

# **THE HARTFORD BLUES**

## **Part 1**

By John Hogrogian

The love of sports burns in the soul of Connecticut. From the insurance companies of Hartford, the brass mills of Waterbury, and the hardware factories of New Britain, workers have washed away their daily toil with sports. In the 1920's, these workers supported semi-pro football teams which played at a high level. One of those teams, the Hartford Blues, burst briefly onto the national scene as a member of the NFL.

The Blues were owned by George Mulligan, the leading sports promoter in Connecticut. He was born in England in 1880 and immigrated to Waterbury with his family at age five. Growing up in the blue collar world of the Brass City, George learned the needs of the working man and how to profit from them. Reputed to be the owner of a popular speakeasy during prohibition, he grew famous as a boxing promoter at a time when Connecticut had several champions and contenders. He also sponsored bicycle races and professional football.

His football team, the Waterbury Blues, was the best pro team in the state in 1924. Mulligan followed the same formula as the other pro football managers in Connecticut. He hired local men, both former college players and sandlotters, at a per game wage. The players practiced once a week, on Sunday morning, just before each game.

The Blues had competition from several rivals for the state title in 1925. Four other pro teams operated, in New Britain, Hartford, Norwalk, and New London. Only the New Britain and Hartford entries harbored hopes of beating the Blues. All-New Britain had rivaled Waterbury for years on an almost even keel. They had a seasoned roster of local players featuring fullback Ed Barnikow, a non-college workhorse from Meriden, and quarterback Vic Radzievitch, a University of Connecticut graduate from Torrington. Hartford was represented by the West Siders, a similar collection of local players. The West Siders did not have an illustrious history, but they did have high hopes for 1925.

Looking past these challenges, George Mulligan already had his eye on an NFL franchise. He set his sights on signing Harry Stuhldreher, the quarterback of the Four Horsemen of Notre Dame. All four of the Horsemen had graduated in the spring. A small, quick back, Stuhldreher had signed on as head coach at Villanova and also had offers to play for All-New Britain and the Providence Steam Roller as well as Waterbury. On September 16, Stuhldreher signed a contract to play for Providence.

About to begin their first season in the NFL, the Steam Roller had a non-league game on September 20, annihilating the West Point Artillery club 127-0. Stuhldreher played in that game, but after his demand for a salary increase was refused, he jumped the team. He immediately accepted Mulligan's offer to play for the Blues for \$7,500, plus a \$500 bonus.

Stuhldreher was the first national star to play pro football in Connecticut. Waterbury's other top backs at the start of the 1925 season were Ken Simendinger, a Holy Cross man, and Dutch Forst, a Villanova grad. The line featured two other Notre Dame alumni. Ed Hunsinger played

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with the Four Horsemen in 1924 and rejoined Stuhldreher as an end in Waterbury. Ed "Hec" Garvey, a brawny tackle, had played pro ball for several years since leaving Notre Dame in 1922. He had received some All-League mention as a Chicago Bear in 1923. Another lineman, Dick McGrath, doubled as captain and coach.

The Blues opened their season on September 27 by whipping a team from Yonkers, N.Y., 32-0. All-New Britain had begun their season a week earlier by losing to the Frankford Yellowjackets, 6-0, but broke into the winning column on the 27th by beating the Adams, Mass., team, 6-0.

On the first Sunday of October, all three pro teams from central Connecticut took the field. All-New Britain hosted the New York Giants before 3,000 fans. The new-born Giants racked up a 26-0 victory, with ancient Jim Thorpe running for one of the touchdowns. Meanwhile, at Clarkin Field in Hartford, the West Siders took on Waterbury. The Hartford team put up a good battle but finally dropped a 7-3 decision to the more talented Blues.

On October 11, George Mulligan had a special attraction for Waterbury fans. He signed Jim Crowley, another ex-Horseman, to join Stuhldreher in the backfield against Adams, Mass. Crowley's regular job was assistant coach at the University of Georgia. The Blues put on a good show by driving to a 34-0 triumph, with Crowley scoring three touchdowns and Stuhldreher booting two field goals and three extra points. Crowley picked up his check after the game and bid the Blues adieu.

That same afternoon, the West Siders disgraced themselves at home with a lackadaisical, 7-0 loss to New Britain. The team's showing was so bad that the team owner, Russell MacIntosh, fired every player after the game. He and coach Dave Hayes held an open meeting on Thursday night, recruiting local players to restock the team. Their first action, however, was to cancel the game scheduled for the next weekend.

