

ALMOST CHAMPIONS

1920-1932 Revisited

By Roy Sye

Throughout the first 13 years of the APFA and NFL, the league champion was crowned not by a formal end-of-season championship game, but by the team managers the following spring. The team managers voted for a champion and then awarded that team the championship for the previous season. This article will focus on teams that were a play or two away from winning a championship. That play could have been a missed extra point or a missed field goal or a last minute score by their opponent. Any of these plays when reversed, could have won them the championship. There are plenty of "what-ifs".....

In 1920, the Akron Pros were awarded the first APFA championship with a 6-0-3 record, while the Decatur Staleys finished second with a 5-1-2 record and the Buffalo All-Americans third at 4-1-1. Going into the Thanksgiving week games, the Pros stood at 4-0-1, the Staleys at 3-0-1 and the All-Americans at 2-1-0. The Pros won both their games, while the Staleys won one and lost one and the All-Americans won one. The Staleys loss was a tough 7-6 defeat at the hands of the Chicago Cardinals on a missed extra point.

If the Staleys had made the extra point against the Cardinals, their record would have been 5-0-3, compared to the Pros at 6-0-3. Who knows who the APFA would have given the championship to the next spring. Best guess would have been the Pros, as they appeared to play a tougher schedule. Both the Staleys and the All-Americans had their chance to pin a late-season loss on the Pros. The All-Americans played a scoreless tie against the Pros on December 5th and the Staleys followed a week later with another scoreless tie against the Pros. If either the Staleys or the All-Americans had come away with a victory, most likely they would have been awarded the championship based on their late-season victory over the Pros.

The 1921 season still rates as one of the closest championship races ever in the early days of the APFA/NFL. The Chicago Staleys were awarded the championship with a 9-1-1 record, while the Buffalo All-Americans finished a very close second with a 9-1-2 record. Debate still exists today as to whether Buffalo was cheated out of a share of the championship. The Staleys lost to the All-Americans 7-6 on November 24th, but followed on December 4th with a 10-7 victory over the All-Americans. This late-season victory over-shadowed an earlier loss, and the Staleys were awarded the championship.

A missed extra point by the Staleys in the first All-Americans game was all that stood between a 9-1-1 season and a near perfect 10-0-1 season. The All-Americans had their chance at the title, but missed 4 field goals in a 0-0 tie vs. the Akron Pros on November 13th and then could not stop a 98-yard fourth quarter drive by the Canton Bulldogs which resulted in a 7-7 tie the week later. A win in either of the games would have given the All-Americans a better record than the Staleys.

By mid-November, the 1922 season was a 4-team race for the championship. The Chicago Cardinals were 6-0-0, the Canton Bulldogs 5-0-2, the Toledo Maroons 4-0-2 and the Chicago Bears 6-1-0; the Bears only loss being a 7-6 game against the Bulldogs in late October, decided by a missed extra point.

In late November, the Bulldogs knocked the Cardinals out of the race by defeating them on successive Sundays. The Cardinals in turn knocked the Bears out of the race by defeating them twice in a span of 11 days. The Maroons knocked themselves out of the race by being soundly beaten by the Bears and Bulldogs in late-season games. The Bulldogs walked away with the championship finishing at 10-0-2, followed by the Bears at 9-3-0, the Cardinals at 8-3-0 and the Maroons at 5-2-2.

The Canton Bulldogs walked away with another championship in 1923, finishing with an 11-0-1 record. The 9-2-2 Chicago Bears and the 7-2-1 Green Bay Packers and the 7-2-4 Milwaukee Badgers all had 2 early season losses, which effectively knocked them out of championship contention.

However, the start of November showed the standings at 5-0-0 for Canton, 5-0-0 for the Chicago Cardinals and 4-0-0 for the Duluth Kelleys. The Cardinals lost 3 of the next 5 games to end their championship hopes, while the Kelleys lost the next 3 league games to make their championship dreams disappear.

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The 1924 season proved to be another close race all the way to the end. The Cleveland Bulldogs, transplanted from Canton, eked out a percentage point championship over the Chicago Bears, Frankford Yellow Jackets and Duluth Kelleys. The Bulldogs finished with a 7-1-1 (.875) season, against the Bears 6-1-4 (.857), Yellow Jackets 11-2-1 (.846) and Kelleys 5-1-0 (.833) seasons.

The Bears only loss was an early season 16-14 defeat, in Cleveland, at the hands of the Bulldogs on October 5th. This game was decided by a field goal. If the Bulldogs miss the field goal, the Bears win the game and most likely the championship. The Bears played a return game against the Bulldogs on December 7th, and won easily 23-0. However, before the season started, the league instituted a November 30th cutoff date for the regular season. Any games played after that date would be considered exhibition games. The Yellow Jackets could have won the championship, but suffered early-season defeats against the Dayton Triangles and the Chicago Bears. The Kelleys could have claimed the championship, but lost 13-0 to the Green Bay Packers on November 9th.

