

# Once More, With Feeling

## 1921

By PFRA Research

Through the winter of 1920-21, the APFA couldn't even say for certain which team had won its championship. On the other hand, there weren't a whole helluva lot of people who cared. How much prestige the title was worth was highly debatable.

In Philadelphia, the Union A.A. of Phoenixville -- while not a member of the APFA -- claimed the mythical "U.S. Professional Championship" by virtue of eleven wins and no ties. Most of the wins had come against the likes of Edwardsville, Holmesburg, and Conshohocken, but the eleventh victim had been the Canton Bulldogs -- the recognized champs of 1919. In the midwest, few fans had ever heard of the Union A.A., and the team itself couldn't trumpet its pretensions too loudly because most of its important players doubled on Sundays as the Buffalo All-Americans.

Up in Buffalo, the All-Americans' fans believed their team deserved to be champs because they'd beaten Canton and tied Akron in early December. Needless to say, the All-Americans hadn't played the Union A.A. Out in Illinois, many folks -- including George Halas -- thought of the Decatur Staleys as champions on the basis of THEIR tie with Akron in mid-December.

In Akron, the question was posed differently. The Pros had played a tough schedule, beaten Canton twice, and been defeated by no one. Those fans who remembered there had been an APFA formed back in September, had no doubt the Pros were champions of it. What they were not certain about was whether there was still an APFA.

### The Spring Meeting

When the managers of the APFA teams met at 7:20 p.m. on April 30 -- not in January as promised -- they were wondering the same thing. Nevertheless, they had the good grace to settle old business first.

Art Ranney, the APFA secretary-treasurer, presided -- not because the meeting was held at the Portage Hotel in Akron -- but because both President Thorpe and Vice-President Cofall were absent. Carl Storck sat in for Ranney to take the minutes.

The first order of business was the presentation of the loving cup donated by the Brunswick-Balke Collender Company. Joe Carr, the manager of the Columbus Panhandles, moved that the group award the "Worlds Professional Football Championship to [the] Akron Professional Team." This was seconded and carried, settling the issue for all time. Well -- not quite. Somehow, in the ensuing years, the league lost track of what it had done and for a long time published in its own record books that the 1920 championship was

undecided. It took about fifty years for the NFL to remember the Akron Pros.

Of more importance, as it turned out, was the precedent of awarding the title by vote rather than by reading the top line of the standings. The APFA hadn't kept standings in 1920, of course, but once the practice was started it did not always yield a certain answer at the end of the season, particularly during the next few years.

After Frank Nied and Ranney, the Akron owners, accepted their trophy, the meeting got down to its *raison d'etre*. The managers in turn made short speeches outlining conditions in their cities and presenting prospects for the 1921 season. Although acting-secretary Storck took no notes on their orations, legend has it that the reports were almost universally bleak.

In the room at the time, besides Carr of Columbus, Storck of Dayton, and Nied and Ranney of Akron, were Chris O'Brien of the Chicago Racine Cardinals, Doc Young of Hammond, Leo Lyons of Rochester, Ralph Hay and his brother-in-law Lester Higgins of Canton, Frank McNeil of Buffalo, and three others worth special notice. Dr. Charles Lambert of Columbus was a well-known game official with respected ties to college football.

He was there, probably at Carr's request, as an advisor. The Decatur Staleys were represented by starchworks vice-president Morgan P. O'Brien rather than coach and team manager George Halas. The third man, Leo Conway, was the "boy manager" of the Union A.A. team which was to be called the Philadelphia Quakers in 1921. Conway's players, remember, doubled as the Buffalo team. At this meeting, Conway seems to have been treated as any other APFA member, even though there is no indication of any affiliation up to this moment. Whatever, his status on April 30, the part he and his Quakers would play in the 1921 season would be very special.

After the managers completed their tales of woe, they moved to reorganize the APFA. That, in itself, answered the most crucial question: they would go on.

The group had plenty of kickers; they needed a new quarterback. According to one version, it was the optimistic lecturing of Joe Carr that uplifted everyone's spirits. Carr believed strongly in the need for and potential benefits of a strong pro football league and said so. After a brief discussion of creating a "football commissioner" with broad powers, much as baseball had done in Judge Landis, the managers returned to earth and elected Carr their new

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president. Carr claimed later, with becoming modesty, that it was "much against my will, and while I was out of the room."

Had George Halas been in the room, he might have become vice-president. Instead, the owners named Decatur's actual representative in attendance, Morgan O'Brien. Mr. O'Brien's total contribution to the history of professional football appears to be that he accepted the vote of his peers.

Carl Storck was elected treasurer and secretary, assuring the league minutes of a surprising number of omissions and misspellings. Storck was to serve the league faithfully for two decades, one decade longer than his Dayton Triangles would survive.

Carr appointed Ranney, Storck, and Dr. Lambert to draw up a constitution and by-laws. That was something the APFA had planned to get around to in 1920 but there is no evidence they ever actually did anything but think about it.

