

THE FRANKFORD YELLOW JACKETS

Part 1: Pre-NFL

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Philadelphia has a long history of pro football thrills – and some great teams. Way back in 1902, a team sponsored by Connie Mack's baseball Athletics claimed the U.S. pro football championship, and, though Pittsburgh made the same claim, the Philadelphia team usually is cited in record books, perhaps because of Mack's fame.

During the 1920's, Philadelphia was the home of one the most (and one of the few) successful teams in the National Football League. From 1924 through 1929, the club won more league games than any other NFL team. Yet today, many pro fans do not realize the famous Yellow Jackets were Philadelphia-based because they took their name from a Philly suburb.

Frankford, a community of Northeast Philadelphia, has been the birthplace of many original ideas, both in business and pleasure. It's always been a sports-loving and sports-producing area. In 1899, a group of local athletes established the Frankford Athletic Association. The association initially fielded baseball, soccer and football teams. Later, they would support only a football team. And what a team it was!

During these early years, the Frankford Athletic Association football team played a variety of opponents, mostly from other Philadelphia suburbs. However, on Thanksgiving Day in 1899, they hosted the Reading (Pa.) Y.M.C.A. at Wister's Park. Over 2,000 Philadelphia fans watched their hometeam win, 28-0. In those days, both touchdowns and field goals counted for five points. Instead of the game being timed in quarters, it was timed in halves.

The team was known as the Loyola A.C. in 1909. Not until 1912 did its caliber warrant taking the Frankford name as a representative of the town. They still played such city neighbors as Wildwood A.A. and Holmesburg. And, although no one can be certain at this late date, the players were probably not salaried pros.

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Football's popularity increased all over the country after World War I. By 1920 the businessmen of Frankford realized the impact this football team had on the community, both in advertising it and keeping thousands of prospective shoppers in Frankford. They incorporated the association and became stockholders. Shep Royle, president of a large textile mill and a state representative, became the president of the association. Five of the eleven original stockholders were presidents of their own textile businesses in Frankford.

The advertising given to the Frankford area by the team was best shown by the fact that the score of Frankford's 1920 scoreless tie with Holmesburg was reported in newspapers as far away as San Francisco and London. In that year, there were one thousand members in the association, and the businessmen raised donations of \$2,500 for team expenses. This would indicate that at least some players were salaried.

The team was a good one, featuring backs Ray Miller and Bob Remmey, and some local fans felt that the Yellow Jackets were the strongest independent football team in the country after one-sided victories over Germantown, Hobart, and Ewing. After the tie with Holmesburg, they edged the Thomas A.C. and Conshohocken, then thumped Lebanon Valley, 34-6, to bring their record to 8-0-1. On Saturday, November 27, they faced the Union A.A. of Phoenixville in a battle of unbeaten.

Most of the Union players were well-seasoned pros. In fact, many of them played Sundays as the Buffalo All-Americans. Among their famous "two-timers" were end "Heinie" Miller, tackle Lou Little, and center Lud Wray – all former Penn stars. The Yellow Jackets gave the star-studded Unions a tough game but bowed 10-6.

Neither team had joined the fledgling American Professional Football Association, the loose group that would eventually evolve into the NFL. However, the Unions finished their season with a 13-7 win over Jim Thorpe and the famous Canton Bulldogs. The visit was profitable for Canton. In the next few years, more famous midwest pro teams would visit Philadelphia for a good late-season payday.

Because of Pennsylvania Blue Laws, all pro football games in Philadelphia (and Pittsburgh, too) were played on Saturdays. This was a disadvantage in one respect, especially in the early years, because it put pro teams in direct competition with established college favorites like Penn. Later, the Yellow Jackets learned to make the situation work to their advantage, playing at home on Saturdays and away on Sundays for a double dose of gate receipts.

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In 1921, the Yellow Jackets and former Unions – under their new guise: the Philadelphia Quakers – battled for the "title" of champions of the city of Philadelphia. "Boy Manager" Leo Conway's Quakers still had their All-Americans, but the Jackets added end "Whitey" Thomas from Penn State and several more ex- college stars.

