

# Struggling to Stay in the Black

A Close Look at the Profit and Loss Sheets for a 1927 Team

By Bob Gill

*(The information for this story came from a Providence Steam Roller cash book for 1927 donated to the Pro Football Hall of Fame by Raymond Monaco of North Providence, R.I. Monaco played with the Washington Redskins, the Cleveland Rams and the Steam Roller.)*

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A few issues back, we took a detailed look at the 1940 financial story of the Providence Steam Roller, a minor league team in the American Football Association – and managed by none other than PFRA's own Pearce Johnson ("Balancing Dollars and Sense," Vol. XIII, No. 5). This time we'll take a similar, though somewhat less detailed, look at another Providence season ledger, this one for 1927, one of the Steam Roller's seasons in the NFL. In fact, as you may recall, this was one year before Providence captured the NFL championship.

Coming off a 5-7-1 season in 1926, the Steam Roller had a new coach and a new star in 1927. The coach was Jimmy Conzelman, who also played as a blocking back and caught at least 34 passes, a very high total for the time. The star was tailback George "Wildcat" Wilson, an All-American from the University of Washington. He signed with Providence after spending the previous season with Los Angeles in the short-lived AFL – the Red Grange league, as it's often called.

Conzelman and Wilson were the highest-paid members of the team; each got \$500 per game. Next-highest, at \$300 a game, were back Curly Oden, a star with Providence since the team had entered the NFL in 1925, and tackle Gus Sonnenberg, an all-pro selection in 1925 and '26. The other salaries ranged from \$125 to \$250.

After a Sept. 18 tuneup against a non-league foe, the Steam Roller's first league game was played Sept. 25 at home in the Cycledrome against the New York Giants, who were destined to win their first championship that season. Providence took an 8-0 loss, but financially the opener was a big success.

The gate receipts totaled \$9,661.41, and with minor additions from the sale of programs and parking tickets, the game brought a total intake of \$9,911.51. Added to a \$1,000 loan received from Cycledrome owner Peter Laudati (also one of the team's three owners) a day earlier, that gave the team a balance of nearly \$11,000, more than enough to cover the game's expenses of \$5,840.64. The NFL took 1 percent of the gate receipts from each game and the Cycledrome took 15 percent; players' salaries (\$1,972) and the visiting team's share (\$2,475) accounted for most of the other expenses.

Incidentally, it appears that the players were usually paid in cash; their salaries are included in a note after each game recording money "paid at track." Most of the checks made out to players involved Conzelman or Wilson, who had the highest salaries.

The next game resulted in a 5-0 win over the Buffalo Bisons, but didn't work out as well at the gate. The intake of slightly over \$4,000 wasn't enough to cover salary payments of \$2,122 and the Bisons' guarantee of \$2,500. It seems odd that an unappealing team like Buffalo could command a bigger guarantee than the powerful Giants, but it's recorded in the ledger sheets in black and white. As for the difference in salaries, much of that may be a result of players getting advances on their pay.

Next on the Steam Roller schedule was a home date with the Chicago Bears. Rain forced a cancellation, but Providence had a rain insurance policy (at a cost of \$270 per game) that paid off to the tune of \$2,500. It was a good thing in this case, because the Bears' guarantee was \$2,220, which they got just for showing up.

A week later the Steam Roller hosted the Pottsville Maroons, and the result was another "good news, bad news" game: Providence took a 6-3 loss on the scoreboard, but took in \$7,871 at the gate and turned a profit of more than \$4,000 for the afternoon. The Roller got back on the winning track with a 7-0 home

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victory over the Dayton Triangles, a game for which the gate receipts totaled \$6,842.35 – not a bad turnout to see the lowly Triangles, who hadn't won more than one game in a season since 1924.

During the last week in October the team caught up on its miscellaneous payments for the month, covering ads in local papers, printing of tickets, towels, medical supplies, 15 bags of lime (for the field, if you were wondering) and so on.

On the weekend of Oct. 29-30 the Roller played a "doubleheader" with the Frankford Yellow Jackets. With

Sunday football banned in Philadelphia (of which Frankford was a suburb), the Jackets usually played home games on Saturday and road games on Sunday, sometimes against the same team both days, as in this case. Providence won the first game 20-7, then came home and repeated it, this time by 14-0.

