

The Game Not Played, the Championship Not Won: Packers vs. Spartans, 1931

by Carl Becker

The Green Bay Packers were masters of all they surveyed in the National Football League as they opened play in the season of 1931. Under the leadership of their coach and general manager, Earl "Curly" Lambeau, they had won the league championship two years hand-running. In 1929, they were undefeated, only a tie marring their record. The following year, though losing three games, they had captured the title again. Their lineup studded with outstanding players -- among them Cal Hubbard, a powerful and mobile lineman, and Johnny Blood, a slashing and elusive running back -- they could realistically expect to claim another championship in 1931, no other eleven in the league looming as a serious threat to their hegemony. As it turned out, though, they faced a stiff challenge in the Portsmouth Spartans of Portsmouth, Ohio and deflected it only by guile, not by muscle and speed.

Unlike the Packers, a member of the league since 1921, the Spartans were "Johnny-come-latelies" in the NFL.. Portsmouth, a city of about 42,000 on the Ohio River, had seen a succession of semi-professional and professional teams in the 1920s, the Smoke House, the Presidents, and the Shoe-Steels, compete with other independent teams in the Tri-state area, a segment of the Ohio Valley where Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia have nearly coterminous boundaries. None of the elevens representing Portsmouth had been able to play on even terms with the Ironton Tanks, the dominant team in the valley through nearly all the 1920s.

Weary of the Tanks' domination, made more galling because Ironton was only half the size of their city, a group of business and professional men organized the Portsmouth Football Association in 1928, resolving "to turn the town upside down with a really good football team." The association named the team the Spartans, an invocation of ancient valor and prowess. Though not dramatically changing the personnel of the squad known as the Shoe-Steels in 1927 (coached by Jim Thorpe), the association fielded a good team in 1928; the Spartans won nine games, lost three, one to the Tanks, and tied two, both with the Tanks.

Ironically, in their opening two years of play, at least until the end of the season in 1929, the Spartan's had close and cordial relations with the Packers. Their first coach, Walter Jean, had played for the Packers and Lambeau for two years, and Lambeau kept him apprised of players released by the Packers who might help the Spartans; as many as three former Packers signed with the Spartans in 1928 and 1929. The Packers also agreed to play the Spartans in the opening game of 1929, providing them with a good gate and enhanced visibility.

In the spring and summer of 1929, scouring midwestern and southern colleges for new players, the Portsmouth Football Corporation, a body replacing the association, brought some truly outstanding men to Portsmouth. Roy "Father" Lumpkin, a picaresque figure, was a bruising running and blocking fullback who had started for Georgia Tech through its undefeated season in 1928. Complementing Lumpkin in the backfield was Carl Brumbaugh, the "Florida Kid," a speedy and shifty halfback who had finished second nationally in collegiate scoring in 1928 at the University of Florida. Among the new linemen were Clare Randolph, a mobile center out of Indiana University, and Ernie Jessen, a big tackle from the University of Iowa. Also from Iowa was the coach, Harold "Tubby" Griffin, a hulk of a tackle.

Of the thirty-three men who had been with the Spartans at one time or another in 1928, nine had no experience playing intercollegiate football; of the thirty-one with the Spartans in 1929, only one had not played for a college or university. Buoyed by the new players, the Spartans gave Portsmouth supremacy in Tri-state football. After losing to the Packers 14-0 in their opening game and to the Tanks in the fourth game, the Spartans tied a game and then won nine in a row, defeating the Tanks twice, the second time 38-0, the worst defeat ever suffered by the Tanks. Their fans could read columns in the *Portsmouth Times* and *Portsmouth Sun* comparing the Spartans favorably with the best collegiate and professional teams in the nation.

Success heady wine, the directors of the corporation began talking about seeking a franchise in the NFL and as a wedge asked the Packers to come to Portsmouth for a season-ending game. The game, asserted the *Sun*, would determine the professional championship of the nation. Lambeau seemed willing to play the game but demanded that the Spartans provide the Packers a guarantee of \$4,500, a hefty sum for the new team. Going to the community for pledges of \$50, the directors soon nearly had the guarantee in hand.

But then Joe Carr, the president of the NFL, citing by-laws of the league prohibiting teams from playing elevens with collegiate players whose classes had not graduated, ordered the Packers not to play the Spartans. He had specifically in mind Lumpkin, whose class would not graduate until 1930. The directors and friends of Carr appealed to him to reverse his decision. He would not relent, noting, too, that the Packers would be foolish to risk their undefeated record against the Spartans. Lambeau declared, momentarily, that he would defy Carr but, deciding to bow to him, called off the game, perhaps more out of fear of losing the game than out of fear of the president. Spartan fans would long remember and resent Lambeau for his failure to keep his word; in their view the Packers could not be national champions until they met and again beat the Spartans.