Although Storck didn't put it in the minutes, news accounts insisted that it was decided any team using college players would be barred from the association. How could they have held a meeting by this time without such a statement? The colleges still regarded the pros as the football equivalent of the Dead-End Kids. The officers were somehow going to negotiate "an understanding" with college officials.

The members were instructed to place in the hands of the president by May 15 a list of all players used in 1920. Players from the 1920 teams were not to be approached by any team manager until the president had been notified by their former teams that they were free agents. Both of these moves were designed to keep players from jumping from team to team, at least within the association. A third motion, to the same purpose, decreed that a player could not play on two different clubs within the same week. McNeil of Buffalo and Conway of Philadelphia must have exchanged worried looks when that one passed.

Turning to high finance, the price of association membership dropped from \$100 to \$50. That was a step forward; 1920's one hundred bucks had been a myth with no money changing hands. This was real. Then, every club represented was assessed \$25 to cover expenses of the association. We may assume that this time the members sent in their checks.

Letters were read from two non-attending clubs -- the Cincinnati Celts and the Louisville Breckenridges -- expressing their desire to enter the association. News accounts listed other cities with "intention of affiliating" as Rock Island and Cleveland, presumably already members but perhaps not counted because neither sent a representative, Minneapolis, Ft. Wayne, and Toledo, where it was thought Jim Thorpe was planning a team. The association, despite its talk of barring teams for indiscretions, still had as its goal the enrollment of every important pro team in the nation. Otherwise, rules about team jumping and using college kids would be worth less than a season pass to Chicago Tiger games.

The election of Joe Carr as the association president was an inspired choice. As much as any individual, he was to be responsible for the eventual success of the organization. But in

1921, from the perspective of the floundering APFA, he seemed to have been handed a job akin to making bricks out of straw. The various team managers could see some advantages to being members of an association, but as soon as anyone tried to make them do something they didn't want to do they could and probably would pull out. Their investment, \$50 and some scheduled games, was not enough to keep them in line. On the other hand, Carr was used to handling tough, independent men; he'd managed the Nesslerers for over a decade.

Carr had his Panhandles in the thick of the fight for the "Ohio League" championship before the war, but by 1921 -- with the remaining Nesslerers aging less than gracefully -- the team survived mainly as a traveling curiosity. Of the managers in the room on April 30, he probably represented the weakest team.

However, he also had the most experience as an executive. In addition to making a go of the Panhandles, he'd also led a successful minor league baseball team in Columbus. Personally a kindly man, Carr -- gray, balding, and bespectacled -- looked like someone's indulgent grandfather, but when it was necessary, he could be hard as a seven-ten split. He established the association headquarters in Columbus, but more important, he established a viable pro football league. His philosophy for pro football success was quite simple: strive for the highest standards and always consider the fans first.

## The Summer Meeting

The managers got together on June 18 at Cleveland's Hollenden Hotel to do some scheduling and ratify the new constitution. Provisions were made in that document to quell contract jumping by players and discourage the use of collegians. According to one report, college officials were to be informed if any young man playing for a college team even made an inquiry to an APFA member. It is not recorded that an institution of higher learning ever received such notification.

Of interest in following the record of the ins and outs of the association is who was there and who wasn't. Neither Lyons of the Jeffersons nor any Staley representative showed up, but the only reason seems to have been that both Rochester and Decatur are a long way from Cleveland.

Absent also was Leo Conway, and apparently not because he couldn't get a train from Philadelphia. No doubt he and McNeil of Buffalo had thoroughly considered the ramifications of the rule about players not performing for two teams in the same week and realized their mutual use of the same players would not work within the association structure. They might have flipped a coin, but more likely McNeil got to stay in the association because member teams were more important to his schedule.

Present at the start of the meeting were Akron, Canton, Dayton, Columbus, the Cardinals, Hammond, and Buffalo. Shortly after the roll was called, two representatives were allowed to enter and plead their cases for membership. These were identified in the minutes as Cleveland and Buffalo!

The Cleveland man seems to have been Jimmy O'Donnell. The next day, the local *Plain Dealer* identified him as having received a "franchise" -- a term not yet used in the minutes. We might

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speculate that the red-hot financial backers of Cleveland's 1919 team had reconsidered after 1920 because, according to the *Plain Dealer*, the whatchamacallit was granted in O'Donnell's name. Nothing came out in print about O'Donnell's finagling to start a new league, as reported during December in the Buffalo *Courier*.

As for Buffalo, supposedly already in the room in the form of Frank McNeil when it was allowed to enter, there are two rather unlikely possibilities. One is that another Buffalo team sought to replace McNeil's All-Americans. Given the demonstrated strength of McNeil's team and the demonstrated ineptitude of all the other Buffalo clubs of 1920, such a request could only be regarded by the assembly as comedy relief. A second possibility is that Secretary Storck simply mislabeled the representative. He did things like that on occasion, and, not to get ahead of our story, a team from Tonawanda, in the vicinity of Buffalo, did indeed make it into the association for 1921. Admittedly, "Tonawanda" doesn't sound a whole lot like "Buffalo," but the only other explanation for this curious entry in the league minutes is to assume that Frank McNeil answered the roll call, got up and left the room, and then asked to come back in.

