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Thirty years later, USFL is being resurrected and Orlando is a prime candidate for a franchise

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Once upon a time — back before the NBA made Magic here and the MLS turned us into an Orlando City — we were literally and figuratively a Renegade professional sports town.

We were a barren wasteland of sports nothingness with no teams to root for and no inclination that there ever would be.

Then the Orlando Renegades of the old United States Football League came to town and provided a spark — albeit a very brief one — that would blaze a trail into our pro sports future. The Renegades played just one season here in 1985 before the USFL went belly-up, but that one season was enough to give Orlando a glimpse of what it could be.

Now, 30 years later, the USFL is trying to make a comeback and Orlando is once again a prime candidate for a team. The question is this: Now that we are a major-league town, do we still have an appetite for minor-league football?

"The league will be purely a developmental league playing in the spring," explained Jim Bailey, the president and CEO of new USFL, from his office in California. "The mission is to give players a second chance. The rosters will be comprised mostly of players in NFL camps who couldn't make it for whatever reason and need more time to develop and mature.

"We think it'll work. There's no outdoor contact sport in the spring. The appetite for football seems to be growing. We're not the NFL. We're more like a minor-league baseball team playing in smaller stadiums, trying to produce fan-friendly competitive football games. And we're going to stay away from cities that already have NFL and Major League Baseball teams. ... Obviously, Orlando fits right in the middle of that demographic."

Bailey isn't your usual fly-by-night snake oil salesman trying to start up another sure-to-fail alphabet league. He was late owner Art Modell's right-hand man for 21 years in the NFL as executive vice president of the Cleveland Browns and Baltimore Ravens. He played football at Florida State in the 1960s and was recruited to Tallahassee by some young, unknown assistant coach by the name of Bobby Bowden. The head coach at FSU during Bailey's college years was Bill Peterson, the colorful malaprop artist who once said, "You can't make a football overnight."

Nor a football league.

"A few years ago, I had a chance to meet with David Dixon, the founder of the original USFL," Bailey says. "His original concept was just to provide more football in the spring. He set up a salary cap that required teams to live within their means. At the first meeting, the owners started talking about doing away with the salary cap and going head to head with the NFL. He knew at that point the league wouldn't survive and he resigned."

The original USFL might have had a chance if not for egotistical billionaire owners like Donald Trump, who essentially took over the league, started trying to outbid the NFL for players like Herschel Walker and even wanted to move to the fall to compete with the NFL.

The Orlando Renegades lasted just nine months after Central Florida businessman Don Dizney purchased the floundering Washington franchise and moved it to the Citrus Bowl. Long before Lee Corso was modeling mascot heads on ESPN, he was the head coach of the Renegades, who averaged about 25,000 fans per game despite a 5-13 record in their one and only season.

The USFL, which gave birth to instant replay, the zone blitz, the run-and-shoot offense and a hotshot young coach named Steve Spurrier, folded following the 1985 season shortly after it was awarded a whopping \$3 settlement in its anti-trust lawsuit against the NFL.

The league has not been heard from since – until now.

Bailey is trying to resurrect it because he thinks there is an appetite for it and because he believes there needs to be a developmental league for the thousands of players like Tim Tebow who aren't yet ready to give up on their NFL dreams.

Who knows if the exhumed league can ever be brought back to life or will ever again field a team in Orlando. Doesn't really matter. The USFL has already helped make us what we are today.

It's not just coincidence that Orlando Magic founder Jimmy Hewitt, an Orlando businessman who was a minority investor in Dizney's Renegades, began his quest to bring the NBA to town shortly after the Renegades folded.

"The Renegades didn't win a lot of games, but there were 25,000 people in the stands and they brought Orlando excitement," Hewitt once told the Sentinel. "I thought we were seeing what might be the future of sports in Orlando."

Added Dizney: "The seeds were planted. The support the team got showed Orlando was ready."

Long live the USFL!

We will forever be a Renegade sports town.