

Pottsville Maroons

1925

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The Pottsville Maroons ... won the title then lost it, not on the field but by orders of league president Joe Carr.

--- *The Encyclopedia of Football*

No team has ever been robbed of a championship quite like the Maroons.

--- *Profiles in Pennsylvania Sports*

One of the greatest injustices in NFL history had been perpetrated.

--- article in *Journal of Sports History*, 1982

The National Football League isn't welcome in Pottsville, Pennsylvania. Not unless it sends back that championship it stole from the little coal city's beloved Maroons more than 60 years ago. Pottsville is not completely alone in its outrage. Every couple of years -- just when the rest of the football world is about to forget -- somebody writes an article called "The Stolen Championship" or "The Tragedy of Pottsville" or "The Anthracite Antic", and the whole story -- or rather, Pottsville's version of it -- returns like those onions you had for lunch.

There hasn't been an NFL franchise in Pottsville since Hoover was President, Prohibition was the law, and a kid reporter named John O'Hara covered the Maroons for the local Journal.

But O'Hara, who achieved worldwide fame with *Appointment in Samarra*, *Butterfield 8*, and a dozen other bestselling novels remained a Maroons' fan all his life. Pottsville's population today is down about 20% from the 25,000 of those days when the Maroons were as good as it got in pro football. Only a few remain who actually saw the team in action, but later generations know the story. And demand their championship pennant.

As an attraction for infrequent tourists, the pleasant little town on the southern tip of the anthracite region boasts a 60-foot statue of Henry Clay. But, unlike that great advocate of compromise, local football zealots still hope that someday the NFL will blush with shame and surrender unconditionally -- just up and admit it played Pottsville fast and loose back in 1925.

Hell will sooner sprout icicles.

THE MAROONS JOIN THE NFL

Most of the events of this story happened in 1925, but to set the scene

Like most wide spots in the American road, Pottsville fielded a town grid team before World War I, but when the boys came back from Over There, some of them got serious about football. The local miners took pride in their semi-pro team. They filled little Minersville Park for home games, though newspaper stories of the day indicate they didn't always pay to get in. The fence was equally easy to go over or under.

Miners in neighboring coal communities Shenandoah, Coaldale, Gilberton, and Mount Carmel where they were also playing a stronger brand of football, were just as proud of their grid teams and not reluctant to put their money where their mouths were. Betting was an important element in firing fan loyalty. Predictably, things escalated as teams began to load up with imported professional talent.

The whole eastern Pennsylvania-New Jersey area underwent a pro football explosion in the early 1920's, with particularly strong teams in Philadelphia and Atlantic City. The quality of football was arguably on a par with the midwest-centered NFL. Pottsville's team held its own against the best of them.

In 1924, team manager Dr. J.G. Striegel decided to spruce up his charges. He called Joseph Zacko, owner of a local sporting goods store, and placed an order for 25 matching jerseys. "The color isn't important." When Zacko delivered 25 maroon-colored jerseys, the team gained a nickname.

The Maroons also gained some NFL enmity when they signed several NFL stars, including future Hall of Fame tackle Wilbur

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Henry, a clear indication the coal region was paying major league salaries. Fielding a powerful lineup, Pottsville rolled through a 12-1-1 season to win the Anthracite League championship. The only loss came in the season finale when they were upset, 10-7, by a touring NFL team.

NFL President Joe Carr was not pleased to see stars like Henry deserting the league to play for an independent coal region team, but there wasn't much he could do about it unless Pottsville joined the league. A suit filed by Henry's former NFL team was thrown out on a technicality by a Pennsylvania judge.

Dr. Striegel believed his team equal to any in the world, and Carr encouraged him to prove it in the NFL. At the league's August (1925) meeting, Striegel paid a \$500 application fee, posted a \$1,200 guarantee, and received a franchise for Pottsville in the National Football League.

Dr. Striegel, now owner as well as manager, set to work assembling a strong squad for the Maroons' first NFL season.

He'd lost Henry and other "jumpers" back to other NFL teams, but he signed the Stein brothers, Herb and Russ, to hold down center and one tackle position. Both had been college All-Americans and continued their excellent play through several pro seasons. Russ Hathaway, a huge veteran and one of the best, lined up as the second tackle. Duke Osborn, who excelled while using a baseball cap for a helmet, and Frank Racis, with no college experience but lots of talent, took over the guard spots.

Joining holdovers Tony Latone and Barney Wentz in the backfield were breakaway threat Hoot Flanagan, former Army great Walter French, and a clever quarterback from Lafayette, Jack Ernst. Latone has been compared with Nagurski as a plunger and the others all could fly. Ernst was a feared passer.