Silly as this may sound, it probably is what happened, at least in a figurative sense. If McNeil arrived representing the team that had played in '20, and if the backers of that team had pulled out, and, finally, if McNeil had decided to sponsor the team himself, as well as manage it, then -- putting all the "ifs" together -- the entry in the minutes might read just as it did.

Next up to plead for membership were Roger Bresnahan, the great baseball star of former years, and Jim Thorpe who proposed putting a team in Toledo. Bresnahan ran the successful minor league baseball team there and Thorpe was spending the summer playing in his outfield. Bresnahan was a future baseball Hall of Famer for, among other things, inventing catcher's shin guards and catching the Giants' great Christy Mathewson. Thorpe was, after all, Thorpe. The idea looked like pure platinum. Membership was quickly and enthusiastically granted.

Billy Marshall who'd managed the defunct Detroit Heralds came next to ask for membership for a team he planned to call the "Tigers". It had been an awfully long time since any pro football team called "Tigers" had avoided bankruptcy, but no one seemed aware of this at the time, and Marshall was an old friend. Add one Detroit team.

Finally, in walked Walter Flanigan to ask the boon of membership for his Rock Island Independents. As a 1920 charter member with a pretty good team, Flanigan should have been a shoo-in. However, the group took its good old time and waited for a report by the "executive committee," apparently Carr and Storck, before okaying Rock Island. Heaven knows what the hang-up was. Perhaps there was some change-of-ownership glitch, an outstanding debt, or a personal grudge. Or, just maybe, somebody knew that Rock Island played a game against a batch of collegians from Washington and Jefferson at the end of the 1920 season.

But, looking on the bright side, memberships in the APFA were no longer being handed out like fire-sale flyers.

Another nice touch, at least for Secretary Storck, was that the association voted him a salary for performing his duties -- all of \$240 per year, only \$60 less than "Paddy" Driscoll made for a game.

## Yet a Third Meeting!

These were times long before the conference telephone call, and the managers were hell on meetings. They got together for a third time before the '21 season -- this time at the LaSalle Hotel in Chicago on August 27. Although not named in any accounts, George Halas finally showed up to represent the Staleys. This is evident because Ralph Hay returned home with the news that his Bulldogs would play the Staleys in Chicago on October 30 and only Halas would have done any Staley scheduling. In view of later versions of what happened with the Staleys, it's worth noting that Halas was planning games in Chicago as early as August.

Aaron Hertzberg of the Louisville Brecks arrived for the tete-a-tete, and the Cincinnati Celts though not in attendance were represented, perhaps by Carr. The Muncie Flyers, apparently dead since last October, did a Lazarus and sent a rep. The rest of the usual crew showed up, hoping to put together profitable schedules. In quick order, four new members were admitted: the Minneapolis Marines; Evansville, Ind., Crimson Giants; Tonawanda, N.Y., Kardex; and Green Bay, Wis., Packers. If anyone had been laying odds on survival, that team from Wisconsin would have rated as a real longshot. Nevertheless, the association showed some discrimination for the first time and tabled the membership bids of Davenport, Iowa., and the Gary Elks.

In an unexplained move, a franchise -- the word was finally used -- was granted to Frank McNeil of the Buffalo All-Americans. This may indicate a change of ownership in Buffalo or may have been related to the practice of the Philadelphia players shuffling off to Buffalo to play as the All-Americans every Sunday. Or, it may be proof that the All-Americans were not in the league whose championship they nearly won in 1920.

They made another assessment to cover association expenses -- this thing was becoming darned expensive! -- and the president was ordered to send season passes to prominent newspaper men and public officials, a good p.r. move; newspaper men and public officials seldom go to events they have to pay for.

The managers exchanged the latest rumors about Thorpe: he and Bresnahan couldn't get it together at Toledo; he would play for Dayton this season. Like many rumors, these were half right: Toledo did not field a team, but Thorpe wound up playing for Jimmy O'Donnell in Cleveland.

## New Team In Town

Somewhere between the August meeting and the beginning of the season, the association added members in Washington, D.C., and New York City. The Washington club, naturally called the "Senators," was well-established in the capital, but the New York team seems to have been brand new. Its manager was Billy Gilbert, a New York promoter, but it went under the name of "Brickley's Giants," indicating that Harvard Charley was back as coach and probably part owner. According to one who played against him, Brickley made only token appearances as a player and then only after that day's opponent had promised to "take it

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easy" on the aging star. Neither team had any bearing on the 1921 championship race, playing mainly semi-pro clubs in their areas.

