

Buffalo's Forgotten First Football Superstar

ADOLPH
"SWEDE" YOUNGSTROM

By Jeffrey Miller

Next time you find yourself talking to a Buffalo football fan, ask him/her who he/she thinks is the greatest guard ever to play in Buffalo, and the answer might be Billy Shaw, Reggie McKenzie, Joe DeLamielleure, Ruben Brown, or maybe Adolph Youngstrom...

Adolph who?!

All modern day fans are familiar with the first four. Billy Shaw, the stalwart of the Bills' A.F.L. championship teams, was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1999, the first player ever inducted who played his entire career in the American league, and just the second Bill so honored. Reggie McKenzie and Joe DeLamielleure anchored the Bills' great offensive line of the 1970s—dubbed the "Electric Company"—which opened holes for O. J. Simpson as he slashed his way to five N.F.L. rushing titles. Ruben Brown is Buffalo's latest great guard, having appeared in the last four Pro Bowls.

But who is this Youngstrom guy?

Youngstrom, better known in his day as "Swede," was a member of the Buffalo All-Americans (later Bisons), the Queen City's first N.F.L. team, from 1920 to 1925. Although his name might not ring any bells with today's fan, Youngstrom was a perennial All-Pro selection and a highly respected player on both sides of the ball in pro football's "iron man" days. It could be argued that were it not for the fact that the team with which he is most readily associated—the Buffalo All-Americans—never won a league title, Youngstrom may have been Buffalo's first representative in Canton's hallowed hall.

Born Adolph Frederick Youngstrom on May 24, 1897 in Waltham, Mass., Swede's path to football greatness was indeed anything but easy. At an early age, Swede became enamored with the game as he watched from the sidelines as the Waltham High School team practiced after classes. When Youngstrom entered Waltham High, he sought his parent's permission to go out for the football team, but was refused. Swede's father objected, fearing that the boy's slight stature—just 140 pounds soaking wet—made him susceptible to injury. Swede continued to watch from afar, longing to be a part of the action.

In his senior year at Waltham, Swede decided he could wait no longer, and joined the team without his parent's consent. However, when a local paper included some glowing remarks about Swede's play in an article about the team, the secret was revealed. But Mr. Youngstrom did not let on that he knew of his son's involvement with the team. Instead, he sneaked to a Waltham practice session and watched his boy in action. Duly impressed, the proud father gave his blessing and permitted the young Swede to stay with the team.

Swede entered Dartmouth College in 1914. At Dartmouth, he played every position on the line, but eventually made guard his specialty, gaining notoriety for his aggressive style. He earned additional fame on the defensive side of the ball, where he was credited with blocking nine punts in his senior year, including no less than three blocks in the 1919 title game against Colgate¹. His stellar play earned him a spot on Walter Camp's All-America team, along with selection to a full dozen other lesser-known honor squads.

After graduating, Swede was operating a candy store in Hanover, New Hampshire, with Dartmouth teammate Ed Healey when he was approached by representatives from Buffalo with an offer to play for

¹ Dartmouth Alumni Magazine, October 1968.

their team in the new professional football league starting play in the fall of 1920. (The league, then called the American Professional Football Association, was renamed the National Football League in 1922.) Youngstrom did not take long in accepting the offer. The Buffalo team, led by former Michigan quarterback Ernest "Tommy" Hughitt, featured several star players, including backs Oscar "Ockie" Anderson of Colgate and Bodie Weldon of Lafayette, ends Murray Shelton of Cornell and Heinie Miller of Pennsylvania, and tackle Lou Little, also of Pennsylvania. When it came time to give the team a nickname, it took little more than a passing glance at the depth chart for an apt moniker to emerge. The abundance of All-America selections gave Buffalo's first pro team perhaps the most fitting name in league history: The Buffalo All-Americans.

Though it is not known exactly how much the six-foot, one-inch, 187-pound Swede was paid for his services, it can be safely assumed that he was paid well. Because he was an All-America selection, he could command a wage commensurate with his elite status. The team contracted to play their games at the Villa on the Canisius College grounds, which had a seating capacity of 12,000. As the association did not control scheduling at that early date, each team was at liberty to make up its own slate. Since cash was at a premium for the embryonic organization, teams did whatever they could to cut corners. Travel was costly, so teams played as many home games as possible, or scheduled road games in nearby cities to keep expenses low. Thus, the Buffalo All-Americans played their first game on October 3 against a local semi-pro outfit called the West Buffalos. In drubbing their over-matched opponent, the pros registered a resounding 32 to 6 victory. Though listed at the guard position, Youngstrom--wearing number 9--had the opportunity to carry the ball on at least one occasion late in the game, and scored a six-pointer on a short plunge.

