

# THE RACINE LEGION

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Originally Published in Racine Journal, August 5, 1979

There were a lot of things you could do in Racine, Wisconsin, with \$100 in 1922. You could buy a 1919 Ford or make a down payment on a new house. Or you could buy your way into the National Football League. Which is just what the American Legion Post 76 did, giving Racine its first – and only – major professional sports franchise. That's right, the Racine Horlick-Legions played right alongside the Chicago Bears and the Green Bay Packers (and 15 other teams) in the 1922 NFL.

The team was organized by American Legion Post 76 to help promote both the club's activities and the city of Racine. Consisting of 18 men, it was coached by one George "Babe" Ruetz. Ruetz's son Howard would go on to play for the Packers from 1951- 53 and his grandson, Joe, is now a tight end for the Wisconsin Badgers.

Babe Ruetz, a mountainous man of 285 pounds, had been one of the city's finest amateur players from about 1910-20. He apparently was as bold as he was big because the first team Ruetz scheduled was the defending NFL champion Chicago Bears. But first, Ruetz had to recruit some players. Which, in 1922, was not an easy task.

The NFL was just entering its third season. And pro ball was nowhere near as popular as college ball. Reaction to the game was mixed, and the new league had a hard time convincing the sporting public that it had a worthy product. Trying to convince the sportswriters of the day was the job of Legions' publicity director John Wagner. The Racine *Journal News'* account of Wagner's first press conference read, in part:

"He (Wagner) paved the way for a lot of Legion write-ups this fall, serving a fine meal, a juicy steak being the `piece de resistance.' And there were plenty of side dishes, the whole being topped off with an apple pie such as mother would have been proud to make. So after we loosened up our belts a bit, we listened to John tell us how much free publicity the team would need."

Despite buying the local newspaper for a piece of apple pie, the Legions still had some recruiting problems. Ruetz had all but signed Michigan All-America Duke Dunne when Dunne's father, a former governor of Illinois, refused to allow his son to play. The elder Dunne said pro football was "beneath the dignity of the family."

In Racine, however, public reaction was basically good, and Ruetz did manage to sign a number of the era's finest players. Among them were two of the best running backs in the country, former Colgate All-America Hank Gillo and University of Wisconsin star Alvah "Rowdie" Elliott. In naming Elliott to its 1921 All- American team, *Colliers Weekly* called him "undoubtedly one of the finest halves who ever donned the moleskins."

Tryouts were held throughout September to fill the roster. The opening day squad that faced the Bears had a number of local players, including guard Bud Gorman (one of the country's best heavyweight boxers) and end Fred "Fritz" Heinisch, apparently the last remaining survivor of the 1922 Legions.

"We used to practice at Lakeview Park on the corner of Main and Goold," said Heinisch, 79, who lives at 4235 Erie St. "I got \$50 a game, which was as much as I made working 40 hours in the post office." With pot roast selling for nine cents a pound in 1922, Heinisch got a lot of mileage out of his \$50. Heinisch, however, didn't play in the Legions' first game. Before a crowd of over 4,000 at Horlick Field, the Legions lost 6-0 to George Halas' Chicago Bears.

Still the team, and the town, were greatly encouraged. More than 200 people accompanied the team to Green Bay the following week, though the Racine *Journal News* assured the fans that it would provide its "usual excellent coverage of the fracas." Things didn't look good though, when Green Bay immortal Curly

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Lambeau recovered a blocked punt in the endzone to give the Packers an early 6-0 lead. But Elliott came back to score Racine's first touchdown on a two-yard run, Gillo added a field goal, and the Legions had their first victory, 10-6.

The next week they weren't as lucky, as the Legions suffered their worst loss of the season, 20-0 to the Milwaukee Badgers. The Badgers won only two games all season, but Heinisch remembers them well. Considering that the NFL had no blacks from 1934 until after World War II, the Badgers were quite unique. The Badgers' three biggest stars were black. One, tackle Duke Slater, later became a federal judge. Another, end Paul Robeson, was called by Grantland Rice "the finest defensive end ever developed." Robeson later went on to become one of the country's most popular black singers and Shakespearean actors, until, after professing to be a Marxist, he was blackballed from the entertainment business during the McCarthy Era.

