

Millville Football & Athletic Club

By John Fenton

The borough of Millville is situated midway between Philadelphia and the South Jersey shore. During the 1920's this self-proclaimed "hub of South Jersey" supported an interesting mix of agriculture and industry. It was also home to the Millville Football & Athletic Club. First taking to the gridiron in 1921, the "Big Blue" quickly established itself as one of the premier football teams in the state. By the end of the 1923 season the team had staked a claim to the mythical championship of New Jersey. It reasserted that claim the following year, and as the 1925 campaign approached fans had high expectations. Among the club's rivals a desire to topple the champions from their lofty pedestal was equally strong...

Big Blue's Blues: Highs and Lows of Millville's 1925 Grid Campaign

By the first week in September, football fans in and around Millville had begun to speculate about the local team's prospects for the upcoming season. The Big Blue had experienced great success in recent years, but several rivals were itching to stake their own claims to the state title. Out in Atlantic City both the Melrose Athletic Club, nicknamed the Roses, and the newly formed Blue Tornadoes were gearing up to make runs at the Big Blue. Rumor had it that the community of Ocean City was also trying to organize a team for the same purpose. Meanwhile, along the Delaware, the venerable Riverside Big Green was always capable of mounting a challenge. The Millville faithful looked forward to seeing their team stare down these challenges, as well those from strong Pennsylvania clubs such as the Coaldale Big Green. And speaking of Pennsylvania, there was even hope that a successful season could entice the NFL's Frankford Yellow Jackets or Pottsville Maroons into late a season contest.

Fielding a quality football team took money, especially when there was local competition for the best available players. In previous seasons the Big Blue had suffered the unpleasant experience of losing key players to their rivals, particularly Melrose of Atlantic City. At that time, however, the Millville eleven had operated as a cooperative, with profits divided among the players. This season was to be a little different. The club's finance committee decided that players would receive fixed salaries. As a result, Millville manager Virgil Johnson spent much of his time just prior to the start of the 1925 season planning and overseeing the various fund raising activities that would provide the initial financing for the club. These fund-raisers included

boxing matches, baseball games and even vaudeville shows. It was expected that, once the season began, revenues generated from gate receipts would cover the club's operating expenses.

Early season success...

Most of the club's supporters believed the Big Blue would start the season slowly, with a few warm-up contests against weaker opponents. But the team kicked off the 1925 campaign against the Media AC, a rough and tumble aggregation hailing from the Philadelphia suburbs. These visitors proved to be no walkover, playing the locals to a standstill for nearly three quarters. Twice in the first half Millville got within striking distance only to be turned away empty handed – first losing the ball on downs when within the shadow of the goalposts, and later when a Michael "Gyp" Downey field goal attempt missed its mark by inches. In the third quarter, with Media pinned deep in its own territory, Shirley "Ham" Haines, a product of Millville High School and former standout at Temple, broke through the line as the visitors attempted to punt. He got a hand on the ball. A Media player recovered, but Douglas Crate, Millville's sturdy right end, threw the man down behind the goal line. This safety put the locals on top, 2-0. That advantage was maintained until early in the fourth quarter, when Media pulled ahead on a field goal. On the Big Blue's next possession Ellis "Dinty" Moore, another former Millville High player, dropped back to attempt a field goal. Although his kick fell short of its mark, it had the good fortune to strike a Media player on his leg. Once again Doug Crate's nose for the loose ball resulted in points on the board, as he recovered in the end-zone. The subsequent point after attempt failed, but Crate's timely touchdown put the Big Blue back in the lead, 8-3. Finally, in the closing minutes of play former Vermont star Carroll "Ginny" Gooch took the ball around right end twice, for gains of 45 and 32 yards respectively. The second run resulted in a touchdown that safely tucked the game away.

While the Big Blue had notched a 14-3 victory in their first outing of the season, they paid a heavy price. Mickey Hummel, who in addition to his coaching responsibilities also served as the club's starting left end, suffered a broken hand. Gyp Downey, the squad's most gifted kicker, seriously wrenched his knee. Both fans and management felt that a lack of practice had been evident in the team's first outing. That shortcoming was addressed the following week, as Coach Hummell worked his players several times in preparation for their next opponent, the Olney AA, so

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named for the Philadelphia neighborhood from which it hailed. At the same time, manager Johnson made several personnel moves. He revealed that Bruce Moore and Rex Jones, two Oklahoma natives recently signed by the team, had been released after it was determined that they were in fact Bruce Morris and Rex Thomas, students at St. John's College, Brooklyn. Johnson also announced that he had secured the services of Dan Lyons, formerly of Lafayette, and Paul Longua, a respected end out of Villanova. Longua would eventually go on to play a few seasons in the NFL, with both Orange and Newark.

The week of extra practice paid-off against Olney, as the Big Blue looked and performed like the well oiled machine their fans had become accustomed to watching. Ginny Gooch gave a stellar performance, rushing for two touchdowns and passing for another. The most dramatic points were scored on a spectacular 30 yard Gooch touchdown scramble in the final quarter. On the defensive side of the ball, Mickey Hummell and Gyp Downey were out with injuries, but newcomer Danny Lyons played a very strong game. With its 19-0 victory over Olney, Millville gained momentum for an action packed two game series the following weekend. On October 10 the Big Blue was due to square off at home against the US Marine Corps team from Philadelphia's League Island Navy Yard. The next morning it was off to Staten Island, there to face a team known as the Stapletons.

