

Wally Koppisch: Great Expectations

by Jeffrey Miller

Walter Koppisch was a local hero. While playing high school ball at Masten Park High--now City Honors--in Buffalo, he led his team to three consecutive Harvard Cup championships. He went on to star at Columbia University, where he captained the Lions for three seasons--playing in a backfield which also featured future New York Yankee immortal Lou Gehrig--and was selected to Walter Camp's All-America squad in 1924. So when it was announced in September 1925 that Koppisch would be returning to Buffalo to coach--at 23 years of age, making him one of the youngest head coaches in league history--and play for the Bisons, local sports enthusiasts were indeed delighted. But Koppisch's signing almost didn't happen.

The New York Giants, a new N.F.L franchise in 1925, were seeking a big name around which they could build a team, and Walter's was the top name on their list. Koppisch's four brilliant years at New York-based Columbia gave him name recognition and the Giants instant credibility in the league. However, according to Giants historian Dr. Harry March, the Gothamites called off their pursuit at the request of the Buffalo Bisons. As March later recounted in his book, *Pro Football--Its Ups and Downs*:

Koppisch was a distinct asset in New York by reason of his four years at Columbia, but when the Buffalo management came to us and pleaded that he would be the *making* of the Buffalo team--his home town--we turned Santa Claus and let them have him to manage, play, captain, and coach.

But Wally found himself at a disadvantage. Expectations were high, but much of the top talent from the previous season, including Benny Boynton, Pete Calac, and Eddie Kaw, had moved on. Tommy Hughitt, the driving force of the Buffalo team in its first five seasons, had retired to become a National Football League official. In fact, aside from Koppisch, mainstay guard Swede Youngstrom and tackle/end Lou Feist, the new team would be virtually unrecognizable.

So Koppisch set to work assembling a new group of players. He eschewed big name talent in favor of the type he felt fit comfortably into the system he planned to use--the one he had learned at Columbia under coach Bucky O'Neill--with himself as the focal point of the offense. To that end, Koppisch brought in guard Eddie Fischer, his teammate at Masten Park High and also at Columbia. The remainder of the team was made up of stand-out collegians, but not one of them an All-American: quarterback Wally Foster and center Max Reed of Bucknell, end Milo Gwosden of Pittsburgh, and tackle Charlie Barber of the Virginia Military Institute, a huge man by the standard of the day at six feet, three inches in height and weighing 235 pounds.

Koppisch sized up his squad for the Buffalo *Courier* just prior to the start of the 1925 campaign:

These men have all subscribed to the idea of remaining in Buffalo all through the season. They have been practicing for two weeks, twice daily, and their condition will be perfect. This is my hobby and my theory, that a group of first-class players, knowing football and in first-class condition . . . can beat any aggregation of stars who meet to play but once a week. On this theory we will build and stand or fall. We guarantee to the Buffalo fans that we will be always in shape, always doing our best to win, and every man giving everything he has. This, we think, will strike a popular appeal and will be our pledge to the public. We will try to win the championship, and if we don't succeed the world will know we have been trying.

The happy homecoming was short-lived, however, as controversy arose before the team even finished with training camp. According to the Buffalo *Evening News*, Koppisch and team president Warren Patterson had divulged some "secret" information about the team roster, but requested that the story be kept under wraps until they gave the go ahead to publish it. The *News*, upon seeing the same

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intelligence published in a rival city paper, proceeded to print the story soon thereafter. But Koppisch took exception to the *News*' article, and physically removed a *News* reporter from a team practice session the very next day, peppering his tirade with "foul verbiage." The *News* maintained that it was Koppisch who broke the agreement by leaking the story to a rival paper. Koppisch didn't see it that way. Either way, the publicity was more damaging to the Bisons than to the venerable Buffalo *Evening News*.

"If Messrs. Patterson and Koppisch desire no publicity for their football team," the *News* wryly observed, "they have hit on just the right way not to get it." The *News* carried its grudge against the Bisons for the entire season, publishing only very small articles when it stooped to publish anything at all about the team. By the end of the season, one wouldn't know from reading the *News* that the Queen City in fact had a pro football team.

