passed away. But Chicago’s 1985 Super Bowl championship team, coached by Halas’s former tight end, Mike Ditka, cemented itself as one of the greatest football teams in history. That club posted a 15-1 regular

season record, falling only to Shula’s Dolphins, and it dominated the competition in the postseason like few teams ever have.

From Ditka’s steakhouse in downtown Chicago, where a photo of Halas and Ditka hangs near the bar, to his bust in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, located a short distance from where the NFL was born in Canton, Papa Bear’s legacy lives on.

The centennial anniversaries of Halas’s brief big-league career and of the Chicago Bears’ existence illustrate that this is not a story of what could have been, but rather what would not have been had Halas continued his pursuit of greatness with the Yankees.

“Getting the opportunity to compete for the New York Yankees was a thrill for him,” McCaskey said. “But our family is thrilled that he couldn’t hit the curveball! There are several people who have founded professional sports teams, but there are not many people who can say that they are also one of the founders of professional football. Then, when you take into account that he amassed 40 years as a successful coach and was, for decades, the leader in professional football victories, it’s pretty obvious that his influence on the American sporting scene is considerable, and that is putting it mildly.” ❧



From the statue outside the Bears’ practice facility to the NFC championship trophy bearing his name to framed photos like the one near the bar at Ditka’s steakhouse, Halas remains an immense presence in and around Chicago. His family carries on the legacy of a man who once dreamed of a future in pinstripes but instead etched his name into football history.