Weekend split...

Reported to have compiled 36 victories and one tie over the three previous seasons, the US Marine Corp eleven that rolled onto the MSAA gridiron brandished a fine reputation. At game time, cold winds whipped the field. Regardless, the shivering faithful were no doubt happy to see the home team take complete control on the field. The locals' defense dominated from start to finish, putting the clamps on the "Devil-dogs" and refusing to surrender even a single first down. On offense, Ginny Gooch turned in another fine performance, highlighted by a twenty-five yard end-around run for a touchdown on the team's first possession. From that point forward the contest belonged to the Big Blue. In the third quarter Millville's defense provided the most memorable play of the afternoon, when Leo Douglas leaped high into the air to intercept an errant pass. He then out distanced all would be Marine tacklers on a 40-yard dash into the end-zone. That play sealed a 13-0 shutout.

The next afternoon the Big Blue found itself in Staten Island's Thompson Stadium. Facing their most difficult opponent of the young season, the team turned in another solid effort. The outcome of this contest, however, was quite different.

The Stapletons, hailing from their namesake section of Staten Island, were one of the strongest independent football teams in the New York-North Jersey area. The

Big Blue and "Stapes" were well acquainted, having faced each other twice during 1924. The first of those games resulted in a 19-12 Stapletons victory, while the late season rematch ended as a scoreless draw. This season's contest was a well played defensive struggle, with neither club making much headway offensively. Round about the middle of the fourth quarter, Millville lined up for what was probably the best scoring opportunity of the afternoon. With the ball near mid-field, Ginny Gooch called for a placement kick. A long distance field goal, to be sure, but it was as good a chance as either side seemed likely to get. As soon as the ball was snapped things started to go wrong. An unidentified Stape broke through the line and leaped in front of Gooch's kick. A chaotic scramble followed as several players tried and failed to recover the deflected ball, which was now bouncing and careening toward the Millville end-zone. Finally, Gooch himself seemed to have a clear shot at the pigskin. But while attempting to scoop it up he was pushed from behind and inadvertently kicked the ball over the goal line. There a Stapleton player fell on it for touchdown.

Millville tried several desperate passes on each of their next possessions, but none were successful. At the final whistle the score stood at 0-6. The Big Blue had suffered its first setback of the season.

Millville's next scheduled opponent was the Hobart Field Club, a well established Philadelphia team. But during the week leading up to the game, manager Virgil Johnson announced that Hobart had cancelled and the open date was to be filled by the Shenandoah Red Jackets. The Red Jackets were an up and coming team from the coalfields of Northeastern Pennsylvania. After a successful 1924 campaign, this club seemed poised to challenge for that state's "Anthracite crown." Just a week earlier these same Red Jackets had played Millville's traditional rival, Melrose, to a scoreless draw. As a result, this contest was widely expected provide a real measure of the Big Blue's strength in relation to the Roses. A few days prior to the game, manager Johnson strengthened his roster by signing Saville Crowther, who had started the season with the Frankford Yellow Jackets. A few veteran members of the team were also on the mend. Player-coach Mickey Hummell was expected to see more playing time as his broken hand continued to heal, and Gyp Downey's knee appeared well enough to allow his return to the line-up.

The game against Shenandoah got off to a slow start, but turned midway through the first quarter. At that point Ginny Gooch left the field following a hard blow to the head, and Gyp Downey took over at quarterback. By halftime the Big Blue had firmly established control. Ham Haines spearheaded a strong defensive effort that shut down the Red Jackets, while Paul Longua and Downey combined for two touchdowns and a field goal as Millville rolled to a 17-0 victory.

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Week six found the Big Blue staring down one of the most aggressive teams from neighboring Camden county. Undeclared in each of the two previous seasons, Frank Newman's Greater Collingswood aggregation had previously contested Millville's claim to the state championship. The team looked upon this game as an opportunity to prove their case. Everyone expected a tough contest, and that's exactly what the 500 fans who braved the elements to watch the game received. Teeming rain and churning cleats turned the playing field into a sea of mud. Even so, it didn't take long for Millville to establish itself as the better club. On just the second play from scrimmage Egg Warren, the big Collingswood fullback, fumbled while trying to break through Millville's defensive front. In an instant Sav Crowther was on the loose ball. Five plays later Ginny Gooch splashed over the visitor's goal line for the first points of the afternoon. A well placed Gyp Downey kick followed, taking the Big Blue's advantage to seven points. In the third quarter it was Al Nemsic's turn. After substituting for Leo Douglas, the hefty back battered his way through the line and into the end-zone. Another Downey dropkick put Millville ahead 14-0. It wasn't until the final quarter that Collingswood appeared to be mounting a serious threat, but time ran out before the visitors got to within twenty yards of the end-zone.

