

Shelby Who?

1910

By PFRA Research

During the Twentieth Century's second decade, Ohio professional football climbed out of the doldrums, surpassed the Olympian standards of the 1905-06 Massillon-Canton super teams, and achieved a level that made the formation of a real league possible, indeed necessary. All this was accomplished within a short ten years and with a sort of rondo movement in which the Ohio teams began at the same low aesthetic echelon as others across the country, then outdistanced the teams of those other areas in both fact and legend, and finally found themselves desperately seeking an institutional methodology to maintain their lead over rapidly improving rivals coming at them from all directions.

At the beginning -- 1910 -- the teams of Ohio, semi-pros all, were no better nor worse in ability than the teams of Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and several other states. Such teams were made up of local sandlotters and occasional college-trained players who either coached in the area or for reasons other than football already lived in or close enough to the team's home base to be available for a Sunday's rough-and-tumble. Players were normally paid by divvying up the profits, if any, at the end of the game or the season. Some teams -- usually those blessed with enclosed playing fields -- charged admission to their games; others, playing on public lots, simply passed the hat among spectators. In one sense, these teams of circa 1910 were more stable than those of the earlier '05-'06 days or the 1915-19 era that followed because their lineups seldom changed drastically over the course of a season. There was very little use of ringers for even the biggest games. The budget couldn't bear it. And even when ringers were introduced, primarily by George "Peggy" Parratt of Shelby and later Akron, they were almost exclusively from Ohio or just beyond its borders.

But the situation escalated within five years. By mid-decade, Ohio stood preeminent in the basically mid-western universe of pro football. With Jim Thorpe -- the world's greatest athlete -- as their centerpiece and crafty Jack Cusack as their manager, the completely professional Canton Bulldogs ruled Ohio gridirons with a juggernaut roster of talented imports. Although he wasn't always certain of their true names, Cusack paid his players by the week. Thorpe received the largest chunk of cash, but others were well compensated by the standards of the day, and Cusack's lineup was likely to be peppered with a new famous name or a new famous set of muscles under an assumed name each game as stars became available.

According to Cusack himself, he was able to keep his ledgers in the black despite his importation of high-priced ringers. Certainly, his Canton club was artistically successful. The Bulldogs played at a level that would make their accomplishments legendary through succeeding decades. Yet they were not the be- all-end-all of pro

football in Ohio. Teams in Massillon, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo and Cleveland were as good or better on the field as any teams to be found in neighboring states. Few teams other than Canton, however, were able to make a profit.

World War I was a curse on Mankind, unless he was the kind of man who earned his living in the American Midwest in 1914-17. As long as the U.S. stayed out of the fighting and sold everything from wheat to weapons to those embroiled across the sea, the first World War was a bonanza for midwest farmers and businessmen.

A side effect of the growing midwestern wealth was rampant boosterism, the kind that would cause the citizens of one small town to bet their collective arm their town's football team could knock the hell out of the eleven of some other Podunk. And the money was there to pay a famous player or two to train in for any big game. Bragging rights cost a pretty penny, but if the local grid team spent a few bucks to beat a neighboring podunk, the money could be made up through wagers laid with the opposing team's supporters.

But all things end, even wars. In the aftermath, money wasn't so easy to come by. Several Ohio pro teams tried to operate in 1919 at the same level or higher that had been the rage in 1917. It didn't work. Players, some great, some not-so, benefitted from a sellers' market, but the team managers grew desperate. All the ink in Ohio turned red in 1919. Had Ohio pro football been the only buyer of fine football flesh, the Canton-Massillon-Akron-Dayton-etc. people could have handled the situation, but by '19 the grid world was populated by many up-and-coming -- and buying -- football teams outside the state. A desperate remedy was needed.

But that's another story. Here we'll simply concern ourselves with how Ohio pro football got in and out of the frying pan. The fire can be detailed later.

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The Canton Simpson Tigers of 1910 were a semi-pro team sponsored by a Canton cigar store, but their coach was a full professional. Ben Clarke's contract called for the princely sum of \$2 a week plus his jersey. He was doing considerably better than his players who had to buy (or possibly rent) their jerseys from the cigar store and, naturally, provide the rest of their equipment such as shoes, pants and any pads.

