

SEMI OR PRO?

By Bob Carroll

Out in Indiana, they take their football history seriously. The Warren County Historical Society is presently engaged in researching the famous Pine Village team of the early part of this century. The legendary Pine Villagers were supposedly undefeated for years but didn't turn pro (or seriously pro) until 1915. Jim Thorpe even played for them on Thanksgiving Day that year. We applaud the Historical Society's efforts.

We recently received a question from Doris Cottingham of the society. It's a good one -- one that many of us have tried to figure out for years.

"During that time period of P.V. [Pine Village] football what determined a professional team? Could a team rated as professional play teams rated semi-pro, amateur? Were teams shifting back and forth in their rating? I have noticed that reporters aren't consistent with rating different teams.

Doris Cottingham, Warren County Historical Society

Dear Doris:

The term "semi-pro" as applied to athletes has been re-defined several times over the years. I believe it was first used in the late 1800s to denote an athlete who was NOT paid for his performance on the field (and thereby retained his amateur status) but who WAS paid for a non-athletic job with the understanding that to keep the job, he would perform as an athlete. For example, in 1902, Charles Follis, a superior runner and the first black professional football player, was given a job at a Shelby (OH) drug store so that he could perform for the local football team. At that time, he would have been considered a semi-pro by anyone who understood the connection between his work in the store and his work on the field. Technically, of course, he remained an amateur.

The only designations that had any meaning as far as eligibility to compete in sports was concerned were "amateur" and "professional." Only amateurs were allowed in the big track meets, football games, and other events under the Amateur Athletic Union. Semi-pros were regarded as full amateurs, not semi-amateurs. So, if Follis had wanted to hitchhike to New York to run in a relay race, no one would have complained. Two years later, he signed a contract to be paid for playing football, and that made him a professional.

Today, the term seems to be most often used to indicate a person who earns less than half his income from a particular endeavor. For instance, a few years ago I was a fulltime school teacher who often moonlighted as an actor. I was paid some of the time for my acting, but it was only a small portion of my income. (A VERY small portion and still some critics said I was overpaid. Even when I acted for free.) Therefore, although I was a professional teacher, I was only a semi-professional actor.

This definition works pretty well most of the time, but how does one categorize Michael Jordan who earns far more from endorsements than he does for playing basketball? A semi-pro athlete?

You mentioned that writers during the time the Pine Village team played were inconsistent in "rating" teams professional or semi-pro. This indicates three things: first, the writers were unsure of the pro/semi-pro definitions; second, the writers probably didn't know how the players (especially those on visiting teams) were being paid, and, third, the teams themselves may have had a mixture of amateur, semi-pro, and pro players.

Incidentally, I wouldn't use the terms "rate" or "rating" when discussing this. Because of the various college football polls, "rating" has come to mean a "ranking" of teams from best to poorest. Perhaps "categorize" or "label" might work better.

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Let me discuss the categories of players found on so-called "independent" (i.e. non-school sponsored) teams in the early part of this century.

Amateurs. These were usually local athletes, some of whom may have played high school ball. They were not paid in any way. In most cases when a team had been around for a few years, the regulars, even if locals only, received something. Any players who still qualified as legitimate amateurs were probably substitutes. Many teams began as a banding together of strictly amateur players from a small town or, in larger cities, a particular neighborhood. The Rock Island (IL) Independents began this way as did the Rochester Jeffersons (Jefferson was apparently a neighborhood in Rochester), and both eventually became members of the NFL. Some started out as amateur "kids" teams. The Toledo Maroons began as a group of football-playing teenagers around 1908; by 1915, they were challenging for the Ohio state professional championship. But, by then, only a few of the original members were still on the team.

My guess is that the Pine Village team belonged in this category for its early years. It's likely that the team was originally made up all or mostly of teenagers and their first opponents were other Pine Village amateurs. Again this is only a guess based on the histories of other teams, but they probably played on an unenclosed field and charged no admission.

Semi-pros (1). As mentioned above, these might be players who were given jobs with the understanding that they would play for a particular team. Sometimes this was used to bring in a skilled outsider. For example, Charles Follis moved from Wooster to Shelby when he was given his drug store job. More often, it was used as a way to induce a local star to play for one neighborhood team instead of another. Such players are hard to pin down because there is seldom any record that their playing and their regular job were connected.

I doubt that many, if any, Pine Village players fit into this category. They seem to have cornered the local market on talented players making it unlikely a good Pine Villager would play for another local team. And the team does not appear to have imported players from outside the area in its early years.

Semi-pros (2). Even though many teams played on unenclosed fields and charged no admission, sooner or later someone was sure to "pass the hat." Spectators were urged to drop in change and some even threw in dollars. The money might be saved through the season and then used to throw a big party for the team or to help build or furnish a clubhouse. In such cases, the players still remained amateurs. However, if the players divided the money among themselves, either after the game or after the season, they became in the strict sense pros at the time. The amount of money divided could vary depending on the size and generosity of the crowd. And because the amount of money the player was to receive for playing was not stipulated before the game such players are generally considered today to have been semi-pros.

I imagine the Pine Village team got its first taste of professionalism this way.

Semi-pros (3). The next step, obviously, was to enclose the field and charge admission. If the players received shares of the receipts, rather than salaries, I would still consider them to have been semis although others might call them pros. My point again is that the amount they were to receive was not stipulated before the game. The unfortunate fact is that once expenses were paid, there often were no receipts left. Teams usually had to pay rent for the field (especially if it was enclosed), pay for tickets and sometimes posters for advertising, and often pay guarantees to visiting teams. It was not unknown for home teams to take up a collection among their own players in order to pay a visiting team's guarantee.

Pros. As far as I'm concerned, the line between semi-pro and pro at this time came when players agreed to play for a stipulated, specified salary in advance of a game. The amount itself was unimportant; it might be \$10, \$25, or \$50 per game. Jim Thorpe was paid \$250 per game by Canton in 1915, and Pudge Heffelfinger received \$500 for a single game in 1892. Most salaries before World War I were for less than \$100 a game. If a player was brought in from outside the area, his train ticket might be paid. He might also be fed after the game. Hiring a player for a season rather than by the game was not unknown, but such contracts were usually made with players who actually lived in the team's town. Outside "ringers" preferred to work from week to week in case a better offer came along.

As I understand it, Pine Village is regarded as full professional in 1915 because several players were promised specific salaries for games. This doesn't mean that all of the players knew in advance what

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they would be paid. Probably the roster was a mixture of pros, semi-pros, and possibly even an amateur or two. After all expenses were paid (including the pros' salaries), the remaining players probably divided what was left.

As to whether a team might be considered pro or semi-pro, the going definition seems to have been whatever the "worst" offender against the amateur code was. In other words, if there was one pro on the team and all the rest of the players were lily-white amateurs, the A.A.U. and other such bodies classified it as a pro team. If they worried about it at all.

In practice, whether they were regarded as semi-pro or pro would have no effect on a team like Pine Village. They could schedule other regional independent pro, semi-pro, or amateur teams without causing any stir. On the other hand, had the 1915 team lined up against the Purdue team, the university might have run afoul of the A.A.U. for taking part in a game with a pro team.