

1st season was a springboard for team's success



DAVID WOLFFORD

David Wolfford teaches at Mariemont High School.

As the Bengals continue their 45th season, some might recall their first in 1968, when veteran coach Paul Brown struggled with an expansion team in the old American Football League.

Brown's stellar record in Cleveland abruptly ended when owner Art Modell let him go. After a frustrating hiatus on the bench, Brown returned to the game, this time in Cincinnati. The new franchise's name came from a short-lived Cincinnati Bengals team from the late 1930s.

This expansion team drafted a few veteran free agents and several rising stars from the college ranks. Brown wanted more pliable rookies for loyalty and to build a future rather than talented prima donnas for short-term gain. Early recruits included running back Paul Robinson from Arizona State, All-American center Bob Johnson from Tennessee and Utah receiver Bob Trumpy. They also took experienced Miami Dolphin quarterback

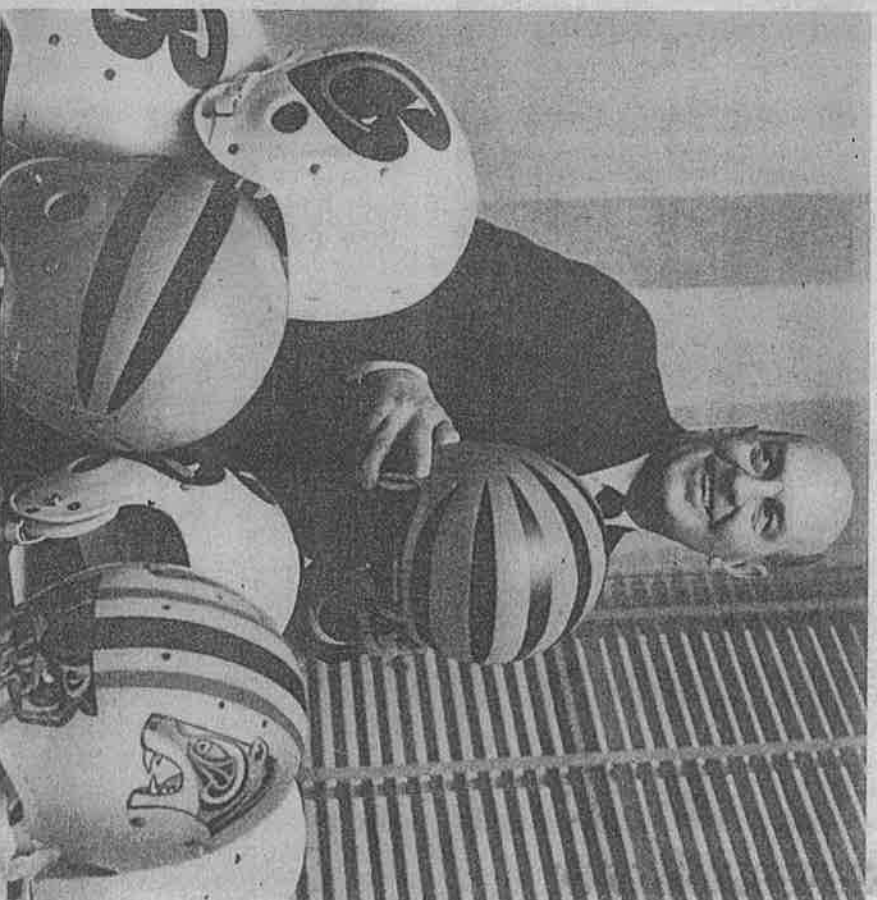
John Stofa. Coach Bill Walsh joined Brown's staff a decade before reshaping the game at San Francisco.

Brown set up training camp at Wilmington College, where he whittled down the original 125 recruits to 75 players. By their first exhibition game against Kansas City, Sports Illustrated called the squad "ragged and outmanned." They lost 38-14. The team went 2-3 in the preseason.

They gave Cincinnatians hope in the opening drive of their first regular season game at San Diego. Quarterback Dewey Warren replaced the injured Stofa and took the team 72 yards. But the Chargers went on to win 29-13.

The first regular season home game against the Denver Broncos followed in University Heights (the Bengals played its first two seasons at Nippert Stadium). On an unseasonably cold mid-September afternoon, hot chocolate rivalled beer sales. Just over 25,000 fans attended. The UC cheerleaders led the cheers.

"I coached myself before I came," a realistic Brown told an AP sportswriter. "We're an expansion team ... we have a tough nut to crack." The Enquirer's Dick Forbes wrote his players "are as nervous as a June bride." The band from Brown's old Massillon school performed at half-time of a scoreless game.



Paul Brown, president of the then-new Cincinnati Bengals, trying to select the design of the team's helmets on Jan. 3, 1968. The Bengals went 3-11 in their first season. AP

In the second half, Bengal Dale Livingston kicked a 49-yard field goal, and then a healed Stofa hit Trumpy for a 58-yard TD. Denver then matched them with a field goal and a TD pass.

The turning point came when they went for a first down from their own 46 yard line. "We felt we had to take the chance," Brown told The Enquirer. "It was a big turning point, and of course the fans wanted it." They finished the Broncos 24-10. In the locker

room Brown toasted the team with a Coke: "To one in a row, men."

The Bengals finished with a typical expansion-team record, 3-11, and last in their division. Running back Paul Robinson rushed for more than 1,000 yards and was named the AFL rookie of the year. Trumpy led the team in receptions. And future Bengals coach Sam Wyche served as another backup quarterback with 63 percent completions and nearly 500 total passing yards. ■