As latest NFL wannabe, UFL might be DOA

by Nick Canepa

The rich kids, the ones who can have everything - but an NFL franchise - are getting ready to try again. This time, they're talking about a United Football League, which would play spring games, starting with eight teams in non-NFL cities. Smart people do not always do smart things. Money talks, but it can speak in a hoarse tongue.

Have they not learned? Do they not remember the World Football League? Do they not remember the USFL? Do they not remember the XFL? Do they not remember the terrible failures? Must we go through another "He Hate Me"?

The USFL was my favorite. Beginning in 1983, with the promise it wouldn't try to challenge the NFL, that it wouldn't spend big money on players, it lied, naturally. It folded in 1985 and went sobbing to federal court, filing an antitrust case trying to prove the NFL was a monopoly.

And it won! It proved The League was a monopoly! A shocker. So the court awarded the USFL $1, and because penalties in antitrust cases are trebled, it came away with all of $3. Missed helping the USFL to recover - by that much.

"I was a part of the USFL," says San Diego Chargers General Manager A.J. Smith, who was a scout under George Allen with the Chicago Fire. "But when Donald Trump (who owned the New Jersey Generals) decided to go head-to-head with the National Football League, it was destroyed. We were devastated."

It was Trump back then who said: "I've never had a losing season. I don't want to start now."

Of course, The Donald didn't have a losing season. He lost a league. Trump wanted to move games to the fall, challenge the NFL and force a merger. Bad idea. Since, he's lost "The Apprentice," and should lose his barber. Probably lost that antitrust money, too.

Anyway, this UFL thing is grabbing attention because Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban wants to be a part of it, possibly running a team in Vegas, which no doubt would stick pins into the necks of the NFL's anti-gambling hypocrites. I tried to reach Cuban, the Maverick's maverick, but he e-mailed me back noting he said everything he needed to say on his blog.

"The NFL wants and needs competition," Cuban blogged. "They have grown so big and powerful that every

move is scrutinized by local or federal officials. A competitor allows them to point to us and explain that their moves are for competitive reasons rather than the move of a monopoly."

Thing is, the NFL is a monopoly and obviously enjoys it. Cuban is the most dynamic owner in sports, but what bothers is his using "competition, "competitor" and "competitive." The NFL has no competition and doesn't need any. The UFL will be a gnat on its windshield. Trying to compete with The League will be public euthanasia.

Although there are plans for a salary cap, you just know some ego-driven UFL owner is going to run amok. The late, lamented AFL was able to get away with it because Commissioner Al Davis wisely decided raiding the NFL's quarterback cupboard would light a fire in Pete Rozelle's pants. It did. A merger ensued, but those were different times, and the NFL had no problem handling growth in the 1960s.

Prediction: There will be no NFL-UFL merger.

If done right - a long shot - it could be a good thing, an NFL farm without portfolio. There are many players, dozens on NFL practice squads, who would love to play football in the spring. It can do nothing but help them.

It also can help the NFL, which doesn't need much. Smith, who is a scout at heart, has no problem with a new league coming into his life. It only can affect him and the Chargers in a good way. He knows the first option for any player is to advance to the big league. This could provide an avenue.

"When I found out who's involved, it drew my attention," Smith says. "Mark Cuban's wheels are turning. I believe it can move forward. There is room for it. Some guys can't play in the NFL still want to play football and stay alive. It won't help the 33-year-old, but it will help the young guys who want to stay alive and get better. As Marv Levy used to say: 'Players do get better.'"

It happens. Quarterback Kurt Warner, who had been stocking grocery shelves, became a two-time NFL MVP while with the Rams after he emerged from the Arena League. Football people who know what they're doing will watch.

"The Chargers will be there," Smith says. "We cover all leagues. There have been mercenaries who have played year-round. It's hard to believe, hard to comprehend, but they just keep playing. A practice squad guy can start in that league."

Practice squadders - each NFL club has eight - can do as they please.

"Practice squad guys are free agents," Smith says. "They can go anywhere. They can play in two leagues and make a helluva living."

If owners don't go overboard. And history insists coach Davy Jones' Locker hasn't been filled.

Copley News Service

As latest NFL wannabe, UFL might be DOA by Nick Canepa