

THE FRANKFORD YELLOW JACKETS

Part 2: The Good Years

By Richard Pagano and C.C. Staph

The Coffin Corner: Vol. 9, No. 4 (1987)

The Frankford Yellow Jackets entered the National Football League in 1924 as the league's first solid east coast team. Attempts at establishing franchises in Washington and New York in 1921 had fallen flat, but the Jackets had already played successfully as an independent for several years. Midwestern NFL teams willingly made the trek to Philadelphia where large and loyal crowds at Frankford Stadium often made the visiting club's share of the receipts larger than what they might hope for as the host team back in their home cities.

Because of Pennsylvania Blue Laws, the Jackets could not play in Philadelphia on Sundays, putting them head-to-head with Penn and other local colleges and high schools for Saturday crowds. Nevertheless, there were enough football enthusiasts that the Jackets could expect 12,000 to 15,000 at most of their home games. Except for the Chicago Bears, no other NFL team consistently drew that well.

With their game out of the way by Saturday night, the Jackets were free to jump on a train and go somewhere else for a Sunday game with another league team or an independent. Often, the Jackets and their Saturday opponents rode the same train back to that team's city for a replay of the Saturday game. As a result of the double-header weekends, Frankford played more games than any other NFL team nearly every season. In 1924, they played 14 league games and another seven against non-league foes.

The first NFL edition of the Yellow Jackets fielded a strong lineup for Coach Bob Berryman. Penn State's "Whitey" Thomas held down one end slot, with Lafayette's Milt O'Connell and Army's Eddie Doyle sharing time at the other. Captain Russ Stein, the former Washington & Jefferson All-America and veteran "Doggie" Julian from Brown were the tackles. Lehigh's "Butch" Spagna, a pro since 1919, and Colgate's 250-pound Jim Welsh, an accurate kicker, were the regular guard. "Bull" Behman from little Dickinson, who would go on to become the Jackets' greatest player, backed up both the guards and tackles. The center was Herb Stein, Russ' brother and an All-America himself at Pitt. Except for Welsh, none of the linemen topped 210 pounds.

Dartmouth's Harvey Haws quarterbacked a small but speedy fleet of backs. Penn State's Charlie Way, a 145-pound streak who'd seen earlier service with the Canton Bulldogs, was the most famous Jacket runner, but "Tex" Hamer, the 190-pound fullback from Penn, had an even better season, scoring 72 points. Other top runners were Lehigh's John Storer, Bucknell's Harry Dayhoff, and Penn's George Sullivan, who joined the team at mid-season. None of these was a passer, but with a crushing running attack, the Jackets averaged better than 23 points a game.

Way and Sullivan, believed to be the last survivors of the '24 team, were interviewed by co-author Richard Pagano in preparing this history, and fondly recalled their days with the Jackets and all-night train trips to Sunday away games.

Frankford opened the season with two straight easy Saturday wins over NFL weaklings, topping the Rochester Jeffersons 21-0 and the Kenosha Maroons 31-6. On the Sunday after the Kenosha win, they went to Dayton for a game with their personal "jinx" team, the Triangles. Perhaps the Jacket players weren't ready for their first all-nighter. Before a full house of 4,000 at tiny Triangle Park, Dayton won their first of only two NFL victories that year, 19-7.

The next Saturday, the Jackets hosted the Cleveland Bulldogs, practically the same lineup that had won two straight NFL titles for Canton, and held them to a 3-3 tie. Two weeks later, they suffered by far the

worst defeat of their history, 33-3, to the Chicago Bears. Again the defeat came in a Sunday away game after a Saturday contest in Philadelphia, this one against the strong independent Providence Steam Roller.

The Yellow Jackets finished October of '24 with a so-so 3-2-1 mark, but they roared through November with eight straight league victories, surely a one-month record. On November 16 at Dunn Field, they handed Cleveland its only regular-season loss, 12-7, as Welsh kicked a pair of field goals. On Thanksgiving, they showed exactly how they really compared with the Dayton Triangles by squashing them 32-7. It was too late. The upset by the Tris in early October had cost the Jackets the league championship.

For 1924, the NFL had decided to end its season on November 30 and base its standings on the winning percentages at that point. Had the Jackets beaten the Triangles on October 5 (as they surely should have even had they been forced to walk all the way to Dayton), they would have finished at 12-1-1 for .923. Instead, they ended at .846, behind Cleveland (7-1-1 .875) and the Bears (6-1-4 .857).

Truthfully, however, Frankford fans had no right to complain. The Bears had beaten them badly during the season and also edged them 13-10 in a mid-December exhibition at Frankford Stadium. And certainly the 11-2-1 record (17-3-1 overall) marked them as one of the best teams in pro football.