Undeterred by the rebuff, the directors sought and received a franchise in the NFL in 1930, their city the last "small town" to enter the league. They reorganized the corporation as the Portsmouth National Football Corporation, with Harry Snyder, a local contractor, serving as president. Snyder took the lead in hurrying along the construction of a stadium seating ten thousand spectators for the Spartans' opening game in league play. The corporation strengthened the roster for the first season in the "big league," signing at least six new men who often appeared in the starting lineup in 1930, among them five linemen. Undefeated in their first five league games, the Spartans could win but one more game, finishing, though, with a respectable record of five wins, six losses and three ties. One of their victories was over the Bears, and in their last game of the season they tied the Packers.

Believing that Griffin had given the team inconsistent and ineffective direction, the corporation hired a new mentor in 1931, George "Potsy" Clark, who had coached at the University of Kansas and Butler University.

Again management, with Clark playing a decisive role, effected a wholesale change in personnel. Only six or seven men who had been with the Spartans in 1930 appeared on the roster at any time in 1931; and at times, the starting lineup had but one carry-over. Two of the new halfbacks were remarkable players. Glenn Presnell, who had played for the University of Nebraska and the Tanks, was an excellent runner, passer, and kicker and was a good defensive back. A rookie from Colorado College, Earl "Dutch" Clark, almost immediately became one of the premier running backs in the league. Maury Bodenger, Harry Ebding and Gover "Ox" Emerson all were first-rate linemen. Despite the infusion of new blood, local and national sportswriters did not see the Spartans as contenders for the NFL title.

Surprisingly, the Spartans opened the season with five victories at home against the Brooklyn Dodgers, Chicago Cardinals, New York Giants, Cleveland Indians and Frankford Yellowjackets and then tacked on three more against the Dodgers, Staten Island Stapletons and Yellowjackets on a swing through the east. But the Packers, undefeated in seven games, nearly kept pace with them.

Then the Spartans appeared to fall out of the race. Before a large crowd at the Polo Grounds -- 32,000 (among them the flamboyant mayor of New York, Jimmy Walker) -- they lost to the (Giants as the Packers again won and took a half-game lead. The Spartans returned home momentarily, met by 10,000 enthusiastic fans, and then journeyed to Chicago where they lost to the Bears in a close contest 9-6. Again the Packers won, and now the Spartans were one-and-one-half games behind with three games to play -- or four depending on one interpretation of the schedule.

The Spartans remained in contention, though, when they defeated the Stapletons in a mid-week game and the Indians on the weekend as the Packers lost their first game of the season to the Chicago Cardinals. Measured by games, the teams were in a tie, the Spartans at ten wins and two losses, the Packers at nine and one. But the Cardinals then beat the Spartans in Chicago in a game marred by fights

and disputes over officiating. The Packers defeated the Giants that weekend and the Yellowjackets in mid-week, their record now at eleven wins and a loss, the Spartans at ten and three.

According to the Packers, they had but two games to play, one against the Dodgers, one against the Bears. But the Spartans had a different view of the matter. As they understood the schedule, if they could beat the Bears at Portsmouth the next week, and should the Packers lose either to the Dodgers or Bears in the next two weeks, they would finish the season tied with the Packers if they beat them in the final game of the season at Portsmouth. Thus they could win the championship in a play-off game with the Packers. The Spartans intensely prepared for the Bears and on a muddy field hampering Red Grange and Bronko Nagurski made Presnell's field goal in the second quarter stand up for a victory 3-0. Beating the Dodgers at Brooklyn, the Packers declared that they had clinched the championship.

Nonetheless, the Spartans eagerly awaited the outcome of the Bears-Packers game in Chicago, believing that they still had a chance to win the title. But the Packers would not accept the Spartans' view. Lambeau told Arthur Bystrom, the sportswriter for the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* that the game at Portsmouth was only tentatively scheduled and that the Packers would not play there if they lost to the Bears. He was quite forthright: "We do not plan to put our title in jeopardy." He might play the game, he said, if the Packers defeated the Bears. Griffin contested Lambeau's explanation. Neither team, he acknowledged, had signed a contract for the game, but they had agreed to play; and he insisted that Carr expected them to do so.