A total of 21 teams took part in the APFA's '21 season, but the final standings, issued for the first time, included only 13.

Years later, in an attempt to explain why the '21 standings didn't match the known number of teams, the NFL suggested "Five teams that dropped out had their records stricken from standings -- Evansville, Hammond, Louisville, Minneapolis, and Muncie." In reality, only Muncie dropped out, quitting after two games when quarterback-coach Severin "Coonie" Checkaye suffered a broken leg. The others played the full season, along with New York and Washington. Tonawanda didn't drop out either, although they played only two games because they could find no one to schedule. The reason none of the eight appear in the standings seems to be that a team was required to play a minimum number of games -- probably six -- against league opponents in order to qualify for the championship race. Unlike 1920, when a game was a game, this year only games between two APFA opponents were counted.

Even allowing for Muncie and Tonawanda's abbreviated seasons, the stricken five-plus-three played plenty of games but mostly against nonentities. Slipping through the cracks in the system were the Cincinnati Celts, carried in the official standings at 0-8-0 despite being 1-3-0 in league games. We can only speculate that the one victory (over Muncie) was lost and someone nearsightedly read 0-3 as 0-8. Despite the mistakes, the ideas of standings, league games, and minimum standards were a marvelous step forward for the association.

From a practical standpoint, the standings needed to include only three teams: Akron, Buffalo, and Decatur. None of the others were ever in the championship race. Without Thorpe, Canton continued to slump. Ralph Hay preferred to describe it as "rebuilding." Dayton slipped to .500 although they could still be tough on occasion. The same could be said about the Cardinals, who still had Paddy Driscoll and not much else. Rock Island acquired halfback Jimmy Conzelman, and when the team started slowly, Walter Flanigan made him the coach -- during a timeout in the middle of a game! Jimmy got word of his promotion from a substitute who trotted into the huddle. Conzelman went on to Hall of Fame selection as a coach, but he couldn't get the Islanders untracked in his first go at a helm.

## Akron Pros

Akron gave a good account of itself in defending its championship. They opened with a shutout over Columbus, in a game distinguished by the number of Nesses on the field. Akron's Al was opposed by five brothers and his nephew, Charlie, who played tailback for the Panhandles this season. By mid-November, Akron had its unbeaten and unscored-upon streak up to seven straight, including a tough 3-0 win at Canton -- their third consecutive trouncing of the once-proud Bulldogs. Except for Nasty Nash, most of the '21 champs were back. Fritz Pollard and Rip King were still a great one-two in the backfield, and veteran Carl Cramer added another strong runner to the crew. Field goal kicker Paul Sheeks was the new quarterback. Copley, Nesser, Johnson, Cobb, Bierce and Bailey manned the line, along with another veteran, Jim Flower, who'd escaped from Columbus.

When he could clear his schedule, Paul Robeson joined the lineup. One of the best players of his time and the most famous black player in the land, Rutgers-grad Robeson was studying law at Columbia University while pursuing a career as a singer and actor. Understandably, his time for pro football was limited, but he managed to get to eight of the Pros twelve games in '21 and starred each time while playing several different positions. An avowed Marxist, his problems during the McCarthy-era of the 1950s would make him one of America's most controversial figures. On November 13, the Pros went back to Buffalo to take on the All-Americans in a battle of unbeaten. Just as they had in 1920, the two powers played to a scoreless tie. But, the next week at Dayton, Akron's streak ended. The Triangles' Dale Sies scored the first points against the Pros all season on a field goal, and the Triangles' defense put on a supreme effort to shut out Pollard and Company 3-0.

Then the bubble burst completely. On Thanksgiving at Canton, the Bulldogs took a measure of revenge 14-0, knocking the Pros out of the race.

## So Long, Decatur

Meanwhile, George Halas' Decatur Staleys were running off a winning streak of their own -- they just weren't doing it in Decatur. The Staleys opened with a 35-0 romp over Waukegan, a non-APFA team, and then edged Rock Island 14-10 in a bang-up game played at Decatur on Monday, October 10. If anything, the team was stronger than in 1921 despite the defection of halfback Jimmy Conzelman to Rock Island. Halas had added big Ralph Scott, a 230-pound tackle from Wisconsin, to make a set with powerful Hugh Blacklock. His new fullback, Ken Huffine, was an experienced pro, and the icing on the cake was a trio of Ohio State stars, tough guard John "Tarzan" Taylor and All-American halfbacks Chic Harley and Gaylord "Pete" Stinchcomb. George Trafton returned to play center, "Dutch" Sternaman was still available for backfield duty, and Halas and Guy Chamberlin, the best end in the world, patrolled the flanks. Old A.E. Staley had in this team a wonderful advertisement for his starchworks.

Suddenly, after two games, the Staleys became a Chicago-based team, playing in Cubs Park.

According to Halas, shortly after the '21 season began, A.E. called him to his office and told him that because of a recession in the country and time lost by the players (all of whom were employees of the company) the starch company could no longer underwrite the team's cost.

