

LOOKING INTO YOUR LOCALS: A REQUEST FROM THE EDITOR

By Bob Carroll

Looking for something to do? Time on your hands? Tired of watching reruns and waiting for the first game of the fall? Why not drift down to your old local library, dig out your old local newspapers and find out about that old local pro team?

If there's one area of pro football history that we really don't know much about, it's the pre-World War II, non-major league pro teams. Some of them, particularly in the '20s and early '30s, were on a par with many NFL teams. Others, while not so strong overall, employed some outstanding individuals. Yet, in many cases, we don't even know the names of the teams, much less the players. Yet, it seems, from what we do know, that virtually every community in America at one time or another took a shot at pro football. Probably yours did. We could argue forever about the distinctions among pro, semi-pro, independent, and sandlot football. For most of those dim names from the past, we don't know enough to even hang a label on them – if we have heard of them at all.

A few individuals have done a lot of work.

Bob Van Atta has carefully researched his home area of Westmoreland County, Pa., and is the main source of information about those Latrobe and Greensburg teams of the turn of the century. Bob Gill has studied west coast teams of 1935-45, as well as some other independents of the '30s. Bob Barnett has published articles on the Ironton Tanks and Portsmouth Spartans. Tom Nikitas has also looked into the Tanks' history. Vic Frolund is the source for information about the Youngstown (O.) Patricians of pre-World War I. Larry Names has come up with information on pre-WW I Green Bay teams. Joe Zagorski is delving into Pennsylvania coal region teams of the early '20s. Emil Klosinski wrote a whole book on early pro teams in Indiana. There are a few others. We won't try to name them all because we probably would miss some. The point is, we need a lot more.

If you decide to check out your own locale, let me make some suggestions as to how you might go about it – although every researcher makes up his own rules and there are many who do it better than I.

Getting started. Most libraries have complete runs of local newspapers either on microfilm or bound. One advantage of microfilm is that photocopies of articles can be made. However, this can get expensive. I once spent \$25 at ten cents a copy in a single session at Canton. You may want to rely on pencil and paper. Some useful materials to take with you to the library: several pens and sharpened pencils; a supply of paper or index cards; a magnifying glass; something to carry it all in; and a pocketful of change.

If you don't know when or if a team operated, pick a year and check the Sunday and Monday sports pages at the end of October and beginning of November. If you start too early or too late in the season, you may miss a team completely. Few teams played during the week and it takes too long to go day by day, so the Monday paper is the most likely (or Sunday because of Blue Laws). Good years to start with: 1917, 1921, 1925, 1930, 1915, and 1912.

What kind of information should you look for?

1. Date, location (city and field), opponents and score of games. Sometimes approximate attendances are given, either in numbers or by such descriptions as "overflow," "sparse," etc.
2. Lineups, but be aware that spellings can vary from game to game. First names were rarely used in newspapers at the time, but it's worth scanning the story just in case. College affiliations, though not 100 percent reliable, are often given. Team captains are useful to know.
3. Scoring and unusual plays.
4. Coaches, owners, managers, involved public officials. This kind of information is most likely to turn up in week day papers which you can check later.

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5. Always note the newspaper used and the date. I used to be careless about this and it's cost me a lot of trouble when I needed to go back and recheck a reference.

Other sources that have proved useful are county histories and old city maps (for ballpark locations) and memoirs. Sometimes telephone directories can be used. Some libraries have vertical files on local sports. Talking to oldtimers is great fun, but personally I'm always suspicious of memories and try to back them with printed contemporary accounts. Is there a local historical society?

Some newspapers have done feature stories many years later on the early local teams. It might be worth a phone call to the present sports editor to see if he knows of any such features. If he doesn't know of any, you might ask him if he's interested in publishing one.

Pitfalls to avoid:

Jot down anything that looks like you might want to have a record of later. I can't tell you how many times I've had to search through some papers I'd read months or even years before to find something I vaguely remember.

Don't try to do too much. If you try to cover ten years of football or ten teams in one session at the library, you'll likely end up with a very sketchy account. Take your time and concentrate on one thing at a time.

Don't get bogged down. Old sports pages are fascinating. It's tempting to sit there and read everything. Then, suddenly, it's time to go home! You have to be ruthless, and ignore all those great stories about other subjects. If I'm working with a reader-printer (a machine that makes copies from microfilm), I usually only read headlines before copying. When I get home and read over what I've got, I usually find I've wasted a few cents, but I know how easily I can get lost using all my time at the library reading.

If you're working with microfilm, you'll find your eyes will get tired. Take a break. Come back later. If you force yourself to keep going, you won't have much fun.

Fun? Well, yes. You have the joy of discovery and the pride of learning about your home area. You'll probably also learn about three million fascinating things having nothing to do with football you never knew. You'll also gain a measure of respect from a few and find many more who will think you're some kind of nut. I wish I could say you'll get rich. Actually, you probably won't make expenses, but at least the outlay won't be very high.

Finally, what should you do with your accumulated information? If you write, you might like to put together some sort of readable account. If you don't feel up to that, you might prefer to simply keep everything in a big envelope. Certainly, The Coffin Corner would enjoy a copy. It well could wind up on these pages. Your local library will be delighted if you donate a copy for their vertical file. Likewise, your local historical society.

But most of all, once you have your research started, you'll have a source of pleasure for years.