Arguing the Spartans' understanding of the question at a meeting of a service club in Portsmouth, the Exchange Club, Snyder recalled the original scheduling of the game. At the owners' meeting that summer, the teams had agreed to play each other at Portsmouth in the last game of the season. The Packers' president, Leland Joannes, had then suggested that it be made tentative -- but only because of the prospect of bad weather in December. At that time no one saw the Spartans as a contender for the championship.

Now, said Snyder, the Packers were hedging. If they beat the Bears and thus clinched the title, probably they would come to Portsmouth; but if the Bears beat them, they might not want to face a possible loss there. According to Snyder, nearly all the owners were calling on the Packers to play the game if it had a bearing on the championship. Joannes and Lambeau, confirming much of what Snyder had said, sent a telegram to him and the *Times* arguing that they had scheduled the game but tentatively and that they would come to a decision on playing it after the Bears' game. Perhaps expecting to lose, the Packers' men lamented the "bad condition" of their eleven. Snyder then wired Carr and all the owners calling on them to unite in requiring the Packers to commit themselves to playing the game. Nothing came of his plea.

The owners had to rely on memory, not the minutes of their meeting the past summer, for an answer. In that meeting, the representatives of each club discussed a tentative schedule posted on a blackboard. Then Lambeau offered a motion for adoption of the "official schedule" that received a unanimous vote of approval. When or whether the game between the Packers and Spartans appeared on the blackboard, the minutes did not say.

The question would have been moot had the Packers defeated the Bears. But they lost 7-6 and now had to decide on playing the Spartans. Awaiting a decision, the Spartans rehearsed their refrain. They could become champions of the NFL if the Packers would play them, if they could win the game for a tie in league play, and if they could defeat the Packers again in a play-off. Clearly the odds were against the Spartans, but they were willing to roll the dice. The Packers would not gamble. Joannes would not agree to play, arguing, as he had before, that the teams had only tentatively scheduled the game and that they had not signed a contract for it.

In response, the Spartan directors noted that they did not sign contracts for many of their games and that "tentatively" scheduled games had often appeared on the "official league schedule." But for Lambeau's opposition, said Patsy Clark, the Packers players were willing to come to Portsmouth. He might have noted that even then that the players were arranging a barnstorming tour against teams in Wisconsin without the consent of management. Carr would not support the Spartans' protest against the Packers' decision. The teams, he asserted, had arranged the game "after the regular schedule had been drawn

up," and the Packers or the Spartans could cancel the game. He would not forfeit it to the Spartans. The Packers were the champions.

In an editorial in the *Times*, the editor, Coleman Grimes, portrayed the decision as one revealing the looseness and expediency at work in the NFL. Professional football, he declared, was no better than any other rag-tag sport -- wrestling, boxing, six-day bicycling. The NFL had to suffer ridicule if it permitted teams to back out of agreements. Green Bay was more concerned about a paper championship than about integrity and the future of the league. The confusion surrounding the game, said Grimes, was an indication of the sloppy way the league operated. Carr had to take a firmer grip and run the league in a business-like way.

Grimes and the Spartans had an advocate in Bob Hovey, a sportswriter for the *Ohio State Journal* in Columbus. The championship flag flew in Green Bay, but outside of the city, he wrote, it was not an emblem of superiority but rather of a broken egg shell. The Packers had permitted their fans, who wanted another title no matter what, to rule over fairness and equity. True, the Packers were tired and in poor condition, and their managers could take refuge in a strict interpretation of scheduling procedures. Had their team won in Chicago, though, certainly they would have sent it "to visit Portsmouth next Sunday, glad for a chance to strut on the Ohio gridiron, but with its crown not endangered. Such is the way of cheese champions." Taking his cue from Hovey, Lynn Wittenburg, a sports columnist for the *Times*, noted that the Packers' title smelled of limburger cheese. No one in the Packers' camp took serious notice of the castigations, and fans in Green Bay continued to celebrate the championship. But relations between the franchises, once cordial, now turned sour, the Spartans looking for revenge, the Packers haughtily ignoring them.

Taking instruction from the affair, club owners hereafter became more careful in scheduling, defining clearly games that were on the league and had to be played. Giving greater formality to their task, they adopted a measure in 1933 turning scheduling over to a three-member committee appointed by the league president. They then had to ratify the committee's proposed schedule by at least a three-fourth's vote. Never again was there a dispute over whether a scheduled game was tentative or official and had to be played. But the Spartans' fans would long remember and lament the game not played, the championship not won.

* * * *

Carl Becker, Professor Emeritus at Wright State University, delivered an account of this incident at the symposium *Pro Football in American Life* jointly sponsored by Stark State College of Technology and the Pro Football Hall of Fame in October.