

Potsy Clark: A Success Story

By Bob Carroll

Likable, humorous, and earthy all describe Potsy Clark. So do such terms as imaginative coach, fierce competitor, strong disciplinarian, ingenious administrator, and effective teacher. An affectionate family man and loyal alumnus, Potsy maintained lifetime friendships with scores of people from his hometown, undergraduate days, military service in two wars, and teaching/coaching experiences at a variety of institutions. A man who loved a good story and told them well, Clark was asked to speak at banquets and special occasions all across the country.

He achieved fame in a variety of sports capacities from 1912 through 1953, but it is as a pro football coach during the 1930's that he is best remembered today. In that critical era when the NFL was moving from its helter-skelter first decade to become in reality a major league, Potsy was considered the equal of such legends as Halas, Lambeau, Owen, and Flaherty. Some would have put him at the top of the list.

Born in a small farming community of Carthage, Ill., on March 20, 1894, he was christened George but at about the age of six he was nicknamed "Potsy" by a local veterinarian. The sobriquet followed him the rest of his days.

The Clarks were a large family. The household included Potsy, his parents, grandparents, an uncle, four brothers, and three sisters. There were plenty of chores around the farm to teach a growing boy the value of hard work, but he still found time to compete in sports with his brothers and neighbors. His father's death when Potsy was only ten perhaps served to increase his self-reliance and independence of mind.

In 1909, Potsy entered Carthage High School and quickly established himself as the quarterback on the football team. Under his leadership, the squad went through two undefeated seasons and had a third within grasp until they lost the final game of his senior year. At Carthage, he also starred in track and baseball.

His brothers had gone to William & Vashti College in Aledo, Illinois, and Potsy followed suit in 1912. His winning way went with him. The football team went unbeaten and he was named All-State College Quarterback for 1912. His teammates picked him as captain for 1913.

In 1914, Potsy entered the University of Illinois. The young Illini coach, Bob Zuppke, quickly installed Clark at quarterback. For the next two seasons, Illinois went undefeated, winning the Western Conference crown outright in his first year and tying for the title in his second. Some of Illinois' greatest heroes played on those teams, including All-Americans Perry Graves, Ralph Chapman, Bart Macomber, and Harold Pogue, but Potsy was the leader.

Many years later Zuppke wrote: "The basic attack of the 1914 team was the balanced formation now known as the **I formation**. This was supported by the **spread** and the deep **T** – a **punt formation** adapted to quick openings, wide-running plays, passes with the ever-present threat of the punt. This is the only team in all my career which had the necessary talent for that formation and that is why I like to say that the 1914 team played the most modern game yet attempted. Its decisive victories and the fact that it was my first great college team make me think it was the greatest of all my teams. Two of my greatest college backs played on this team, Pogue and Potsy Clark. The third was Grange."

This was not the only time Clark's name was linked with that of the fabulous Redhead. In 1951, he was named the mid-century quarterback of an Illini backfield with Buddy Young, Jack Crangle, and Grange.

Potsy continued to star on the championship Illini baseball team. He was a fine shortstop – good enough to be offered professional contracts by both John McGraw and Clark Griffith – but he had chosen coaching as his future.

In the summer of 1916, after receiving his B.A. from Illinois, he taught the first summer school classes for coaches at the U. That fall, he accepted a position as assistant football coach at the University of Kansas

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for \$1,400, reportedly the highest first year salary for a coach to that date. In the season's second game, with the head coach ill, Potsy took the Kansas team to Champaign to play his alma mater. Although he was warmly welcomed with cheers and gifts, his team was routed 30-0.

Before Clark could continue his coaching career, a more important conflict than any played on a football field intervened. In May of 1917, he entered officer training at Fort Riley, Kansas. On August 15, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the field artillery. At first, the army was most interested in his coaching skills. He took the Camp Funston baseball and basketball teams to U.S.A. service championships. Grover Cleveland Alexander, the future Hall of Fame pitcher, assisted him in coaching baseball. That fall he organized the Camp Funston football team and led them to the Army-Navy title with a 7-0 victory over the Great Lakes Naval Training Station.

