

Hail to the real 'redskins'

All Indian team from Hominy, Okla. , took on all comers

By Arthur Shoemaker

Buried deep in the dusty files of the Hominy (Okla.) *News* is this account of a professional football game between the Avant Roughnecks and the Hominy Indians played in October 1924:

“Johnnie Martin, former pitcher for the Guthrie team of the Oklahoma State League, entered the game in the fourth quarter. On the first play, Martin skirted right end for a gain of 20 yards. However, Hominy was penalized 15 yards for Martin having failed to report to the referee. On the next three plays, the backfield hit the line for a first down. With the ball on the 20-yard line, Martin again skirted right end for the winning touchdown.”

This speedy, high-stepping halfback was none other than Pepper Martin, star third baseman of the St. Louis Cardinals' "Gas House Gang" of the 1930s. Pepper became famous during the 1931 World Series when the brash young Cardinals beat the star-studded Philadelphia Athletics four games to three.

Nowhere is Pepper more fondly remembered than in the land of the Osage. For all his fame as a baseball star, he's best remembered as a spectacular hard-running halfback on Oklahoma's most famous and most colorful professional football team, the Hominy Indians. It was here that Pepper was called the "Wild Horse of the Osage.”

The football team was organized in late 1923 at a time when Hominy was riding the crest of the fantastic Osage oil boom. Wealthy Osage tribal members furnished the financial backing for the operation, and the team was made up entirely of "real" Indians. Thus the Hominy team furnished a parallel to Jim Thorpe's Oorang Indians, who played in the NFL in 1922 and '23.

During the early years, games were scheduled against such regional teams as Joplin and Sarcoxie in Missouri; Coffeyville, Elk City and Fredonia in Kansas; and Stillwater, Avant, Bartlesville and Fairfax in Oklahoma.

The rivalry against the neighboring Osage County town of Fairfax was especially noteworthy. Fairfax also had wealthy Osage Indians who loved football. With no organized team, they would often import college players who entered the games under assumed names. Home-and-home games between Hominy and Fairfax indirectly had a bearing on the construction of a new stadium at the Haskell Institute, the renowned Indian school in Lawrence, Kan.

Hominy's connection with the famed Indian school came about in 1924 after the school's football season was over. To help raise money for a proposed new stadium, the Haskell team had played an exhibition game in Muskogee, Okla. One of the players was John Levi, an All-American halfback. Levi had exhausted his eligibility, so he was approached by several Osage Indians about playing for Hominy. He agreed, and took along several of his teammates, including his brother George.

They reported in time for a showdown with Fairfax, which had loaded its team with players from area colleges. It was alleged that some \$200,000 was wagered on the outcome of the game. The Haskell players were told that a large contribution would be made toward the building of Haskell's new stadium if they won. They did, and after learning of what the Osages had done. other tribes chipped in with additional funds, with the result that the stadium was built.

Over the years, many Haskell footballers played in Hominy uniforms. Many tribes were

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represented: Osage, Pawnee, Otoe, Creek, Seminole, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Sioux, Cherokee, Navajo, Kiowa, Seneca, Sac and Fox, and even an Eskimo. An attempt was made to list all those who played for the team, and it stopped with 70 names. Some played for years; others may have played just a single game.

In 1927, Pepper Martin was off playing baseball when the Hominy team hit the big time with a shocking win over the New York Giants in a game played in Pawhuska, Okla. It was the day after Christmas, and the Giants rolled into town as the newly crowned NFL champions.

The game was a natural for prosperous, oil-booming Oklahoma. Football fans from across the country converged on Pawhuska and the betting was heavy, with most of the "smart" money riding on the Giants. This was the Hominy team's first crack at a football club with the stature of the Giants. A year or so earlier, though, they had defeated the Buffalo Rangers, who finished ninth in the 22-team NFL that season with a 4-4-2 record. The Indians beat the Rangers first at Tulsa and again two weeks later in San Antonio.

Newspaper accounts of the Indians-Giants fray tell of outstanding plays made by Giant halfback Ben Hobson and tackle Rudy Comstock. Interestingly enough, neither of them played for the Giants in any league games that year (Comstock played for Frankford, Hobson for Buffalo), which suggests that this was a barnstorming team with a number of "ringers" filling in around a nucleus of players from the champs. Whoever their opponents were, it's certain that John and George Levi, Joe Pappio and George Nix (the Eskimo) led the Indians to a 13-6 win.