But, because he knew Halas was "more interested in football than starch," Staley suggested George take the team to Chicago and see if pro football would make a go there. The starchmaker knew Decatur and other such small towns had neither the parks nor the populations to support a first class pro team. Chicago, on the other hand, had all the necessities and was a great sports town.

To help Halas get started, Staley offered to give him \$5,000 as "seed money", asking only that the Staley name be retained for one year. Halas agreed faster than he could say "Chicago Staleys".

In the letter of agreement dated October 6, Staley's terms were spelled out. \$3,000 was for keeping the Staley name and for two

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pages of advertising, plus pictures and 100-word biographies of the chief Staley company officials in the 50,000 programs Halas had printed. The remaining \$2,000 was to be paid at a rate of \$25 a week to up to nineteen players as Staley employees. Halas also agreed to obtain as much publicity as he could in the Chicago newspapers and to conduct "the team, its playing and management, as to reflect credit on the A.E. Staley Manufacturing Company."

Then Halas skedaddled off to Chicago, made a deal with Chicago Cubs owner William Veeck to use Cubs Park for a percentage of the gate, and on Sunday, October 16, the Staleys played their first game in their new home. Although the Rochester Jeffersons gave them a good battle, the Halasmen continued undefeated with a 16-13 win. The next week they knocked off the Dayton Triangles 7-0. Each game drew about twice what might have been hoped for back at Staley Park in Decatur.

"Dutch" Sternaman, who Halas asked to become his partner, remembered it pretty much the same way, except he also remembered to add his name into the team's early history -- something that Papa Bear usually avoided after he and Dutch began feuding a few years later.

The whole story has an almost ad-libbed quality that is so picturesque pro football historians never tire of re-telling it as an example of the casual way things were handled in the early days. The only question that might be asked is this: if the deal was whipped up almost overnight, how come -- way back in August -- George Halas scheduled the Canton Bulldogs for October 31 at Cubs Park?

Ironically, the game was rained out.

The Staleys ripped through the first three Sundays in November, defeating Detroit, Rock Island, and Cleveland. The big game of the season was scheduled for Thanksgiving against the Buffalo All-Americans, and -- when Akron lost at Dayton on the Sunday before -- the game became a battle for the championship of the American Professional Football Association.

## **Buffaloed!**

Buffalo had undergone some changes too. If the Decatur Staleys were no longer in Decatur, the Buffalo All-Americans were no longer so All-American! Their Philadelphia Connection had finally been discovered. Frank McNeil blew the whistle.

According to "Heinie" Miller, the former Penn star who played end for Buffalo on Sundays after coaching and playing for Philadelphia on Saturdays, things had been going sour between McNeil and his players for some time. In December of 1920, Miller said, the players had not received a promised bonus for their late season heroics against Canton and Akron.

Next, at the beginning of the season, McNeil cut popular halfback Johnny Scott after he'd promised the young man a job with the team. Then, when a spot opened up on the roster, McNeil "induced" Scott back on the team after he'd joined new APFA member Tonawanda. Miller accused McNeil of back-dating Scott's contract to "fix things with Carr." By doing this, McNeil could claim Scott had NOT been released and was not a free agent, leaving

Carr no choice but to force Scott back to Buffalo. Setting aside any alleged contract-tampering, if Carr really was able to prevent an apparent example of contract-jumping, his dread Scott decision was a first for pro football. But the Buffalo players weren't interested in historical precedence; they resented Frank McNeil's treatment of good ol' Johnny Scott.

Finally, just before Buffalo met Akron on November 13, Miller and the other players brought up the long-delayed bonuses and McNeil grudgingly gave them some of his money. When his team could gain only a disappointing tie with the then-undefeated Akrons, McNeil believed it was because of exhaustion from their previous game that week in Philadelphia.

For Sunday, November 20, McNeil had a game scheduled against Canton, and even though the Bulldogs were slogging through a middling season, they were still rated as a league power. Then McNeil learned the Bulldogs had a game scheduled for Saturday, November 19, against Philadelphia! "I first knew of the intended game in Philadelphia on Thursday, when I saw it in a Philadelphia paper," McNeil said.

There's no way of knowing if McNeil's next move came because he feared association repercussions once it became obvious to all that the same players were being used by two teams, because he hoped to keep fresh players for his Canton game, or because -- as Heinie Miller insinuated -- he was angry about the bonus money. He called Ralph Hay and Joe Carr to tell them he'd just learned -- to his shock -- that some of his players were doing double duty in Philadelphia. Also, he pointed out, a game with a non-APFA team by Canton was strictly in violation of association rules.

In a public statement, Hay said he'd been completely unaware that Buffalo and Philadelphia employed the same players. This is a little hard to swallow since the Bulldogs had played both teams the year before, but when Hay added that he'd believed the Philadelphians were really association members, he was on more credible ground. It seems that no one -- with the possible exception of Joe Carr -- knew who was in and who wasn't. At any rate, he cancelled the game at Philadelphia.