The 1925 season proved to be the most controversial season in NFL history. Much has been written about the Chicago Cardinals and the Pottsville Maroons. The Maroons claimed they were cheated out of the championship, especially since they had beaten the Cardinals 21-7 on December 6th in a game that was advertised as the league championship. The Pottsville (10-2-0) victory moved them ½ game ahead of the Cardinals (9-2-1) and the Maroons celebrated an apparent championship.

However, before the season started, the league stated that the season would end on Sunday, December 20th and any games played up to that date would count toward the final standings. The Cardinals, seeing an opportunity to overtake the Maroons, quickly scheduled 2 more games. The Milwaukee Badgers were trounced 59-0 on December 10th and the Hammond Pros beaten 13-0 two days later. Both opponents had disbanded earlier in the year, but teams were scraped together and the Cardinals victories moved them ½ game ahead of the Maroons. Over in Philadelphia, the Maroons played the Notre Dame All-Stars. The NFL league office warned the Maroons not to play in Philadelphia, as that was Yellow Jacket territory. The game was played anyway and Commissioner Joe Carr suspended the Maroon franchise for violating territorial rights, thus voiding all claims the Maroons had to the championship.

Forgotten in all the Cardinals-Maroons hoopla, were the Detroit Panthers. By mid-November, the Cardinals were 7-1-0, the Panthers 6-1-2 and the Maroons 6-2-0. The Panthers suffered a close 6-3 loss against the Rock Island Independents on Thanksgiving and then finished the season a few weeks later at 8-2-2. A field goal loss to the Independents and two earlier scoreless ties against the Chicago Bears and the Akron Pros was all that stood between the Panthers and a NFL championship.

The 1926 season again went down to the wire. At the end of November, there were three very strong teams. The Chicago Bears at 11-0-2, the Frankford Yellow Jackets at 12-1-1 and the Pottsville Maroons at 10-1-1. The Bears finished out the last three games at 1-1-1, while the Yellow Jackets overtook the Bears by going 2-0-1 in the last three games and the Maroons quietly went 0-1-1 in their last 2 games. The Yellow Jackets won over the Bears by percentage points – Yellow Jackets (14-1-2, .933) and the Bears (12-1-3, .923) and were awarded the championship.

The Bears only loss was to the Yellow Jackets on December 4th, 7-6 on a blocked extra point. The Yellow Jackets also blocked a field goal attempt by the Bears. If the Bears make the extra point, they tie and stay ahead of the Yellow Jackets and finish 12-0-4 vs. the Yellow Jackets 13-1-3. The Yellow Jackets played a scoreless tie against the Maroons on December 19th, while the Bears tied the Green Bay Packers 3-3 on the same day. A win by the Maroons and a missed field goal by the Bears would have given Pottsville the 1926 championship.

In 1927, the NFL pared down from 22 to 12 teams and with the AFL folded, the remaining teams were much stronger. By mid-November the New York Giants were 7-1-1, the Chicago Bears 6-1-1 and the Green Bay Packers 6-1-1. The Giants won the remainder of their games and finished 11-1-1, while the Bears went 3-2-1 in their last six games finishing third at 9-3-2 and the Packers splitting their last 2 games and coming in second with a 7-2-1 record.

Back on October 2nd, the Packers lost a close game to the Bears 7-6, while the Giants played a scoreless tie with the Cleveland Bulldogs. If the Packers tied the Bears and the Bulldogs somehow score against the Giants, the Packers end up (7-1-2, .875) and the Giants finish second (11-2-0, .846). The Bears had their chance, but went 0-2-1 in the 3 games before, during and after the Thanksgiving holiday.

With the NFL losing 2 more teams in 1928, the 10-team league produced three strong teams by the time the November games started. The Detroit Wolverines were leading the way at 3-0-0, followed by the Providence Steam Roller and Frankford Yellow

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Jackets both at 4-1-0. The Steam Roller did not lose any more games for the rest of the season, while the Yellow Jackets and Wolverines each lost twice to knock themselves out of the race.

The Steam Roller and Yellow Jackets played a home-home series on November 17th and 18th, with a 6-6 tie in the first game followed by a 6-0 win for the Steam Roller in the second game. Had the Yellow Jackets tied both games, they would have finished at 12-3-1 and the Steam Roller at 8-2-1. With the same winning percentage, who knows who would have been crowned champion. For the Wolverines, they lost to the Steam Roller 7-0 on November 4th. Had the Wolverines tied the Steam Roller in that game, they would have finished 7-1-2 and the Steam Roller 7-1-3. Again, who knows who would have been crowned champion.

Back up to 12 teams in 1929, the NFL again boasted three strong teams by mid-November. The perfect Green Bay Packers at 9-0-0, followed closely by the New York Giants at 8-0-1 and then the Frankford Yellow Jackets at 8-2-3. The Packers claimed their first championship at 12-0-1, closely followed by the Giants at 13-1-1 and the Yellow Jackets a distant third at 10-4-5.