* * * *

The Yellow Jackets went into the 1925 season with high hopes of winning it all and came out of it as one of the central figures in a controversy that's still being discussed today.

New eastern teams were added by the NFL for the upcoming season. The New York Giants and Providence Steam Roller would win league titles within four years. The Pottsville Maroons wouldn't – although that's not the way they feel about it. Pottsville was the strongest of the Pennsylvania coal region teams that had been playing independently of the NFL for several years. As far as the league was concerned, Pottsville's main attractions was that a visiting team could play on Saturday at Frankford and then zip up to Pottsville which was not affected by the Blue Laws for a second pay date on Sunday.

In Frankford's pursuit of the NFL title, the Jackets hired Guy Chamberlin as coach for the '25 season. He'd been player-coach of three straight NFL champions: the Canton Bulldogs in 1922-3 and the Cleveland Bulldogs of 1924. An inspirational leader, he was also the finest end in pro ball. Most of his players were as new as he was to the Yellow Jackets.

Opposite him at end was Rae Crowther of Colgate. Behman played one tackle and Vermont's Art Harms usually started at the other. The guards were Spagna, Welsh and Will Hoffman of Lehigh. Both the Stein brothers had joined Pottsville for '25; the new Jacket center was another Lehigh man, Bill Springsteen.

Haws began the season at quarterback, but by mid-season Henry "Two-Bits" Homan took over. Backs Sullivan and Hamer returned, with Idaho's Bob Fitzke and Gonzaga's Houston Stockton, a fair passer, added to the corps.

The squad was considerably deeper than the '24 ironmen. Versatile Charlie Cartin subbed at all the line positions; Pitt's Harry Seidelson played guard or tackle. Late season acquisitions included tackle "Link" Lyman, fullback Ben Jones, and halfback Lou Smyth, all of whom had played for Chamberlin before.

The Jackets got off to a three-win start before dropping another one of those Sunday-after-a-train-ride games in Detroit, 3-0. Six more wins followed, including back-to-back victories over the Giants and a 3-0 win over the Dayton jinx on a Behman field goal. On Sunday, November 8, they dropped one to the Bears, 0-19, in Chicago, as usual after a Saturday home game.

On Saturday, November 14, the Jackets hosted near-rival Pottsville. The Maroons stood 5-1-0, having profited by playing most of their opponents the day after those teams had been softened up in

Philadelphia. The Jackets handled the Maroons roughly, topping them 20-0. As far as Frankford was concerned, that win established them as the top team in Pennsylvania and maybe in the east.

Shortly after that, when a promoter came up with the idea of having a squad of star Notre Dame graduates play the top Pennsylvania team at Shibe Park in December, the Jackets were all for it. All they had to do was repeat their win over the Maroons.

However, things suddenly started going sour for the Jackets. Chamberlin was knocked out of a string of games with an injury, and the team suffered without his fiery leadership on the field. The next Saturday, they lost a home game to a very ordinary Cleveland team, led by Al Nesser, the last of the six Nesser brothers still playing football. The next day, the Yellow Jackets lost again at Providence.

For Thanksgiving, the non-league New Britain team was edged 7-0. Two days later, the Jackets slipped past the visiting Green Bay Packers, 13-7. The next day, they went up to Pottsville for their third game in four days to take on the tough Maroons. To put it mildly, Frankford wasn't up to the task. The Maroons ran over and through them for a humiliating 49-0 walloping.

Meanwhile, in Chicago, Harold "Red" Grange had turned pro with the Chicago Bears, drawing huge crowds and turning the NFL on its ear. From Thanksgiving Day, when Grange brought 36,000 into Wrigley Field, every team in the league was anxious to book a game with the Bears. Frankford's chance came on Saturday, December 5. Because of the anticipated crowd, the game was played at Shibe Park. Grange scored both touchdowns in a 14-7 Bear win before 35,000 Philadelphians.

The next day in Chicago, Pottsville defeated the Chicago Cardinals in a game that the Maroons and most newspapers said gave Pottsville the NFL title, somehow ignoring the fact that the 1925 season was slated to run through December 20. Shortly thereafter, Frankford learned (or was reminded) that Pottsville planned to play the Notre Dame All-Stars, featuring the Four Horsemen, at Shibe Park the next Saturday.