The third major star on the Milwaukee team was halfback Fritz Pollard. Pollard coached four different teams in the 1920s, and remains to this day the only black head coach in NFL history. And he was also responsible for Heinisch's ascent into Racine's starting lineup. "He (Pollard) was just running all over us," Heinisch said. "I mean, he was a slippery little fellow. And Babe (Reutz) was just getting angrier and angrier. Finally, he just turned around to the guys on the bench and said, 'Anybody think he can stop that S.O.B.?' I said, 'I can't do it while I'm sitting on the bench.' So he told me to get in there." Heinisch rates Pollard as one of the finest players he ever saw. But there were others.

"Well, Jim Thorpe was still in the league then, but he was getting a bit old, and the alcohol had started to get to him by then," said Heinisch, who also played against such Hall of Fames as Ernie Nevers, Johnny Blood McNally, and Joe Guyon. "But he (Thorpe) was still a punishing runner. When he ran, he brought his knees way up to his chin, so when you tackled him, you tackled his knees. But I'd say the best player I ever played against had to be Paddy Driscoll (a star quarterback of the Chicago Cardinals and later coach of the Bears). He could do it all."

Heinisch started the Legions' next game, but they couldn't shake their losing ways, dropping a 7-0 decision to the Toledo Maroons. With the team now 1-3, Reutz went scouting for some new players. Halas, whose Bear team had quite a surplus released four players to Racine, including a 5'6", 145-pound baseball player named Charlie Dressen. Dressen immediately moved in at quarterback, and the team won its next game against the Rochester Jeffersons, 9-0. The next week, the team gave free tickets to 200 young women for a game against the Louisville Brecks.

One writer wrote, "It is expected that this galaxy of beauty will wreak havoc on the impressionable Kentucky gentlemen, and allow the home boys to pile up a big score." It worked. The Legion set a league record (broken one week later) for most points in a game, winning 57-0. The team won three of its next four, the other being a last-minute 3-3 tie with the Packers. Gillo, who kicked a field goal with 10 seconds left, apparently saved a lot of people a lot of money. The next day, the paper wrote, "Many a fan owed his financial stability to Hank's educated toe."

The Legions finished their inaugural season in fifth place with a 6-4-1 record. Dressen would play one more year before wisely choosing a baseball career. He would manage the Washington Stenators, Chicago Cubs, Milwaukee Braves, and Detroit Tigers in a career that lasted until his death during the 1966 season. Gillo, who had led the league in scoring with 53 points, also decided to get out, saying, "I've lost too much hair to stick in football." At the time, Gillo was 27.

Though the team got better every week during the 1922 season, the attendance did not. After drawing crowds of 4,000 and 3,600 in the first two games, the team's attendance dropped off to 1,400 a game. A fund-raising dinner temporarily bailed out the team, and the Legions returned in 1923. They went 4-4-2 to finish tenth in a 20-team league. In 1924 they improved slightly, finishing 5-3-2. Gillo returned to play both years, and along with quarterback Shorty Barr and halfback Rollie Williams, athletic director at the University of Iowa for many years) led the team to moderate success. But the financial burden ultimately proved to be heavy, and the Legions didn't field a team in 1925. The franchise was sold to the Racine Exchange Club, which returned a team to the NFL in 1926.

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With a new coach (Gillo) and a new name – the Tornadoes, the team opened the season with a 6-3 victory over the Hammond (Ind.) Pros. Things then went downhill rapidly, as they lost four consecutive games by a combined 78-2 score. The Legions last game was in Green Bay, October 24, 1926. After absorbing a 35-0 beating at the hands of the Packers, the team folded. Its four-year record was 15-15-5.