Punked...

The following Tuesday it was announced that Mickey Hummel had stepped down as coach. Although Hummell would remain with the Big Blue as a player, both he and club management felt that his personal obligations (he commuted daily to Brooklyn for work, in addition to attending evening classes at law school) were restricting his ability to oversee regular practices between games. Hummell's replacement was Robert "Punk" Berryman. An outstanding halfback at Penn State, Berryman had established a fine reputation as an assistant at Colgate, before taking over head-coaching duties with the Frankford Yellow Jackets in 1924. At Frankford Punk coached the Jackets to an impressive 11-2-1 record (indeed, 17-3-1 overall) in their inaugural NFL season. The new coach took the reigns at Millville just as the team was preparing to face the Coaldale Big Green. Coaldale, like Shenandoah a few weeks earlier, hailed from coalfields of Northeastern Pennsylvania. Led by such hard hitting players as Jack "Honey-boy" Evans and James "Blue" Bonner, this club was a perennial powerhouse in its home state. It was also no stranger to Millville, having defeated the Big Blue 10-0 the previous season. This year Coaldale, like Millville, had dropped a close game to Stapleton. But unlike Millville, or Shenandoah for that matter, it had also notched a victory over Melrose.

It was a cold and windy Halloween afternoon when the two clubs met in a fiercely contended tilt. The game remained deadlocked through the first three periods of play. Ginny Gooch had managed two long field goal

attempts during the second quarter, but both times the brisk wind carried the ball wide. After halftime the stalemate developed into a punting duel between Al Nemsic and Coaldale's Joe Glitner. The Millville kicker's stronger leg eventually yielded a slight advantage, and as the final quarter neared a close Nemsic pinned the Big Green at its own 3-yard line. Glitner attempted to punt away, but a strong rush hurried his kick. The wobbly ball went only as far as the 22-yard line before sailing out of bounds. Gyp Downey, who had replaced the bruised and battered Gooch, then connected on a quick series of short passes to several different receivers. These passes, in combination with a few punishing rushes by Nemsic, soon brought the ball to the 4-yard line. The final play of the drive was another hand-off to Nemsic. Although firmly in the grasp of Honey-boy Evans, the hard charging halfback lifted the Coaldale star from his feet and carried him into the end-zone. Downey's successful point after brought an end to the scoring, as the Big Blue held on for a 7-0 victory.

The first weekend in November promised plenty of action, with a pair games scheduled against teams from North Jersey and Pennsylvania's Susquehanna Valley. The Bayonne Vikings were said to be on a par with the Stapletons, but never had a chance to prove it at Millville. In the days leading up to the game Bayonne's management called-off the contest, claiming that several of its players had been crippled in a rough Election Day loss to the Elizabeth (NJ) Collegians. In lieu of the Vikings, Virgil Johnson arranged to bring the Jamaica Cardinals, of Queens (NY), into town. Another supposedly well reputed club from the New York-North Jersey area, it was reported that the only blemish on the Cards' undefeated season was a scoreless tie with New Haven (CT). The Millville-Jamaica match-up promised to be a tough one, especially with Al Nemsic expected to see only limited action due to cracked ribs suffered against Coaldale. The injury to Nemsic was also expected to be a factor the following afternoon when the Big Blue, taking to the road for only the second time that season, would face All-Lancaster.

Clad in bright red jerseys and stockings, the Cardinals certainly presented a smart looking team. But appearances are one thing and play is another. Once the contest started, the New Yorkers proved no match for the locals. As had been the case in several games during the young season, the Big Blue's defense provided opportunities and the offense took full advantage. A forced fumble early in the opening quarter gave Millville the ball on Jamaica's 25-yard line. From there the Big Blue's backs pushed the ball forward. Within a few plays Leo Douglas was standing alone in the end-zone. Gyp Downey followed up with the extra point. Downey's foot came into play again in the second quarter, as another well placed dropkick took the score to 10-0. Then, in the third quarter, Millville drove the ball the entire length of the field.

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This time it was Ginny Gooch who carried the ball, along with several Cardinal defenders, the remaining few yards before crossing the goal line. The final margin of victory was 16-0.

The next morning found the Big Blue headed west into Pennsylvania Dutch country. Their opponent, All-Lancaster, was a well established club that routinely challenged teams from Delaware, Philadelphia and the Northeastern Pennsylvania coal fields. Despite darkening skies and pending thunderstorms, a large crowd of the All-Lancaster faithful turned out. These fans no doubt hoped to see their club notch a victory over one of the best teams in New Jersey. Instead, they witnessed a clinic by Leo Douglas. The former Vermont and Lehigh standout was the workhorse of a sixty-five yard second quarter drive that led to the first touchdown of the afternoon. Then, early in the third quarter, Douglas intercepted a long pass and returned the ball to the Lancaster 35-yard line. Two plays later he carried the ball off tackle for an eight yard touchdown run. Gyp Downey's point after was successful, but a penalty negated the score, holding Millville's advantage at thirteen points. Shortly before the quarter ended, the Big Blue again took possession on a Lancaster turnover, this time a fumble recovery by Dirk Johnson. A few plays later Leo Douglas, ball in hand, was again crashing into the end-zone. Downey's kick went wide, so the score remained at 19-0. Finally, as time in the final quarter was about to expire, Downey put his toe to the ball again. This time he found his mark, making the final tally 22-0.