The day after the West Siders held their recruitment meeting, the Hartford *Courant* reported that the Waterbury Blues were contemplating moving some of their games to Clarkin Field. According to the *Courant*, Ed Curley, who assisted Mulligan in his business pursuits, approached the owner of the park about transferring at least one of the Waterbury-New Britain contests to Hartford. No decision had yet been reached, the newspaper said.

For the rest of October, the West Siders stayed out of action, while New Britain and Waterbury went undefeated. The only contest against an NFL team was on October 18, when the Blues beat the Rochester Jeffersons 7-6.

On November 1, while the Blues were shipping the Newark team, 26-0, in New Jersey, the West Siders again took the field. With a mostly new group of players, they traveled to New Britain and lost 3-0. After the game, the West Siders threw in the towel. George Mulligan immediately picked up the lease on Clarkin Field and renamed his team the Hartford Blues. According to the Hartford *Courant*, Waterbury's poor support of the team prompted the move. The same article reported that Mulligan had already posted entrance money with the NFL, and that Hartford would have a place in the league in 1926.

With rain falling, the 1925 Hartford Blues debued on November 8 by beating the Rochester Jeffs, 8-6, in a rematch. Stuhldreher suffered a mild concussion in the fray, held in bad weather before a disappointing crowd of 2,000. New Britain beat Atlantic City, 12-6, in New Jersey the same day to set up a Hartford-New Britain showdown the next week at Clarkin Field.

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The Blues came into the game undefeated and came out of it a 6-0 loser. New Britain outmuscled the Blues and negated Stuhldreher's offensive skills. Another prime Hartford back, Ken Simendinger, suffered a dislocated shoulder that ended his season. New Britain got its points on two field goals by halfback Dutch Connors, who had joined the club in October after being cut by the Providence Steam Roller.

New Britain now claimed bragging rights to the state championship, but Hartford pointed to a rematch scheduled for November 29. On the intervening Sunday, both clubs won. Hartford beat Norwalk, 9-6, while New Britain beat Quincy, Mass., 26-2.

On Thanksgiving Day, the Blues didn't schedule a game because a number of key players, including Stuhldreher, had to be elsewhere coaching college or high school teams. All-New Britain traveled to Philadelphia and lost a 7-0 decision to the Yellowjackets. On the home front, Mulligan booked an NFL contest between the Cleveland Bulldogs and Kansas City Cowboys at Clarkin Field. NFL president Joe Carr sanctioned the match, announced only on Tuesday, as an official league contest. Thus, the NFL came to Hartford a year before the city joined the circuit.

Cleveland was the defending league champion, but had a weakened squad this year. Kansas City topped the Bulldogs by a 17-0 score before about only 1,000 fans. In Chicago, meanwhile, the NFL was making its stardom at the University of Illinois, Red Grange turned pro with the Chicago Bears. 40,000 people paid their way into Wrigley Field to witness the scoreless tie between the Bears and the Chicago Cardinals.

On the next day, Mulligan had big local news. To beef up the Blues for the New Britain rematch, he signed five new players: back Obie Bristow and guard Steve Owen from the Kansas City squad which ended its season in Hartford; fullback Bob Mackert from the Rochester Jeffs; end Herb Kopf, a Washington & Jefferson grad; and, most newsworthy, halfback Don Miller, another of the Four Horsemen. The speedy halfback was the third of the Horsemen to sign a contract with Mulligan.

The rematch was no contest. A good crowd of 7,000 fans turned out at Clarkin Field to watch the Blues whip New Britain, 28-7. The losers were still beaten up from Thursday's game in Philadelphia and played without spirit. Mackert scored two touchdowns for Hartford, as did Miller, who made a long run to the end zone with a pass from Stuhldreher. Held in check two weeks ago, the reinforced Blues ran up the score sufficiently to ensure its claim on the state championship.

New Britain ended its season with that game, but George Mulligan had other plans. He booked a game for December 6 at Clarkin Field against Pere Marquette, probably the strongest pro team in Boston. Of the new recruits, Bristow, Owen, and Miller were still in the line-up, and Mulligan added another new man in end Grattan O'Connell, a Bristol, Conn., native who had just finished his senior season at Boston College and followed Grange's lead by turning pro immediately. The Blues beat Pere Marquette, 12-0, while Grange was drawing 75,000 fans into the Polo Grounds in New York for a game against the Giants.

