

# THE ANTHRACITE FOOTBALL LEAGUE

By Joe Zagorski

The hills and mountains of the coal region of Northeastern Pennsylvania are alive with history. One particular moment of coal region history, however, has passed nearly into oblivion. In an area of the country where pro football took center stage during the golden age of sports, a new league was born in 1924 that grabbed the spotlight for a brief moment, then relinquished it to the future.

The Anthracite Football League was formed not by the hardened coal that supplied its name, but by a strong desire to set a handful of teams on a smoother organizational path. It lasted only one season, and was considered by many to be a success for even less time than that. Nevertheless, it provided something different for the fans, and everyone agreed that it made a difference in the game.

The Anthracite League was conceived by a group of people who attempted, in a somewhat feeble way, to imitate the five-year-old National Football League. With the coal region teams, as well as with the NFL teams of a half-decade earlier, player raiding was running rampant, and a poorly designed scheduling system left game day matters in utter disarray. Moreover, the secret buying of assorted ringers (several of whom could produce, even guarantee, victory) made keeping a steady lineup almost impossible.

The pro game in Schuylkill County was in desperate need of some common-sense organization and standardized rules to live by. The *Pottsville Republican* provided the first sign that such elements were about to play a part in the game when it editorialized during the latter part of August that local pro football was in a heap of trouble.

## MANAGERS MAY KILL FOOTBALL

This headline in boldface type initiated a forthright response from James (Casey) Gildea, the manager of the Coaldale Big Green team, who recognized the truth in the warning.

"It has been learned," the *Republican* noted, "that some football teams in this vicinity have already started the thing which has pushed the region baseball down into the cave, and if this football mistake is not immediately corrected, football, which has been operated so successfully during the past few years, will soon be travelling on the same "excursion" that baseball went."

Professionalism being what it was back then, Gildea knew that the drive to win provided a rollover effect to the game. Money was being handed over by several managers in record amounts, as they hoped to lure the finest talent available. When the talent wasn't available, these managers took the next best step -- raiding their opponents for big-name players.

The newspaper went on to say that terrific sums were offered the players to throw down their original offer and join another club.... [O]ne player who was sought by two teams was surprised to get an offer from a third team in the region. His price jumped in a little over two weeks to almost double what he originally asked.

Thus the facts were presented. In the final paragraph of the story the *Republican* delivered an edict to the controlling factions of the game:

"If football is to continue," the paper proclaimed, it is wise for the managers in this region to get together and draw up an agreement not to pay such sums for the gridmen. The region cannot stand it, and if the fans get their way, they will be happy to see as much home football talent playing as it is possible to put in the game without weakening the club. This should be a good football year, but the wrong start is being made.

Gildea, for his part, acted upon these words. Like every good leader, manager, and promoter, he would attempt to discuss the problem calmly with his constituents. This discussion, Gildea thought, would hopefully lead to a way out of the morass that the teams were wallowing in.

A meeting was set up by Gildea for Thursday night, August 28th, at the Coaldale Town Hall. Invited were the managers and patriarchs of every major coal region team, not to mention a bevy of local sportswriters.

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Representing the Gilberton club were Joe Keating, James Rafferty, and T. Conner. On hand for the Shenandoah Yellowjackets were Joe Sepauley, Dr. Leach, and Thomas Purcell. Sitting in for Wilkes-Barre was a fellow known to the men present only as "Owens."

Also attending the meeting was the duo from the Pottsville Maroons, Dr. John Striegel and Harry Portz, and the trio from Coaldale, Edward Cavanaugh, E.E. Evans, and, of course, Gildea.

In the agenda this evening were two main topics: putting a halt to roster thievery, and developing a concise scheduling format for the teams in the region. The latter of these two objectives would certainly be easier to accomplish than the former, mainly because every manager knew the importance and longed for the benefits of a sound, opponent-by-opponent schedule.

In the years preceding 1924, finding open dates when teams could play each other was quite difficult, and often had to be delayed until the latest possible moment, usually two or three days before the Sunday in question.

One reason for this was the inability of some clubs to draw enough people into the ballpark. As expected, a team like Pottsville (with newly acquired stars such as Harry Robb, Larry Conover, and Wilbur Henry) needed larger gates at home and guarantees on the road than most coal region teams.

