

## **1949 AAFC Coach Profile: Paul Brown**

Paul Eugene Brown (September 7, 1908 – August 5, 1991) was an American football coach and executive in the All-America Football Conference (AAFC), the National Football League (NFL), and the American Football League (AFL). Brown was both the co-founder and first coach of the Cleveland Browns, a team named after him, and later co-founded the Cincinnati Bengals. His teams won seven league championships in a professional coaching career spanning 25 seasons.

Brown began his coaching career at Severn School in 1931 before becoming the head football coach at Massillon Washington High School in Massillon, Ohio, where he grew up. His high school teams lost only 10 games in 11 seasons. He was then hired at Ohio State University and coached the school to its first national football championship in 1942. After World War II, he became head coach of the Browns, who won all four AAFC championships before joining the NFL in 1950.



Brown coached the Browns to three NFL championships — in 1950, 1954 and 1955 — but was fired in January 1963 amid a power struggle with team owner Art Modell. In 1968, Brown co-founded and was the first coach of the Bengals. He retired from coaching in 1975 but remained the Bengals' team president until his death in

1991. The Bengals named their home stadium Paul Brown Stadium in his honor. He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1967.

Brown is credited with a number of American football innovations. He was the first coach to use game film to scout opponents, hire a full-time staff of assistants, and test players on their knowledge of a playbook. He invented the modern face mask, the practice squad and the draw play. He also played a role in breaking professional football's color barrier, bringing the first African-Americans to play pro football in the modern era onto his teams. Despite these accomplishments, Brown was not universally liked. He was strict and controlling, which often brought him into conflict with players who wanted a greater say in play-calling. These disputes, combined with Brown's failure to consult Modell on major personnel decisions, led to his firing as the Browns' coach in 1963.

On April 1, 2025, the NFL announced All-America Football Conference records and statistics will be recognized in its official records. This bumped Paul Brown to seventh place on the NFL's all-time head coaches wins list.

### **AAFC Years.**

By the time Brown arrived in Cleveland, the team had signed a number of players to its roster, including quarterback Otto Graham, whose Northwestern squad had beaten the Buckeyes in 1941. Many of the players came from Ohio State, Great Lakes and Massillon teams that Brown coached. Lou Groza, a placekicker and tackle, played for Brown at Ohio State before the war intervened. Receiver Dante Lavelli was a sophomore on Ohio State's championship-

winning team in 1942. Bill Willis, a defensive lineman whom Brown coached at Ohio State, and Marion Motley, a running back who grew up in Canton and played for Brown at Great Lakes, became two of the first black athletes to play professional football when they joined the team in 1946. Other signings included receiver Mac Speedie, center Frank Gatski and back Edgar "Special Delivery" Jones. Brown brought in assistants including Blanton Collier, who had been stationed at Great Lakes and met Brown at Bluejackets practices.

The name of the team was at first left up to Brown, who rejected calls for it to be christened the Browns in his honor. McBride then held a contest to name the team in May 1945, which yielded the name "Panthers," which had previously been used by an earlier team that had played in Cleveland in the 1920s. However, the nickname was scrapped soon afterward.



Bill Willis (left), Brown, and Otto Graham (right)

Depending on the source, Brown rejected it after learning that the Panthers had failed (according to this version, Brown said, "That old Panthers team failed. I want no part of that name.", or McBride balked at paying the owner of the original Panthers for the rights to use the name. Whatever the case, in August, McBride gave in to popular demand and christened the Browns, despite Paul Brown's objections.

For years, however, Brown claimed that the second name-the-team contest yielded the name "Brown Bombers," after then-world heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis, whose nickname was "The

Brown Bomber." According to this version, when Brown rejected the nickname "Panthers," he decided that the team needed a nickname befitting a champion and felt the nickname "Brown Bombers" was appropriate. The name was reportedly shortened to simply "Browns." This alternate history of the name was even supported by the team as being factual as recently as the mid-1990s, and it continues as an urban legend to this day. However, Paul Brown never held fast to the Joe Louis story, and later in his life admitted that it was false, invented to deflect unwanted attention arising from the team being named after him. The Browns and the NFL now both support the position that the team was indeed named after Paul Brown.

With the roster fixed and the team's name chosen, Brown set out to build a dynasty. "I want to be what the New York Yankees are in baseball or Ben Hogan is in golf", he said.

After a training camp at Bowling Green State University, the Browns played their first game in September 1946 at Cleveland Stadium. A crowd of 60,135 people showed up to see the Browns beat the Miami Seahawks 44–0, then a record attendance mark for professional football. That touched off a string of wins; the team ended the season with a 12–2 record and the top spot in the AAFC's western division. The Browns then beat the AAFC's New York Yankees in the championship.

Cleveland won the AAFC championship again in 1947 behind an offensive attack that employed the forward pass more frequently and effectively than was typical at the time. The Browns' offensive success was driven by Brown's version of the T formation, which

was gradually replacing the single-wing formation as football's most popular and effective scheme.

The Browns won every game in the 1948 season, a feat that went unmatched until the Miami Dolphins (coached by Brown disciple Don Shula) did it in 1972. Cleveland then won the AAFC championship for the fourth time in a row in 1949. By then, however, the league was struggling for survival, due in part to the Browns' dominance. Attendance at games dwindled in 1948 and 1949 as fans lost interest in lopsided victories, and at the end of the 1949 season the AAFC dissolved. Three of its teams, the San Francisco 49ers, the Baltimore Colts and the Browns, merged into the NFL. The Browns picked up a few good former AAFC players from other teams, including offensive guard Abe Gibron and defensive end Len Ford, but some observers saw Brown's team as the lone standout in an otherwise minor league.