For six months, renowned artist Gail Folwell (BFA ’83, art) worked tirelessly on her newest project: a 7-foot-tall sculpture for the Pro Football Hall of Fame’s parade route in downtown Canton, Ohio. On Aug 7, 2015, the city of Canton, in conjunction with the Pro Football Hall of Fame, unveiled “The NFL Draft, 1936,” Folwell’s enormous bronze sculpture depicting former Philadelphia Eagles coach Bert Bell’s creation of the first NFL draft.

“Prior to the draft, the teams with the most money could afford the best players in the most coveted positions,” explains Folwell, who lives in Boulder, Colo. “Consequently, those teams were getting all of the good players and all of the wins. Bert Bell came up with the idea of the draft, and made it so that every team could get better players. The competition became more fair, and the sport became more fan-friendly.”

The Pro Football Hall of Fame, along with ArtsinStark, a nonprofit organization that awards grants to artists, commissioned Folwell to construct a permanent installation for their $2.2 million project, scheduled for completion over the next six years. The project will consist of 11 pieces of artwork to depict the 11 greatest moments in pro football history. The artworks will be located along the Pro Football Hall of Fame’s Enshrinement Festival parade route, in an effort to develop a new tourist attraction in Canton.

“Once I was awarded the commission, I was able to choose which moment I wanted to represent,” Folwell says. “I ultimately picked the draft, and I presented the model with my son in his Chargers jersey, posing as the quarterback behind Bell.”

Folwell graduated from the University of Denver in 1983 with a BFA in graphic design. She worked as a designer and an illustrator for many years prior to shifting her focus to sculpting in 1995. In the time between graduating and establishing herself as a sculptor, Folwell spent a year teaching at DU as part of an interim design faculty.

“At the time I was teaching, Maynard Tischler was the head [of the art school],” Folwell says. “My beginning design students had an opportunity to hear lectures from each of the art department heads, and Maynard’s inspirational lecture about creative people being unique additions to the workforce has never left me.”

Creativity paid off when Folwell won the commission to sculpt “The NFL Draft, 1936” through a national competition that produced five finalists. Three artists, all from Colorado, were awarded commissions, and the date was set for Folwell to present her work to the public.

“I had never done something like that before,” Folwell says of the unveiling ceremony in August. “There were so many famous people and such prestige. I was shaking all over, I was so nervous. That’s when the coolest thing happened: I was trying to work out what to say when a coach came up to me and gave me this empowering pep talk. He told me to lose the notes and just talk about what I did and how I did it.

“He and his players cornered me,” Folwell recalls with a laugh. “They took the papers out of my hand, and I remember thinking that this is what the sculpture is all about — bringing people together.”