Another former Army man, end Eddie Doyle was a fine player who, during World War II, would become the first American killed in the landings in North Africa.

Topping this collection of stars was Charlie Berry, possibly the best athlete on the team. After a spectacular athletic career at Lafayette College, he signed both pro baseball and pro football contracts. A catcher, he played 11 years of major league baseball and then spent 17 seasons as an outstanding American League umpire. On the gridiron, his defensive work would have made him a star, but he was even better known as a dangerous pass receiver. Moreover, he ranked with the best placekickers in the land.

To coach his awesome collection of stars, Striegel signed Dick Rauch, "one of the handsomest men I ever saw," according to O'Hara. More to the point, Rauch had been an assistant to respected Dick Harlow at Colgate University -- impressive credentials for an NFL coach in the '20s. Most leaders around the league were little more than on-field captains.

Striegel insisted that all Maroons players must live in Pottsville during the season -- it was common for players of the time to "job in" for weekend games -- and this allowed Rauch to practice his team daily. Only a few other NFL teams were able to do that.

All this talent cost money. Players were paid by the game, and though modern players might leave tips as large as most 1925 salaries, the money wasn't bad for those days. As Russ Hathaway pointed out many years later: "I was getting \$100 a game; the local miners didn't make that in a month. I was doing pretty well!"

Dr. Striegel's payroll had bulged in 1924; in 1925 it exploded. He was gambling that the Maroons' share for road games would make up for the meager receipts even a sell-out at little Minersville Park would bring.

After a tune-up victory over a non-league foe, the Maroons entertained Buffalo and blasted the Bisons, 28-0, for their first NFL victory. Unaccountably, they went flat the following week and the Providence Steam Roller, another team new to the NFL, topped them 6-0.

The Maroons righted themselves and for the next five Sundays were unscored upon while showing an unstoppable offense. Included in the five victories was a revenge, 34-0, win at Providence.

Just as Pottsville's miners were beginning to think about a championship, the team was upset by the Frankford Yellow Jackets, 20-0. Frankford was a Philadelphia suburb -- a mere 90 miles east of Pottsville -- and the Jackets played all home games on Saturdays because Pennsylvania Blue Laws prohibited Sunday football in the City of Brotherly Love. This was one of the reasons Pottsville had been granted an NFL franchise despite the tiny capacity of Minersville Park. Most NFL teams at that time were in the midwest, but a club's traveling expenses could be offset by playing back-to-back games at Frankford on Saturday and Pottsville on Sunday.

The win over the Maroons put Frankford out front as the top NFL eastern team. It also was the first step on the road to the "Stolen Championship." Flushed with victory, the Jacket leaders signed a contract with Frank Schumann, a Philadelphia promoter, wherein the leading eastern team would play a group of former Notre Dame stars at Shibe Park in December. In 1925, Notre Dame ranked second only to Red Grange as a football attraction. Naturally, the Jackets assumed they would continue as the eastern leader.

The day after losing at Frankford, Pottsville returned to friendly Minersville Park and got back on track with a tough win against Rochester. Two weeks later, after a couple more victories, the Maroons got their revenge. They ambushed Frankford at Minersville and humiliated them, 49-0.

Suddenly -- rather shockingly -- the Maroons supplanted the Yellow Jackets as tops in the east. Actually, many in Pottsville considered their team, with its sparkling 9-2-0 record, the best in the world.

But, out in Chicago, Chris O'Brien's Cardinals (now the Arizona Cardinals) were enjoying a rare good season. Led by their great triple-threat, halfback Paddy Driscoll, the Cards stood at 9-1-1, leaving the Maroons a half game behind in the NFL standings. It seemed a game between the two would settle the 1925 championship.

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O'Brien and Striegel scheduled the battle for Sunday, December 6, at Chicago's Comiskey Park.

THE POTTSVILLE VERSION

It is at this point -- the week before and the week following the Cardinals-Maroons game -- that the "Pottsville version" and the facts begin to diverge. The differences are sometimes subtle and, for the most part, based on an insufficient knowledge of the way things were in 1925. Nevertheless, the sum total is to make the "Pottsville version" as leaky as a two-dollar dinghy.

Here is how they tell the story in Pottsville:

The Cardinals-Maroons game was billed as "a post-season affair to settle without question the championship of the pro league."

An 18-degree temperature and driving snow held down the crowd at Comiskey Park where the Cards were favored. Perhaps everyone in Chicago underrated the invading Maroons. Few Chicagoans could have found Pottsville on a map -- or could have found any reason to.

