

They Call It Pro Football

By Ed Carter

When “They Call It Pro Football” was produced in 1967, the film revolutionized how football highlight films would be made, how games would be broadcast, and even how the NFL would be perceived around the globe. Producer Ed Sabol’s NFL Films company eventually became a multi-billion dollar sports media giant and Sabol himself a member of the 2011 NFL Hall of Fame.

Five years earlier, Sabol’s Blair Motion Pictures company paid the NFL \$5,000 for the rights to create a package of film highlights from the league’s championship game between the New York Giants and the Green Bay Packers. At the time, football highlight films were almost an afterthought, using techniques borrowed from newsreels. Well-known sportscasters (often those who had broadcast the games) read straightforward descriptions of the action, occasionally injecting bad puns or strained alliteration. The games unfolded in chronological order, showing individual plays in their entirety. Coverage was almost always from a high angle, showing a bird’s eye view of most of the players at once. The soundtracks consisted of canned, generic audience reactions and formulaic college fight-song style music.

But Pete Rozelle, a former ad man and the league’s commissioner, knew the value of public presentation and product branding. His “product,” professional football, had risen to national prominence in the late 1950s, but still trailed baseball’s popularity – a far cry from the national obsession it is today. Rozelle, often in conflict with many conservative team owners, supported Sabol’s efforts to shake things up and create a filmic record that was more than just a factual document, something with artistry and flair. In 1965, each team in the league put up \$20,000 to purchase Blair Motion Pictures, and retained Sabol to head the new entity called NFL Films which would cover not just the annual championship but the entire season.

Though the Blair/NFL Films product grew progressively more successful and innovative, they still



The extreme close-up, one of the features that distinguished “They Call It Pro Football” from earlier sports highlight films. Close-ups and slow motion cinematography made watching the game a more visceral experience for the audience. Courtesy NFL Films.

clung somewhat to the old style of filmmaking. Sabol’s group started integrating new filming techniques such as slow motion and field-level angles, using long telephoto lenses to capture images of the players’ faces and hands. They photographed the teams on the sidelines and began miking them as well – a first for sports films. Even individual fans in the stands became important subjects.

In 1966, Sabol and his team began work on an entirely new type of sports film. It would be more of a promotional film for the league, and describe not a particular game or team or season, but the game itself. “They Call It Pro Football,” completed in early 1967, became the first film to combine all the elements - dynamic editing, dramatic writing and narration, compelling music, and incredible cinematography - which later became the company’s signature, and ushered in a new way to look at the game.

It’s impressive how much of the world of an NFL game “They Call It Pro Football” packs into less than 25 minutes -- passionate fans, the pageantry of marching bands and cheerleaders, referees, an introduction to the fundamentals of the game, and, of course, plenty of exciting game footage. At training camp, we see the sweat and pain of grueling summer workouts. The film describes the various positions: quarterback, runner, linebacker, defensive back (though sadly, no mention is made of the traditionally overlooked offensive lineman). One sequence describes play in bad weather conditions, no doubt to differentiate the sport from baseball.

Fans can see the faces of players like John Unitas, Gale Sayers, Bart Starr and Fran Tarkenton up close and personal instead of hidden by helmets and facemasks. In less than 30 seconds of screen time, Philadelphia Eagles head coach Joe Kuharich displays a wide range of coaching emotion and performance. The legendary Vince Lombardi diagrams his famous play, the “Packer sweep,” on a chalkboard.

Ed Sabol, executive producer of the film, brought on to the project his son Steve, a recent graduate of Colorado College and avid movie buff, to write and produce. Ed quipped that all Steve had done at college was play football and watch movies, making him “uniquely qualified” to create films about football. Steve loved Hollywood epics (as did Ed, who titled the 1962 championship film “Pro Football’s Longest Day,” after Darryl Zanuck’s film about D-Day) and writers like Kipling, both of which influenced his poetic writing and narrative storytelling. In the film Steve describes a defensive line as “one ton of muscle with a one track mind.” The film was directed by John Hentz, formerly of the Tel-Ra company (another sports highlight film pioneer, begun in 1948) and NFL Films’ head of production. As they perfected their developing style, the team amassed miles of footage from thousands of games. But they lacked key elements to bring the footage to life: sound, editing, music and narration.

The team wanted to utilize non-linear, montage-style editing and hired Yoshi Kishii, a well-known freelance professional editor, to help realize this vision. Kishii, however, knew nothing about football and had never even seen a game. But since the film was designed at least in part as a primer on how the game worked, an outsider’s perspective proved invaluable. At the beginning of the film Kishii displays his associative editing style with images of flight: a falcon, cheerleaders flapping their arms, a man propelled skyward by jet-pack, balloons released en masse.

Sound plays a key role in the film. The ticking clock in the film’s opening sequence establishes the time-based nature of the game (again, in opposition to baseball). The voices of the players and coaches reveal their individual personalities. Groans amplify grimaces and thuds punctuate tackles as they convey an intimacy lacking in earlier films. It’s also the first film to utilize another of the company’s trademark flourishes – melodic, stirring music. Film and television composer Sam Spence was hired to replace the traditional “oom-pah” fight songs with more sophisticated compositions, weaving together classical, folk, rock, jazz and Ed Sabol’s beloved big band music. Spence’s compositions proved integral to the film’s sense of spectacle, despite the fact that the composer never watched any of the footage his music accompanied, but was simply guided by Sabol’s suggestions.

Finally, Ed Sabol needed someone to give character to Steve’s writing. As Philadelphians, they were familiar with accomplished local news anchor John Facenda, then being phased out for younger talent. Unlike Kishii and Spence, however, Facenda knew and loved football. Instead of the “just the facts” approach of a sportscaster, Facenda brought vibrancy and nuance, beginning with the film’s famous opening line, “It begins with a whistle, and ends with a gun.” It earned him the nickname “the Voice of God.” Facenda continued to narrate films for the company until his death in 1984.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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