In July, 1918, he was in England, and by September, he was in combat in France.

After hostilities ended, Clark led the 89th Division to the AEF football championship. In June of 1919, he returned to the United States. Zuppke hired him as an assistant at Illinois where he also taught the first four-year course for coaches.

The following year saw him take his first head coaching assignment on the college level. He was named head football coach and assistant baseball coach at Michigan State (then called Michigan Agricultural College). His 1920 club finished only 4-6 but was noted for its wide-open offense. There, he also met the future Mrs. Clark, a coed named Janet Mahon. They were married in December of 1921.

By then, Potsy was head coach at Kansas. His five-season record was an ordinary 16-17-6, but his 1923 squad tied Nebraska for the Missouri Valley championship while giving up only two field goals all fall.

He spent 1926 as an assistant to Dr. Clarence Spears at Minnesota and then accepted the post of athletic director and head football coach at Butler University. In three seasons, he brought Butler into the national spotlight, but his success cut two ways. Concern over the popularity of sports at Butler, coupled with a North Central investigation, cost him his job.

In 1930, he was out of coaching, having begun a successful insurance business in Indianapolis, but when he was offered the position as coach for the NFL Portsmouth Spartans, he returned to the game he loved.

The Spartans hadn't done much in their first season in the NFL. Under the slack reins of Coach Tubby Griffin, they wallowed to a 5-6-3 finish, far down in the standings. But the team had some real talent returning and more on the way, including all-time great backfielders Dutch Clark and Glenn Presnell.

What was needed was a firm hand on the tiller. According to historian Bob Barnett in *The Spartans and the Tanks*:

Clark established his authority early. On the first day of practice he threw Father Lumpkin (star of the '30 team) off the field for "too much horseplay." The spectators and the team were shocked by Clark's action, but it worked. The next day Lumpkin apologized to Clark, and Clark, with discipline established, named Lumpkin captain of the team.

Glenn Presnell remembers Clark as an excellent coach. "Potsy trained us like a college team: hard physical practice, attention to detail, and discipline," says Presnell.

The Spartans drove to an 11-3-0 finish, good for second place in the NFL. Had the champion Green Bay Packers gone through with a tentatively scheduled final game, Portsmouth might have won the title.

In 1932, after tying the Bears for first place, the Spartans met Chicago in a specially-arranged indoor play-off at the end of the season. The game was one of the most significant ever played in the NFL. It helped convince the league to split itself into two divisions with a championship game at the end of the season in 1933. It was the inspiration for several important rule changes. It also left Portsmouth on the short end of a 9-0 score.

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In 1933, Dutch Clark announced his retirement, leaving Coach Clark without his greatest player. Nevertheless, the Spartans finished second in the new NFL Western Division as Presnell had an exceptional season.

Potsy Clark was firmly established as one of the NFL's finest coaches, but Portsmouth's day in the NFL was over. The Depression had made it nearly impossible for small-town teams to survive in the NFL. As the '33 season closed, the players and coaches were paid in stock, rather than cash. It's a tribute to Coach Clark's leadership that the team continued to play their hearts out right to the end.

Radio executive George Richards purchased the team and moved it to Detroit for 1934. Potsy was retained as coach. The NFL had already failed three times in Detroit, but Clark's Lions, decked out in bright blue and silver, quickly won fan interest. The unretired Dutch Clark and steady Presnell, along with a number of other stars, got the Cats rolling with ten straight victories, including seven straight shutouts. Reality set in at the end, and the Lions finished 10-3 behind the undefeated Chicago Bears.

A four game winning streak at the end of the 1935 season brought Potsy's Lions home in first place in the west. He had the league's best running attack, with Dutch Clark, Presnell, Ace Gutowsky, Ernie Caddel, and Buddy Parker all lugging the leather. George Christensen, Ox Emerson, and Clare Randolph were line leaders. The championship game at the end of the season was no contest as the Lions roared 26-7 over the New York Giants. Potsy's Cats were world champs.

