

Out in the Boondocks

Westmoreland County Leads the Pros: 1897

By PFRA Research

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In November of 1897, President William McKinley pressured Spain into granting limited self-government to Cuba. Many Americans hoped that would be enough to quiet U.S. war talk over Spain's treatment of Cuba. Many other Americans hoped it wouldn't. They thought it would be just ducky to own some Spanish possessions like Puerto Rico and the Philippines. With that kind of encouragement, Cuban revolutionaries proved far from satisfied with any limitations to self-government. They took an all-or-nothing approach and kept fighting. That, of course, was just what William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer wanted them to do.

Gridiron conflicts underwent some rule changes in 1897. The goal posts could be taller -- 25 feet high -- but the game could be shorter. The referee was allowed to shorten the halves under certain conditions, such as impending darkness or the imminent departure of the visiting team's train. Teams had been lopping off part of the second half for years but now they could legally decide to play less than 70 minutes before the game began.

An important rule change allowed a substitute to enter the game at any time instead of only in case of severe injury, total exhaustion, or death. However, once he was substituted for, a player could not return to the game.

The most obvious rule change upped a touchdown's value to five points -- the same as a field goal -- and lowered the goal after from two to one point. Inevitably, the foot was being replaced by the feet. In western Pennsylvania, Washington and Jefferson had another exceptional team. "Teck" Matthews, Bill Inglis, and the rest won ten games and lost only to national champion Pennsylvania. Nearby West Virginia University had a middling team, losing to W. & J., the P.A.C., and Latrobe.

W.U.P. (Pitt), as usual, was dreadful. Even bringing in Doggie Trenchard as coach gained them only a single victory -- over Pittsburgh High School!

An expected close race for athletic club supremacy between the D.C. & A.C. and the P.A.C. never developed because the East Enders apparently adopted W.U.P. as a role model. They opened with a pair of practice-game wins over Grove City College and the Wheeling, W.Va., Tigers. In pre-game publicity, the Wheeling boys were described as "up to snuff" because in an earlier contest "they were daring enough to attempt the new place kick for goal, and came near being successful."

Then the East Enders embarked on the important part of their schedule and sank with no survivors. W. & J. whipped them 18-0 on the last Saturday in October. November was horrendous! They

lost to D.C. & A.C., Latrobe, D.C. & A.C. again, and Greensburg without scoring a single point. The Latrobe score was 47-0!

The Duquesne Country and Athletic Club had a good -- but not quite good enough -- team.

They started like a house on fire, trumping the Youngstown, Ohio, A.C. and then traveling to Michigan for a 24-0 win over the Detroit A.C. They completed October by topping Latrobe's strong team 12-6 on Saturday, the 30th, and then sailed into November with a 4-0 win over the P.A.C. the following Tuesday.

At the time, everyone assumed a win over the P.A.C. meant something. The Red and Black was being hailed as the best Pittsburgh team ever. Captain Ed Young was still a standout as fullback, but the new backfield star was Charley Gelbert, an authentic three-time All-America from Penn. Gelbert weighed in at 160 pounds and was very quick. A superb tackler, he usually lined up on defense at end. Without a doubt, Gelbert was the biggest "name" to be regularly employed on a Pittsburgh grid team in '97.

On Saturday, November 6, the Greensburg A.A. came to Exposition Park. Nearly 3,500 fans showed up expecting a glorious contest.

The Greenies scored first, but the Red and Black came back to tie when they recovered a fumble in close. That was the high-water mark of the Duquesne season. From there on the game belonged to the men from Westmoreland County. The D.C. & A.C. returned the favor by fumbling on their own 35. Greensburg quickly drove in a touchdown to take a 12-6 lead at the half. In the second stanza, the home club continued to crumble before the Greenies' heavier line. Two more Greensburg touchdowns brought the final score to 24-6.

Several players were roughed up during the game. Duquesne quarterback "Posey" Rose was the most seriously injured with a dislocated shoulder. After the game, he announced his retirement.

Still reeling, the D.C. & A.C. entertained the Detroit A.C. The Michigan squad was so amused they won 12-10. Little Don McNeill went to quarterback for the Red and Black. Although he proved he wasn't a Rose by any other name, he played with reasonable sweetness.