The exact terms of the contract are unknown. Certainly when it was first proposed, the Jackets fully expected to play the Notre Damers themselves. It's hard to believe that the Frankford officials would in any way leave an opening for the Maroons to play at Shibe Park. But it's equally difficult to think that Shep Royle and the others—all successful businessmen who took no pay for their Yellow Jacket efforts—could sign a contract without knowing all its details. We only know for sure that by the week of the Notre Dame-Pottsville game, Frankford determined to quash it.

The Jackets protested to the league that Pottsville intended to violate their territorial rights, arguing they had a game scheduled with Cleveland at Frankford Stadium on the same date and attendance there game would be hurt. That game may have been a last-minute arrangement concocted to shore up their territorial claim, as Pottsville supporters later charged, but Frankford was certainly within its rights to schedule a league game at its own park.

League President Joe Carr supported Frankford's protest and ordered Pottsville to cancel the Notre Dame game. When the Maroons played it anyway, they were immediately suspended by Carr. Meanwhile, the Frankford-Cleveland game drew a smaller crowd than what might have been normally expected (the "damage" was later set at \$2,500), but the Jackets got an additional game out of the mess when they were sent to Providence the next day to substitute for the suspended Pottsville team.

The final '25 record of 13-7-0, good for only sixth place, was a distinct disappointment to Frankford. If there was a "spoil sport" element to their dealings with Pottsville, this may have been partly at the root.

The NFL faced stiff competition in 1926, as Grange and his business partner C.C. "Cash and Carry" Pyle opened the American Football League with Grange's New York Yankees as the main attraction. Frankford lost several players to the new league: Behman, Spagna, Cartin and Sullivan. Of greater concern, the Philadelphia Quakers emerged as the new league's strongest team and vied directly for the local pro football dollar.

Chamberlin returned as coach. He and Crowther manned the ends. Rookie tackles were Bob "Daddy" Potts of Clemson and Lafayette's Johnny Budd, a real find. At season's end Nebraska great Ed Weir signed on for the last four games. Hoffman returned at one guard. The other was shared by veterans Rudy Comstock and "Swede" Youngstrom. Max Reed was a rookie center, with Springsteen the number one sub at center or end. Stockton, Hamer, and Homan were in the backfield again. Other important backs were West Virginia's "Doc" Bruder, "Hap" Moran of Grinnell and Carnegie Tech, Ned Wilcox of Swarthmore, and a pair of former Canton Bulldogs, Ben Jones and "Wooky" Roberts.

After romping over the Atlantic City Rosies in a non-league game, the Yellow Jackets staggered out of the starting block against league foe Akron with a 6-6 tie at Frankford Stadium. But after that, they ran off six straight victories to move to the front in the standings.

Frankford fans came in for special mention in the New York *Times* when the Jackets played the Giants:

Twenty thousand persons saw National Football League professional football inaugurated at the Polo Grounds with the blare of trumpets from Frankford, Pa. The Frankford fans; men, women and children, most of them wearing yellow slickers, had not only their band and cheer leaders, but also organized cheers and songs. The enthusiasm was as great and the cheering as loud as at any college battle.

On Saturday, October 30, the Providence Steam Roller came to Philadelphia and edged the Jackets 7-6. The loss dropped them behind the undefeated Chicago Bears in the race. The next day, both teams met again at Providence, with Frankford gaining a measure of revenge, 6-3.

Five more victories brought the Yellow Jackets to a 12-1-1 mark when the Chicago Bears at 11-0-2 arrived for a showdown on December 4. Despite the Jackets' excellent record, attendance was down because of the Quaker competition. Only about 10,000 showed up at Shibe Park for the biggest game in Yellow Jacket history. More than twice that many had turned out the week before to watch the Quakers play Grange and his Yankees.

Neither the Bears nor the Jackets could score through three quarters. A Bear try for a field goal was blocked by Chamberlin in the third period. With only five minutes left, Chicago's Bill Senn broke away for 62 yards and a TD to give the Bears the lead. Chamberlin blocked the extra point try.

The Jackets took over at their 25 and Stockton began throwing passes, mostly to Crowther. There were still 27 yards away from the goal line with two minutes left, when Stockton spotted Two-Bits Homan in the end zone and threw a strike. Tex Hamer booted the extra point to give Frankford a hard-fought 7-6 win.

Both teams finished out the season without losing. The Jackets' 14-1-2 record gave them the edge over the Bears' 12-1-3 mark. Pottsville put in a strong second outing and could have knocked Frankford out of the title on the last Saturday of the season, but could manage only a 0-0 tie.

The Quakers won the AFL championship although, by the end of the season, most of their league-mates had gone belly up. They tried to get a game with the Jackets, but when that fell through, settled for a contest with the seventh-place Giants in New York. They were stomped, 31-0, a harsh lesson in football relativity for those Philadelphia fans who'd abandoned the Yellow Jackets for the Quakers.

