

“I Did Not Play:” Team Roster Errors in Pro Football

by Mel Bashore

A lot of research work goes into compiling reference books. I know because I have had a hand in compiling a few. Despite the exhaustive research that goes into such works, mistakes inevitably occur. Although we might wish it to be otherwise, football reference books are not exempt from error – even those published by the PFRA. The compilers of football reference books must necessarily rely on extant team rosters, records, and newspaper reports. Unfortunately, many of those who reportedly played on pro teams in years past are no longer alive to attest to the authenticity of these old printed records.

I would like to recount what I have learned in corresponding with a couple of old football players. Not only were their stories interestingly, but these findings raise questions about the authenticity and accuracy of contemporary documentary sources that football historians rely on.

In 1990, I wrote a letter to Roy Scholl. He was listed in Roger Treat's Encyclopedia of Football as having played guard with the 1929 Boston Braves. I was interested in this team because Perry Jackson (a.k.a. Arnold Shockley) played on that team. Jackson had an interesting story and I wanted to learn what Scholl could recall about him. Jackson disappointedly didn't receive an invitation to tryout for any pro team after playing college football. A college teammate, Arnold Shockley, received an invitation to try out for the Braves. Shockley decided not to go to the try out and Jackson saw this as an opportunity to tryout for a pro team. Using a bit of subterfuge, he went to the camp, assuming the name of his teammate, Shockley. He made the team and played that year as Arnold Shockley. I wrote to Roy Scholl, asking him for his recollections about this interesting story. He wasn't able to help me. Why? He never played for the Braves. He is listed in Neft and Cohen (1991 ed.), a 205 pound guard out of Lehigh, who played for the 1929 Boston Braves. Nevertheless, Roy Scholl wrote me that the only football he played was for Bethlehem High School (1920-23) and at Lehigh University (1924-27).

In the course of trying to gather information for the PFRA encyclopedic biographical database project (headed up by Rich Topp), I have been writing to a lot of the older, still-living players. I wrote to Inwood Smith who was listed in Gill and Maher's The Outsiders as having played for the Cincinnati Bengals (AFL) in 1937 and 1940. I was surprised when he replied to my letter that he had never played pro football. He wrote:

“...upon graduation from Ohio State University in the spring of 1937 I was drafted to the ‘to be’ Cleveland Rams who commenced playing in the NFL that fall, but had not then be[en] publicly announced as the ‘new team.’ The Commissioner of the NFL at that time was Joe Carr, who had his offices in Columbus, Ohio; and it was Mr. Carr who made the draft selections (10) for the ‘yet to be announced’ Cleveland Rams. He drafted me, I believe, because of my Ohio State background in the belief that it would be helpful to the new team located in Ohio; and did so despite the fact that I had confidentially advised him in advance that I would not play professional football – which I stuck to...I negotiated with the Rams to the point of reaching agreement that I would play a defensive cornerback position primarily, but in the end I decided to continue with building up a career in business...Of course, pro football in those days was not truly ‘accepted’ and the compensation (on a per game basis) was by today's standards ridiculously low.”

He wrote that he had played for Ohio State in 1934 through 1936. He added that he had made the All Big Ten Team and was an honorable mention selection on a couple All American teams in 1936. I thought it must have been an oversight that he had not mentioned playing for the Bengals. I made a copy of the 1937 Bengals roster which appeared in Gill and Maher's Outsiders book and included it with my letter. The copied roster and team stats also showed that “Inwood Smith” had scored a touchdown during the season. He promptly replied to my second letter and clarified his athletic history, although it still didn't account for the recorded six points “Inwood Smith” apparently tallied for the Bengals in 1937. He replied:

“I did not ‘play’ for the Cincinnati Bengals in 1937, nor did I play in 1940 as your letter suggests. Most certainly I never scored ‘points’ for the Bengals, or for any other team over the prior years [playing at guard]. Although I had completely forgotten it, your asking causes me to remember an incident which may be creating some of this confusion. In 1937, by prior agreement [with his employer], I took ‘leave’ for sufficient time during the summer to participate in the Chicago Tribune All-Star College Game at Soldiers Field in Chicago. That year the All Stars, with Sammy Baugh at quarterback, beat the Green Bay

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Packers. It was during the 'game period' when we were staying at the old Stevens Hotel (we stayed at Northwestern University during the practice period) that the newly-formed Cleveland Rams made me a 'final offer', which I declined.

Shortly after returning to Mansfield, Ohio [where he was taking an employee training course], I was approached by a group in Cincinnati interested in my 'playing' for them on a basis of driving down each Saturday, practicing, and playing on Sunday [and] returning to Mansfield after the game. I now recall that I actually did go down to Cincinnati one Saturday to discuss the matter and, I believe, I even agreed to practice that afternoon with the team (as I recall at Xavier University). Obviously, that arrangement would not work out and had I been interested in playing full-time, I would have accepted the rather attractive 'final offer' of the Cleveland Rams."

These are just two instances of college players whose names have mistakenly appeared in the records and on the rosters of pro teams.

At this late date, it's doubtful that we can compile a completely accurate list of professional players. Nevertheless, with persistence, documentary errors of the past can be uncovered and corrections made.

Ed. Note: David Neft points out that six different newspapers identify Roy Scholl of Lehigh as playing one game (as a sub) for Boston in 1929. Memories fade faster than newsprint.