The Saturday before Thanksgiving, the Duquesnes restored some prestige with a 10-0 win over the P.A.C. Of course, by that point the East Enders were impressing everyone with their ineptitude so the

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Red and Black could take only a limited amount of pride in the victory.

The season finally came down to the Thanksgiving Day meeting with Washington and Jefferson. A victory by the D.C. and A.C. would assuage any disappointments. Between twelve and fifteen thousand fans -- the largest crowd yet to witness a football game in Pittsburgh -- packed Exposition Park, most of them rooting for the home team.

Most of them were disappointed again. The Presidents had the game in control all the way. "Teck" Matthews scored a touchdown, halfback Judson Crookston scored another, both goals were successful, and W. & J. also caught Duquesne for a safety. The final score was 14-0. Feature of the game were several substantial gains made by Prexys' signal caller Jack Flowers on quarterback kicks.

The 1896 crowds at Exposition Park indicate that football's popularity continued on the rise in Pittsburgh, but the teams within the city were not keeping pace.

The Pros of the West

The fact that historians can follow an unbroken trail from the first Pittsburgh pros in 1892, across the state line to Ohio in the early part of the Twentieth Century, all the way to the National Football League in 1920 tends to give the illusion of exclusivity to the pro teams found along the path. In truth, by the mid-1890s, many team managers in many different parts of the country had discovered that an offer of money often secured the services of a fine player.

One of the stronger pro clubs appeared in the unlikely town of Butte, Montana. There, a copper-rich mine owner decided to create the strongest team in the country. He began gathering players by the strictly semi-pro method of offering jobs. When that inducement proved insufficient for some of the athletes he'd set his mind to, he created little jobs-in-name-only that reportedly paid as high as \$150 a month. So far so good. The Butte Copper Kings could still claim they were only semis when the subject of professionalism came up.

For a couple of years, things went well. In both 1895 and 1896, the Copper Kings won most of their games, defeating some good western colleges and athletic clubs. Then, as 1897 came around, the A.A.U. attacked. Apparently the watchdogs were alerted by such little tidbits as this description of the mine owner's recruiting practices from a San Francisco newspaper: "The tentacles of this wealthy `angel' reached out in four different directions, and all available football material was drawn in."

The upshot was that two Copper Kings' players -- Hall and Laswell -- were declared professionals. Worse, the Butte team was not allowed to play any other amateur club that was under the A.A.U. umbrella. Because every football team in the country -- even the Pittsburgh clubs -- professed to being lily-white amateurs, Butte was done for.

The West Coast had a whole carload of athletic clubs playing football in the mid-'90s. Up north were the Portland Multnomah Club and the Portland, Seattle, and Tacoma A.C.'s. The San Francisco Bay area had the Olympics and the Reliance Club. Los

Angeles had a couple of highly regarded clubs, and inland, the Denver A.C. was known as a rugged outfit.

It has been suggested that these supposed semi-pros were just real honest-to-gosh professionals. Moreover, in 1895-97 they may have been paying better than the clubs in western Pennsylvania. However, the fact that so many of the best ballplayers from the west came east to play within a few years indicates that the salary structure belied Horace Greeley's dictum by the turn of the century. Two top players to make their way east were Seattle's multi-talented Dr. Ben Roller and Denver's magnificent Herman Kerchoff, a giant guard compared favorably by some with "Pudge" Heffelfinger.

Halfback Coleman Brown of the Santa Barbara A.C. and Los Angeles Stars was an early black star, regarded as the greatest all-around back in the west during the '90s. At better than 190 pounds, he was powerful and extremely fast. He was said to be a tremendous punter and fine field goal kicker, credited with several successful 40 and 45-yard boots. To historians, the key question is whether Brown was a semi-pro as claimed at the time or a true professional as believed by some modern researchers. If he actually was paid in coin of the realm, he was the first black pro football player. However, at this point, his status is unclear.

Donald Gillis, a sensational breakaway runner for Butte, was the highest paid pro of his day, according to one undocumented source. If he made half the 60, 70, and 80 yard runs that legend credits to him, he was underpaid no matter what the figure.

"Sport" Donnelly, Langdon Lea, and Heffelfinger himself reportedly played some games on the West Coast during the mid-'90s. All of them are known to have been well paid for the same activity in the East.