After a scoreless opening quarter, the Maroons began to roll. Paddy Driscoll punted from behind his own goal line, and Jack Ernst returned it for Pottsville to the Cardinal five. Barney Wentz punched across a touchdown in three brutal plunges. Berry's conversion made it 7-0, Pottsville.

The Cardinals started a drive of their own after the kickoff, but Herb Stein intercepted a Redbird pass at Pottsville's 38. On the next play, Maroon halfback Hoot Flanagan suffered a broken collarbone and was replaced by Walter French. The former Army star reeled off matching 30-yard dashes, scoring on the second one. Berry again kicked true.

The game was as good as over. Chicago managed a touchdown before halftime, but Pottsville's crunching rushing attack controlled the second half. French, despite having his nose broken late in the game, led the way as the Maroons triumphed, 21-7, and thus -- Pottsville claimed -- won the NFL 1925 championship.

The Pottsville *Republican* gleefully stated, "Chicago newspapermen say the Maroons are the greatest football team they have seen."

One week later at Philadelphia's Shibe Park, the Maroons played another post-season game. This time they represented the NFL east against the Notre Dame All-Stars, a team made up of former Notre Dame players, including Harry Stuhldreher, Jim Crowley, Don Miller, and Elmer Layden, the famed "Four Horsemen" who had led the Irish to a national title and a Rose Bowl victory the season before.

Layden scored a first half touchdown for the Notre Damers, and Crowley added the extra point. In the third quarter, Tony Latone took a touchdown pass from Ernst, but the conversion was missed. The Irish led, 7-6, as time ran down in what Pottsville loyalists insist should be regarded as the first Professional vs. College All-Star game. Then, in the closing seconds, Charlie Berry stepped back to the 30-yard line and placekicked a perfect field goal to give the Maroons a 9-7 win. From the Pottsville point of view, their boys had

beaten the best of the pro football and the best of college football on consecutive weekends.

But, the victory at Shibe Park was pyrric, at best.

Shibe Park was located within the "market" (to use the current term) of the Frankford Yellow Jackets. According to Pottsville, the Jackets -- who'd entered the NFL in 1924 -- were bitter rivals of the Maroons. The teams had been staging no-holds-barred battles since before either joined the league. Therefore, Frankford officials maliciously protested the game as a violation of their territorial rights.

Although the protest came both after the official end of the season and after the game with the Notre Dame stars had been played, league president Carr spitefully upheld Frankford and ordered the Maroons stripped of their championship. Most dastardly of all, this came after the league had given verbal permission to the Maroons to go ahead with the game!

In order to "fix up" the official standings, Carr ordered Chris O'Brien's Chicago Cardinals to play two extra games against teams that had already disbanded for the year. This was hurriedly done. The Cards, naturally, won both games easily to go a half game ahead in the standings and finish as the "synthetic champion."

On Wednesday evening, December 16, 1925 -- four days after the victory over the Notre Dame All-Stars -- 300 loyal Maroons fans gathered at Pottsville's Necho Allen Hotel to declare their football team champions of the world and brood about the chicanery of the NFL. Joe Zacko presented each player with a tiny gold football, engraved with an assertion of the championship the league denied them.

A PETITION REJECTED

Although shorn of most of its outrage, that is the story as told by Pottsville for more than 60 years. If consistency is a virtue, the little town belongs with the saints. However, "consistency" and "accuracy" are two very different words ending in "y." The Pottsville version also ends with a "why." After all these years, WHY has the NFL refused to right such an apparently obvious wrong?

It certainly wasn't because Pottsville suffered in silence.

Walter S. Farquhar, longtime sports editor of the Pottsville *Republican* and patron saint of the "Pottsville version," repeated the story annually on his newspaper's pages for nearly three decades. Outside writers, looking for a little controversy to spice up a column, never found a lack of quotable, irate witnesses in Pottsville. The town's discontent blazed intermittently, but it smoldered always.

In 1962, some 37 years after the event, the Pottsville story again gained national attention when former Maroon fans made their most determined assault on the NFL.

Dick McCann, the first director of the new Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, was searching for significant football artifacts when he ran into Joe Zacko, still owner of Zacko's Sporting Goods, the original outfitter of the Maroons team. For years Zacko had been carrying the torch for his old gridiron heroes,

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and telling his story to anyone with time enough to hear it. He found McCann an eager listener, especially after he presented the director with some Pottsville football mementos. Encouraged by McCann, a committee, chaired by Zacko, requested and was granted an opportunity to present the Pottsville case to the NFL owners at their January 1963 meeting.

