

The First Football World Series

Experiment in the Garden

By PFRA Research

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Tom O'Rourke had a big old barn of a building to fill. As manager of Madison Square Garden, he needed a constant flow of attractions to keep New Yorkers swarming into his place. Especially, he needed something both first-rate and unusual for the New Year's celebration. There were just too many other spots in New York where people could go to welcome in 1903.

Tom stared out over the wide, empty expanse of the Garden floor. With nothing cluttering it, the roomy arena seemed as big as a football field. A smile covered Tom's Irish face as quickly as his imagination covered the Garden floor with yard lines.

Why not a football game? Better yet, why not a whole tournament of football games? Why not the biggest and best football tourney ever? The Garden was big, and, to Tom's wishful eye, it was big enough. The more O'Rourke thought about it, the more his idea expanded. The Garden floor, unfortunately, remained the same size.

But that would be the players' problem.

What Tom O'Rourke envisioned was a series of games, showcasing the best in college and pro teams, eventually leading to one grand, climactic game, crowning the "champion of the world." What he got was considerably less, but it still made a pretty good show.

Filling the Slots

Although O'Rourke had hopes of putting a couple of "name" undergraduate elevens on his "gridiron" right up to the last minute, the colleges really weren't at all interested. That left the pros.

All things considered, the best professional clubs in the country during 1902 had been the Phillies and Athletics of Philadelphia, the Stars of Pittsburgh, and the Watertown, N.Y. Red and Blacks. The first three had formed what they called the "National Football League," beat everyone else into the ground, and tangled their "league" standings so monstrously that no one is certain to this day who won.

The fourth football power, Watertown, humbly claimed to be "champions of the world" already. How they managed to convince themselves of this after the Athletics came up to Watertown and defeated them in October was between them and God. Still, all claims aside, they did indeed have a strong club.

As a matter of fact, probably only a fumble or two separated the teams in ability. However, none of this had any bearing on

O'Rourke's tournament because he didn't succeed in getting any of the four intact to his party.

Watertown decided it could best defend its "championship" by refusing to expose it to the whims of fate or strong Pennsylvania football teams. O'Rourke didn't bother to invite Pittsburgh on the logical assumption that very few New Yorkers would pay good money to watch a team from Pittsburgh.

The Phillies and Athletics didn't make it either, at least not in recognizable form. Instead, some players from each team got together and formed a new amalgam, which was neither wholly Athletic nor wholly Phillie, and was therefore logically called the "New York" team.

The squad, made up of eight Phillies and four Athletics, boasted Charley Gelbert, three times All-American end, and Blondy Wallace, twice named to the second AA team at tackle. The center, W.E. Bachman, had also received a few AA plaudits at Lafayette, and several other players had names recognizable in New York back then. These included fullback Curly Davidson and Benjamin Franklin Roller, a great player at several positions.

It was an all-star aggregation, easily favored to win the tournament. In calling them the "New York" team, O'Rourke expected to give his patrons the pleasure of watching a "home team" win.

The competition didn't look overpowering. The teams O'Rourke used to fill up his card weren't in the same class. The New York Knickerbockers had enjoyed some success, but they were in over their heads. The Orange, New Jersey, Athletic Club was a little stronger but not enough to frighten the "New Yorks." The best the Warlow A.C. could present was a strong rooting section. O'Rourke rounded out the field with the Syracuse A.C., next to Watertown the best available upstate team.

Even though the lineup was made up of four New York state teams and one from New Jersey -- none of them the best in the country -- historians would inevitably refer to the affair as a "World Series." It was hardly a series in the sense of two strong teams playing each other over several games; no team played another more than once. The pairings were odd, too. The anticipated second-place team was "ceded" right into the championship game. Meanwhile, the expected first place finisher had to fight its way through the pack.

However, "World Series" has a nicer ring than "Indoor Football Tournament," so it will probably stick forever.

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If the tournament wasn't a true "series," and could only by Tom O'Rourke's active imagination be regarded as a "world's championship," what remained to be decided was whether the activity that took place at the Garden was really football.

The answer turned out to be "sort of."

No matter what the teams did, the game they played could never really be football -- not with what they had to use for a field. The *New York Times* described the readying of Madison Square Garden like this:

"The wooden flooring of the big garden was taken up, and the gridiron was laid out on the earthen surface, which proved to be rather too sticky and holding for fast work. The goal lines were seventy yards apart, and the width of the playing space was scarcely more than thirty-five yards."

That size, reducing the normal 110-yard field used in 1902 by more than a third, coupled with the "sticky and holding" surface meant that speed and cleverness were neutralized and the advantage was, even more than usual, with the bigger and stronger eleven.

Kicking was drastically affected. In a normal game on a normal field, the team with the longest punts had a tremendous advantage. But even a weak punter was more than adequate when playing on this postage stamp. To make matters worse, the arena wall was right on the edge of the field, presenting a serious hazard on any sideline plays. One player knocked himself silly by running into the wall on the opening kickoff and never played another moment of the game.

O'Rourke scheduled his tournament with a certain logic, considering the expected strengths of the teams. On opening night, he scheduled the "New York" team against Syracuse. The "locals" from Philadelphia were expected to eliminate the upstaters and get rid of the team that figured to bring the fewest fans into the Garden. On the second night, the Knickerbockers and Warlow were slated to play for the honor of getting creamed by the New York Philadelphians on New Year's Eve. Either the Knicks or the Warlows could draw well, and O'Rourke anticipated the third game as having the best attendance of the tourney. However, by holding out the Orange A.C. until the end, he had himself a "natural" for the final -- a New York versus New Jersey match.