Although too little is known about the western teams of the 1890s to make any final assessment, there is certainly evidence to indicate they could have put up a good fight against the recognized Pennsylvania pros of the period.

Championships, Championships, All Around ...

The professional or semi-pro tangle is best covered by referring to any team that did not represent a college or university as an "independent." That begs the question of professionalism, of course, but in ranking the various teams at the end of the season, it wasn't how you paid the game but whether you won or lost.

All kinds of championships were up for grabs to present bragging opportunities. Most of them were mythical, but that made them no less important to the contestants.

The national intercollegiate champion obviously was going to be from an institution of higher learning. In theory, any college or university was eligible. In practice, the honor belonged exclusively to Yale, Princeton, Harvard, and Pennsylvania until Michigan finally broke through with Fielding Yost's first great "Point-a-Minute" team in 1901.

Independent teams could have claimed a national football championship, dropping the "intercollegiate," but never did. In truth, with the possible exception of the Allegheny Athletic Association's

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special team in 1896, no independent team through 1897 ever had quite the talent of the big eastern schools.

Then there were various state and area championships. For example, Penn was national intercollegiate champ in '97 and obviously state champ also. However, Washington and Jefferson, which lost only to the Quakers, could claim the WESTERN Pennsylvania championship, both intercollegiate and general. And, because they were on the western side of the Allegheny Mountains, they could also brag about their midwest title. Here, they might run up against a similar claim from the University of Wisconsin, a team that won nine games and lost only to its own alumni. It was all very unofficial. City championships were usually most important for independents. The D.C. & A.C. may have had a so-so season, but as long as they bested the P.A.C. -- the only other major athletic club in town -- they could consider 1897 something of a success.

The Westmoreland Title

The Westmoreland County championship fought for by Latrobe and Greensburg was the equivalent of a city championship since the two were geographically so close. Both put up their finest units yet in '97, and the question of supremacy was not settled until the final game of the season.

Both Greensburg and Latrobe later claimed to have fielded the first all-professional teams in 1897, conveniently ignoring the Allegheny Athletic Association's two-day wonders of '96. However, the Three A's worldbeaters were in the way of a short term all-star squad, and the two Westmoreland County giants might well vie for the honor of putting the first full-season pro teams into the history books.

Greensburg's claim is on shaky ground. No fewer than 27 players were on the Greenies' squad at one time or another during the year -- an exceptionally large number for the time. Many stars were brought in for a game or two and were doubtless paid for their efforts. There certainly must have been times when the eleven players on the field were all professionals, but it's hard to believe that 27 different men were paid during the season. There were just too many bodies!

Robert B. Van Atta, the most respected authority on Westmoreland County football, glosses over Greensburg's pro status in his accounts of the teams, but he states flatly that "the Latrobe team went all-professional in 1897, signing a number of college players from the east coast and as far west as Iowa."

Greensburg brought in former Bucknell and Lafayette halfback George Barclay as captain-coach for '97. A sturdy 160-pounder, Barclay was a real speedster. He later played major league baseball, where he picked up the nickname "Deerfoot." As a rookie outfielder with the St. Louis Cardinals in 1902, he batted .300 and stole 30 bases, but in three more seasons, he never hit over .248. He died in Philadelphia in 1909 while still in his early 30s.

In 1897 he was at his peak as a football player, but he had plenty of backfield help. Lawson Fiscus retired after the '96 season, but Alfred Sigman of Lafayette, Fred Robison of Penn State, and W.A. Sterrett of Geneva shared running duties with "Deerfoot." Adam Wyant, "Bo" Thomas, and R.H.M. MacKenzie were among the able linemen, and late in the season they were joined by "Tiger"

McFarland, one of the greatest guards of the period. Several W. & J. players also appeared for Greensburg during the year.

Robison, Sigman, and Barclay all scored in the first fifteen minutes of the Greenies' opener, an easy 22-6 win over the Swissvale A.C. But things were just warming up. The following week, they obliterated poor Jeannette 74-0, "the largest score ever on the home grounds." That record lasted a week. On October 9, the Greenies crushed the unfortunate Imperial A.C. of Pittsburgh by a shattering 90-0! W. & J. captain William Inglis was in the lineup for the Greenies, but it's hard to believe he was paid. Why would anyone pay an extra player to face the Imperials?