The Quakers, playing their home games at Baker Bowl, dropped a close one early, 3-0, to Charley Brickley's New York Giants team. On Saturday, November 19, they were scheduled to meet the Canton Bulldogs but the Buffalo manager let out the "open secret" that many of his players were doing double duty in Philadelphia – a practice against A.P.F.A. rules. Whatever his motives, he cost his team some excellent players. To a man, Miller and the rest voted to play in Philly. Canton cancelled its Philadelphia appearance and the Rochester Jeffersons replaced them. The Jeffs were a step down, but they managed a 3-3 tie against the harried Quakers. Former Buffalo back Johnny Scott kicked the field goal for Philadelphia.

Meanwhile, the Yellow Jackets were undefeated playing area teams. On the same day the Quakers tied Rochester, Frankford was tied 14-14 by the Union A.A., still a good team despite the loss of its All-Americans from the year before.

On November 26, the Jackets hosted the Quakers at Brown's Field before a large crowd. New to the Quaker lineup were Syracuse All-American guard Joe Alexander, former Canton stars Joe Guyon and Pete Calac, and Penn State immortal "Hinkey" Haines. Frankford added veteran pro backs Dinger Doane and Arda Bowser. After sixty furious minutes, the teams were tied 0-0. The "championship" was still up for grabs.

As December began, the Canton Bulldogs finally came to Philadelphia and defeated the Quakers 14-9 before 12,000 at Baker Bowl. Meanwhile, at Brown's Field, the Jackets rolled over the Ewing A.A., 41-0. The following Saturday, the Philly title was decided at Baker Bowl.

Most pro teams had disbanded by December 10, making any number of excellent players available to the contenders. Frankford imported "Swede" Youngstrom, an all-star Buffalo guard, and back Earl Potteiger, a veteran "hired gun." The Quakers, surprisingly, stayed with their regular lineup except for former Penn Stater Harry Robb, a speedy back who'd played one game with them earlier in the season.

The game was even through a scoreless first half. Alexander starred on defense for the Quakers, breaking up several plays behind the line of scrimmage. Whitey Thomas and Bob Remmey played well for the Jackets.

The game turned on a clever move by Johnny Scott of the Quakers in the third quarter. A long pass from Scott to Hinkey Haines put the ball at the Frankford eleven, but three plunges failed to gain an inch. In full view of the Jacket players, Scott took Haines aside and whispered to him furiously. When the ball

was snapped, Scott faded to pass as five Frankford players followed Haines into the end zone. In the meantime, Heinie Miller loped unattended at the ten. Suddenly, Scott fired the ball to Miller who zipped across the goal line. Robb added the extra point, and the teams played impregnable defense for the rest of the game.

The 7-0 win gave the Quakers the city championship, a truth they underlined a week later when Canton made a second visit to Baker Bowl and was swamped, 34-0. Glenn Killinger, the All-American halfback from Penn State, made his pro debut in the Quaker lineup.

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Shep Royle and the other Frankford directors had had enough. Two years as Philadelphia's second-best team was more than these business leaders would sit still for. All stops were out for 1922.

They didn't have the Quakers to worry about. Almost en mass, the Quakers' players moved to Frankford and Conway's team folded. Heinie Miller took over as Yellow Jacket coach. Before the season, he told his players what the community expected of them: "Playing in Frankford is probably different from playing with any other team with which you have been connected. The residents here show the same spirit and interest that the undergraduates did during your collegiate days, but at the same time look upon the team as a community affair designed to advertise Frankford and help promote the things for which other organizations in the town are striving."

Miller had the horses. He and Whitey Thomas held down the ends. Lou Little and veteran pro "Bull" Lowe were at tackle. Lud Wray held forth at center. Lehigh's Joe Spagna played one guard; several players, including Joe Alexander, alternated at the other guard. Johnny Scott, Penn's Howard Berry, Lafayette's George Seasholtz, and Penn State's Joe Lightner played most games in the backfield.

In 1922 the Yellow Jackets finished the season undefeated over a thirteen-game schedule. The idea that the leading Philadelphia team played host to choice, late-season NFL attractions was firmly established in the "City of Brotherly Love" and would have some surprising consequences a few years later. The four of the Jackets' final five games were against teams from the NFL.