Injuries and age kept them from repeating in '36, although they posted a creditable 8-4 record. George Richards was not the easiest man to work for. Impatient with the Lions' third-place mark, he fired Potsy in a move that shocked Detroit.

Coach Clark was not unemployed for long. Dan Topping, owner of the perennially losing Brooklyn Dodgers, quickly hired him to coach that team. The Dodgers were far below the Lions in ability, but after star quarterback Ace Parker joined them in November, they became respectable.

Parker and Clark even got the Dodgers up to .500 in 1938, a feat that should have gained the pair of them instant immortality. However, in 1939, the Dodgers slipped back into the doldrums and Clark was out as coach.

Meanwhile, in Detroit, George Richards had been involved in a tampering scandal concerning college senior Clyde "Bulldog" Turner. The upshot was he sold the team to Fred Mandel, who hired Posty Clark in hopes of returning the Lions to their winning ways.

Once more, Potsy had a great back in his lineup – league-leading runner Whizzer White. However, he didn't have much else, and after a deserved 5-5-1 season, he resigned. His ten-year record as a pro coach stood at 64-42-12 for a .603 winning percentage. At the time, only Halas, Lambeau, and Owen had coached pro teams to more regular season wins.

Potsy still had a lot to accomplish. He took the head coach job at the University of Grand Rapids for 1941 and hired as his line coach a former U. of Michigan center who later became quite successful in another line of work, Gerald Ford. He produced a 6-2 season with the highest scoring team in Michigan.

With the coming of World War II, Potsy entered the USNR as a Lt. Commander, serving at North Carolina Pre-Flight, Pensacola, St. Mary's Pre-Flight, and with the Submarine Force Pacific through 1945.

After the war, he coached at both Grand Rapids and Nebraska until 1949 when he became athletic director at the latter school. In 1954, he began a two-year stint as athletic director at California Western.

In 1956, after accomplishing more than most men could in several careers, Potsy left sports to enter a brokerage firm in La Jolla, California. As usual, he made a success of it. He retired in 1968, four years before his death.

Clark's is a model Horatio Alger story. By talent and hard work, he rose from humble beginnings to a position of success and nationwide respect.

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Yet, he always kept a sense of perspective. He found success in several sports as both a player and a coach, and he also did well in business, but through it all, his sense of decency kept him popular with his contemporaries.

One of his favorite quotes describes his life:

You strive until the goal is gained,
Then look for one still unattained.
Your record points the course you take,
To greater records you can make.
For hope springs not from what you have done,
But from the work you have just begun.

POTSY CLARK'S COACHING RECORD

1916 - Assistant, U. of Kansas
1917-18 - U.S. Army
1919 - Assistant, U. of Illinois
1920 - Michigan State: 4-6-0
1921 - U. of Kansas: 4-3-0
1922 - " 3-4-1
1923 - " 5-0-3, Mo. Valley co-champs
1924 - " 2-5-1
1925 - " 2-5-1
1926 - Assistant, U. of Minnesota
1927 - Butler U.: 4-3-1
1928 - " 6-2-0
1929 - " 4-4-0
1930 - Did not coach
1931 - Portsmouth: 11-3-0, 2nd NFL
1932 - " 6-2-4, 3rd NFL
1933 - " 6-5-0, 2nd-W NFL
1934 - Det. Lions: 10-3-0, 2nd-W NFL
1935 - " 7-3-2, NFL CHAMPIONS
1936 - " 8-4-0, 3rd-W NFL
1937 - Brooklyn: 3-7-1, 4th-E NFL
1938 - " 4-4-3, 3rd-E NFL
1939 - " 4-6-1, 3rd-E NFL
1940 - Det. Lions: 5-5-1, 3rd-W NFL
1941 - U.of Grand Rapids: 6-2-0
1942-44 - U.S. Navy
1945 - U. of Nebraska: 4-5-0
1946 - U.of Grand Rapids: not available
1947 - " not available
1948 - U. of Nebraska: 2-8-0

Record as pro coach: 64-42-12
As college coach: 46-47-7
Total record: 110-89-19