In a letter to NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle, the committee stated, "On behalf of the citizens of Schuylkill County, we kindly request your consideration for action on the part of the National Football League to correct the 1925 championship records." The committee's petition further stated that the "erroneous action" taken by the league was the result of an invalid protest filed by the Frankford Yellow Jackets. Three reasons for invalidity were given:

1. The Pottsville Maroons had verbal permission from Joseph Carr, President of the NFL, who later refused to confirm this authorization although several men offer testimony to this fact today.
2. The game was played after the close of the NFL season and under the rules of the period it is certainly questionable that NFL jurisdiction should have extended beyond the playing date, December 6, 1925.
3. Since the game with Notre Dame was an exhibition event, it certainly could not affect the league standing and, if a penalty were required, it should not have been greater than a monetary fine.

As an added incentive toward justice, the Pottsville contingent dangled a choice item of memorabilia before the NFL -- the very shoe with which Charlie Berry kicked the winning field goal against the Notre Dame stars. In effect, no championship -- no shoe.

The Pottsville petition was referred to a three-man committee, consisting of Jack Mara of the New York Giants, Art Rooney of the Pittsburgh Steelers, and Frank McNamee of the Philadelphia Eagles, for further study. Four months later at the May league meeting, the committee made its report. After listening to the findings and recommendations, the league owners voted 12-2 in favor of leaving the standings as they were.

How could the NFL be so heartless!

CHAMPIONSHIP GAME THAT WASN'T

To understand what really happened in 1925, you must know a little more about the time than what Pottsville tells. Additionally, you must keep the chronology of events carefully in mind. Let's start with November 26 -- Thanksgiving Day.

On that snowy Thursday, Harold "Red" Grange turned pro, and everything in professional football went slightly askew. He joined the Chicago Bears at Wrigley Field for their battle with the Cardinals. Paddy Driscoll's magnificent punting kept the redhead at bay all afternoon, and the game ended in a scoreless tie, the deadlock that kept the Cards a half game ahead of Pottsville in the standings at the time.

The most significant aspect of Grange's debut was that more than 36,000 people -- the largest crowd ever to witness a pro football game up to that time -- braved the snow to see Grange in action. Although the Bears made out like bandits, Cardinal Boss Chris O'Brien, who was losing money with a better team, had opted

before the game for the standard guarantee, \$1,200, instead of a share of the gate.

On Sunday, November 29, while Pottsville pummeled Frankford at Minersville, the league-leading Cardinals edged Rock Island, 7-0, before a meager crowd. Meanwhile, a full 20,000 turned out to see Grange lead the also-ran Bears over the so-so Columbus Tigers. Clearly, the name of the game had changed. For the time being, championships could take a back seat while everyone scrambled to get rich by playing the Fabulous Redhead.

December arrived and Grange departed Chicago with the Bears to play seven road games in less than two weeks. During that time, his box office magic would be unavailable to Chris O'Brien. The Cardinal owner settled for the next-best choice and scheduled the Maroons for the first Sunday of the month.

No doubt prompted by O'Brien, Chicago papers began hyperbolizing the upcoming clash. The *Tribune* observed: "The game is assuming proportions of a pro football world series." The next day it reported: "The fans appear to have warmed to the spectacle of the two strongest pro teams in the league battling for the title and the sale of seats at Spalding's 211 South State street yesterday was heavy." On December 5, the *Trib* explained the significance of the game: "Manager O'Brien scheduled the game as a post-season affair to settle without question the championship of the pro league. The Cardinals could hang up their moleskins and quit as champions, but Driscoll's men refuse to quit until they have had a chance at the eastern champions."

The only problem with all this tub-thumping was that the game was for the league LEADERSHIP rather than for the championship because it was not a "post-season" game at all. As a matter of fact, the season had two more weeks to go AFTER the Cards and Maroons met! This is possibly the most important misunderstanding in Pottsville's version of the story.

To explain the mix-up which confused Pottsville, the Chicago *Tribune*, and, perhaps at the time, even Chris O'Brien, we must take a quick tour through the league's first five years. In both 1920 and 1921 (when the league was called the American Professional Football Association), the championship races ended in dispute, partly because of disagreement as to what games to count and partly because no firm decision had been reached as to when to stop playing. With the championship based on win-loss percentage (there was no championship playoff scheduled until 1933), in theory, a team could play right on through April, racking up wins until its percentage topped its fellows. In 1922 and 1923, the Canton Bulldogs went undefeated, thus avoiding any controversy. However, the NFL could not expect an all-winning champion every year, and before the 1924 season began, the owners decided the season should end on November 30 with the team owning the best percentage at that time considered the champion. All games played after that date were to be considered exhibitions.