The next visitor to the Greensburg slaughterhouse was Geneva College which had old favorite Ross Fiscus as its playing coach. Ross needed a lot more. 34-0.

Greensburg ran up a 28-0 lead over Altoona in the first half, with Robison scoring the first three touchdowns. Then they relaxed through a scoreless second half, apparently toying with the visitors. The Wheeling Tigers, the team whose one claim to fame was that they'd almost placekicked a field goal, were easy 30-0 dead meat.

A Wednesday afternoon game against pathetic W.U.P. must have been regarded as strictly practice. Indeed, Sterret kicked a 25-yard field goal -- the first by a Greenie since 1894 -- and he must have been showing off. Certainly Greensburg didn't need the boot in their 47-0 win.

The opposition hadn't been much, but seven victories by such one-sided scores were beginning to attract attention. The November 6 meeting with the Duquesne Country and Athletic Club, also undefeated at that point, was the first key game. On other occasions Greensburg had built up their fans' hopes with early wins and then crumbled -- or had bad luck -- once they went to Pittsburgh. Red and Black fans were confident it would happen again. They were wrong.

This time the Greenies completely dominated in a very rough game, keeping their record perfect and sending the Duquesnes into a spin. Although the Greensburg *Daily Tribune* called it "the best game of the year," that was pride talking. After Greensburg broke out of an early 6-6 tie, they had 'em all the way, 24-6.

The victory had its cost. So many Greensburg players were hurt that the following week's game against Latrobe had to be postponed. By that time it was obvious that the story of the season was the Greensburg-Latrobe meeting.

Manager Dave Berry loaded Latrobe for bear in '97. He had Brallier back to play quarterback and a sensational breakaway runner in the unfortunately-named Jack Gass. Other important backs were Walter Howard, Ed "Awful-Name" Abbaticchio, and former Penn star "Deacon" Blair. Captain Harry Ryan starred at tackle, and "Big Bill" Hammer was an excellent, 210-pound center. Walter Okeson, an outstanding end from Lehigh who later headed the Eastern Intercollegiate Football Officials and the NCAA Collegiate Rules Committee, was hired as coach and to hold down one terminal. The other end was at times Charles McDyre, reportedly the greatest tackler ever to play in Latrobe. At other times it was Eddie Wood, a football gypsy who played for almost everybody before he

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hung up his cleats. If a team didn't have Eddie Wood or "Teck" Matthews playing on it during the next decade, it probably couldn't be taken seriously.

Late in the season, seeking an edge, both Greensburg and Latrobe bid for the services of "Doggie" Trenchard. Supposedly, the Greenies were all set to kidnap (dognap?) him when Latrobe rushed in and saved him for \$75 a game.

Latrobe started out like Greensburg with easy wins over Jeannette 28-0 and the woebegone Emerald A.C. 58-0. Then they ran afoul of Altoona and could only manage a 0-0 tie.

They bounced back the next week with a 22-0 victory over Pittsburgh College and then got even with Altoona, 36-0. Youngstown gave them a good tussle before falling 14-4.

During the last week in October, ever-easy W.U.P. obediently showed up to be crushed 30-0. The Latrobe Clipper, in a story that must have been filed on Mars, said "Latrobe won a big victory today and the town is wild with excitement ... The Western U. of Pa. eleven came out today at noon and struck terror to our men by their size and appearance" Unless the W.U.P. boys had dressed up for Halloween a few days early, it's hard to figure how they could terrorize anyone over the age of six. Such was hometown reporting in those days.

Latrobe had a shot at the brass ring on October 30 when they took on the D.C. & A.C. at Exposition Park, but they literally fumbled away their chance. Brallier was commended in the news accounts for putting up a "good defensive game," but the 12-6 loss put his team back in the also-ran category.

The next Saturday they took out their frustrations with the 47-0 slaughter of the fading P.A.C. The East Enders were hamstrung with injuries and had been losing regularly, but this was the worst defeat in their eight-year football history. Latrobe blasted over for seven touchdowns. Abbaticchio kicked a like number of goals and added an 18-yard field goal.

