

Ohio Tiger Trap

Ohio's First Football Ringers: 1903

By Bob Carroll

Ohio was ripe with Bigness, Boom, and Best.

In Canton, they still mourned McKinley as an Ohio saint, but less than two years after his death, the narrow protectionist thinking that put him in the White House was giving way to vigorous, big-toothed expansionism, as personified by "that damned cowboy," T.R.

In Cleveland, Nap Lajoie's line drives and Addie Joss's curves excited baseball fans. Here it was September and a pennant still possible! In Columbus and Youngstown, in Lima and Steubenville, business was up. In Cincinnati and Toledo, in Alliance and Cadiz, the future held no limits. In Dayton, two bicycle-making brothers readied for another trip to North Carolina, where they'd enjoyed flying gliders the year before. This time they planned powered flight.

In Massillon, on the evening of September 3, 1903, thirty-five local civic leaders and businessmen gathered at the Hotel Sailer to boost an altogether different project off the ground. Spurred by Ed J. Stewart, the young and ambitious city editor of the *Evening Independent*, they planned to improve the fortunes of one so-so aspect of Massillon life -- the football team.

And THAT, they agreed, could be accomplished in only one way -- beat Canton!

Massillon had fielded amateur football teams featuring local athletes off and on since the early 1890s. Some had performed well, but consistently they met defeat -- often by humiliating scores -- when they played archrival Canton, Stark County's "big city."

Massillonians took these defeats hard. They believed their city to be more than the equal of Canton, despite their rival's advantage in size. That Canton football teams could ever top Massillon's was more than the local folk cared to stand.

Not only was the string of losses embarrassing to Massillon pride, but also -- and, to many, more important -- it was costly in dollars and cents. Large amounts of lucre were always wagered on the games, and Canton almost always took home the cash.

The situation had become intolerable. For an hour at the Hotel Sailer, each Massillon merchant tried to outdo his fellows in civic pride and Canton-hating.

From the get-together came a new football team and a determination to do whatever it took to avenge Massillon honor (and replenish a few pocketbooks) at the expense of the cursed Cantons. Jack Goodrich, who expected to play halfback for the new team, was named manager. To no one's surprise, Ed J. Stewart

was elected coach. Stewart had the benefit of having played "a little football" at both Western Reserve and Mt. Union College. Even better, his election assured the team of a good press.

Clerk of Courts J.J. Wise, whose name echoed the opinion the community held of him, led a committee to secure the necessary funds for equipment. In 1903, "equipment" for a team meant a new football and jerseys that were nearly the same color. It so happened that the local sporting goods emporium had in sufficient quantity to outfit an entire team only jerseys imitating the orange and black striped attire of Princeton. Naturally, the new Massillon team was christened the "Tigers."

A Bad Beginning

The story thus far was no different than that enacted in countless Ohio and western Pennsylvania towns during these years: the gathering of community leaders, the earnest resolve to "do something" about a hated rival, the election of a manager and coach, the purchase of jerseys and the team being named for the color or pattern of its apparel (or, for a backer, local landmark, or favored symbol of strength). The Massillon Tigers were strictly amateur, a breed of local cats with high hopes and little training. But no one yet thought to say: "Hey, let's go out and get someone who knows how to play this game!" Had the script followed the traditional plot, a string of ugly defeats would have embarrassed everyone and the Tigers would have quickly become extinct.

Ominously, several of the expected starters hadn't touched a football in eight or more years. According to local legend, one of them, Julius "Baldy" Wittman, 32-year-old proprietor of a local cigar store and a spare-time police officer, had never played the game at all.

On September 26, a little over three weeks after the Hotel Sailer meeting, the new Tigers went to Wooster College to try out their new jerseys. Starting at tackle was Charles "Cy" Rigler, later famous as a major league baseball umpire. Wittman opened at an end, and newsman-coach Stewart lined himself up at quarterback.

The result was disappointing, as the collegians took a 6-0 verdict. On the bright side, observed the Massillon *Evening Independent*, the Tigers had really outplayed Wooster, even though some of the Massillonians had never gotten around to actually practicing with the team before taking the field. This, of course, was in no way to be taken as criticism of quarterback-coach-city editor Stewart but was meant as a gauge by which to judge the team's potential.

Besides, explained the paper, the loss was entirely caused by unfair officiating. Time after time, the obviously biased official turned the ball over to Wooster for just no reason at all. Why, things

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got so bad, swore the Massillon reporter, that, when a Wooster man ran 75 yards for the winning touchdown, the Wooster fans refused to cheer because no fewer than five Massillon players were visibly and illegally held on the play! Apparently, if that little news item is to be believed -- and who could doubt the reporter's neutrality -- the silent Wooster rooters set a standard of sportsmanship never matched anywhere else.