At the meeting, a schedule was agreed upon that would incorporate twelve set dates from the beginning of October until the end of November. This allowed non-league contests of natural rivals from nearby towns to take place at different intervals during and after the league's scheduled games. With this move, non-league teams like Reading, Tamaqua, and Minersville were not left out of the action. As the design for the local games grew, so too did the feeling that the football managers of the coal region were finally on the right track.

The meeting's other point of discussion, as mentioned earlier, involved more diplomacy and compromise but was believed crucial to success. Certainly each man present believed it to be the most controversial part of the meeting.

To combat the frequency of player raiding, several measures were decided upon by this learned panel. First, it was agreed that the league teams had to secure all of their players prior to the start of the league season. This move seemed to be the most basic, and after its quick acceptance came a few other changes which fed off the question of roster adjustments.

One change required a list of eligible players which had to be filed by each team for all the others to observe. The plan was that all teams would be required to finish the season with the same players listed on the roster at the start of the year.

The second motion required that a monetary forfeit had to be posted by each team to guarantee that the team would stick to its preseason player roster. As described by the *Republican* newspaper, "this [move] will prevent a lot of gold digging on the part of the grid artists and will prevent players hopping from one club to another."

The managers then went on to agree that a forfeit sum of \$500 or \$1,000 had to be used in league games, and that there was no objection to any player being signed, as long as one club did not tamper with another team's players.

This then was the agreement for the Anthracite League, a group of men who put the welfare of the game above their own team's success. Unfortunately, that sort of agreement didn't last very long.

Gus Sonneberg, a famous guard out of Dartmouth (as well as a member of the 1923 Columbus (Ohio) Panhandles of the NFL), was signed by Pottsville representative Stan Cofall the day after the big meeting in Coaldale. It now seemed apparent that Dr. Striegel of the Maroons was playing a different kind of game than the other managers in the new league. Striegel's plan was to stockpile as much talent as he could in an effort to provide the Pottsville fans with a winning team. In doing so, his list of ringers topped that of any other club in Schuylkill County.

In less than a week, several other league teams followed Pottsville's lead and began to sign the available big-name players (local or otherwise). The agreement to unify the coal region teams with an eligible player list was suddenly just an afterthought to the drive to win games.

The growing will to win was more important for the individual managers than the health of the new league, but one man disagreed with the competitive actions of his fellow Anthracite administrators. Coaldale's Jim Gildea didn't want to see his principles thwarted, but he didn't want to see the new league fail, either. As a response to the early problems of the AFL, he called another meeting September 18th at Pottsville.

At this second meeting with the various representatives of the member teams, Gildea tried to push his faith and beliefs in the eligible player list. His pleas fell on deaf ears.

All of the other managers had already closed the book on Gildea's ideas. Most were more interested in discussing the rights to the services of two players who were apparently already signed by both Shenandoah and Gilberton.

Despite Gildea's disappointment in his managerial contemporaries, he knew that the beginning of the new season was only a few days away. To prepare for the '24 campaign, Gildea had worked hard and long for several months with the Coaldale Athletic Association in the construction of new bleachers at their home field. These new stands (which could accommodate 8,000 fans) cost the Coaldale A.A. somewhere in the neighborhood of \$3,500.

In fact, several teams in the Anthracite Football League made structural improvements to their playing fields and seating arrangements before the season began. The total cost of these rectifications for all the teams was a then-staggering \$15,000. Investments such as these proved that most managers believed that their teams were worthy of big-league status.

On their respective opening days, both Pottsville and Coaldale won easily over their non-league opponents. The Maroons trampled Colwyn-Darby, 39-0, and Coaldale shut out the All-Lancaster eleven, 42-0. The other teams in the league were busy preparing for their regular season debuts in the following weeks.

The Gilberton club, under the managership of Joe Keating and James Rafferty, did a little bit more preparing than the other teams in the AFL. They acquired three new star players just days before their season opener. With the signings of former Canton Bulldogs Ben Shaw, Cecil Grigg, and Lou Smyth, the Gilberton club let the rest of the league know that they meant business.

For his part, Gildea was getting sick and tired of that kind of business, and so he decided to call another meeting in one last attempt at keeping the basic player personnel principles of the league intact.

The date was September 25th. The place was Shenandoah (just a few miles west of Mahanoy City, Pa.). The reason was simple. Gildea wanted the teams in the coal region to thrive on their own local talent, and he took those feelings to the other managers at the meeting and let them be known. The arguments that ensued concerned the matter of the eligible player list, which Gildea viewed as vital to the welfare of the league.

The *Pottsville Republican* reported the arguments and results of the meeting with cut-and-dried clarity.