The season started off well when the Simpsons drew nearly 2,000 people to Whitacre Field for their opener with the Cleveland Hinkles. Canton dominated the visitors en route to a 17-6 win, but

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the game was maddeningly slow. Everyone, players and fans alike, was confused by the new schemes that had been adopted by the college rule-makers after the 1909 season. Time and again, bored fans sat twiddling their thumbs while officials explained the changes to the players.

The most significant of these made it a no-no for a player to aid the ball-carrier by pulling, shoving, pushing, or tugging him through the line -- or throwing him over it for that matter. Until this little rule was writ, ball-carriers sometimes had handles sewn on their uniforms to help their teammates get a grip. To say the practice was dangerous is to praise with faint condemnation. The handles were just as helpful to foe as to friend. The effect on a runner being pulled in two directions by a dozen or so hefty men was seldom wholesome. The no-help rule capped a campaign that had been in progress to eradicate mass and momentum plays like the flying wedge before the wedge eradicated all the football players.

Two other important rules: the game was divided into four quarters instead of simply two halves. And a player who left a game for illness, injury, fatigue, or simply to run to the men's room was allowed to return in a later quarter.

The Simpsons' grasp of the new rules had few witnesses the next week. Attendance fell off alarmingly for an easy, 27-0 victory over another Cleveland-based team, the Wayne A.C. Hoping it was the park's fault, the Simpsons played their next game at League (formerly Mahaffey) Park, but the size of the crowd didn't improve. And the Simpsons regressed. They played sloppily in the first half and let the Akron Tigers build up a 12-0 lead. When they finally began attending to business in the second half, the Simpsons closed the gap to 12-11, but Akron iced the game with a field goal in the closing minutes.

"Peggy" Parratt's Shelby Blues were up next. The Blues came to town fully expecting a win. After all, the only team to whip them since 1906 had been the state champion Akron Indians. And, perhaps the Blues had their minds on an upcoming meeting with Akron. Whatever the reason, the Simpsons were all over them from the beginning, though scoring was beyond their grasp. The Cigar-men consistently drove down the field only to be stopped just short of the goal line by Shelby. Then, in the second quarter, the Blues caught a break. Or, more specifically, Curtis of Shelby caught an errant Canton pass and sped 70 yards for a touchdown.

Trailing 6-0 -- the five-point TD plus a conversion -- in the fourth quarter, Canton's Coach Clarke earned his jersey by switching strategy. The Simpsons laid aside their passes and trick plays and concentrated on old-fashioned, grind-it-out football. As the Simpsons drove down the field Norman "Dutch" Speck, who would still be around when Canton began winning championships in the National Football League, did most of the ball-carrying, finally crashing over for the TD. Captain Roy Guest nailed the conversion for a 6-6 tie.

On the following Monday in the wake of the Simpson's best performance, the Canton *Repository* revealed that the players were thinking about packing it in for the season. The team was in a financial hole. At an emergency meeting called that night at the cigar store, Captain Guest complained: "We have been getting the best teams in the state, and were under the impression that that

was what the Canton people wanted, but when it comes to supporting us financially they have fallen down. It costs to get teams like Shelby and the Akron Tigers here. The guarantee that we had to put up for the Shelby game was \$135, and we took in but a little over \$100 Sunday afternoon. We also went into the hole last Sunday." The Simpsons had already canceled two games with well-known teams because their ability to make the guarantees was doubted.

"We are not eager to make money," Guest insisted, "but we must make expenses."

The players hemmed and hawed through the rest of the meeting and finally decided to try to finish the season. A special campaign was launched, selling booster tickets and soliciting aid from Canton businesses.

It was enough to allow the Simpsons to struggle along. They lost a game to the Akron Blues, but then finished with three straight wins, including victories over their two city rivals -- the Canton Indians and the Canton Nutshell Tigers. Several of the Simpsons' best players, including Captain Guest and "Dutch" Speck had jumped to the Nutshells in mid-season, probably over the Simpsons' money crunch. When the two teams squared off for the Canton city championship on November 13, they were very near equal in strength.