A not so mighty wind...

Atlantic City mayor Ed Bader's newly organized Blue Tornadoes took to the gridiron in 1925 with one goal in mind – fielding the best pro football team in the state. As the season wore on it seemed his club just might be succeeding. The Tornadoes' roster featured a number of veteran players, most notably a local favorite named Carl "Whitey" Thomas. Over the previous nine seasons the former Penn standout had donned the togs of numerous successful professional clubs. These included the NFL's Buffalo All-Americans and two well regarded independent teams from Philadelphia – the Union Quakers and (pre-NFL) Frankford Yellow Jackets. Whitey was joined in the Tornadoes' line-up by Les Asplundh. A certified gridiron mercenary, Asplundh had been Thomas' teammate at Buffalo and Frankford. Dating back to his college days at Swarthmore, the tall back was best known for his powerful kicking. Ironically, he had also played regularly for Millville in 1924.

Much was written in local newspapers concerning the comparative records of two Blues, with the edge seeming to fall in Atlantic City's favor. Beginning with an early October victory over the Holmesburg AC, a strong club playing out of Philadelphia, the Tornadoes had put together a string of six consecutive victories, including a 23-0 thrashing of the Stapletons, before

dropping a close game with All-New Britain (CT) in their most recent outing. The Tornadoes were poised for a showdown with the Big Blue, and the feeling was mutual.

Despite all the hype about Atlantic City's prowess, Millville seemed to have the upper hand throughout the contest. Ginny Gooch played another fine game, providing all the offense his team needed. A 33 yard first quarter scamper across the goal line and 27 yard bullet to Mickey Hummell in the end-zone during quarter number three accounted for both Millville touchdowns. Defensively the Big Blue limited the Tornadoes to just four first downs, three of which came in the final minute of play. In comparison, the home team gained eleven. The real key to victory, however, was Millville's ability to interfere with Les Asplundh's much vaunted kicking game. This they did to perfection. Atlantic City's only points of the 13-6 Millville victory came on what amounted to a "gimme" in the final play of the game.

The following afternoon the Big Blue was in Pennsylvania for a rematch with All-Lancaster. Not much had changed in the two weeks since the last meeting between these clubs, with the possible exception of an explosion of Millville's confidence. Within five minutes of the opening kick-off, Ginny Gooch capped a quick series with a two yard plunge into the end-zone. The Pennsylvanians responded with their best offensive effort of the afternoon, driving the ball to the Millville 40-yard line. From there a Bunny Sawyer field goal brought the score to 7-3. Stung, the Big Blue replied in kind courtesy Gyp Downey's toe. Downey added another three points in the third quarter. When Millville finally began to tire under the strain of their second game in as many days, Lancaster mounted a desperate effort. A series perfect of passes advanced the ball into Millville territory, before an errant throw by Briggs Kingsley was picked by Ham Haines. Despite coming down in a mass of players, Haines bulled his way through the throng, twisting and reversing until he was finally able to break free on a fifty-five yard dash to the end-zone. That play sealed the 19-3 victory.

Fresh off their latest triumph and sporting a 10-1-0 record that included victories over Coaldale, Collingswood and most importantly the Blue Tornadoes, the Millville squad was the picture of confidence. They certainly harbored no doubt concerning the upcoming rematch with Atlantic City.

Little did anyone realize it would be over a month before the Big Blue would again taste victory.

The skids...

Next up for the Millville eleven was the second in a scheduled two game series with the Blue Tornadoes. Atlantic City claimed to have been lame in the previous meeting, missing several key players including Vic

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Emanuel, Frank Chicknoski and Ed McGinley from their line-up. Since that contest the Tornados had also signed Rae McGraw, the former Penn captain. Although McGraw wasn't expected to start against Millville, it was anticipated the talented back would see action off the bench. The Big Blue, on the other hand, believed the Tornados' claims to be little more than sour grapes, and looked to hammer home the final nail in the upstart's coffin.

Much to Millville's chagrin, the Atlantic City eleven that met them on Airport Field arrived well prepared and ready to play. Marching down the field on their very first possession, the Tornados took only minutes to score a touchdown. In the second quarter Millville managed to put together a sustained drive, advancing the ball to their host's 10-yard line. At that point Gyp Downey attempted a quick pass to Mickey Hummel. But Marv Wood, Atlantic City's crafty backfield man, intercepted the ball to kill the drive. Early in the second half, the Tornados again began pounding their way forward. After advancing to within a few yards of the goal line, halfback Frank Chicknoski crashed headlong into the line, only to loose the ball. Les Asplundh, however, was trailing close behind and recovered the fumble in the end-zone. Millville protested that the play should have resulted in a touchback, but the referee ruled it a touchdown for Atlantic City. Asplundh's second successful point after of the day sealed the Big Blue's 0-14 defeat.