Ironically, the proposal for this cutoff date was made by Chicago Bears co-owner Dutch Sternaman, and a week into December the Bears defeated the Cleveland Bulldogs, the team with the top percentage on November 30. The Bears began calling themselves champions. Nevertheless, at the league's January 1925 meeting, President Joe Carr, backed by most of the league owners but

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bucking the powerful influence of George Halas, ruled that the NFL had to follow its own rules. Cleveland was declared the champion.

At this same meeting, a more realistic end date was agreed upon for the 1925 season -- December 20.

At the August meeting -- the one at which Pottsville joined the league -- a schedule of games was okayed. Most pro football histories indicate hit-or-miss scheduling in the NFL's early years, but that is not precisely true. By 1925, the league was able to put together a complete schedule up to a point and publish it before the season began. But, and this no doubt added to the confusion, the final listed games were on December 6. The idea was that, by that date, all of the league's teams would fulfill their obligation to play a required number of games (eight games against eight different clubs). The poor draws that stood to lose their jerseys if they continued to play among December's snowflakes could pack it in for the year. Those teams that might still make money could schedule each other through December 20. The Cardinals-Maroons game, which was not on the original schedule, was just such a game.

To help fans cope with this open-ended schedule, teams that expected to take advantage of it sometimes published a note in their home game programs similar to the one found in the Detroit Panther's program of November 11: "All games played up to and including December 20 will count in the League standings."

And that is the essential point. When the Maroons defeated the Cardinals on December 6 and newspapers around the country rushed to declare Pottsville the NFL Champions, they were a bit premature. The Maroons had merely taken over the league lead. The season still had two weeks to go. Anything could happen.

It nearly did.

Before those two critical weeks were over, events took place that would cause one NFL team to be fined, one to be suspended, an owner to be forced to sell his team, a player to be barred for life, and a controversy begun that would last more than 60 years.

O'BRIEN TRIES FOR RED

On Saturday, December 5, the day before the Cardinals-Maroons game, Red Grange drew 36,000 to Shibe Park in Philadelphia to watch the Bears defeat Frankford. The next day, more than 60,000 came to New York's Polo Grounds as the Bears topped the Giants. After his Cardinals lost to the Maroons by a solid 21-7, club owner Chris O'Brien still believed he had a good possibility of landing Grange for a season-closing, December 20, game with his Cardinals. But he also knew he could enhance his chances by reclaiming first place in the league standing. Therefore, he tried an end run.

On Tuesday, December 8, he announced the Cards would play the Hammond Pros on the following Saturday. The next day, he revealed another game would be played first on Thursday, December 10, against the Milwaukee Badgers.

O'Brien's intent was obvious. Two victories over weak opponents would give his team a better percentage than Pottsville, thus -- according to the Chicago *Tribune* -- "forcing another contest with

the Bears." That a rematch with Grange was O'Brien's real object is shown by the fact he met with C.C. Pyle, Grange's personal manager, BEFORE announcing the Milwaukee game.

Although both Hammond and Milwaukee had disbanded for the season, the Pros were able to call in most of their regulars and put up a good struggle before falling, 13-0. The Milwaukee game two days before was a different matter. The Badgers' lineup was so patched together with unfamiliar players that O'Brien decided to throw open the gates and forego any admission charge. Paddy Driscoll didn't even play as the Cards romped, 59-0.

The dates of these two games are significant. Pottsville has always contended that Joe Carr ordered the Cardinals to play them AFTER the Pottsville-Notre Dame All-Star game. Instead, the Milwaukee affair took place two days BEFORE (Dec. 10) and the Hammond game was on the SAME DATE (Dec. 12) as the Notre Dame game. Moreover, Chicago *Tribune* stories make it clear that the idea of outflanking Pottsville with two extra games originated not with Carr but with Chris O'Brien.

Ironically, the purpose of all O'Brien's maneuvering went down the drain during the same week. Red Grange suffered an injured arm in a non-league exhibition game at Pittsburgh. Doctors ordered him out of action. Whether the Cardinals were in first place or not, there would be no rich payoff against Grange on December 20.

O'Brien didn't even try to schedule another team for the season's final day. That would have only cost him more money. As far as any claim to the championship, that would turn on the resolution of the curious events taking place in Pennsylvania.

