

## Cleveland A.C.: Pioneer Team in Pro Football?

by Tod Gladen

This is a rather bold headline for a team that's largely forgotten today. Its accomplishments on or off the playing field are left out of the history books. No articles are written proclaiming its merits. It was a team that did little of any importance or interest.

So why in 1989, almost a hundred years later, is there a sudden interest in this faceless team? Why is there a sudden rush to the microfilm readers and boxes of old documents for a team that disbanded years ago?

The answer is simple. The Cleveland Athletic Club may fall into that important "Historical First" category. The Cleveland A.C. may be the first team that we can prove paid some of its players to play.

The current accepted first pro player was Pudge Heffelfinger, who got \$500 (a rather large amount in those days) to play one game for the Allegheny Athletic Association on November 12, 1892. If the Cleveland report is true, the players for the C.A.C. were paid to play a few weeks prior to Pudge's big payday.

Soon maybe the city of Cleveland can tout itself as the home of professional football as well as rivers that catch fire, Superman and rock 'n' roll.

That day, however, is probably some time off. It will take a lot of work to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the C.A.C paid its players. Knowing and proving are two different things.

The club no doubt paid its players under the table. This was a fairly common practice. Everybody did it to preserve their amateur status so they could play college teams. In the 1890s there were very few football programs available, and to be banned from playing any of them could force a team to disband for a lack of opponents.

What brought the Cleveland team into limelight is an out-of-town newspaper article written in 1892 and accidentally discovered recently. The paper was the Ohio State Journal, the Republican paper in Columbus, and a pretty good one too. This was the same paper that Joe Carr, commissioner of the NFL from 1921-39, later worked on.

The best paper in Columbus for local sports was its competitor, the Democratic Columbus Press, but what the Ohio State Journal lacked in local coverage it made up in national coverage. Some of the teams that the paper regularly covered were the Chicago Athletic Association, the Duquesne Country and Athletic Club, the Homestead Library team, the Maryland A.C. and the Massillon Athletic Club, a forerunner of the powerful Massillon Tigers. Sometimes when the paper had enough material, it would group them in a section under the heading "Professional Football"--a practice unusual for the 1890s.

The article that's drawing current attention was a report of a game between the Cleveland A.C. and Dayton on November 19, 1892. The team from Dayton was listed just like that--as "Dayton," with no other name of affiliation. The game was played in Dayton in utterly awful conditions. The paper said, "Five hundred football enthusiasts waded through seven inches of slush...to witness the game...The visitors won by a score of 10 to 0."

What makes the article interesting is what comes next: "The Clevelanders are the champions of Ohio. Their club consists of many professionals."

The article implies that the players have been professionals for some time. But professional what? The context is about the quality of the players, because right after that the article says Dayton brought in two Yale varsity boys to play for them. The logical assumption is that the quoted reference means the Cleveland team consists mostly of professional football players.

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Is the paper saying that the players are professional in their field of work, or professional in being paid to play football? Many of the players on the team were veterans from college varsity football teams. Would a newspaper in 1892 use the term "professional" for their off-field work?

Whatever the truth, it will be some time before we can determine whether the Cleveland Athletic Club was a pro team or not.

For the record, here's the complete article as it appeared in the Ohio State Journal of November 20, 1892:

### Dayton Defeated by Cleveland

DAYTON, OHIO, NOVEMBER 19--Five hundred football enthusiasts waded through seven inches of slush at the Athletic park this afternoon to witness the game between the Cleveland Athletic club and the Dayton eleven. The game was stiffly contested and was a pretty exhibition of skill, strength and science. The visitors won by a score of 10 to 0 after a hard fight.

The Clevelanders are the champions of Ohio. Their club consists of many professionals. The Dayton aggregation was strengthened by two Yale varsity boys. The local club was outweighed 16 pounds per man in the rush line, and this in the main accounts for the score.

A singular fact was that at the end of each thirty- minute half the Daytons had the ball within a few feet of the goal.

The C.A.C. made and kicked a good game in the first half, but did not succeed in kicking it in the last.

On Thanksgiving day the Otterbein winning club will buck the center with the Dayton in this city. If the weather is in any way agreeable, 5000 spectators will be in attendance. Fashionable tally-ho parties will swell the crowd.