



Tribune Photo by Sally Good

With a Harvey Wallbanger cake and a kiss from staffer Kathy Dunne, George Halas celebrates his 83d birthday. "I'm right in the prime of life," he said.

At 83, Halas kicks off a Super Bowl future

GEORGE HALAS is a pro.

The man who invented professional football knows his business, whether it's football or being the subject of a photo session and interview or celebrating his birthday.

Thursday was the 83d birthday for the owner of the Chicago Bears. He celebrated with a telegram from the mayor, a proclamation from the governor, and a luncheon party thrown by his old friend, Federal Judge Abraham Lincoln Marovitz.

He also posed for pictures for an hour — as obedient and cooperative as any National Football League rookie posing for his first bubble gum card—cut a Harvey Wallbanger cake baked for him by one of his secretaries, and talked, mostly about "the present and the future."

HALAS SAID HE does not really like to talk about the past, to reminisce all that much, though when one has as much of a past as he does it's hard not to venture a memory or two.

"You come back in seven years after we've won two Super Bowls and then we'll reminisce," he promised.

But before those future Super Bowls, Halas is determined to claim another

Close-up with Dorothy Collin



championship—the one he says the Bears won in 1924, but lost when Halas went to the men's room.

It happened at the annual meeting of the NFL, which was all of four years old at the time.

"**AT THIS MEETING,** when I went to the men's room, they gave the championship to Cleveland," Halas said, his voice full of injury. "I didn't pay much attention because you know in the early '20s you didn't care much about championships. You were worried about just trying to survive. But now at this year's meeting I'm going to put in a claim for that championship.

"The season had ended and this was an extra game. We got permission to send Cleveland a letter stating it was for the championship. And we had a big

Continued on page 12, col. 4

Halas at 83 'looks to the future'

Continued from page one

crowd. And we won that game. So I'm going to put in for it."

As Halas posed for photographs, expertly fondling a football, he said he was amazed at what had happened since 1920 when he began the Decatur Staleys, which became the Chicago Bears.

"YOU KNOW, I once paid \$10,000 to a Louisville television station to broadcast our games in Indiana," he said, shaking his head at the thought of the immense amounts paid by TV to the NFL today. "I never thought anything like this would happen."

But it wasn't TV that made pro football the national institution it has become. "It was the players in the '20s that made it," Halas said. They were paid \$100 a man for each game and "survival was the word. But I was always inspired to keep on by what my coach at college said, coach Robert Zupke.

"At our final dinner for the senior players he said, 'Just when you've learned something about football, I lose you.' I've always kept that in my mind and it was true. When you played football after college games, you're a year older and a little smarter and you know more about football. And that was the key statement that convinced me to keep on."

AFTER MORE posing with the football, it was time to pose with the cake baked by Kathy Dunne. Halas grinned, cut the cake, and warbled, "Hail to the Orange," the Illinois loyalty song.

"I'm right in the prime of life," he said. "I'm so happy, so happy."

He told about his grandchildren calling him about their report cards. His grandson announced he was doing very well, except for Spanish. "I said, 'That's all right. I wasn't so good in Spanish either when I was at the University of Illinois and thank goodness in the final

Close-up

examination the pretty girl that sat in front of me lowered her right shoulder so I could look over and I got a passing grade."

Halas said he negotiated with his granddaughter to help her brother in Spanish.

HE PICKED UP the football to pose again. "This is the proper way to hold a football," he said tucking it in his arm close to his side. "I'm going to tell our Bears next year so they'll stop making all those damn fumbles."

He put down the football and allowed a bit of reminiscing. He told how he went to work for the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad as a structural engineer, figuring stresses and strains on new bridges. "Thank goodness none of those bridges ever collapsed," he said.

"Then a man came up from Decatur who wanted to know if I would be interested in going to Decatur, work for the Staley company, learn the business, be athletic director, get a good football team together, and to play on the football team and the baseball team."

HALAS, OF COURSE, was a good baseball player and a rightfielder for the New York Yankees. Unfortunately, he couldn't hit a curve so the Yankees sent him to St. Paul. There, he unraveled the mystery of the curve, but he never went back to the Yankees. A young pitcher turned rightfielder named Babe Ruth had taken his place.

In Decatur, Halas learned the starch business and started the Staleys. But in 1921, he took them to Chicago. "After the 1920 season there was a slight recession and Mr. Staley said, 'Gee, this recession, George, we can't stand the expense [of the team].

"So I'll give you \$5,000. Take the team to Chicago and call it the Chicago Staleys for the year 1921,' which we did, and that was the greatest break in my life.

"And it built from there, from the Staleys, which I called the Bears. And I called them the Bears because we were bigger men than the Cubs. It stuck."

ONE NAME THAT did not stick was the one first suggested for the Bears cheerleaders. "They wanted to call them George's Girls," Halas said, laughing. "Well, I said, 'No, not on your life.' So they called them the Honey Bears, which is a good name.

"I hope our last year at Soldier Field will be a wonderful year. In fact, I know it will be a wonderful year. The improved team will be most interesting."

And the coach? "That's where Jim Finks fits in and he is doing a beautiful job and really, working hard at it," Halas said. "It wouldn't surprise me if you're very shortly we didn't have a coach."

IT WAS TIME for a toast. We toasted Halas and we toasted the Bears. I suggested next year we might toast a Bears championship.

"No, that takes two years," Halas said. "And better yet, you want to do a little reminiscing? Well, right now I'm busy with the present, busy with the future, but as I said before you come back in seven years and we'll have a couple of Super Bowls under our belt and then I'll reminisce."