THE WRONG PLACE FOR THE IRISH

Until the Maroons went to Chicago, there was a distinct odor of fish emanating from their record. On no fewer than seven different occasions during 1925, Pottsville played teams the day after the same clubs had fought a Saturday game at Frankford. Not surprisingly, Pottsville won six of the encounters. Some critics wondered what the Maroons' record might have been had all their opponents been fresh. Indeed, their humiliating, 49-0, victory over Frankford -- the win that put them in line to play the Notre Dame All-Stars -- came the day after a tough Yellow Jacket game with Green Bay. However, the 21-7 victory over the Cardinals quieted criticism to the extent that most fans were willing to accept Pottsville as the top team in the league.

Certainly, many fans in Pottsville had already decided the Maroons were the champs. However, those who looked at the schedule realized the season had not yet been completed. A game at Providence was slated for Sunday, December 13.

But Pottsville was much more intent on the day before -- Saturday, December 12 -- when they would play the Notre Dame All-Stars at Shibe Park. The game figured to be a big moneymaker; next to Grange, Notre Dame was the biggest name in football. To Pottsville's way of thinking, the Maroons had already won the NFL championship. A victory over the Irish would mean the "world" title -- and a lot of money.

In later years, Pottsville supporters tried to pass the contest off as the first pro-college all-star game, a forerunner of the Chicago

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extravaganza which for so many years kicked off the grid season. This it certainly was not. Nearly all of the Notre Dame men had already appeared in one professional uniform or another, some of them for several seasons. And all-star teams were a fairly common occurrence. On Thursday, December 10 -- two days before the Notre Dame game -- an all-star team that included Russ and Herb Stein of the Maroons defeated the Bears at Pittsburgh in the game that saw Grange injured.

All this flummery aside, Dr. Striegel had badly overplayed his hand. Shibe Park was clearly inside the protected territory of the Frankford Yellow Jackets -- the Jackets had just played there on December 5 against Grange and Co. -- and security of a home territory was one of the main reasons any team purchased a franchise in the NFL. A Pottsville trespass might not have seemed so awful had the Yellow Jackets disbanded for the season, but, as a matter of fact, they were scheduled to go against Cleveland across town at Frankford Stadium on December 12 -- the same day! In other words, Dr. Striegel had signed a contract to go head-to-head against a fellow member of the league!

As ludicrous as it may seem, Striegel always told reporters that he had received verbal permission over the telephone from the league before signing the contract. On close questioning, he admitted that the verbal go-ahead hadn't come from Carr, the only person who could grant it, but instead from the league secretary. On at least one occasion, Striegel even named the secretary -- Jerry Corcoran. The only problem with that scenario was that the NFL secretary was Carl Storck! Jerry Corcoran was manager of the Columbus Tigers and had no more power to set league policy than Striegel himself.

Frankford's protest has a "spoil sport" side to it. When the contract was signed to bring the Notre Damers to Philadelphia, the Jackets fully expected to play host. The contract has been lost, but certainly Frankford president Shep Royle never believed for a moment that the Maroons could be the "home team" in Philadelphia. The scheduling of a Frankford- Cleveland game at little Frankford Stadium opposite the "big one" at Shibe Park was a last-minute idea, probably just to strengthen Royle's protest to the league.

But no matter what might be said for (or against) Frankford sportsmanship, the fact is they were on firm legal (at least, "NFL legal") ground.

As soon as President Carr heard about the Notre Dame game, messages began descending on Dr. Striegel, all of the "thou shalt not" variety. Carr was very clear that Pottsville faced suspension if it played the game. The Pottsville people later accused Carr of delivering his verdict only after the game had been played, but that just isn't so. Pre-game newspaper stories show that Carr warned Striegel a biblical three times and detailed what he would do to Pottsville and its "championship" if they went ahead with the affair.

Striegel hesitated. He asked Carr if the league would cover the loss (and probable law suit) if he backed out of his contract with Schumann. Carr offered all reasonable protection but the NFL wasn't going to pick up the tab for Striegel. For home publication, Striegel was all bluster. He'd never backed out of a contract before, he postured, and wasn't going to do it now, conveniently forgetting his obligation to the National Football League.

Striegel insisted he was honor-bound to take his team to Philadelphia (where he expected to be honor-bound to accept a large check).

THE AXE FALLS

On Saturday, December 12, four things happened.

The Pottsville Maroons defeated the Notre Dame All-Stars, 9-7, on the strength of a Charlie Berry field goal before a disappointing crowd of only 8,000, not many more than might have been jammed into Pottsville's Minersville Park. Ironically, the big game was a big financial flop.

The Cleveland Bulldogs defeated the Yellow Jackets, 3-0, at Frankford Stadium before another 8,000 -- about half what the popular team normally drew at home.

