

WERE WEST COAST PROS THE REAL STARS OF THE 1890S?

by Bob Carroll

I think it was Alice who advised someone in Wonderland to "Begin at the beginning, and, when you get to the end, stop." I'll begin at the beginning in a minute, but I have no idea where this will end. You see, what I'm contemplating here is a complete revision of the first couple chapters in every pro football history ever written.

On the other hand, this may be the biggest false alarm since Orson Welles was invaded from Mars.

For those of you who always skip those first couple of chapters, I'll just mention that they always detail how pro football grew up around Pittsburgh, Latrobe, and Greensburg in western Pennsylvania before the turn of the century. While no one pretends that the Pennsylvanians were the only ones in the 1890s who ever thought of paying someone to play football, the general idea is that pro football anywhere else didn't really amount to very much.

Now, along comes Ken Cotanch to suggest that everyone else has it backwards. The big money and the big games, he says, were all out west along the Pacific coast and in places like Denver and Butte. Either Mr. Cotanch is wrong, or historians are in for some tall re-writing.

What is most ironic is that Mr. Cotanch said these revolutionary things twenty years ago. But nobody listened.

But, to the beginning....

Back around 1973, Mr. Cotanch wrote a long letter to the then brand new Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton. I don't know who read it, but whoever did decided it was of sufficient merit to file. Alas, you know the way of the world. The phrase that comes to mind is "file and forget."

About ten years later, part of Mr. Cotanch's letter was resurrected -- the wrong part. Remember, this was before John Hogrogian went back and dug out those 1920s all-pro teams and no one knew they existed. Mr. Cotanch, in part of his letter, had taken it upon himself to choose teams for each of the years 1920 to 1930, thirty or forty years after the fact. Given the state of PF research in 1963, he made some pretty intelligent selections. But he sent them to several sources and they began to appear in magazines and such, usually uncredited and with no indication they weren't contemporary.

I'd seen Cotanch's letter without really reading it all, and a few months ago while at the Hall I asked to take a look at it again to compare his all-pro choices with some of John Hogrogian's discoveries. This time I read all of it and soon forgot about the 1920s.

Mr. Cotanch's letter is too long and roves through far too many areas to reprint in its entirety. I'll try to summarize the major points of interest:

While the Pennsylvanians were playing their little games in the 1890s, the west had more stars, higher salaries, and bigger games. It would not be an exaggeration to say his thesis (whether intentional or not) is that the west was the major area of pro football activity, interest, and accomplishment. And, make no mistake. This was football, he says, not soccer or rugby. And pro, not amateur or semi-pro.

The teams practicing play-for-pay were (in no special order) Butte A.C. Copper Kings; Portland, Ore., Multnomah A.C.; San Francisco Olympic Club; Denver A.C.; Oakland Reliance Club; Santa Barbara A.C.; Los Angeles All-Stars; Seattle A.C. Although Contanch is not very specific, the "golden age" for these clubs seems to have been from 1894 to 1897.

He goes on to list a number of eastern players who went west to get the big bucks. They include:

"Halfback Coleman Brown (Santa Barbara A.C., Los Angeles Stars) Greatest all-around back in the West during the Gay Nineties...Powerful and coordinated 190-lb. Negro great--the Jim Brown of his day...Devastating runner with great speed and power...tremendous arching punter and field-goal kicker--40 and 45 yarders common with Coleman. Greatest back in Southern Cal for quarter of a century...What a sensation he would have been back East! 6'1", 196.

"Halfback Donald Gillis (Butte Copper Kings). One of greatest scoring backs of all time...Scored on runs of over 60- yards in every game of rugged 32-game schedule played by Butte in 1895...scored on startling open-field runs in every contest by Miner eleven in 1896...Western Conference sprint champ at Michigan...Broke the backs of the San Francisco Olympians in scandalous series. Caused millions of wagered dollars to change hands during the notorious Butte-Olympic series...By far the highest paid pro of his day. . .5'11", 186 lbs."

Other western stars whose names were unfamiliar to me were Douglas Sexton (S.F. Olympics), General Leonard Wood (S.F. Olympics), George McMilan (Oakland and Butte), Fenton Taylor (S.F. Olympics and Oakland), and Wolf Ransome (Oakland).

After giving Contanch's letter some long consideration, I realized there was an awful lot of checking to do.

I decided that I wouldn't try to contact Contanch, at least not right away. I don't know if he's still alive and the only address I have is 20 years old -- 2912 1/2 Della Vina, Santa Barbara, California. I figured if I reached him and then the western story didn't prove out, we'd both be embarrassed. The thing to do was find evidence supporting his thesis.

