

JOHNNY BLOOD: HE SCORED POTTSVILLE'S LAST NFL TOUCHDOWN

By Doug Costello

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Nov. 25, 1928, was a cold and dreary day in Schuylkill County, with particular notice of the weather being taken at Minersville Park where the Pottsville Maroons played their National Football League home games.

The Green Bay Packers were the visiting team that Sunday afternoon. The next day The REPUBLICAN reported that by the time the fourth quarter had been reached, the lines on the field were beginning to disappear in a driving snowstorm.

Pottsville was winding down its fourth National Football League season and the date had been promoted as "Booster Day" for a couple of reasons.

The Maroons wanted to show the Packers -- "the other community club in the NFL" that Schuylkill County could be as hospitable to visitors and as supportive of their home team as they had found Green Bay fans to be three weeks earlier, and they needed a good gate to put a dent in the season's deficit.

The weather was not of much help either way and, as subsequent events would prove, there were matters of far greater importance, some with sad and some with exhilarating undertones, at hand.

The pre-game ballyhoo had not urged spectators to turn out in great numbers because it would be the last chance for them to see the Packers, or because time was running out for the Maroons' ties with the league.

Nobody knew then, but that's what was in the cards just a little more than three years after the Maroons had played their first game in the big pro league.

On the brighter side of that bleak and fateful day 57 years ago was to be the Maroons' best field showing of the season, a 26-0 victory over the Packers spearheaded by one of their three future Pro Football Hall of Famers in uniform -- John McNally, who was better known by his playing name of "Johnny Blood."

The next day, The REPUBLICAN noted that "Blood ... had a good game. He scored thirteen of Pottsville's points and helped materially to get the others." Actually, Blood scored the last two touchdowns of the game, his second coming on a 65-yard run after an interception. Although neither he nor anyone else at Minersville Park knew it, his game-closing touchdown would be the last Pottsville would ever score in the NFL. (The Maroons were shut out 7-0 by Providence in their next and final NFL game. Providence went on to win the league title.)

All of this comes to mind because of a press reports on the death of "Johnny Blood" on Nov. 28 of this year in Palm Springs, Calif.

At the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, O., there is a description of a famed "vagabond halfback ... a totally unpredictable funster." Two days after Blood's death, the Minneapolis Star and Tribune reported that it was his rambunctious off-field antics as much as his dazzling on- the-field performance that caused John F. Kennedy to tell him that "your name was a household word in our home."

The Star and Tribune went on to say that the name itself was at the foundation of the legend. As McNally once recalled, it was during a hiatus in his collegiate career in 1924 -- while he and Ralph Hanson, a college classmate, were working as stereotypers at the Tribune -- that the two friends decided to pick up some extra money by joining a semi-pro football team being formed in the city.

They began a mental search for assumed names so as not to endanger their remaining year of college eligibility, and a movie marquee highlighting Rudolph Valentino in "Blood and Sand" did the trick for them.

"There are our names," McNally said. "I'll be Blood and you be Sand."

After the Maroons folded in 1928, McNally went to the team against which he scored Pottsville's last NFL touchdowns: the Packers. He starred on four of the 11 Green Bay championship teams -- in 1929, 1930, 1931 and 1936 -- and ranks 16th on the all-time scoring list of the Packers, who have been in the NFL since its inception.

Born in New Richmond, Wisc., he started his NFL career with the Milwaukee Badgers in 1925, and came to Pottsville along with Walt Kiesling, another Pro Football Hall of Famer-to-be, from the 1927 Duluth Eskimos. McNally and Kiesling played together on a third NFL team when they were in Green Bay lineups in 1935 and 1936.

As he outlasted all other Pottsville touchdown-getters in the NFL, McNally also outlived the other two Maroons who were eventually enshrined in the Hall of Fame.

Kiesling died in 1962 at the age of 58, Pete Henry passed away in 1952 when he was 54.

"Johnny Blood" was once a so-called "genius" who graduated from high school at 14. He was an irrepressible personality who shrugged off expulsions from Notre Dame and then Dartmouth, before going on to acquire a degree from St. John's of Minnesota 26 years after his class had graduated. And he was an exciting sports celebrity around whom wild tales grew in the "Roaring 20s." He was 82 when he breathed his last.