Dr. J.G. Striegel received a telegram from Joe Carr stating that the Pottsville Maroons had been fined \$500, suspended from all rights and privileges (including the right to compete for the championship, of course), and had their franchise forfeited to the league.

The Providence Steam Roller received word that they were not permitted to play Pottsville the next day. It took \$44 worth of long-distance telephone calls for Providence to hurriedly fix up a substitute visitation from Frankford.

By Sunday, all of these things were public knowledge.

Also on Sunday, without Red Grange and after returning a good deal of money to disappointed fans, the Bears lost to the New York Giants at Wrigley Field.

One week later, the Yellow Jackets defeated the Bulldogs at Cleveland. They were the only two NFL teams who found any reason to play a game on the official last day of the 1925 season.

WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS?

At this point, one might well wonder where all the controversy came from. It should be obvious that a team that is not in a league -- and Pottsville was officially out eight days before the end of the season -- cannot win the championship of that league.

We may not like the Cardinals' scheduling those extra games, but Chris O'Brien had every right to do it.

We may not admire Frankford's churlish protest, but Shep Royle was within his rights, too.

We may sympathize with Dr. Striegel, but he was wrong.

And he was well warned. Instead, he chose to ignore his league obligations in hope of a fast Philadelphia dollar. He traded a championship nearly-won for gate receipts never-to-be.

However, memory is selective. Over many years the details of the story faded and only the memory of an outstanding team that did NOT get its title remained.

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Then, too, as soon as the 1925 season ended, events began to unfold in a way that completely muddied the waters.

First, the Cardinals found themselves in trouble when the truth about the hastily-arranged Thursday morning game broke in Chicago. In order to get eleven men on the field, the Milwaukee team had put four high school boys in uniform.

Joe Carr investigated immediately and his punishment was swift. The Milwaukee team was not suspended, but the owner, Ambrose McGurk, was given 90 days to sell his club. Art Folz, a Cardinal player who admitted procuring the high school boys for McGurk, was banned from the NFL for life. And, although everyone agreed that Chris O'Brien hadn't known about the arrangement, the Cardinals were still fined \$1,000 and put on probation.

Carr said he would have the Milwaukee game stricken from the standings, but the league never got around to doing that. It is still carried in the official 1925 standings appearing in the NFL Record Manual. Pottsville fans want that game and the Cardinal-Hammond game played two days later removed on the false hope that their Maroons would then win the title on percentage. But Pottsville had been suspended; their percentage didn't matter!

At about the same time the truth came out in Chicago, Dr. Striegel went to Columbus and begged Carr to reconsider his actions against Pottsville. Carr relented to the extent that he agreed to submit the whole mess to the owners for review at the February league meeting. In the interim, Pottsville's suspension held.

The league met on February 6, 1926, at the Hotel Statler in Detroit. With Dr. Striegel in the room, President Carr detailed the events of the Pottsville case. Perhaps his most damning statement was: "Three different notices forbidding the Pottsville club to play were given and the management elected to play regardless".

After Carr finished his summary, the owners took ten minutes to discuss the situation and to hear anything Dr. Striegel had to say. Then they voted to accept Carr's report. Pottsville was still out of the NFL.

However, when it came to awarding the 1925 championship, a new snag developed. Even without the Milwaukee game, the Cardinals clearly had the best record of those teams eligible for the title. But, when it was moved and seconded that the Redbirds be awarded the championship, word arrived from Chris O'Brien that the Cardinals would not "accept" the championship. The decision, of course, was the league's to make, not O'Brien's, but the vote was tabled and apparently not picked up again. The NFL never actually went through the formality of awarding the 1925 championship to anyone!

The distinction is, of course, purely technical. The Cardinals were indisputably the league champs, and later Redbird owners (the franchise was moved to St. Louis in 1960 and is now in Arizona) have had no scruples about claiming the 1925 title as part of the Cardinal heritage. But O'Brien's refusal gave Pottsville supporters fuel for their fire.

And, finally, the Pottsville team in 1926 and for several seasons thereafter wore jackets with "World Champions 1925" emblazoned

on the back. Apparently no protest was ever made by the league, and, indeed, none should have been. The Maroons -- with their wins over the Cardinals and over the ex-Notre Damers -- quite probably were the best team in the world that year. Had they chosen to remain in the league until the end of the season, they might also have been NFL Champions.

There's something in us all that loves an underdog. Certainly, in taking on the big bad NFL, little Pottsville qualifies and then some. All they ask is that one ancient championship be removed from the record of the (now Phoenix) Cardinals and chalked up in the Pottsville column. After all, the Cards have one to spare; they won again in 1947. By then, the Maroons had been a memory for 19 years.