The game at the Cycledrome was a profitable one, taking in more than \$9,000, more than enough to cover salaries and Frankford's payment of \$2,654.06. Obviously that unusual figure wasn't a guarantee; apparently the Jackets had the option of taking the guarantee or a percentage, and the crowd was big enough to make the percentage a better deal.

On the other hand, the trip to Frankford didn't payoff. The Roller pocketed a \$2,500 guarantee, but that would have been more than offset by the player's salaries (usually around \$2,000) and train fare for the trip, which came to \$526.58.

Still, at the end of October the team had \$8,801.90 in the bank, up from \$5,070.87 on Sept. 30. Add that to four wins in five games, and it hadn't been a bad month at all.

November didn't start out as well. The Steam Roller traveled to Chicago and played a scoreless tie with the Bears, then got right back on the train and rolled into New York for a Tuesday game (it was election day) with the Giants that turned out to be a 25-0 loss. The team picked up \$2,220 for the first game, \$2,500 for the second; but the players' salaries, added to railroad fares of \$1,941.76, made the trip a losing proposition in more ways than one.

The team got back in the black on the following Sunday in a 13-7 win over the Duluth Eskimos, featuring Ernie Nevers, one of the league's three biggest stars. Nevers lived up to his billing by rushing *and* passing for more than 100 yards apiece – the first such game that can be documented. Despite his presence, though, the gross receipts for the game totaled a so-so \$7,530.89. Duluth got two payments totaling \$2,464.88, which still left a decent profit for the Steam Roller management.

A week later the Cleveland Bulldogs came to town. Led by Michigan All-American Benny Friedman, the Bulldogs attracted the season's largest crowd, with gate receipts of \$12,374.15. Reasonably enough, they also pocketed a check for \$4,507.84 for providing their share of the afternoon's entertainment, which resulted in a 22-0 loss for the Steam Roller. Things got worse on Thanksgiving Day in Pottsville, where the Maroons posted a 6-0 win and the Roller did little more than break even financially on the trip. The team's take (\$2,468) was enough to cover salaries and traveling expenses, including one night in a Philadelphia hotel and one night in Pottsville.

Back home in the Cycledrome on Nov. 27, the Roller hosted the New York Yankees and Red Grange. The gate receipts of \$11,498.40 didn't quite match those for the Cleveland game, but this time Providence also came away with a win, by a score of 14-7. The victory broke a two-game losing streak and put the Steam Roller back over .500 with a 6-5-1 record. As for the Yankees, they went home with a check for \$4,273.81, and it was a profitable day all around.

The season's final weekend was something of an anticlimax. On Saturday, Dec. 3, the Roller traveled to Syracuse for a neutral-site rematch with the Yankees. Providence posted a 9-0 win, but the turnout was poor and the gate receipts weren't nearly enough to cover the players' salaries plus the \$641.74 railroad tab. A day later it was back to the Cycledrome for the finale against Pottsville. Again the Steam Roller win, this time by 20-0; and again the turnout was very poor, an estimated 1,500, with gate receipts totaling a season-low (for home games) \$2,191 – another losing proposition.

Despite the lack of financial success, the two season-ending victories gave Providence a final record of 8-5-1, good for fifth place in the league.

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There was no more football to be played, but there were still plenty of bills to be paid, including a couple of sizable loans from the Cycledrome. The last financial details were wrapped up in February when the team got a check for \$3,624.50 from the NFL. This represented a refund of the Steam Roller's \$2,500 guarantee fund for 1927, plus \$1,069.50 from a dispute over the distribution of gate receipts from the Nov. 6 game at Chicago – a rare case of an opposing team winning a judgment against George Halas. (Apparently something else was included, too, because those numbers don't add up.)

After that windfall, the team wrote a check for \$500 to James Dooley, one of the owners, and another check to the Cycledrome for \$3,124.50. The first was apparently to repay a loan Dooley had made to the corporation; the second probably went to cover loans made by co-owner Laudati.

With the books finally closed on the 1927 season, Steam Roller management could turn its attention toward the following fall – and the team's one and only NFL championship.