The argument of the other four managers, representing Wilkes-Barre, Gilberton, Shenandoah and Pottsville was that it was professional football and that an eligible player list was out of place.

Gildea kept pressuring the panel to reconsider their earlier decisions. As it turned out, they were to have none of it.

All four stood against Gildea on his proposition. They contended that if an eligible list is made and the club must be held to that, then the players get the upper hand on the management and can demand almost any price for a game. Players will have to listen to reason or be banned all around.

It was further contended that in case of injury to a couple of players of a list of perhaps 18 men, a club would be handicapped if not able to get another player. Gildea said that in a case of this sort the other four managers should select a player for the club in place of the one injured.

Despite his enthusiastic pleadings, however, Gildea was unable to make the other managers of the AFL agree with his ideas, and so he and his Coaldale team quit the newly formed league.

Gildea may have left the Anthracite Association (as the league was also called) with the bitter taste of defeat still pungently unpleasant, but he did not go out like a loser. Instead, "Casey" believed that his group of local players could play against the best there was and still come out on top.

According to the *Pottsville Republican*:

Gildea said he would be fair as could possibly be, that while he withdrew his team from the Anthracite League he would keep the schedule arranged with all the region teams. In explaining he said he would play Pottsville two games, the same with the other clubs, one on each club's grounds, as had been previously fixed for the league season.

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With Gildea's takeout move, the AFL was left with four teams, the three of which proved to be no match for the Maroons. Even the Fritz Pollard-led Gilberton club fell to the nearly invincible juggernaut from "the gateway to the anthracite."

At season's end, Dr. Striegel's team claimed the coal region championship with a 12-1-1 overall record. Within a matter of months the Maroons would be accepted into the National Football League for an event-filled 1925 season.

The Big Green team from Coaldale fell on hard times after they left the Anthracite League. They managed to win only four games in 1924. Around the midpoint mark of the following season they became strictly a traveling team (due mostly to the fact that just about every football fan in the coal region became a Maroon fan when Pottsville became affiliated with the NFL).

Perhaps the most unique occurrence of the AFL in '24 involved the goings-on with the Wilkes-Barre Barons. Only one of their league games (a 34-0 loss to the Maroons) was recorded in the AFL standings, which today leaves a tantalizing question as to what happened to their remaining games. Further research may uncover whether Wilkes-Barre attempted to imitate Coaldale's decision and quit the league, whether they disbanded, or whether they just rescheduled most of their games to take advantage of their closer regional opponents.

That is how the Anthracite Football League was back in 1924. The AFL's shortened lifespan was easily forgotten after the spotlight dimmed, but still it produced many events that changed the history of coal region football.

### 1924 Anthracite Football League Standings\*

	W	L	T
Pottsville	12	1	1
Gilberton	4	3	1
Shenandoah	4	4	0
Coaldale	4	6	0
Wilkes-Barre	0	1	0

\*Including non-league games.

#### Recorded Games

- Sept. 21 Pottsville 39, Colwyn-Darby 0  
Coaldale 42, All-Lancaster 0
- Sept. 28 Pottsville 78, Phillipsburg 0  
Coaldale 13, Thomas A.C. 0  
Gilberton 62, Palmerton 0
- Oct. 5 Pottsville 34, Wilkes-Barre 0  
Coaldale 52, Conshohocken 0  
Shenandoah 38, Hobart A.C. 0
- Oct. 12 Pottsville 17, Gilberton 0
- Oct. 19 Pottsville 10, Coaldale 7  
Shenandoah 6, Gilberton 2
- Oct. 26 Pottsville 40, Reading 0  
Gilberton 14, Shenandoah 0
- Oct. 29 Coaldale 9, Gilberton 3
- Nov. 2 Pottsville 7, Shenandoah 0  
Atlantic City 7, Coaldale 0
- Nov. 8 Pottsville 6, Millville 0
- Nov. 9 Pottsville 22, Atlantic City 0  
Shenandoah 15, Coaldale 0
- Nov. 11 Gilberton 13, Akron 0  
Pottsville 33, Reading 0
- Nov. 16 Pottsville 0, Gilberton 0  
Shenandoah 6, Coaldale 0
- Nov. 23 Pottsville 3, Coaldale 0

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Nov. 27 Pottsville 7, Shenandoah 0  
Gilberton 17, Coaldale 0  
Nov. 30 Rochester 10, Pottsville 7  
Dec. 7 Frankford 27, Shenandoah 6