In the City of Brotherly Love, Leo Conway was angry. Brandishing a cluster of letters, telegrams, and signed contracts over his head, he blamed Frank McNeil for the cancellation of what should have been the season's best gate. "At the last minute, the manager of the Buffalo team entered a protest. He could have done it a week ago. He wanted to make sure that our game would be killed."

However, insisted the "boy manager," McNeil had "made a mistake. The public wants to see good football games and I have arranged one. Luckily I was able to get the Rochester team, who, strange as it may seem, also had a game canceled on them." Replacing Canton with Rochester was like replacing gold with goldenrod, but the Jeffersons would have had no trouble getting Carr's permission to play a non-APFA game; everyone knew they needed every gate they could get just to survive.

In Buffalo, the most interesting news was that five Buffalo players -- "Hienie" Miller, Lou Little, Joe Spagna, Lud Wray, and Johnny Scott -- swore they were done with Buffalo and would play henceforth only in Philadelphia. Miller made a long statement to the Buffalo

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Courier expressing his appreciation to the Buffalo fans and reciting his list of grievances against McNeil. Although he didn't say so, the indication was that he and perhaps some of the others had money invested in the Philadelphia team.

Back in Buffalo, McNeil blamed everyone. Hay shouldn't have scheduled Philadelphia. Conway shouldn't have been using Buffalo's players. Carr was responsible for the whole thing by enforcing APFA rules. He'd given Miller, Wray, and Little permission to engage in only "light" games to keep in condition, but they hadn't told McNeil they were playing "real" games down there in Philly. Regardless, he confidently expected the players to all return for Sunday's game with Canton. After all, he had contracts.

For all his brave words, McNeil knew his contracts were worthless if the players wanted to play for a non-APFA team. He also knew Billy Marshall's Detroit Tigers had closed up shop for the season (and forever, as it turned out) so he quickly imported five of their better players -- Walt "Tillie" Voss, a 6-3 tackle- end who would star on pro gridirons for nearly a decade more; Clarence "Steamer" Horning, a veteran pro tackle from Colgate; Charlie Guy, a quick center who excelled on defense; Milt "Moose" Gardner, a large and experienced guard; and Walt "Waddy" Kuehl, a speedy and versatile back.

He still had a number of stars, including "Nasty" Nash, "Swede" Youngstrom, "Tommy" Hughitt, and "Ockie" Anderson, but asking a team the team to gel against Canton without even a single practice session was a bit much. On Sunday, the patched- together All-Americans sputtered and stuttered but still had enough to escape with a tie, 7-7. Still undefeated, Buffalo boarded a train for Chicago -- their first road game -- to settle the season's championship against the Decatur Staleys.

## Settling the Championship -- #1

On Thanksgiving Day, the Staleys took the opening kickoff and drove the length of the field, with Sternaman crashing over for the touchdown on a short plunge. But the Staleys missed the extra point. After that, the All-Americans played Decatur on even terms throughout the remainder of the first half. In the third quarter, Buffalo stopped the Staleys on downs after the Halasmen had gained a first down at the Buffalo five. A few moments later, Tommy Hughitt connected on a 40-yard pass to Waddy Kuehl for a touchdown. Then he added the PAT to put Buffalo in front 7-6. Twice the Staleys got drives going in the fourth quarter, but both times Hughitt intercepted Staley passes to end the threats. When there was no more scoring, Buffalo had a victory and, as far as they were concerned, the APFA championship.

Years later, Buffalo fans still felt that way about it. The Pro Football Hall of Fame once received an angry letter from a woman resident of that city, demanding that all mention of Buffalo be stricken from the Hall unless the All-Americans were declared 1921 champs.

To underline their new "championship," the All-Americans defeated Dayton 7-0 that Sunday. Decatur got back on the winning track at Cubs Park the same day with a 20-0 win over Green Bay. At that point, the Staleys stood 7-1-0 in league games; Buffalo was 8-0-2.

## The Season Winds Down

Bruce Copeland of the Rock Island *Argus* didn't pick an all-pro team for 1921, but one appeared in the Buffalo *Evening News*.

Ends: Luke Urban and Bob Nash, both of Buffalo.

Tackles: Wilbur Henry and Belf West, Canton.

Guards: Al Nesser, Akron, and Bulger Lowe, Canton.

Center: Doc Alexander, Rochester.

Quarterback: Benny Boynton, Rochester.

Halfbacks: Elmer Oliphant, Buffalo, and Pete Stinchcomb, Staleys.

Fullback: Rip King, Akron.

In end-of-season news, Canton made its second eastern tour, defeating Washington and -- after all the hassle -- Philadelphia. In late December, they came back to repeat the Washington win and to receive the worst beating a Bulldog team had ever taken, 34-0 at the hands of "Heinie" Miller and company.