Tony Cusher sent me this on Butte: "The only thing I have on Butte A.C. is their 1895 record in my 1896 Spalding Football guide. They played 15 games in 1895. They beat Nebraska 16 to 6 in 1895 and 20 to 6 in 1896. In my different football histories they are listed as Butte A.C., Montana Mines, and Butte Mines."

Bob Gill did quite a bit of checking:

"I got down to the Library of Congress for a few hours and looked up those western teams. I can tell you one thing for sure: they were playing football, not rugby or anything else. But I can't tell a thing for sure about their standing as amateurs, professionals, or semi-pros, and I'm not sure where anybody could find out.

"Some overall facts: the main teams in 1895-96 (the years I looked through) were the Olympics and the Reliance Club in the Bay Area, the Denver A.C., the Butte A.C., the Portland Multnomah Club, and three other northwest clubs -- Tacoma A.C., Seattle A.C., and Portland A.C. I haven't seen anything of the Santa Barbara A.C. or the Los Angeles All-Stars, mainly because I don't have access to an LA paper from the era. But I did see a game involving the Los Angeles A.C., which may be the All-Stars' real name.

"One problem with Cotanch's list is that it gives virtually no dates. I chose 1895-96 because he did mention those years in his sketch on Gillis of the Butte A.C. And I did see most of the players he mentions in the line-ups of the time. But some of his information is off. For instance, he claims that Gillis scored on long runs in every game for Butte during those two years, but of the half-dozen games or so that I saw, he failed to score in half. In a couple, though, he did make long (70-90 yards) runs for scores, so I guess he was rather good.

"Back to the teams: In 1895, particularly, all those teams I listed seemed to play each other, as if there were a fairly regular circuit. But in 1896, at least the San Francisco teams didn't make the rounds, playing only Butte from out of the area. Supposedly, Heffelfinger was coaching the Portland Multnomahs in 1895.

"In San Francisco (the only paper I really checked in any detail, except for a quick glance at Denver) there was a distinct circuit of four teams -- California, Stanford, Reliance, and the Olympics, called the big four in the paper. Apparently, all four competed on fairly equal footing. According to the paper, Reliance had been the Coast champion in 1894, while the Olympics hadn't fielded a team for two years prior to 1895.

"Judging from the game results I have here, it's hard to say that the Butte team was "the greatest eleven in America" -- though again, that may refer to a later period. At the time in question, they were certainly good, but not notably superior to the San Francisco teams, for example.

"However, I do have some good information on the Butte team. In 1896 -- well, actually 1897 -- just before the January 1 game against the Olympics, two players for the Butte club (Hall and Laswell) were declared professionals by the Amateur Athletic Association of the Pacific Coast. This meant that Butte could no longer play games with amateur clubs; the S.F. *Chronicle* called it a "death blow to the Montana team," since there were no organized professional teams around. This gives some idea of where those West Coast teams stood: they may have been paying players, but at least they were keeping up appearances of being amateurs. By the way...the game went ahead as scheduled, thus tainting all who participated.

"There are other hints of professionalism out West. A player known as "Hanlon" (a fake name) was stolen from the Olympics in 1895 by the Reliance team, causing some bad blood for a while. It seems to me that the easiest way to steal a player from another team would be to offer him (more) money -- though of course that isn't necessarily so.

"And then there's the Butte team again. They were bank-rolled by a wealthy miner who wanted the best team possible. To that end, as the S.F. paper described it, "the tentacles of this wealthy 'angel' reached out in four different directions, and all available football material was drawn in." Doesn't sound like amateurism in its purest form, anyway. Actually, what this "angel" did was to find his players jobs; but if he couldn't find one suitable, he created sinecures for them to hold, at least in name, for salaries like \$150 a month. Apparently, in the cases of Hall and Laswell, he went even further in the pursuit of football material."

As those familiar with his work know, when Bob Gill researches, he researches! Unfortunately, neither Bob nor Tony Cusher nor I are free to give the subject the time it deserves. So that's where we stand right now. We have Cotanch's thesis and some facts from Tony and Bob. We also have a lot of blanks.

Perhaps a West Coast member would like to delve into this in more detail. We'll gladly provide him with any additional information we get.

Perhaps there is a P.F.R.A. member somewhere who already knows everything there is to know about these early western teams and players. Perhaps he would be willing to enlighten us.

Lacking that, *The Coffin Corner* has a new file labeled "Early Western Pros."

It's an open file. Any contributions?