Koppisch forged ahead with his new group of hard-nosed yet inexperienced gridders. After two weeks of practice sessions and an exhibition tilt against a semi-pro team from Tonawanda, Koppisch's charges traveled to the City of Brotherly Love to open the season against the powerful Frankford Yellow Jackets on September 26. The Herd had finished the previous season with a 45 to 7 schooling at the hands of the Yellow Jackets. The new bunch didn't fare much better in this rematch, losing 27 to 7.

In assessing the outcome of his first game as a pro coach and player, Koppisch chalked the loss up to experience.

They certainly were nice to us until that whistle blew. Then! Boys, how they tackle and how they hit that line. I think I learned a lot from that game with Frankford. It was new to us, but I'll profit by it, and so will the Buffalo team. I'm not discouraged. I think we met the best team in the league and with an even break in the officiating and the luck of the game the score would have been no worse than 13 to 7.

Just one day removed from the drubbing Philadelphia, the Bisons trekked north to the eastern-Pennsylvania coal-mining town of Pottsville for the Maroons' inaugural National Football League game. The Maroons were an old franchise by some standards, having been in existence since before the first World War. They were a formidable team, coached by Dick Rauch and led by star halfback Tony Latone, fullback Barney Wentz, quarterback Jack Ernst, and linemen Russ and Herb Stein. However, they had remained steadfastly independent, not joining the N.F.L. until the 1925 season.

It didn't take long for the Maroons to prove they belonged, as Wentz gave his team the lead on just the twelfth play of the game, going over on a five-yard reverse. The Bisons' defense, apparently desiring not to spoil the occasion for the city of Pottsville, yielded a touchdown in each quarter. The offense was shut out for the second straight game, managing just two first downs for their efforts. Final score: Maroons 28, Bisons 0.

In perhaps the most anticipated game played in the Queen City since the 1921 season, Walter Koppisch received a homecoming celebration the likes of which are normally reserved for royalty when the Bisons played their home opener on October 4 at Bisons Stadium. The pregame fanfare included a marching band and a procession of Koppisch's teammates from the 1919 Masten Park championship team, who, along with Buffalo Mayor Frank X. Schwab, led Wally onto the field for a flag-raising ceremony. This was followed by the Masten Park boys, backed by the rah-rahs of frenzied high school cheerleaders, presenting their former brother-in-arms with a congratulatory floral horseshoe. Mayor Schwab then took center stage, strolling out to mid-field to boot the ceremonial opening kickoff.

All this, and there was still a football game to be played.

The Rochester Jeffersons were a struggling franchise, having gone without a victory in each of the last three seasons. With home attendance averaging less than 2,000 over that span, manager Leo Lyons arranged for his team to play all of its games this season on the road. Thus far in 1925, the Jeffs had played just one game, a loss to the weak Canton Bulldogs. But the Jeffersons saw the Bisons as their biggest rival--a civic tradition dating back to the pre-N.F.L. days of the late 1910s when the Jeffs and the old Buffalo Prospects battled for the state championship. Lyons' men would be up for this game--no doubt eager to spoil the day for Koppisch and the Buffalo faithful.

And spoil it they did. Despite the fact that the Herd managed not to lose, the Jeffersons handed them their second consecutive shutout. As the 0 to 0 score implies, it was a tough game from start to finish.

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Koppisch and newcomer Jim Kendrick were able to break free for a few dazzling runs, but the Jeff defense stiffened when it had to. The Bisons were held to just nine first downs for the game, and never got closer than 12 yards from the Rochester goal line. Buffalo's defense showed marked improvement over the previous week, allowing the Jeffersons just two first downs.

Any titular aspirations Koppisch might have been entertaining were fading fast. And with the unbeaten Akron Pros due up next, it didn't appear that things would be getting better any time soon.