Almost immediately a conversation was initiated with Tornados' manager Bill Shaner concerning a third meeting between the two clubs. In the mean time, Punk Berryman began working his charges in earnest for the upcoming Thanksgiving Day clash with Atlantic City's other, better known team – the Melrose AC. The rivalry between the Big Blue and the Roses dated to 1921. That year the newly formed Millville eleven soundly defeated their already established foes, 28-0. In 1924 the two clubs had played a three game series. After splitting the first two contests, Millville took the Thanksgiving Day tie breaker, 9-0. This season the Roses rolled into Millville looking to avenge that setback.

The Big Blue couldn't take this game lightly. The Roses' 6-1-2 record, with the lone set-back coming in a hard fought scrape with Coaldale, showed they were entirely capable of standing up to the Big Blue. That strength, combined with his own team's stinging loss to the Tornados, convinced manager Johnson that changes were in order. In the days leading up to the holiday contest he announced the release of both Mickey Hummel and Al Nemsic, as well as the signing of three new players: Briggs Kingsley, star of All-Lancaster, Cecil "Tex" Grigg, who had won two NFL championships with the Canton Bulldogs before jumping to the Rochester Jeffersons, and Roy Martineau, another veteran of the Rochester NFL club.

The mix of Millville and Melrose fans that gathered at MSAA Field on Thanksgiving afternoon witnessed a classic battle every bit as difficult as had been anticipated. The visiting Roses took possession on the opening kick-off and, in the most explosive offensive series of the game, quickly marched the ball down field. After yielding three first downs, the Big Blue's defense finally stiffened, stopping the Roses advance at the 25-yard line. But that was close enough for Johnny Budd, a hefty guard who would later distinguish himself with both the Frankford Yellow Jackets and Pottsville Maroons. The big man's dropkick sailed cleanly through the uprights to put the Roses ahead, 3-0. Playing what was generally acknowledged as its best game of the season, the Melrose defense managed to stop Millville on successive drives before eventually allowing the Big Blue its first scoring opportunity. That effort, however, ended when a poor snap from center hurried a Gyp Downey field goal attempt, causing the ball to drift wide of its mark. The balance of the contest was a bitter deadlock until very late in the contest. At that point coach Berryman finally inserted Tex Grigg into the line-up. The talented Grigg made steady progress by pounding his way through the Melrose line, but time expired before he could bring the Big Blue to within striking distance.

The stunning Thanksgiving Day loss had serious ramifications. First and foremost, it weakened any claim to the coveted state championship, even if the Big Blue proved victorious in a third game with the Tornados. It also opened the door for Melrose to stake its own, albeit tenuous, claim to the title. But perhaps worst of all was its negative effect on fan support. Attendance had been somewhat light all season, but following the first upset against the Blue Tornados, interest dropped off substantially. Consequently, turnout had been low for the holiday contest, which pretty much dashed any hopes Millville might have had for luring the Frankford Yellow Jackets or Pottsville Maroons into a game. Unsure of its fan base, the Big Blue could not risk defaulting on the sizeable guarantees that these NFL clubs would require.

The ill fortune continued as a highly anticipated contest with the Allentown (PA) Pros, scheduled for later in the holiday weekend, was cancelled. Almost as bad as the cancellation itself was the way in which its news was delivered. Several Millville players and fans made the trip to the Lehigh Valley on Saturday evening. Only then did they receive notification. A week later it was like de ja vu, only this time in Lancaster. Again Millville players and fans arrived on location Saturday afternoon, only to find out that evening that their hosts had backed out on them. The next day, with several Millville players scouting in the stands, the Rochester Jeffersons came to Atlantic City. It was the Blue Tornados second game against the Jeffs in as many weeks, and resulted in the Tornados' second victory in as many weeks too! In the minds of many, the

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consecutive victories over an NFL club lent credibility to the Blue Tornadoes' claim that it was the best football team in New Jersey.

Now or never...

On December 7 it was announced that the Millville and Atlantic City managements had come to an agreement for a third and final game between the two clubs. The contest would be played the following Sunday, at Airport Field, Atlantic City. Initially Virgil Johnson sought to include tackle Russell "Bull" Behman, former captain of the Frankford Yellow Jackets, in the Big Blue's line-up. He'd had signed powerful lineman in anticipation of a finale against the Tornadoes, but Atlantic City Manager Ed Bader objected on the grounds that although Behman had been suspended by Frankford, he had not been formally released by that NFL club. Behman, Bader argued, was therefore not a Millville regular, but rather, a ringer. Johnson eventually acquiesced, agreeing to leave the big tackle out of his line-up.

On game day both clubs came the stadium knowing that the championship laurels, as well as a year's worth of bragging rights, were hanging in the balance. Millville seemed poised to draw first blood, taking its initial possession to the Atlantic City 2-yard line. But the Tornadoes dug in to hold the Big Blue on downs. Later, in the second quarter, those roles reversed. Atlantic City embarked on its own march down the field, only to turn the ball over on downs at the Millville 4-yard line. Shortly thereafter time expired in the half with neither team having scored.