1924 (11-2-1 .846 - 3rd NFL)

Sat	S-27	H	Rochester Jeffersons	...	21-	0	W
Sat	O- 4	H	Kenosha Maroons	31-	6	W

Sun	O- 5	A	Dayton Triangles	7-19	L
Sat	O-11	H	Cleveland Bulldogs	3- 3	T
Sun	O-12	A	*Staten Island Stapletons	27- 6	-
Sat	O-18	H	Columbus Tigers	23- 7	W
Sat	O-25	H	*Providence Steam Roller.	21-10	-
Sun	O-26	A	Chicago Bears	3-33	L
Sat	N- 1	H	Akron Pros	23- 0	W
Sun	N- 2	A	Buffalo Bisons	24- 0	W
Sat	N- 8	H	Kansas City Cowboys	42- 7	W
Sat	N-15	H	Minneapolis Marines	39- 7	W
Sun	N-16	A	Cleveland Bulldogs	12- 7	W
Sat	N-22	H	Milwaukee Badgers	21- 6	W
Sun	N-23	A	*Providence Steam Roller.	16- 3	-
Thu	N-27	H	Dayton Triangles	32- 7	W
Sat	N-29	H	Buffalo Bisons	45- 7	W
Sat	D- 6	H	*Shenandoah	27- 6	-
Sun	D- 7	A	*Waterbury Blues	14- 0	-
Sat	D-13	H	*Chicago Bears	10-13	-
Sun	D-14	A	*Clifton Heights	34- 0	-

1925 (13-7-0 .650 - 6th NFL)

Sun	S-20	A	*New Britain	6- 0	-
Sat	S-26	H	Buffalo Bisons	27- 7	W
Sat	O- 3	H	Providence Steam Roller	7- 0	W
Sat	O-10	H	Canton Bulldogs	12- 7	W
Sun	O-11	A	Detroit Panthers	0- 3	L
Sat	O-17	H	New York Giants	5- 0	W
Sun	O-18	A	New York Giants	14- 0	W
Sat	O-24	H	Dayton Triangles	3- 0	W
Sat	O-31	H	Columbus Tigers	19- 0	W
Sun	N- 1	A	Buffalo Bisons	12- 3	W
Sat	N- 7	H	Akron Pros	17- 7	W
Sun	N- 8	A	Chicago Bears	0-19	L
Sat	N-14	H	Pottsville Maroons	20- 0	W
Sat	N-21	H	Cleveland Bulldogs	0-14	L
Sun	N-22	A	Providence Steam Roller	7-20	L
Thu	N-26	H	*New Britain	7- 0	-
Sat	N-28	H	Green Bay Packers	13- 7	W
Sun	N-29	A	Pottsville Maroons	0-49	L
Sat	D- 5	H	Chicago Bears	7-14	L
Sat	D-12	H	Cleveland Bulldogs	0- 3	L
Sun	D-13	A	Providence Steam Roller	14- 6	W
Sun	D-20	A	Cleveland Bulldogs	13- 7	W

1925 (14-1-2 .933 - 1st NFL)

Sun	S-19	A	*Atlantic City Rosies ..	45- 0	-
Sat	S-25	H	Akron Pros	6- 6	T
Sat	O- 2	H	Hartford Blues	13- 0	W
Sun	O- 3	A	Hartford Blues	10- 0	W

Sat	O- 9	H	Buffalo Rangers	30-	0	W
Sun	O-10	A	Buffalo Rangers -----	Cancelled		
Sat	O-16	H	New York Giants	6-	0	W
Sun	O-17	A	New York Giants	6-	0	W
Sat	O-23	H	Canton Bulldogs	17-	0	W
Sun	O-24	A	Canton Bulldogs -----	Cancelled		
Sat	O-30	H	Providence Steam Roller	6-	7	L
Sun	O-31	A	Providence Steam Roller	6-	3	W
Sat	N- 6	H	Chicago Cardinals	33-	7	W
Sat	N-13	H	Nevers Eskimos	10-	0	W
Sat	N-20	H	Dayton Triangles	35-	0	W
Thu	N-25	H	Green Bay Packers	20-14		W
Sat	N-27	H	Detroit Panthers	7-	6	W
Sat	D- 4	H	Chicago Bears	7-	6	W
Sat	D-11	H	Providence Steam Roller	24-	0	W
Sun	D-12	A	Providence Steam Roller	Cancelled		
Sat	D-18	H	Pottsville Maroons	0-	0	T

* = Non-league game