After finishing third in 1926 (yes, they got back in the league), the Maroons plunged to the bottom of the NFL standings for two years when their stars aged, retired, or moved on to other teams. Finally, in 1929, Dr. Striegel took his franchise to Boston, renamed it "Bulldogs," and spent a season contending with Depression economics and Beantown apathy. Then he folded for good.

As a footnote, a new Boston franchise, granted in 1932, moved on to Washington, D.C., in '37. There is a line of thought that argues today's Redskins are an incarnation of the old Maroons, but that's mere romanticism. The Maroons are gone forever.

But that only makes their "lost cause" more appealing. A great many people both in and outside Pottsville would grow warm and mushy if the little town could set up an official "NFL Champions 1925" monument next to their 60-foot Henry Clay.

Aside from the Phoenix Cardinals, the only folks who might object are those who know what REALLY happened back then.

Alas! the "Pottsville's version" is just the opposite of that Henry Clay statue. If you actually go to the statue instead of reading the Pottsville brochure, you'll discover 15 feet of Henry Clay and 45 feet of base. If you actually check into the infamous "stolen championship," you'll learn the Pottsville version has no base at all. It's a myth.

But a myth, that's been nurtured for more than 60 years.

AFTERMATH

Had Pottsville remained out of the league, there might have been a chance for clearing up the mess. Their absence in 1926 might have tipped researchers that the team had not completed the 1925 season. But Red Grange got the Maroons back into the NFL.

At the same February meeting in Detroit that confirmed Pottsville's suspension, Grange and Pyle announced they had secured a lease to Yankee Stadium and intended to put a pro football team in New York. Understandably, this was distressing news to Tim Mara, who held exclusive territorial rights to the Big Apple for his Giants. Just how important it had been for Joe Carr to take a stand on the issue of territorial rights in 1925 now became clear. If the NFL gave into Grange and Pyle this time, it would soon find itself at the mercy of every new star who happened along.

The Professional Football Researchers Association

Standing behind Mara, the league turned down Grange and Pyle in their application for a franchise. The dynamic duo announced they would form their own league for 1926. By mid-summer the NFL was involved in a war with Grange's American Football League.

Discretion became the better part of justice. Chris O'Brien was in deep trouble in Chicago, facing the new AFL Bulls as well as the Bears. His \$1,000 fine was rescinded to help him operate. Even Art Folz was reinstated to keep him from playing for the AFL.

One NFL team, Rock Island, jumped to the new league, but the others held firm. And that left Pottsville. The Maroons had a strong team in being but no league to play in. If they joined Grange, the AFL would gain a great deal of credibility. To avoid that, the National Football League reinstated the Maroons at the League's summer meeting. No consideration was given to awarding the prodigals the previous year's championship.

Although Pottsville's reinstatement helped the league survive Grange's challenge, it forever obscured the 1925 situation. For the 1925 and 1926 standings did not reflect the fact that from December 12, 1925 until July 10, 1926, the Pottsville Maroons were not members of the NFL.

IN RETROSPECT....

To summarize, in 1925 the Pottsville Maroons by their own choice and despite repeated warnings, disobeyed a crucial NFL rule. As a consequence, they forfeited their franchise, did not complete their scheduled league season, and gave up any rights to a championship they were on the verge of winning. All of this occurred before December 20, the scheduled end of the 1925 season.

The last two games scheduled by the Chicago Cardinals at the end of the 1925 season were initiated by Chris O'Brien, not to secure the championship itself, but to set up a potentially profitable game with Red Grange and the Chicago Bears. The games were not ordered by Joe Carr as claimed by Pottsville. And, although the Milwaukee team used ineligible players in one of the games, the Cardinal owner was found to be in no way at fault.

The nice people of Pottsville are not barefaced liars. Like Don Quixote, they're simply unaware of the true situation. It's time they stopped tilting at the NFL windmill. The Maroons were a heck of a good team in 1925, but the NFL did not ripoff their championship.

Although the Maroons handed it to them, the Cardinals at first refused to accept the championship and, in fact, the NFL never officially awarded one for 1925. However, as the team with the best record of those eligible for the title, the Cardinals must be regarded as the 1925 champs.

The attempt by "Red" Grange and C.C. Pyle to form a rival pro league in 1926 caused Pottsville to be reinstated to the NFL, but certainly did not make the Maroons eligible for the championship of the previous season.

Instead of glory, they chose to go for the "quick buck" in Philadelphia. By doing so they did not have a championship "stolen" as they have so long claimed. On the contrary, they discarded it themselves.

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