If all went according to plan, New Jersey would lose a close game to a tired New York team before a packed Garden audience, wrapping up Tom O'Rourke's "World Series" in a blaze of profitable glory.

But football -- even O'Rourke's curious indoor brand -- seldom goes quite according to plan.

The Syracuse Surprise

The problem was Syracuse.

The upstaters took their invitation seriously. Deciding that the regular Syracuse A.C. team wasn't quite good enough to represent them, the civic leaders commissioned Frank "Buck" O'Neill to organize a team of world-beaters. O'Neill later coached

successfully at Syracuse University, and he foreshadowed his future abilities with the job he did in late 1902.

To start, he had one excellent end in himself and another fine one named Carver for the opposite terminal. He set out to fill the space in between.

Jack Wright had enjoyed a good reputation as a center for Columbia University. O'Neill tagged him for the middle of his line. He scored a real coup by hiring two Indian brothers, Bemis and Hawley Pierce, to play on one side of Wright. Both were experienced pros who had learned their football at famed Carlisle. For the other side of his line, O'Neill signed up another pair of brothers, Glen and Bill Warner. Bill had just received All-American honors at Cornell. His older brother, better known as "Pop" than Glen, was his equal. Pop Warner went on to become one of the most successful and most innovative coaches in the history of football, developing such stars as Jim Thorpe and Ernie Nevers.

With the Warners and the Pierces in camp, Buck O'Neill had a line that could hold its own with anyone. Next he needed a backfield. He already had a clever little quarterback named Moore. For runners he looked to Watertown. The strength of the Red and Blacks was in its backs, and none of them were employed at football at that moment, Watertown having decided to rest on its self-proclaimed laurels. O'Neill hired all three of the Red and Black runners, two tough pluggers in Bottger and Mason and one of the greatest halfbacks of the day, Phil Draper.

Indirectly, Watertown was back in the tournament.

More important, Syracuse had a team that looked like the equal of any in the country. The squad was christened the "All-Syracuse" team with as much logic as applied to the naming of the "New York" team.

It was obvious to anyone knowing the personnel that the winner of the tournament would be the team that survived the opening confrontation between New York and All-Syracuse.

Buck O'Neill gave his team a big edge by practicing daily at the Syracuse Armory. He had an all-star team, but he knew that to perform like one they would have to learn to work together. Meanwhile, the New York Philadelphians got in very little drilling time for three weeks or so before the tournament.

On Monday night, December 28, 1902, the two teams squared off on Tom O'Rourke's pint-sized gridiron.

The Games

The contest has been called the first indoor pro football game. Actually, it was preceded by a warm-up, lightweight match between the Monitor A.C. and the Colonial Football Club, but it is unlikely that any of the players on either team were professionals. But whether it was a first or second on the indoor court, the game between Syracuse and New York turned out to be a real thriller.

The teams were exceptionally even in skill and equally rugged. Each team tried to intimidate the other and only the crowd of 3,000 delirious New Yorkers profited by any of the exchanges of mayhem. Glen Warner was cut badly on the side of his head, but

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he laughed it off at the time. Tom O'Rourke's junior-sized playpen was absurdly small to house this battery of giants. On the other hand, it brought the fans down front closer to the action than they could have been at any stadium. They could hear the grunts and groans and watch the sweat and the blood fly.

The teams played twenty-minute halves, and at the end of the first neither had scored. However, in the second session, all that practice in the Syracuse Armory began to tell. At last, Bottger was shoved over the goal line for a touchdown. New York was unable to duplicate the score, and All-Syracuse had beaten the expected champs.

The score of this game is given as 6-0 in most histories, but that is a mistake. Touchdowns in '02 were counted at five points, and Glen Warner missed the extra point. As a matter of fact, he also failed on three field goal attempts, bothered perhaps by his head injury. To all competitive intents and purposes, O'Rourke's tournament was over. None of the other teams had a prayer. Still, the amenities had to be observed.

The Wrap-Up

On the next night, the Knickerbockers bested the Warlow A.C. from Whitestone, Long Island, 11-6, much to the disappointment of a huge Warlow cheering section. The second half had to be extended so that a decision could be reached, making this perhaps the first "overtime" football game.

Glen Warner's head injury turned out to be more serious than he had suspected, and he sat out the remainder of the tournament. His place was taken by Blondy Wallace from the New York team. There was apparently no loss of efficiency, although one could

hardly tell because the rest of the Syracuse games were so one-sided.

The Knickerbockers would have liked to sit out the New Year's Eve game. They stalled as long as they could, demanding that they receive their \$250 guarantee before the game. When the money was in their hands, they went meekly out on the field and were destroyed by Syracuse, 36-0. The game was such a laughter that the second half was cut down to ten minutes. Syracuse had scored at a rate better than a point a minute -- 36 points in 30 minutes!

Although the main event was a rout, the fans got a good spectacle for their money in the preliminary match -- an exhibition of Gaelic football.

By stretching a point or three, the finale on New Year's night could be called "the first Super Bowl." It had one thing in common with many later Super Bowls -- it was a blow-out.

To no one's surprise, Buck O'Neill's team wrapped up the tourney with another 36-0 tromping, this one over the "ceded" Orange, New Jersey team. Actually, Orange did a better job than the Knickerbockers; it took Syracuse forty minutes instead of thirty to get their points.

Syracuse could safely claim the "world's indoor professional championship," and, quite possibly, they were the best on any kind of field.

Tom O'Rourke counted his money and began planning his 1903 tournament.