Lop-sided victories over more semi-pro outfits over the ensuing weeks brought Buffalo's record to 4-0 before the team finally faced an actual A.P.F.A. opponent. On October 31, Buffalo hosted the Rochester Jeffersons, and established themselves as a contender by beating the Rochester eleven by a 17 to 6 score. On November 21, the All-Americans rocked the pro football establishment by defeating Jim Thorpe and the Canton Bulldogs 3 to 0 at the Canisius Villa.

The All-Americans put together a string of impressive victories which eventually led to calls for a rematch with Canton for a spectacle to be played at New York's Polo Grounds. A crowd of approximately 12,000, most of whom were there to see Thorpe, turned out. Due to a drenching rain which preceded the game, the field was reduced to a quagmire. The contest soon deteriorated into little more than a punting contest between Thorpe and Buffalo's booters. Canton barely missed taking the lead in the second quarter when a Thorpe drop kick from 42 yards out missed by inches. Canton capitalized in the third, however, when Thorpe booted a 17-yard field goal to give his team a 3 to 0 bulge. Shortly thereafter, Buffalo's defense provided the points its offense could not, as Youngstrom broke through the formidable Canton line to block a Thorpe punt, picked up the errant ball and raced the remaining 20 yards for the winning score. Immediately following the Big Apple triumph, the All-Americans departed for Buffalo where they were scheduled to play the Fritz Pollard's Akron Pros for the championship the very next afternoon. Playing games on consecutive days, or even several games within a week's span, was a daunting prospect, but such was the life of the professional football player in the Roaring '20s.

Flushed with confidence but definitely fatigued from the previous day's battle, Youngstrom led his team onto the field for the most important game of the season. The Akron squad was on top of the association, boasting a record of seven wins, three ties, and no losses. All they had to do was tie and the championship was theirs. Due to a severe storm, the field was a mess. Players had difficulty getting their footing. Line smashes resembled rugby scrums more than football plays. Punts and fumbles were the order of the day, as neither team was able to mount a convincing offensive threat in the greasy proceedings. As a result, the game ended in a 0 to 0 deadlock. Undefeated Akron was awarded the title.

Youngstrom is reported to have blocked nine punts during that first season, equaling the number of blocks he attained in his senior year at Dartmouth. Three of those blocks were returned for touchdowns, a special-teams record of which even Steve Tasker would be envious.

The All-Americans entered the 1921 season as top contenders in the A.P.F.A. A few new faces were brought in to help bolster the team, including Army halfback Elmer Oliphant and Bob "Nasty" Nash of Rutgers. The team got off to a fast start, amassing an impressive 7-0-1 record by mid-November. The All-Americans appeared to be a team of destiny. But things began to unravel during the week of November 20, in which they were scheduled to play the Canton Bulldogs. The transient nature of pro football in its infancy is best illustrated in the events which transpired in the week leading up to the Canton

game. League rules were somewhat lax in those days, and many A.P.F.A. players took advantage of this situation by playing for teams in other leagues to make a little extra green between games in the “real” league. Eight members of the Buffalo squad (including Swede Youngstrom) played for a non-league team called the Union Quakers of Philadelphia on Saturdays, then hopped the train for Buffalo and the next day’s game. The Quakers played their games on Saturdays because Philadelphia blue laws prohibited professional sports being played on the Sabbath. League President Joe Carr, seeking to provide some stability and integrity to the young league, instituted a rule aimed at curtailing such freelancing. The Buffalo management, in an effort to comply with the rule, attempted to force the cancellation of a game scheduled for Saturday, November 19, in Philly between the Quakers and Canton. So incensed were five of the Buffalo players (Heinie Miller, Lou Little, Lud Wray, Johnny Scott, and Butch Spagna) that they refused to report for the All-Americans’ game with Canton on the 20th. In fact, the quintet remained on strike for the balance of the 1921 season. The other mercenaries (Youngstrom, Pat Smith, and Bill Ward) reported in time for Sunday’s scrap, which ended in a 7 to 7 stalemate.