Payment to Hominy players in the 1920s seldom rose higher than \$150 per game. In many instances it was less than that. Occasionally it was necessary to announce that all proceeds from a game would go to the players. They risked broken bones, torn ligaments, hospital bills and unattended injuries of every sort. The Indians never owned a bus, but used a caravan of touring cars. The breakdown of a lumbering Pierce-Arrow or Buick, the ragged jerseys, the greasy lunch rooms, the smell of liniment and sweat, the rejoicing after a victory – all were a part of the game.

The arrival of the 1930s brought the Great Depression, and a need for more creative marketing. When playing far from home, many of the Hominy players would dress in their tribal costumes and put on a "pow-wow" dance before a game. Complete with drums, whoops, chants and feathers, they could always bring out a crowd, especially in the East.

Game conditions were often miserable, as reported by this Associated Press dispatch datelined Dec. 15, 1928, from Memphis, Tenn.:

Indian Eleven Beats Tigers in Mud, 20-13

For the second time this season the Oklahoma Indians football team from Hominy, unbeaten in two years, conquered the Memphis Tigers Sunday at Hodges Field, in a sea of mud and water. The triumph of the redskins marked their twenty-seventh consecutive victory in two years, in which time they have not been beaten or tied.

The dispatch doesn't fully explain that the entire 60 minutes were played in a cold, dreary downpour that turned the turf into a swamp. Mud oozed from every uniform, and the entire game was played with just one ball.

Memphis was a popular and lucrative stop for the touring Hominy team. In 1928 the Indians played the Sole Owner Tigers twice, beating them both times, by scores of 7-0 and (you guessed it) 20-13.

A year later the Hominy team made two more trips to Memphis and lost two hard-fought games, 13-7 and 16-7. Their first meeting drew a crowd of 6,500 – so many that the game was stopped after a few minutes of play and restarted to accommodate the fans who were still arriving.

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In 1930 the Indians must have fallen off a bit, because on their only trip to Memphis they dropped a 43-0 decision to the Tigers, by then the undisputed kings of southern football.

In 1931 the Hominy team took a swing up the East Coast. In New York, on Sept. 23, the Giants got revenge by trouncing the Indians 53-0. This was followed by a short hop to New Jersey, where they dropped a 9-6 decision to the Orange A.C., a former NFL team.

Moving north to the Boston area, the Indians met the Fitton A.C. of East Boston in Somerville, Mass., on Oct. 3. The local paper carried an interesting account of the game and praised the play of the visitors' Fait Elkins, who led a furious fourth-quarter comeback after the Fit tons had taken a 13-0 lead. The rally fell short, however, as the Indians failed to convert their PATs and lost, 13-12.

Later that season the Indians again journeyed to Memphis, where they made a much better showing than the last time, falling to the Tigers by a score of 6-0.

The 1932 team was the first to travel to St. Louis, where they dropped a 14-7 decision to a new team called the Gunners. Two trips to Memphis resulted in two more respectable losses, 20-7 and 19-13. The latter game, played in December, was notable because Pepper Martin returned to the Indians' lineup and scored both their touchdowns. He broke loose for a 75-yard run to pay dirt, then made a shoestring catch of a pass and ran 25 yards for another score.

Despite that fine showing, however, the St. Louis Cardinals' front office was extremely upset with Martin and forbade him from playing in future games.

The second American Football League, born in 1934, was pro football's first big-time venture in the South. The Indians weren't included in the league, but they did play two of its teams in preseason exhibitions, losing a 52-0 laugher to the St. Louis Blues, who went on to win the AFL title, and coming out on the short end of a 14-3 score against the Tulsa Oilers.

Few records of the Indians were kept, and many of those have been lost. It's difficult to know how long the team played. One letter was found from Professional Sports Enterprises Inc. of Los Angeles. Dated 1936, it was an inquiry about a game with the newly formed L.A. Bulldogs. But the arrangements fell through, and the Hominy team never played the Bulldogs.

Research also turned up a 1936 game contract from the Syracuse Braves of the American Football League (not the same as the 1934 AFL). It's a signed contract, complete with terms of payment – but again, it appears that the game never took place. That same year, contacts were made with a pro club in Dallas, but it's not clear whether anything came of that.

It seems that 1936 marked the end of the line for this unique and colorful team. They played all comers. They played on fields that were little more than chalked-off pastures, and they played in stadiums seating thousands of fans. They played because they loved the game, and because they could play as an all-Indian unit.