The Giants only loss was to the Packers on November 24th. The Giants won their last 5 games, but could not overtake the Packers whose only blemish was a scoreless tie against the Yellow Jackets on November 28th. Had the Yellow Jackets beat the Packers in late November; the Giants (13-1-1, .929) would have won the championship by percentage points over the Packers (12-1-0, .923).

Only one loss separated the top 5 teams in 1930. The Green Bay Packers won the championship at 10-3-1, followed by the New York Giants at 13-4-0, then the Chicago Bears at 9-4-1, then the Brooklyn Dodgers at 7-4-1 and then the Providence Steam Roller at 6-4-1.

In late November, the Giants lost successive 7-6 games to the Staten Island Independents and the Brooklyn Dodgers. A tie in either of those games would have given the Giants the championship. The Bears lost to the Packers 13-12 on November 9th. A win by the Bears in that game would have given them the championship. The Dodgers lost a close 3-0 game to the Providence Steam Roller on November 2nd. A win in that game coupled with the Independents beating the Giants the same day instead of the Independents losing 9-7, and then the Portsmouth Spartans beating the Packers instead of a 6-6 tie on December 14th, would have given the Dodgers the championship.

The 1931 season produced a controversy with late season scheduling. The Packers won the championship finishing with a 12-2-0 record, followed closely by the Portsmouth Spartans at 11-3-0. The Bears lost a few early season games by close scores, effectively knocking them out of the race.

The Spartans claimed that they had a December 13th game scheduled with the Packers. Had the game been played and the Spartans won, the 2 teams would have finished with identical 12-3-0 records, thus forcing another game to determine the championship. The Packers, however, stated that the game was only "tentative" and that a contract had not been signed. Not wanting to jeopardize their championship, the Packers "cancelled" the game. The Spartans appealed to Commissioner Carr, but the appeal was ignored and the Spartans ended up playing a non-league game on that day.

The Spartans could have avoided any controversy had a reversal of kicks gone the other way. On November 1st, the Spartans lost to the Chicago Cardinals 20-19 on a 4th quarter missed extra point. Had the Spartans made the extra point and the Cardinals missed, the Spartans would have finished 12-2-0, the same as the Packers. A "championship" game would have had to be played to determine the league champs.

1932 produced 3 teams that battled to the wire. Tie games played an important part in determining the champion. On December 18th, the Chicago Bears defeated the Portsmouth Spartans, 9 to 0, in the first championship game. Prior to the game, the Bears were 6-1-6 and the Spartans were 6-1-4, (ties did not count in determining winning percentage), followed closely by the Packers with a 10-3-1 record.

Either the Packers or Spartans could have easily won the championship outright. At the start of December, the Packers were out in front at 10-1-1, (.909), then the Spartans at 5-1-4, (.833), then the Bears at 4-1-6, (.800). In the next 2 weeks, the Packers lost to both the Spartans and the Bears, finishing them at 10-3-1. The Spartans played only 1 league game and beat the Packers, finishing them at 6-1-4. The Bears beat the New York Giants and the Packers, finishing 6-1-6 and put them in a first place tie with the Spartans, setting the stage for the first "championship" game.

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Had the Bears lost any of their 6 tie games, the Spartans would have claimed the championship. Had both the Bears and Spartans each lost one of their tie games, the Packers would have taken their 4th straight championship.

A few points here and there, would have produced championships for many now-defunct teams. The Buffalo All-Americans, Duluth Kelleys, Pottsville Maroons, Detroit Panthers, Detroit Wolverines and Brooklyn Dodgers all could have taken home championships. The Portsmouth Spartans, now the Lions, may have stayed in Portsmouth, had they won championships in 1931 and 1932.

From 1920 to 1926, the Staleys/Bears controlled the league, finishing in 1st place once and 2nd place 5 times. From 1927 to 1932, the Packers controlled the league, finishing in 1st place 3 times and 2nd place twice.

Actual Champions:

1920 – Akron Pros	1925 – Chicago Cardinals	1930 – Green Bay Packers
1921 – Chicago Staleys	1926 – Frankford Yellow Jackets	1931 – Green Bay Packers
1922 – Canton Bulldogs	1927 – New York Giants	1932 – Chicago Bears
1923 – Canton Bulldogs	1928 – Providence Steam Roller	
1924 – Cleveland Bulldogs	1929 – Green Bay Packers	

Had the ball bounced differently, champions would be: (bold indicates actual winner)

Akron Pros	1920
Decatur Staleys/Chicago Staleys-Bears	1920, 1921 , 1924, 1926, 1930, 1932
Buffalo All-Americans	1920, 1921
Canton Bulldogs	1922, 1923
Cleveland Bulldogs	1924
Duluth Kelleys	1924
Frankford Yellow Jackets	1924, 1926 , 1928
Chicago Cardinals	1925
Pottsville Maroons	1925, 1926
Detroit Panthers	1925
Green Bay Packers	1927, 1929, 1930, 1931 , 1932
New York Giants	1927 , 1929, 1930
Providence Steam Roller	1928
Detroit Wolverines	1928
Brooklyn Dodgers	1930
Portsmouth Spartans	1931, 1932

Sources

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