Cleveland was called the "Indians" by most newspapers in 1921, not because the baseball team used that name but because of the presence of Jim Thorpe, Joe Guyon, and Pete Calac in the backfield. Although never embarrassed, the team went winless once Thorpe was sidelined with broken ribs in late October. However, the great Indian was healthy for a big appearance against Brickley's Giants at the Polo Grounds on December 3. Jim kicked a field goal and extra point in Cleveland's 17-0 win, but the Saturday crowd was reported at only about 3,000.

Writing in *Pioneer in Pro Football*, Jack Cusack -- the former Canton manager who originally brought Thorpe to the Bulldogs -- explained the circumstances around that game and a great deal more about pro football finances in those days. Cusack had been working in the oil business for several years when he picked up the story:

"In 1921, while assisting in the building of a refinery in Arkansas, I developed a severe case of malaria and found it necessary to leave that locality for awhile, so I decided to go back to Canton until I recovered. Jim Thorpe had transferred his interests to Cleveland's Indians, and the old warhorse asked me to come to the Ohio metropolis and look after his financial affairs. His contract called for a guaranteed amount for each game or a percentage of the gate, whichever was greater, and he felt that there were times when he was not getting his full due."

Apparently, Jimmy O'Donnell was no longer running the club. Cusack doesn't mention the veteran Cleveland promoter. O'Donnell had secured the franchise, but very likely had been serving as a front for the real owners.

"The team was backed by a large Cleveland mercantile firm, and when I arrived the management for the Indians showed some resentment over my presence," Cusack wrote. "Home attendance was rather poor, and it did not take me long to discover that the team carried the same rating in the win column."

"It did not take me long, either, to learn something about the unusual methods of bookkeeping being practiced. When playing in baseball parks, difficulties rarely arose over the take since the baseball management handled the gates with their own crews, and

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it was a simple matter to check the gate stiles at openings and closings. Then the baseball men would deduct their percentage for use of the park and give the rest to the football teams in accordance with contracts presented.

"However, in parks under control of the home team, the check on receipts often posed some difficulties. In some instances, the tickets were of the roll variety such as those used at movie theaters, and these required a count before and after the game in order to arrive at the amount of money taken in. Also, the agreements between teams sometimes failed to designate the number of complimentary tickets issued, and this often complicated the business of making an accurate check.

"As the representative of the players, I insisted on checking the tickets wherever Cleveland played, and for this purpose I always took sufficient help to man the gates, along with an ample supply of gunny sacks. I counted all the tickets into the sacks, then checked the roll figures, and this simple method of audit paid off for the players. On two different occasions I found discrepancies running from \$900 to \$1,100, and complimentary tickets totaling 800 to 900, far in excess of the number that should have been allowed. In both instances, after strong and vivid argument, I succeeded in collecting our share of the deficiencies."

The problem of complimentary tickets would bedevil the league for years, but the complaints seldom came from the players. It was the visiting clubs who were getting a short count. Although there were no doubt examples of home clubs counting paid-for tickets as comps, the more common practice was simply too many free seats. Most owners were local businessmen, often involved in politics. Freebies to a pro game handed out on a large scale could be useful for the local owner's business or might garner a few precious votes, but they did nothing for the out-of-town team providing half of the entertainment.

Incidentally, a good case could be made that Cusack was acting as the first "player agent." His story continues:

"After the regular season ended, Cleveland booked a December 3 exhibition game at the New York Polo Grounds with an All-Star team that Charlie Brickley had assembled. The Cleveland Indians were deep in the red for the season and the management asked for my influence in getting the players to give their services for free, except for expenses. I flatly refused to use my influence for any such purpose, but did tell the players about the overture and informed them that I had no intention of making the New York trip. They, too, decided not to go unless I went along to protect their interests, and to that end they raised \$300 among themselves to cover my expenses, and I at last agreed to go."

It's interesting that Cusack and the players (and, probably, the Cleveland owners) thought Brickley's New York team was an all-star aggregation put together just to play them. In reality, of course, the Brickley Giants were regarded by the APFA as league members, making the Cleveland-New York meeting an official game.

"The New York exhibition deal called for two games with a guarantee to Cleveland of \$4,000 per game -- the first to be played at the Polo Grounds on a Saturday, with the second scheduled in Brooklyn on the following day -- a game that never would be played for reasons that will soon be explained.

"A crowd that was very disappointing in numbers watched Cleveland win at the Polo Grounds. The net returns after the baseball management deducted the percentage for use of the park amounted to only \$3,750, which was \$250 short of the guarantee, but we accepted, and a check for that amount was written by the baseball management and made payable to the Cleveland treasurer. Brickley's All-Stars received nothing.

"We were staying at the old Imperial Hotel, Thorpe and I occupying a room together. It had been understood that the players would be paid at the hotel -- a procedure that had been followed during the season -- but around seven o'clock a bellhop came to our room with a statement covering our hotel expenses, and I became suspicious. I made inquiry at the desk and discovered that the Cleveland treasurer, just as I suspected, had checked out -- which meant to me that he was running out with the check, without paying the players.