When play resumed the Tornadoes picked-up right where they left off. This time, however, their steady advance didn't stop until halfback Frank Chicknoski found his way across the Millville goal line. The follow-up kick by Les Asplundh put Atlantic City up 7-0. The two teams traded punts on the next several series, before Atlantic City eventually took possession just inside Millville territory. The ball was quickly brought to within striking distance. Then, after three failed attempts to breach the Big Blue's defense, Asplundh dropped back and placed a perfectly kicked ball between the uprights. That field goal took the Atlantic City advantage to ten points.

As the final quarter started, both clubs brought in fresh players – Atlantic City in an effort to clamp down and secure their victory, Millville because it was now or never. On the first play from scrimmage Gilroy, the Tornadoes fullback who had just replaced Asplundh, took the ball on a 30 yard tear through the Big Blue defense for another Atlantic City touchdown. Rae McGraw missed the extra point attempt, leaving the score at 16-0, but time was quickly running out. The Big Blue took possession on the ensuing kick-off, and launched an impressive drive. The key play came when Ginny Gooch connected with Tex Grigg, for a 27 yard completion that took the ball to the Tornadoes 7-

yard line. From there, three failed attempts to rush the ball across the goal line were followed by a perfect Grigg to Gooch pass that netted six points. The point after attempt was unsuccessful, but that mattered little. Time expired just a few minutes later. Dethroned, the Millville players could only watch as their foes left the field exulted.

The Big Blue took what appeared to be its final bow of the season the following evening, at a meeting of the club's financial committee. Art Deibel, captain of the team, spoke for a majority of the players and volunteered to play another game, if such a contest could be scheduled. But the decision was made to end the season and begin planning for a new campaign the following autumn.

That decision, however, would shortly be reversed.

Not Quite Finished

A scant two weeks after disbanding at the end of the 1925 season, the *Millville Daily Republican* reported that the Big Blue was reorganizing with a roster supplemented by the addition of several veteran NFL players. Among the new faces in the team's line-up were Guy Chamberlin, Rae Crowther (Saville's brother), Henry "Two-Bits" Homan and Elmer McCormick. All were regulars with the Frankford Yellow Jackets.

This turn of events was arranged by Vernon Pepper. Pepper, a sales representative for the Winter Haven (FL) based Haven-Villa real estate development company, was intent on bringing a group of potential investors from South Jersey to the Sunshine State. His guests would be wined, dined and given the opportunity to see their favorite football club in action against a local eleven sponsored by Haven-Villa. The collegial atmosphere, it was hoped, would provide the perfect backdrop to pitch Central Florida real estate opportunities. As for the team, this was a chance for the players to get back on the field and earn a few bucks while on an expense paid mid-winter working vacation.

Almost immediately there was speculation that, once in Florida, the Big Blue might arrange a contest with Coral Gables, a mercenary team composed primarily of players from the Pottsville Maroons and Frankford Yellow Jackets. And Coral Gables was only one possibility. There were a number of barnstorming teams headed South for the winter, including the Chicago Bears featuring college sensation Red Grange, and a pair of All-Star teams led by Jim Thorpe and Ernie Nevers, respectively.

No one in the Millville line-up had the marquee of a Grange, Thorpe or Nevers, but there was one player with the football credentials to stand up to those giants – Guy Chamberlin. A former All-American out of Nebraska, Chamberlin was one of the most

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accomplished men of the early NFL. He had been recruited into the pro ranks by Jim Thorpe himself, and has the distinction of having played on five of the league's first seven championship teams. In fact, he pulled double duty as both a player and coach on four of those teams. His presence in the Big Blue line-up lent instant credibility against any opponent.

Millville's first contest of the "post season" was a warm-up game on New Years Day, against the Mount Airy AA. This well rounded Philadelphia based club hosted the Big Blue at the 103rd Cavalry Armory. The unusual indoor contest on a shortened field provided a good opportunity for both old and new members of the Big Blue's line-up to get to know one another.

Although the outcome was never really in doubt, the game was a good one. Mount Airy threatened in the first quarter, driving as far as the Millville 3-yard line. There the Big Blue finally stiffened, and the Philadelphians turned the ball over on downs. Early in the second quarter Millville advanced to the opposing 15-yard line. At that point a Gyp Downey dropkick put Big Blue up 3-0. A short while later that lead increased to 10 points, when Sav Crowther breached the Mount Airy line and blocked a Johnny Hedron punt. The quick thinking Crowther alertly snatched the loose ball and raced 35 yards for a touchdown. Downey added the extra point. Then, not long before the half ended, Downey rounded out the Big Blue's scoring with another well placed dropkick, this time from the Mount Airy 22-yard line. Hedron stepped up in the third quarter, leaping high on a defensive play to intercept the ball. The wily backfield man then dodged and weaved his way through the entire Millville offense and on into the end-zone. After that play the Big Blue clamped down, quashing any further hopes of a Mount Airy comeback.