On the train back to Massillon, the Tigers elected Baldy Wittman, the neophyte footballer, as their captain. Aside from being older and balder than his teammates, Wittman was a natural leader and an athlete who learned quickly. The *Evening Independent* summed things up in its headline: "Defeated But Not Discouraged." Sure enough, the team improved once they got around to practicing together.

The Tigers had some real talent, including several big, bruising linemen, such as "Farmer" Boerngen, a huge center; guard Frank Botoner, another 32-year-old policeman; and 21-year-old Fred Haag, who tipped the scales at better than 250 pounds at the other guard. Captain Wittman and Herman Vogt were tough defenders in an age when that was an end's primary duty. If the line had a weakness, it was at tackle. Cy Rigler was injured in the opening loss and thereafter confined himself to cheering from the sideline. It took awhile to fill the tackle slots with top-drawer athletes.

The backfield boasted breakaway threats in Manager Goodrich at half and Coach Stewart at quarter. However, the prime mover of the team was 170-pound fullback Charles "Mully" Miller. In those pre-forward pass days, a reliable plunger was a necessity, and Miller could blast.

On to Canton!

On Saturday, October 17, the Tigers showed the results of three weeks' hard practice when they opened at home before 500 fans at Hospital Grounds Field, an unenclosed expanse near the state mental asylum. Using their considerable size to advantage against a speedy little team from Stewart's alma mater, Mt. Union, the Tigers won handily by a 16-0 score.

The next Saturday came a far more difficult time in downing the Imperials, an independent team from Akron. With only three minutes left and no score, Goodrich broke away for a 55-yard touchdown to win the game 6-0. One Imperial player, tackle Walt Roepke, caught the eye of the Massillon hierarchy. Wouldn't it be nice, they mused, if WE had a tackle like that?

Another Akron team, the Blues, proved easier victims on October 31, falling 38-0. Indeed, the Tigers' score might have been higher had not the second half been limited to a mere eight minutes. Goodrich contributed a 75-yard dash and Miller, although hampered by a lame back, scored two touchdowns.

The Tigers were really rolling now. Playing their fourth straight Saturday home game on November 7, they clawed the Dennison Panhandles 34-0. Goodrich and young Bob Featheringham, starting his first game at halfback, zipped for long runs and Miller garnered two more TDs. The feature play of the day came on the second half kickoff when Stewart brought the ball back 90 yards to a touchdown.

The next opponent really counted -- Canton!

More than 400 Cantonians came over to Massillon, and the crowd at the Hospital Grounds exceeded 2,000. Bets ranged from \$5 to \$200. The *Evening Independent* estimated that more than \$1,000 was risked on the game's outcome.

In spite of all the money involved, the players were accepted as simon-pure amateurs. True, they might wager heavily on their own performances, but that was a far cry from professionalism. Betting was gentlemanly; accepting pay for playing football was not.

Some in the crowd may have remarked on the happy coincidence that found the "heavy but slow" Tiger line suddenly sporting two new large and speedy tackles for the big game. No doubt big Emery Powell and Akron native Walt Roepke chose just this moment to join the Massillon team for reasons of sportsmanship and camaraderie. Certainly no mention of monetary inducement ever reached the pages of the Massillon *Evening Independent*.

Before the game, the Massillon Military Band, led by Drum Major Edward Ertle, who doubled as chief of police, paraded through the streets. During the game, Mully Miller and company paraded through the Canton line. Negotiating wide holes created by Roepke and Powell, all the Massillon backs had a wonderful time. Miller scored three touchdowns.

When darkness halted the festivity, the Tigers held a 16-0 lead, Massillon held its head high, and their rooters held a lot of Canton money.

What Next?

With Canton in the bag, many fans felt that further games would be anticlimactic, but the team's success had given Tiger backers even higher ambitions. Not content with the championship of Stark County, they now lusted after the Ohio State Independent Championship.

The state championship had nothing official about it; it was proclaimed by popular opinion at the end of each season. The custom dated back to the mid-1890s. For several years the East End team of Akron had been recognized as strong championship contenders. They appeared to have the 1903 title locked up in a close race with Shelby. Akron and Shelby had not actually played each other, but the Akrons had beaten a team the Shelbys had been unable to top, and on that basis most of the opinion-makers were ready to award Akron the crown.