The following Sunday, the All-Americans defeated the Dayton Triangles to end the regular season, and claimed the league title with a record 9-0-2. But for some unknown reason, team owner Frank McNeil agreed to play two more games, which he thought would have no bearing on the team’s claim to the title. Enter George Halas. Halas’ Decatur Staleys had amassed a record of 7-1-0, with their only loss coming against Buffalo on November 24. He scheduled a rematch with Buffalo for December 4 in Chicago, hoping to exact a measure of revenge against the team that marred his perfect record. McNeil made the mistake of scheduling the two “postseason” games on the same weekend, the first for December 3 against the Akron Pros, after which his team would take an all-night train to Chicago to play the Staleys the next day. After dispatching the Pros on Saturday, the All-Americans rode to Chicago, where they disembarked the next day in no condition to take on Papa Bear’s hungry brutes. The All-Americans fought hard, but found themselves behind by ten points when a defensive stand in the third quarter brought the team to life. Buffalo stopped the Staleys on their own 15-yard line, forcing them to punt just a few yards shy of the goal line. Youngstrom again played the part of the hero, breaking through the Staleys’ front line and blocking the kick. The All-Americans recovered the ball in the end zone, and closed the gap to three points. But the Staleys held on for the victory and subsequently claimed the title. Once again, Swede and the All-Americans had come within one victory of the league championship.

By this time, Swede’s reputation throughout the league was well-established. His play on both sides of the ball was marked by aggressiveness as well as intelligence. What’s more, he always seemed to play at his best in big games—the true mark of a great player. When one takes into account that he not only played for Buffalo on Sundays and sometimes in Philadelphia on Saturdays, all the while coaching football at New York University, it becomes clear just how extraordinary an athlete Youngstrom was.

The 1922 season saw the All-Americans’ fortunes fade, as the team finished with a lackluster 5-4-1 record. But Youngstrom remained the bright spot on the team, and his play began to attract All-Pro mention. The following season saw the All-Americans go 5-4-3 in a rebuilding year, but Youngstrom’s consistently stellar play earned him a spot on the Green Bay *Press-Gazette* All-Pro team, quite a compliment for a player on a mediocre football team.

When the 1924 season opened, Buffalo’s football team had a new owner (local businessman Warren Patterson, who previously owned the Buffalo Niagaras semi-pro team) and a new name (Bisons). Patterson’s first order of business was to sign top talent in an effort to return the once-mighty franchise to its former position at the top of the league. Signed were star halfback Benny Lee Boynton (the “Purple Streak” of Williams College fame), halfback Eddie Kaw of Cornell, and former Canton fullback/end Pete Calac. But untimely injuries to key players hindered the Bisons, who limped to a disappointing 6-5-0 record. Despite the team’s less-than-spectacular finish, Youngstrom was once again tapped for All-Pro honors, this time being selected not only to the Green Bay *Press-Gazette* squad, but also a team picked by *Collier’s Eye Magazine*.

Swede’s swan song in Buffalo came in 1925, a year that proved disastrous for the franchise. Led by newly-named coach Walter Koppisch--a local boy who enjoyed an All-American career at Columbia--the Bisons were at a disadvantage after losing Boynton, Kaw, Calac, and mainstay Tommy Hughitt after the 1924 season. Koppisch tapped Youngstrom to help lead the team, naming the Swede line coach and charging him with developing the squad, made up entirely of rookies, into a cohesive unit. But through no fault of Youngstrom, the Bisons suffered their worst season yet, recording just one victory in nine league games. Swede was the only bright spot in an otherwise terrible season, receiving All-Pro honors for the third consecutive year.

Youngstrom became restless with Buffalo's inability to rise above the pack and in 1926 accepted an offer to play for the Frankford Yellow Jackets. In addition to his duties on the field, Swede was asked to coach the linemen. He spent two seasons with the Hornets, and played a major role in helping the team win the 1926 title.

But 1927 was the last for Swede Youngstrom. Now 30 years of age and with a legitimate championship to his credit, he decided it was time to hang up his cleats. His post-playing career was spent mainly in real estate in his home state of Massachusetts. He died in Boston on August 5, 1968, at the age of 71, after a long illness.

Swede's tenure with the Buffalo All-Americans/Bisons was the longest of any of the men who played for the team, spanning six stellar seasons in which he never missed a game. It could be argued that had the All-Americans won the title in 1920 or 1921, Swede's name would be mentioned along with Mike Michalske, Wilbur Henry, Walt Kiesling, Link Lyman, and Cal Hubbard when historians list the names of the era's greatest linemen. One could argue also that Youngstrom was actually *the* best guard of the era, since the only two guards in the Hall of Fame who played in the '20s--Michalske and Kiesling—actually played the majority of their careers in the 1930s. And Swede had as many All-Pro berths as any other guard during the '20s. But it wouldn't matter to Youngstrom. He was a quiet man who led by example--he played football because he loved to compete.

But if you ever find yourself in a debate over who is Buffalo's all-time best guard, throw Swede Youngstrom's name into the fray. You're sure to get some curious looks (maybe even an "Adolph who?!"), and you might actually impress someone with your vast football knowledge!

Jeffrey J. Miller is author of *Buffalo's Forgotten Champions: The Story of Buffalo's First Professional Football Team*, due out in 2001.