On October 11, some 3,500 fans turned out to witness Walter Koppisch's Buffalo Bisons take on Fritz Pollard's Akron Pros in an unrelenting downpour at Bison Stadium. Playing on a field described by the Buffalo *Courier* as a "slushy, slithering quagmire," the Herd extended its unbeaten string to two games in battling the Pros to a scoreless tie. The Bisons' stingy defense held Pollard in check throughout the contest, allowing the Pros just seven first downs for the entire game. Akron's defense, however, proved even more miserly by allowing Buffalo's impotent offense just two first downs. The Bisons had a chance to win it in the last minute of play, as Chase Van Dyne recovered an enemy fumble on the Akron 15-yard line. But time expired before the Herd could make a final stab at the end zone, leaving the Orange and Black winless in four games.

The Bisons extended their unbeaten string to three games by pulling off their first victory of the season with a 17 to 6 drubbing of the Columbus Tigers in front of 5,000 faithful at Bisons Stadium on October 18. But it was newcomer Jim Kendrick who supplied the heroics, while local fans continued to wait for Koppisch to break out.

But on October 22, Koppisch was involved in an automobile accident. He received some bad cuts and bruises on his legs, and was advised to sit out a few games to allow his injuries to heal. It was just another setback for a team suffering through the worst season in its short history.

The Bisons were scheduled to play the New York Football Giants (as they were commonly referred to at that time) at the Polo Grounds on Sunday, October 25, in a game that was to have marked Walter Koppisch's triumphant return to the city where he had made his college legend. But torrential rains on Friday and Saturday left the field in atrocious condition. The game was rescheduled for Tuesday, November 3 (Election Day).

On November 1, the Koppisch-less Bisons took on the Frankford Yellow Jackets at Bisons Stadium, and again proved they were no match for the Hornets, especially now that they were playing without their captain and star player. But the score was much closer this time, with Frankford pulling it out in the fourth quarter, winning 12 to 3.

The much-ballyhooed return of Wally Koppisch to the familiar confines of New York's Polo Grounds, where he made his name as a collegian, drew a large throng of approximately 20,000 fans, anticipating the same electrifying runs that brought him fame as a member of the Columbia University eleven. The crowd was disappointed when it became obvious that Koppisch would not be starting in this game against the New York Football Giants, still out due to the injuries sustained in the car wreck two weeks earlier.

A large contingent from his alma mater turned out for this Tuesday afternoon contest, many apparently unaware of Koppisch's indisposition as they booed their returning hero for not appearing at the opening of the contest. But Koppisch responded to the demand and valiantly strode onto the field late in the second quarter with the Bisons already down by seven. He played only a series or two before removing himself from the field. Koppisch was ineffective as a result of his injuries, and his mere presence failed to inspire his team in any manner. He returned to action in the fourth quarter after Wally Foster's interception return put the Herd within striking distance of the Giants' goal line, but Koppisch and the Bisons failed to cash in on the opportunity. The Giants held on for the victory and Buffalo's record fell to 1-4-2. It would be Koppisch's last appearance in a Buffalo uniform. Final score: New York 7, Buffalo 0.

The final two games of the season saw the Bisons fall to the Providence Steam Roller 10 to 0, and eventual the champions, the Chicago Cardinals, 23 to 6, as the team continued to struggle without Walter Koppisch as it had with him.

Following the loss to the Cardinals, the demoralized Bisons opted to call it a season. The team had played nine games--two more than the seven required for official recognition in league standings--and amassed a record of 1-6-2, the worst of its short existence.

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The Walter Koppisch experiment had turned out to be a failure, and the team would not ask him back for the 1926 season. Koppisch had not lived up to the high expectations the Queen City had for him. However, many circumstances hindered any successes he might otherwise have attained. The Herd was suffering from years of declining attendance, which in turn meant little money with which the team could sign decent supporting talent. The better teams of the league, such as Frankford and the Chicago Cardinals, exploited the Bisons' inexperience. Koppisch's mid-season injury deprived the team of one of its few legitimate offensive threats.

In 1926, Wally signed with the New York Giants, for whom he played just one season before giving up pro ball as a vocation. Koppisch remained in New York City after his playing days and became a stockbroker, at one point a business partner of former Columbia teammate Lou Gehrig. He later became an investigator for the Securities & Exchange Commission. Koppisch died in November 1953. He was enshrined in the College Football Hall of Fame in 1981.
