

Murray City's Mighty Tigers

By Roy Cross

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Stories of a 60-yard field goal, a crooked referee and ringers on the rosters of almost every team are all a part of the legend of the Murray City Tigers, once one of Ohio's better semi-pro football teams.

With professional football now dominating the television screens as well as sports pages, and players pampered and overpaid, the rough and tumble days of semi-pro are recalled by oldtimers in towns like Murray City. One of those who remembers the Tigers is Charles "Bone Coal" Roberts. Although Roberts was too young to play for the Tigers, he was an avid fan, never missed a game and often attended practice. His father, Dave, and two uncles were founders of the team, which gave Bone Coal an inside track to the team. He later played for Murray City High School.

"I remember they (the Tigers) often practiced at night," Roberts said. "The men worked all day in the mines, came home, ate and then practiced. I often watched them. They practiced right there in the street on the cobblestones."

The field where games were played was in nearby Orbiston, once a busy mining town but now only a memory. In Orbiston there was an area flat enough to accommodate a football field. A wood fence was erected to keep out those who tried to avoid the ticket booth. When the Tigers were at their peak, crowds of 2,000 were common, Roberts said.

The Tigers were whelped in the mines and taverns of Murray City in the late 1920s. They were a hodge-podge outfit when they first took the field. Their uniforms didn't match, there weren't enough helmets to give one to every player; but some players refused to wear them anyhow.

Once the Tigers started winning, town pride was fanned into action and money collected for uniforms. The shirts were black with orange stripes, hence the team became the Tigers.

Roberts remembers that the team was a mixture of coal miners, other laboring men and a few college boys who changed their names to play with the Tigers on Sundays.

"Those college boys were always paid, even if the others weren't," Roberts said. The players shared the gate receipts.

Roberts laughed as he recalled that the home team was expected to provide the referee. This made for some interesting decisions and one case where it cost the Tigers a victory.

Once the Tigers got rolling they soon built a reputation as a hard-nosed team. "They played the Portsmouth Spartans and the Ironton Tanks," Roberts related. Both the Spartans and Tanks later became members of the National Football League, eventually as the Detroit Lions. The Tigers also played the Columbus Athletic Club, Akron Awnings and Akron Goodyear.

Roberts told of the time the Marietta College team challenged the Tigers. "The Tigers soon taught those college boys the fine points of the game," he said.

Another game Roberts remembers was against Wellston. It was the second time the two teams had played. When the Tigers took the field they didn't recognize some of the Wellston players. They realized Wellston had imported some "ringers" -- players not on the regular squad. "We beat 'em," Roberts recalled.

The kingpin in the Tiger offense was a man who was not your typical football player. His name was George Mudrie. He was 5 feet, 5 inches tall and weighed only 150 pounds. Mudrie was the coach, quarterback, passer and kicker. He teamed with Chick Shuttleworth, an end, for a hard-to-beat passing combination. That was in the days when forward passes were not as common as they are today.

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When Tiger tale's are traded, two are always told. One is Mudrie's 60-yard field goal. The other is Mudrie's game-winning run that was canceled by a crooked referee.

Roberts' recollection of the field goal was that the Tigers trailed by two points with the clock running out and they had the ball at mid-field. Mudrie was the kicker. In those days, field goals and points after were usually drop kicked. As the crowd waited, Mudrie stepped back, took the pass from center, and drop-kicked the ball for 60 yards and a victory.

The other story does not have a happy ending. The Tigers were playing the powerful Ironton Tanks and the game was deadlocked. Mudrie broke loose, evaded Tanks tacklers and raced into the end zone to put the Tigers ahead.

But no! The referee ruled that Mudrie stepped out of bounds. Roberts said there was no way Mudrie could have been out of bounds. He wasn't that close to the sideline.

For a few minutes tempers boiled. The crowd got nasty. There was a conference between the team captains, coaches and officials. The Tigers walked away defeated. They had lost at the conference when the Tanks officials told the Tigers if they took the victory they would not get their share of the gate receipts. Money talked, especially if you were a long way from home and needed money for food and travel expenses.

Roberts said the referee later confessed he had made a crooked call, but there was nothing he could do because he was employed by the Tanks and he had bet money on the home team.

All the players who wore the orange and black in the late 1920s are now deceased, but the stories of the Tigers linger and grow richer with each telling.