Akron was proud of its reputation and considered the Massillon Tigers to be nothing more than upstart farmers. After all, no Massillon team had ever made a serious bid for the title before. When the Massillon people approached the Akron leaders, they were told, in effect: "Go play for a couple of years until you're good enough to challenge us."

But the Tigers continued to win, easily kayoing the All-Clevelands, 29-0, on Saturday, November 21. Apparently "all" of Cleveland held only eleven players because when J. Fairfax, one of the visitors' halfbacks, went out with an injury, they had to recruit a Massillon sub. A second-string Tiger named Klein reportedly acquitted himself well for the visitors.

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On Thanksgiving Day, Wooster College -- the same outfit that handed the Tigers a loss back in September -- came to Massillon for a rematch. The day turned up snowy and miserable, but a thousand Massillonians watched their heroes get revenge. The one-sided game and 34-0 score supported the Tigers' contention that they'd been robbed at Wooster. Miller and Goodrich each made touchdowns and Roepke, the Akronite, scored three times.

Meanwhile, the Akron East Ends defeated Canton 17-6. The similarity of the score to that of the Massillon-Canton tilt -- indeed, the Tigers' winning margin was greater -- put pressure on the East Enders to give Massillon a game. Unless Akron actually topped the upstart Tigers, their title claim would be as cloudy as cheap tea.

At long last, the two teams struck an agreement to play at Akron on Saturday, December 5. The contract called for a 75-25 split of the gate, with the winner taking the 75. Fans from both cities began putting their money where their mouths had been.

Then a cloud darkened the Tiger horizon. By the week of the game, the team had enough injuries to start its own hospital. Farmer Boerngen had a finger amputated, making his centering questionable, to say the least. Harry Anderson, a lineman who'd seen plenty of action, had a broken bone in his right hand. Bob Featheringham's ankle was hurting. Jack Goodrich was limping. Fred Haag, the big guard, had a bum shoulder. Captain Wittman and Mully Miller were definitely out of the game. Baldy had a sprained ankle, and Miller's arm was in a sling because of a dislocated collar bone.

The Massillon squad was deep enough to put players on the field in place of the regulars, but the reserves were not of championship game quality. Desperate, Manager Goodrich went shopping.

Ringers!

And so it happened that midway through the big week, four Pennsylvanians came to Massillon to battle for the football championship of Ohio. All were veterans of the Pittsburgh football scene where professionalism had been in vogue for a decade.

A burly individual whose name was spelled "Pfeifer" in Pittsburgh newspapers but "F. Piper" or "Peiper" in the Massillon daily possessed a sterling reputation as a tackle, no matter what he was called.

Big Bob Shiring, all 250 pounds of him, had held down the center position for the Pittsburgh Stars in 1902. That was as good a recommendation as it was possible to get; the Stars had been culled from the best available players in western Pennsylvania.

The most famous members of the quartet were the two McChesney brothers, Harry and "Doc" -- both alumni of the Pittsburgh Stars. Harry was a back whose gargantuan punts at practice immediately set all Massillon buzzing. Doc McChesney quickly impressed everyone with his play at either end or tackle.

All four new Tigers were ready and raring to play, having just completed a good season with Pittsburgh's East End team.

The *Evening Independent* trumpeted the imports' prowess but neglected to say just what it was that had induced them to spend a wintry week in Ohio. An innocent reader of the local press might well assume four famous Pittsburgh pros had migrated simply to breathe Massillon's fresher air.

The Akron *Beacon-Journal* knew better and said so two days before the game:

Since the fact has leaked out that Massillon has employed a number of outsiders to play on the "Massillon" team in their efforts to wrest the state championship from Akron, it is noticeable that little has been said by the Massillon men about the "amateur" football players of the place. Before professionals of Pittsburgh were hired, all their talk was of a team composed exclusively of Massillon boys who were just going to "act up tur'ble" when they came to Akron to show the locals how to play the game. But whether it be Massillon, Pittsburgh, or any other city that is represented, it makes little difference to the fast local bunch, so long as the visitors can play the game and put up a stiff fight.

It is the old wail about the exclusively Massillon team, whose star by the way is Roepke, the Akron tackle ..., that makes grins come to Akron faces. The game on Saturday will be a game between the Akron champs and a picked professional team. If they were paid players who had been in Massillon's lineup all along during the season, it would not seem so laughable. Now the Akron lineup will be the same as it has been right along this season. All the men live in Akron. All are members of the Akron Athletic Club and were previous to the opening of the football season.