Following the less than strenuous 13-7 victory, the Big Blue hopped on a train for the Sunshine State. They arrived in Florida two days later, with their first game, against the locally successful Haven-Villa team, scheduled for January 6th. Back home in Millville, the *Daily Republican* reported that none other than Red Grange had been secured to referee the contest. This was certainly possible, given that Grange and several other members of the Chicago Bears had apparently spent New Years in Winter Haven as guests of the Haven-Villa Corporation.

Unfortunately, heavy rains on game day forced the contest's postponement until the following afternoon. In reporting the postponement, the *Winter Haven Daily Chief* also announced that the legendary Jim Thorpe would appear in the Winter Haven line-up. When the two clubs finally did meet, it was on a sloppy field. The result was a lopsided 28-6 victory for Millville. That win, however, proved costly, as Gyp Downey, the team's gifted kicker, suffered a season ending injury. Tackled hard between two defenders after catching a

pass, he fractured his collarbone. Reports of the contest make no mention of Grange officiating, and Thorpe did not take to the field, although several of his old teammates from the NFL. These included Pete Calac, Joe Little Twigg and Rube Ursella. Shortly after the game it was announced that the Millville squad would, for the remainder of its stay in Florida, play under the Haven-Villa banner. Art Bulger a member of the old Haven-Villa line-up was added to the new roster. Bob Daley took over as the team's manager.

New line-up intact, the "Haven-Villas," as the Winter Haven press took to referring to the team, headed to Palm Beach to square-off against a local club known as the Evergladers on January 11. Despite the fact that they were reportedly undefeated in seven previous outings and touted as the "Southern Professional" champions, the Palm Beach eleven presented little in the way of opposition. The first points of the contest came on a second quarter safety, when the Evergladers' Jim Kendrick, a regular with the NFL's Buffalo All-Americans, fumbled a pass near his own goal line and then fell on the ball in the end-zone to prevent a Haven-Villa touchdown. While that wasn't the end of the visitors' scoring, it was all they really needed. The Millville-Winter Haven aggregation rolled to a 16-0 victory.

Two days later the Villas were was on the road for the first in a two game series with the St. Petersburg Cardinals. This St. Pete aggregate featured essentially the same line-up as the "Tampa" Cardinals which had originally been organized to play a New Years Day exhibition against Red Grange and the Chicago Bears. Its roster featured a number of familiar faces including Jim Thorpe, Pete Calac and Joe Little Twigg, all of whom had also appeared in the Haven-Villa line-up for Millville's initial game in Florida. Staged at the St. Petersburg Kennel Club, this tilt was a bitterly contested defensive struggle. Although the press previewing the game was rife with speculation regarding Thorpe's age and rumors of his pending retirement from the sport, he had a hand in what were perhaps the two best scoring opportunities of the afternoon. In the Cards' only real chance, Big Jim attempted a first quarter field goal from 45 yards out, but the dropkicked ball drifted just wide of the uprights. Later, in the second quarter, Ben Jones connected with a wide open Art Bulger for what looked to be a sure Haven-Villa touchdown. On that play the "Old Indian" managed to catch the dashing halfback from behind and prevent the score. Both teams picked up the pace throughout the second half, and played frantically in the fourth quarter. But those efforts went for naught as the game ended a scoreless draw.

The two teams faced each other again just a few days later, on the grounds of the high school at Winter Haven. Although the Cards, paced by Pete Calac and Rube Ursella, started strong, neither team managed to put any points on the board during the first two

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quarters. That changed shortly after the intermission, when Ginny Gooch broke free on an end-around and quickly covered the 60 yards to the end-zone. That touchdown initiated a landslide of Haven-Villa scoring, as the locals went on to run up 38 unanswered points before the final whistle blew.

The very next day the two teams met for a third contest, this time at Lakeside's Adair Park. On this afternoon Thorpe and his mates were playing under the banner of "Lena Vista," while the Millville-Haven-Villa aggregation was touted as the "Eastern States All-Stars." The Eastern States squad took to the field under the direction of Matty Owens, who had made a name for himself in Pennsylvania, directing the Wilkes-Barre Panthers. This contest was not much different than the previous afternoon's game. Thorpe's team was clearly overmatched, as the All-Stars ran up 24 unanswered points en route to their second shutout victory in as many days.

Following the game it was generally agreed that, after such a long season, everyone involved was ready for a break from football. The decision was made to disband the team and head home. Most of the players caught the train back to Philadelphia the following evening, although a few stayed a little longer to pursue some real estate investment opportunities.

Millville's post-season swing through Florida had mixed results. The team certainly met with great success on the field. Overall the Jersey boys went 5-0-1 in post-season play under a variety of banners (two victories as Millville, a pair of victories and a tie as Haven-Villa, and another victory as the Eastern States All-Stars). But the lack of fan interest was a surprising disappointment. The final games against the Thorpe led teams drew small crowds of only a few hundred spectators.