Starting on the Saturday before Thanksgiving, they beat the Rochester Jeffersons, 20-7. On Thanksgiving, they defeated Brickley's Giants, no longer an NFL member, 12-0. Two days later, they topped the Akron Pros, 6-3. The Pros had been A.P.F.A. champs two years before. On Saturday, December 9, the Buffalo All-Americans held the Jackets to a 3-3 tie. The crowd at Brown's Field was reported at a scarcely credible 20,000. The season ended a week later with a 12-0 win over the Toledo Maroons.

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Flush with success, Frankford spent \$100,000 on a new playing field – Frankford Stadium. But, first things first, they also spent heavily on top drawer players.

Heinie Miller sat out the first half of the 1923 season. Tackle Lou Little took over as player-coach. The next year he became head man at Georgetown and began a long road that would land him in the College Football Hall of Fame.

Whitey Thomas, Bull Lowe, and Joe Spagna returned to join Little on the Yellow Jacket line. Joe Alexander played the the full season at guard. Newcomers were Art Corcoran, an end formerly with the Canton Bulldogs, and the All-American Stein brothers -- Russell, the big tackle from Washington and Jefferson, and Herb, the clever center from Pitt. In November, Heinie Miller returned.

In the backfield, Johnny Scott, Michigan fullback Cedric "Pat" Smith, Lafayette's Joe Lehecka, and Les Asplundh, a legendary punter from Swarthmore, were available all season. Looking in for occasional games were Hinky Haines, George Seaholtz, Joe Lightner, Harry Dayhoff of Bucknell, Ben Boynton of Williams, Walter French of Army, and two locals from the University of Pennsylvania -- Harry Rosetsky and J.K. "Poss" Miller.

Had all the All-America credits earned by this crew been stacked up, the pile would have been higher than Independence Hall.

The Jackets were far beyond local sandlot teams. Few of the sandlotters would schedule them, and those that risked life-and- limb as early-season "warm-ups" were easily dispatched. The only competitive clubs in Pennsylvania were the coal-region teams, and these proved stumbling blocks. Shenandoah and Coaldale were handled well, but Gilberton and Pottsville loaded up for their visits to Frankford Stadium, and both left with scoreless ties to brag about. Nevertheless, when it was time for the NFL teams to make their annual Philadelphia visit, the Yellow Jackets still stood undefeated.

Things began well enough. Rochester's Jeffersons were smashed 33-0. The next week began one of those strange situations in sports that defy rational explanation. The Dayton Triangles had been a good team around World War I, but they grew old and broke. By 1923, they were a road team, taking their lumps weekly from just about everyone. They got worse throughout the '20s. Yet, almost every time they played Frankford, the hapless Tris played like world beaters. On Saturday, November 24, 1923, Dayton cast its first spell, handing the Jackets their first defeat, 7-6.

Four days later, Frankford hosted Brickley's Giants in their annual Thanksgiving Day game. Although not an NFL team since 1921, the Giants still employed some "name" players, but the Jackets had no trouble dropping them 27-3. They followed with solid wins over Akron and Buffalo.

The season's biggest game was the last one scheduled. The Canton Bulldogs, with future Hall of Famers Guy Chamberlin, Wilbur Henry, and Roy "Link" Lyman, had completed their second consecutive undefeated season as NFL champions. As far as Frankford was concerned, a victory over Canton meant the Jackets could claim the world's pro football title.

The Bulldogs performed as champs. Canton's Lou "The Hammer" Smyth passed and ran brilliantly, but the Frankford defense was up to the task. Pat Smith, Bull Lowe, and Poss Miller were particularly outstanding for the home team.

The first half ended 0-0. So did the third quarter. Through more than ten minutes of the final period, there was still no score, but Canton had the ball at Frankford's three- yard-line with fourth down to go. Speedy Bulldog Quarterback "Tex" Grigg took the ball on a sweep. Heinie Miller was blocked, but Poss Miller rode Grigg down inches short of the goal line.

Frankford punted out of its own end zone. Time was running out as Canton worked the ball down to the 15-yard-line. Smyth went back to hold for a field goal try. Big Wilbur Henry swung his foot.