"To get to Cleveland, the check-holder had one of two choices -- to depart either from Brooklyn or New York City. I therefore sent two husky players to Brooklyn with instructions to stop the man from boarding a train, using physical force if necessary.

"Thorpe and I went to the Pennsylvania Station and, as good fortune would have it, found the treasurer and his lawyer awaiting a train which was scheduled to leave in half an hour. I demanded that he return to the hotel and pay the players, but he refused, saying he would mail them checks from Cleveland -- which meant they would receive expenses only. Getting nowhere, and with time running out, I sought out two detectives stationed in the lobby and explained the situation, whereupon they decided (for a certain sum) to help us. They talked to the treasurer and his lawyer, but the Clevelanders insisted again that they would mail the checks.

"When the train was announced and the gates opened for boarding the two men reached for their grips, but at that juncture the detectives grabbed them and we all went down to a precinct station by taxicab. The two frustrated birds of passage were not long in deciding that they did not care for the atmosphere of the police station, and agreed to return with Thorpe and me to the hotel. There, with several big gridsters giving me silent support, I succeeded in convincing the treasurer that the time for settling accounts was at hand. I gave him a statement for the payroll and expenses of the players, and in return he endorsed the \$3,750 check over to me, and we paid him the difference in cash.

"After this adventure in football finance, I took over the Cleveland team and booked two more exhibition games -- one on December 10 with the Richmond (Va.) Athletic Club and the other with the Washington (D.C.) All-Stars. We took a rather pleasing dividend out of these two ventures, and then disbanded. And that was my last active connection with professional football."

Settling the Championship -- #2

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The distinction between regular league games and exhibition games between two APFA members was blurry for many years but never more so than in 1921. Whether the Cleveland-Washington game -- the "All-Stars" mentioned by Cusack were the "Senators" -- is finally counted in the league standings is not of any real importance except to add a win to Washington's totals and a loss to Cleveland's. But the 1921 championship depends on how the December 4 rematch between the Staleys and Buffalo is classified. The All-Americans, with their new players performing well, scheduled a back-breaking pair of games for that weekend: first Akron at home, then the Staleys in Chicago. The series was reminiscent of the games that had failed to settle the championship in early December of 1920.

Akron's offense had deserted them completely ever since their scoreless tie with the All-Americans. They failed to score once again -- their fourth consecutive pointless outing. At one point, the Pros recovered a Buffalo fumble at the All-Americans' three yard line, but could not push across for a touchdown in four shots. Meanwhile, Buffalo took advantage of a pair of Akron miscues to score a pair of touchdowns and win 14-0.

After the game, the All-Americans boarded a train for an all-night train ride to Chicago to take on the Staleys for the second time in eleven days.

The Halasmen took an early lead on Guy Chamberlin's 70-yard return with a pass interception. Dutch Sternaman added the extra point to make it 7-0. That lead held until the third quarter when Ken Huffine dropped back to punt for the Staleys. "Swede" Youngstrom burst through and blocked the kick and Steamer Horning recovered for the touchdown. Elmer Oliphant kicked the point- after to tie the score.

The third quarter was nearly over when the Staleys got a drive going. They moved down inside the Buffalo 20, but then the drive stalled, and "Dutch" Sternaman went back to try for a field goal. His

placekick was true to move the Staleys back into the lead 10-7. Both teams battled furiously through a scoreless fourth quarter.

No matter, said Buffalo. The game was only an exhibition anyway. Convinced they had won the championship back on Thanksgiving Day, they disbanded for the season.

George Halas had other ideas. Post-season exhibition be damned! the association had set no official end to its season. His Staleys had bested the All-Americans in the crucial second meeting. If they could keep playing and winning, they could even end the season with a better record.

One week later, the Canton Bulldogs were guests at Cubs Park, making up the game originally scheduled for October 30. The crowd was a disappointing 3,000, and the Staleys no doubt lost money by playing, but Halas got what he wanted -- a 10-0 victory.

On December 18, two weeks after topping the All-Americans, the Staleys took on "Paddy" Driscoll and the Cardinals in a game supposedly for the city championship, but which Halas hoped would give his team one more win than Buffalo. However, the Canton game had taken a toll: both George Trafton and Ken Huffine were sidelined with injuries and Sternaman was limping noticeably.

Several thousand Chicagoans braved the cold weather to watch a surprisingly even game. Although he missed three field goal attempts, Driscoll's all-around play gave the Cardinals slightly the better of things. When the final whistle blew, the scoreboard still read 0-0. Even Halas knew the season was over.

Buffalo stood 9-1-2 with a win over the Staleys. Decatur finished 9-1-1 with a win over the All-Americans. For the second consecutive year, the APFA finished a season with more than one team claiming its championship.