The definition of professionalism used here warrants a closer look. No one seemed to be particularly upset if a local boy made a few dollars for his gridiron efforts. Of course the local newspaper never mentioned such goings on because there could be some embarrassing questions from the A.A.U. and scheduling purely amateur teams could have become dicey. What the neighbors said was something else. The Columbus press pointedly called the Shelby team "pros" in 1902, but did not seem to attach any censure to it, probably because only locals were paid. Ohioans did not live in a vacuum; they knew football players were being imported and paid openly in Pittsburgh, Chicago, and a few other places. Quiet payments were being made in several Ohio cities to encourage the best of the locals to stay home. "Home" could even be loosely defined as Massillon for an Akron native like Roepke without drawing much fire, even in the Akron press.

What really raised the hackles was the idea of paying good Ohio money to an outsider. That was BLATANT! When the four Pittsburghers took the field in orange and black stripes on December 5, 1903, they escalated professionalism in Ohio from a quiet, rather furtive activity to a generally acknowledged situation.

The acknowledgement had not yet been publicly made in Massillon, of course, but if there was a football fan in northern Ohio who didn't know what was really happening on that Akron field, he

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probably also believed in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and honest politicians.

The Big Game

The game, aside from its historic importance, turned out to be memorable for its rugged play. The field was frozen, adding to the number and degree of bruises and abrasions. The players took care of the rest.

The "traitor" Roepke opened at fullback for the Tigers in Mully Miller's place, but he didn't last very long. Almost immediately he was put out of action when a well-aimed kick broke his nose. Goodrich limped on in his place. The *Evening Independent* said later that Roepke cried on the sideline because he was unable to continue in the game. A few cynics suggested that the tears might have resulted from the fact that his nose was nearly hanging out his ear.

All the Pittsburgh pros lived up to their advance notices. Pfeifer, Shiring, and Doc McChesney were magnificent as they completely stopped Akron's line smashes. Harry McChesney's long-distance punts kept the East Enders back on their east ends.

Akron fought back gamely, but when their quarterback mishandled one of Harry's boots, brother Doc was right there to fall on the ball for a touchdown. Massillon led 6-0 at the half.

The Akron fans were every bit as frustrated as their team. About 800 Massillonians, including the Military Band, had swelled the attendance to over 2,000. Things began to turn ugly. The *Evening Independent* described the scene:

During the intermission ... headed by the Military Band, with Chief of Police Ertle leading, the Massillon fans paraded around the gridiron. Such audacity was a new thing on an Akron field ... and the hoodlums, rowdies, and even policemen joined in one of the most ruffianly attacks which it has ever been the misfortune of the Massillon crowd to undergo.

A large clod of frozen mud struck Chief Ertle on the back of the head. Sticks and stones flew through the air. The ribbons of the fans were snatched. The players in the band were bumped and jostled about by the crowd until in several instances their instruments were damaged. The Massillon fans were offered absolutely no protection by the corps of policemen about the field. Officer

Wittman, the Tiger captain, who was acting as linesman was deliberately assaulted by a gang of five men, and only prompt action on the part of the Massillon fans saved him.

Then, before the second half began, Akron captain Bill Laub insisted that the officials be changed. The intent was probably psychological, but it also bordered on the inflammatory. Play resumed with the distinct possibility that the game might explode into a full-scale riot at any moment.

However, the Tigers were so patently in charge during the second half that Akron's fans lost their anger in the numbing gloom of defeat. A second Massillon touchdown came when Doc McChesney on a tackle-around fumbled conveniently into the end zone where Vogt recovered.

When time was finally called, Massillon had the state independent football championship and 75% of the receipts. How much was won in wagers can only be guessed, but the day before at least 350 Massillon dollars in one chunk were sent up to Akron to be bet at even money.

On the train home, ecstatic fans took up a collection for Roepke and his nose. He netted \$40 as an "expression of gratitude." Eventually, the native Massillon players were paid too. Although one report had it at a mere \$10 apiece for the whole season, Frank Bast said years later that he got \$120. And he was a reserve.

Just what the Pittsburgh pros took home was open to conjecture. The *Beacon-Journal* insisted they walked off with all the Massillon profits for 1903, but that estimate was chock full of sour grapes. According to them, the Tiger win was "hollow."

Massillonians were so embarrassed at winning the state title with the aid of hired outsiders that they celebrated far into Sunday morning. In fact, Pfeifer and Doc McChesney didn't catch their train back home until late Sunday night, vowing to return for the 1904 season.

For several weeks after that, the arguments for and against importing professionals raged throughout northern Ohio. In Massillon there was no divergence of opinion. Plans were made immediately after the championship game to raise \$1,000 to pay for the 1904 Tigers.

Professionalism was established in Ohio.