Mulligan had attempted to schedule the Blues against Grange in Boston on Wednesday, December 9, but the Providence Steam Roller secured that date for themselves. Crowley and Miller, two Horsemen who had played with the Blues, joined the Steam Roller for that one contest. The Bears lost to Providence, 9-6, on the New England stop of their Grange tour.

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On Saturday, December 12, the Blues did travel to Boston for a game, beating the St. Alphonsus team 10-0 at Fenway Park before 2,000 spectators. Miller and Stuhldreher couldn't play because they were in Philadelphia with the other Horsemen and a squad of Notre Dame grads, losing to the Pottsville Maroons, 9-7. While the Horsemen were helping Pottsville get in dutch with Joe Carr, Mulligan bolstered the Hartford backfield with Dutch Hendrian, who had spent the season with the New York Giants, and Billy O'Leary, the star back of Pere Marquette. Hendrian scored a touchdown on a pass from Bristow and also kicked a field goal and extra point.

On Sunday, Mulligan booked the grand finale of the season at Clarkin Field. He brought in the Cleveland Bulldogs as opponents, and he signed all four Horsemen to play in the Hartford backfield. The Hartford *Courant* speculated that Mulligan might be paying \$5,000 for the one-day services of Stuhldreher, Miller, Crowley and Elmer Layden.

Before a large crowd, the Four Horsemen showed the effects of Saturday's game and long train ride from Philadelphia to Hartford. A soggy field further handicapped their quickness and speed. Although Elmer Layden scored a touchdown, the Bulldogs had little problem scoring a 13-6 victory.

That game ended the season for the Waterbury/Hartford Blues. Owen and Bristow, who came to town with the Kansas City team, left town with the Cleveland team to finish its schedule. Owen played four games for the Blues and was the only future Pro Hall of Famer to wear the colors of the Hartford Blues. Hec Garvey would go on tour with the Bears in late December, and the other players scattered to their homes.

### WATERBURY/HARTFORD BLUES 1925\*

DAY	DATE	AT	OPPONENT	HA-OP	R
Sun.	S-27	H	Yonkers, N.Y.	32- 0	W
Sun.	O- 4	A	Hartford West Siders	7- 3	W
Sun.	O-11	H	Adams, Mass.	34- 0	W
Sun.	O-18	H	Rochester Jeffersons	7- 6	W
Sun.	O-25	A	Newark, N.J.	RAIN	-
Sun.	N- 1	A	Newark, N.J.	26- 0	W
Sun.	N- 8	H*	Rochester Jeffersons	8- 6	W
Sun.	N-15	H	All-New Britain	0- 6	L
Sun.	N-22	H	All-Norwalk	9- 6	W
Sun.	N-29	H	All-New Britain	28- 7	W
Sun.	D- 6	H	Pere Marquette (Boston)	12- 0	W
Sat.	D-12	A	St. Alphonsus (Boston)	10- 0	W
Sun.	D-13	H	Cleveland Bulldogs	6-13	L

\*-Starting with the game on November 8, home games played in Hartford.

### ALL-NEW BRITAIN 1925

DAY	DATE	AT	OPPONENT	HA-OP	R
Sun.	S-20	H	Frankford Yellowjackets	0- 6	L
Sun.	S-27	H	Adams, Mass.	6- 0	W
Sun.	O- 4	H	New York Giants	0-26	L
Sun.	O-11	A	Hartford West Siders	7- 0	W

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Sun. O-18	H	All-Norwalk	7- 0	W
Sun. O-25	H	Cleveland Panthers	6- 0	W
Sun. N- 1	H	Hartford West Siders	3- 0	W
Sun. N- 8	A	Atlantic City, N.J.	12- 6	W
Sun. N-15	A	Hartford Blues	6- 0	W
Sun. N-22	H	Quincy, Mass.	26- 2	W
Thu. N-26	A	Frankford Yellowjackets	0- 7	L
Sun. N-29	A	Hartford Blues	7-28	L

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John Hogrogian is a charter-member of P.F.R.A. His article on the Providence Steam Roller appeared in the March, 1980, issue of *The Coffin Corner*.