When Greensburg defeated the D.C. & A.C. the same day, they not only put themselves on top of the athletic club heap, they also gave Latrobe a lift up. If Latrobe could knock off the Greenies, they'd become kings of the hill in turn.

The Westmoreland County rivals were scheduled to square off on Saturday, November 13, at Greensburg. When the beat-up Greenies had to beg off for a week, Latrobe invited Youngstown to come over as a replacement. The Ohioans obliged by being docile guests, losing 19-0.

The championships of both Westmoreland County and of western Pennsylvania athletic clubs would turn on the last two Saturdays in November with home-and-home meetings. Greensburg stood 8-0-0; Latrobe 8-1-1.

The largest crowd in Westmoreland County football history to that point -- 5,000 people -- showed up at Greensburg's Athletic Park for the 3:10 kickoff. The players were so charged up that when the kickoff bounded into the creek just off a corner of the field, a half

dozen went splashing in after it. Walter Okeson of Latrobe recovered.

The teams raged back and forth through the first half with neither gaining a clear advantage. Then, near the end of the period, "Barclay oozed through left tackle" to score the first touchdown. Joe Donohoe added the goal, and Greensburg led 6-0 at the intermission.

Early in the second half Gass went twelve yards for a Latrobe TD. When Abbaticchio kicked goal, the game was tied.

Back came Greensburg. At one point, they appeared about to score. Manager Berry inspired his troops with an emotional plea to "Hold for the sake of dear old Latrobe!" and the drive was stopped.

It was late in the game when a break settled the outcome. A Greensburg man touched a punt but could not control it. Okeson was Walter-on-the-Spot to grab the bouncing football and zip across for the winning touchdown. Abbaticchio's goal made the final score 12-6.

The Greensburg *Daily Tribune* headlined: "WE HAVE MET THE ENEMY AND WE ARE THEIRS!"

Both teams had Thanksgiving Day games scheduled -- a risky proposition in view of the possibility of a serious injury two days before the big rematch. However, everything went smoothly. Latrobe kayoed W.V.U., 16-6, to register its tenth victory. Greensburg went to Pittsburgh and added to the P.A.C.'s woes 16-0 before a disappointing crowd. Most Pittsburgh football fans were over at Expo Park setting an attendance record at the W. & J.-D.C. & A.C. game.

Pittsburghers would never agree, but the biggest game of the year was played two days later in Latrobe. Surprisingly, the crowd was only 2,000. Perhaps many fans had to work on this Saturday after the Thanksgiving holiday.

For a long time -- an hour and twenty minutes -- it looked like no game would be played at all. First, Greensburg failed to appear at the scheduled time. The referee called the game at 2:45 and Latrobe kicked off to an empty end of the field. They claimed a forfeit of \$200 for the non-appearance and, of course, the championship. Only the most partisan liked that idea. When Greensburg showed up about fifteen minutes later, everyone got ready to play.

However, a long wrangle ensued over whether Greensburg might be allowed to use three W. & J. men: Crookston, Flowers, and Core. Under the terms of the agreement between the two teams, only those players who had been in uniform the previous Saturday were eligible. After much shouting, Crookston and Flowers were allowed to play, but Core was not. He'd been on the sideline for the earlier game but not dressed in the required Maroon and White.

So much time had elapsed that it was agreed to play shortened halves -- 20 minutes for the first session and fifteen minutes for the second. The season's most important contest was cut to half the time of a regular game!

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The two teams were evenly matched. Latrobe, with Brallier, Gass, and Abbaticchio, had a slight edge in the backfield; Greensburg, with Crookston at end and "Tiger" McFarland at tackle, had by a hair the better line.

Just as in the first game, a break decided things. Late in the first half Abbaticchio fumbled a punt in the very shadow of his own goal posts, and the Greenies recovered. It took three plunges, but on the third McFarland crashed over on a tackle- around. Joe

Donohoe booted the goal. The fifteen-minute second half was scoreless.

Greensburg was Westmoreland County -- and western Pennsylvania "independent" -- champion by 6-0. After the season, the Pittsburgh *Times* picked an "All Western Pennsylvania Team" and tried its best to ignore Westmoreland County. Okeson, Harry Ryan, and Abbaticchio were named from Latrobe, but only Barclay made it from Greensburg.