By the Numbers

The Big Blue generated 201 points during 1925, including the two "post season" contests against Mount Airy and Winter Haven. Ginny Gooch led all scorers, with 60 points coming off ten touchdowns, while Leo Douglas and Gyp Downey contributed another 48 and 32 points respectively. Douglas' total came on eight touchdowns, while Downey's was a result his strong kicking game. The dynamic trio of Gooch, Douglas and Downey would continue to compliment one another during the next season, and not just with the Big Blue. In 1926 they pulled double duty, playing for both the Millville Big Blue and the Bethlehem Bears of the short lived Eastern League of Professional Football. The table below provides a breakdown of all the players who contributed to the Big Blue's 1925 regular season points total:

Carroll "Ginny" Gooch	10	-	-	-	60
Leo Douglas	8	-	-	-	48
Michael "Gyp" Downey	-	11	7	-	32
Paul Longua	3	-	-	-	18
Doug Crate	1	-	-	1	8
Al Nemsic	1	2	-	-	8
Guy Chamberlin	1	-	-	-	6
Saville Crowther	1	-	-	-	6
Shirley "Ham" Haines	1	-	-	-	6
Mickey Hummell	1	-	-	-	6
Ben Jones	-	3	-	-	3
Totals	27	16	7	1	201

Scoring totals for all games, including post-season contests against Mount Airy & Haven Villa.

On the New Jersey Championship of 1925

The Riverside Big Green, for many seasons a contender out of South Jersey, raised little challenge for the state championship in 1925. As a result, Millville's primary competition for the title came from the two Atlantic City clubs – the Blue Tornadoes and Melrose AC.

Millville's 13-6 victory over the Tornadoes in the season's first meeting of the two teams, coupled with a dominant performance against All-Lancaster the following afternoon, took the Big Blue's season record to 10-1-0 and seemed to indicate that the club would once again lay claim to the state championship. That success, however, was fleeting. Two rematches with the Tornadoes and a Thanksgiving Day tilt with the Melrose AC all resulted in losses. Millville's favorite sons, in fact, were out-scored 33-6 in those three contests, finishing the regular season campaign with a 10-4-0 record. Championship hopes dashed, the Big Blue would have to be content with the satisfaction derived from the success of their post-season tour through Florida.

Based on the strength of its 12-2-0 record, as well as the diversity of opponents played, the Atlantic City Blue Tornadoes could certainly lay claim to the title of "strongest" team in New Jersey. And if a team's strength is the determining factor in the state championship, then the Tornadoes may very well claim that title as well. But although the club notched decisive victories over Holmesburg AC, Holyoke of Brooklyn, the Cleveland Panthers, Staten Island Stapletons, and a team from Steubenville (OH), before edging the NFL's Rochester Jeffersons in a pair of late season contests, the Tornadoes only faced two New Jersey opponents, the Orange AC and Millville Big Blue. Granted, they defeated Orange 21-7 and took two out of three from Millville. But it raises the question, are those victories weighty enough to form the basis of a claim to the state championship?

The Melrose AC, in comparison, finished its 1925 campaign with a 9-3-2 record. The strongest argument in support of the Roses' claim to a state title is that they played more New Jersey based opponents than any of the other contenders. Their season opener was a 9-0

Millville Big Blue's 1925 Scoring Leaders

Player	TD	XP	FG	S	Pts
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shutout of the Newark AC. This was followed a few weeks later by a 13-0 victory over Greater Collingswood, an up and coming South Jersey club. A week later the same Collingswood team would fall to Millville by a similar score, 14-0. Melrose then embarked on a series of games against North Jersey teams from Paterson, Englewood and Elizabeth, before finally defeating Millville on Thanksgiving Day. Until that contest Millville seemed the strongest contender in the race for the state championship. On balance, the Roses played only .500 ball against teams from outside the state, although two of those losses came at the hands of NFL clubs, the Cleveland Bulldogs and Pottsville Maroons – a team that staked their own claim to that season's NFL championship. The Roses, however, had also suffered a loss and a tie against Coaldale, whereas both the Blue Tornadoes and Millville had defeated the Big Green, 9-0 and 7-0 respectively.

The strongest North Jersey team of 1925 was probably the Orange Athletic Club. Orange book-ended its season with a pair of games against the Staten Island Stapletons, resulting in a tie and a loss. In between Orange squared-off against five New Jersey based opponents. These contests resulted in two of close victories over the Newark FBC, as well as more one-sided victories over Paterson, Englewood and Elizabeth than Melrose had managed against the same clubs. Orange also defeated the Cleveland Panthers twice, although neither of those victories was as decisive as the Blue Tornadoes 31-0 thrashing of the Ohioans. That, however, is not surprising. In what was arguably their most difficult game of the season, Orange fell to the Tornadoes, 21-7. Orange also dropped a 21-0 game with the NFL's Rochester Jeffersons, the same team against whom the Blue Tornadoes had managed a pair of hard fought victories.

Comparative Results for Several Prominent New Jersey Teams of 1925							
Team	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	Notes
A.C. Blue Tornadoes	12	2	0	.857	256	44	
Melrose A.C.	9	3	2	.750	111	37	
Millville Big Blue	12	4	0	.750	201	65	
Orange A.C.	7	3	1	.700	125	74	
Bayonne Vikings	4	4	1	.500	62	31	Scoring data incomplete
Riverside Big Green	3	1	1	.750	28	13	Data incomplete
Greater Collingswood	1	2	0	.333	6	27	Data incomplete