The 3-0 loss ended talk of a national championship in Philadelphia but showed the Jackets could play with anyone.

At the annual association meeting in January, 1924, Shep Royle was re-elected president unanimously. Royle announced the club would look into a proposal to establish an Eastern Professional Football League. If that didn't work out, Frankford would consider joining the National football League, even though that entity was comprised exclusively of midwest teams.

The financial report was enlightening. The refreshment stand had made a tidy profit of \$892.61. The club's baseball team had done well and was \$2,408.33 in the black. But all this paled beside the football team.

The largest football expenditure was for salaries, \$31,915.00 -- \$2455 per game! (NFL teams were supposed to keep their salaries under \$1,800 total per game.) Guarantees to visiting teams came to \$28,148.88; game officials received \$1,335.00; rain insurance was \$3,137.40; equipment \$392.30; advertising \$2,027.12. Various other expenses brought the red side of the ledger to \$73,372.60.

But receipts from football tickets totalled \$88,465.34. A whopping \$15,092.74 profit!

An Eastern Football League never got out of the talking stage. On July 25, 1924, the Frankford Athletic Association was granted a franchise in the National Football League.

1920 (8-1-1 .889)

Sat	O- 2	H	East Falls Y.M.A. .	28- 0	W
Sat	O- 9	H	Germantown	62- 7	W
Sat	O-16	H	Hobart	56- 0	W
Sat	O-23	H	Wheeling Club	14- 0	W
Sat	O-30	H	Ewing A.A.	41- 0	W
Sat	N- 6	A	Holmesburg	0- 0	T
Sat	N-13	H	Thomas A.C.	7- 0	W
Sat	N-20	A	Conshohocken	10- 6	W
Thu	N-25	H	Lebanon Valley	34- 6	W
Sat	N-27	A	Union A.A.	6-10	L

1921 (6-1-2 .857) Probably 2 games missing

Sat	O- 8	H	All-Philadelphia ..	54- 0	W
Sat	O-15	H	Allentown	42- 0	W
Sat	O-22	H	Vincome	56- 0	W
Sat	N- 5	H	Holmesburg	3- 2	W
Sat	N-19	H	Union A.A.	14-14	T
Thu	N-24	H	Thomas A.c.	18- 0	W
Sat	N-26	H	Phila. Quakers	0- 0	T
Sat	D- 3	H	Ewing Club	41- 0	W
Sat	D-10	A	Phila. Quakers	0- 7	L

1922 (11-1-1 .917)

Sat	S-30	H	Lykens	44- 0	W
Sat	O- 7	H	Edwardsville	31- 0	W
Sat	O-14	H	Gilberton	14- 0	W
Sat	O-21	H	Orange A.C.	50- 0	W
Sat	O-28	H	Shenandoah	29- 3	W
Sat	N- 4	H	Coaldale	14- 0	W
Sat	N-11	H	Mt. Carmel	45- 0	W
Sat	N-18	H	Holmesburg	13- 6	W
Sat	N-25	H	Rochester Jeffs ...	20- 7	W
Thu	N-30	H	New York Giants ...	12- 0	W
Sat	D- 2	H	Akron Pros	6- 3	W
Sat	D- 9	H	Buffalo All-Amer. .	3- 3	T
Sat	D-16	H	Toledo Maroons	12- 0	W

1923 9-2-2 .818)

Sat	S-29	H	All-Lancaster	24- 0	W
Sat	O- 6	H	Thomas A.C.	19- 0	W
Sat	O-13	H	New Haven	25- 0	W
Sat	O-20	H	Gilberton	0- 0	T
Sat	O-27	H	Shenandoah	36- 7	W
Sat	N- 3	H	Coaldale	20- 0	W
Sat	N-10	H	Pottsville	0- 0	T
Sat	N-17	H	Rochester Jeffs ...	33- 0	W
Sat	N-24	H	Dayton Triangles ..	6- 7	L
Thu	N-29	H	New York Giants ...	27- 3	W
Sat	D- 1	H	Akron Pros	10- 0	W
Sat	D- 8	H	Buffalo All-Amer. .	10- 6	W
Sat	D-15	H	Canton Bulldogs ...	0- 3	L