The Nutshells outplayed the Simpsons through most of the game. Nearly all the action for three quarters took place in the Simpsons' territory, but all the Nutshells had to show for their efforts were five points, the results of a short field goal by Guest and a safety. In the fourth quarter, the Nutshells were forced back toward their own end of the field. Guest attempted to punt under a strong Simpson rush. His kick was a line drive that traveled only about ten yards right into the hands of Walter Lawrence, a sub Simpson end. Lawrence nipped over the goal line, but he was ruled to have stepped out of bounds at the four. However, only two line plunges were necessary to put the ball into the end zone with Ralph Hoffman doing the honors. "Red" McDermott's successful conversion put the Simpsons in front 6-5, a lead they maintained to the final gun.

Technically, both McDermott and Hoffman were ringers. Both had performed up until this game for the Canton Indians. Nothing much was said about it. Hoffman and McDermott were veteran Canton players rather than outsiders, and their presence in the Simpsons' lineup was no more unusual than that of Speck and Guest in the Nutshells'.

Most larger cities had more than one team. For those teams, a game for the city championship was THE game of any season. Such contests usually drew the biggest crowds and betting was high, but more than bragging and betting was involved. Winning the city championship usually meant a team could base its home games at its city's best football field the following year. New fans and a stronger schedule could justify the investment. On the other hand, losing could condemn a team to games on a cow pasture that might not even be enclosed. Moreover, the best local players gravitated to a town's top team. In many cases, a first city championship became the springboard to a long reign as a city's main football attraction.

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The Simpson Tigers' victory over the Nutshells wasn't as big a deal as many other city's championships. Canton, still remembering the super Bulldog teams of 1905-06, didn't support any of its lesser teams to any great extent. It would take a serious challenge for the state championship to induce Cantonites to spend their Sunday afternoons watching football. If then.

The year of 1910 saw three deaths of significance in American cultural history. Mark Twain, that most American of our writers, passed away in New York and was universally mourned even though by then he'd become so darkly pessimistic about his fellow man that he may not have viewed his taking permanent leave of their company as an unmitigated tragedy.

Out in the Sorrow Mountains of California, the last white man to die in a skirmish with Indians bit the dust. From here on out, any example of a native American dispatching a white man would be regarded by our government as a homicide rather than warfare. This has no doubt been a great comfort to those who compile death stats.

In Ohio, Charles Follis died of pneumonia on April 6. He was 31 years old. Known as "The Black Cyclone," Follis was a marvelous athlete and, as nearly as we can tell, the first African-American ever to be paid to play football. His long-distance runs from his halfback position had helped make the team of the tiny city of Shelby a giant in Ohio football in the century's first half dozen years. He was to all accounts even more talented on the baseball diamond. Everyone who saw him play agreed he would have been a star in the major leagues had he only been white. African-Americans, of course, were not permitted in the white major leagues. Few at the time saw anything inherently evil in such a prohibition.

The deaths of Follis, Twain and what's-his-name in California were marked by the return of Halley's Comet, although it is quite likely the comet would have looked in regardless. Nevertheless, the comet's reappearance sparked the usual mularkey about ends and beginnings of the world. And though the end-of-it-all predictions proved premature, it has become customary to assert a connection between any thing that began in 1910 and Halley's.

It would be nice if we could find such a comet connection to Ohio professional football in 1910. But that just isn't the case. A new beginning occurred in very small measure during the 1911 season when no comet appeared -- a measure so tiny as to go almost unnoticed -- but 1910 is more accurately identified as the last season of the old regime when home-grown town teams were all that could be seen on Ohio pro football gridirons. This glamourless milieu had been the rule in Ohio (and everywhere else) since the star-laden Massillon Tigers and Canton Bulldogs collapsed of their own excesses in 1906.

If pro football were movie titles, 1910 was "The Way We Were."

The Akron Indians had ruled as Ohio champs in 1908-09, and they got off to a big start in 1910 with a 72-0 win over yet another

Canton team -- the Blues. The next week they cemented their claim to being the best in their own town by topping the Akron Tigers, 26-0. The Cleveland Hinkles were no problem, visiting and losing 49-6. For their fourth win, the Indians took on the Pittsburgh Lyceum team, a power from 1907-09 but on the downgrade by '10. What might have been the battle of the season only a year earlier turned into a routine, 17-0 Akron victory. The Indians improved their record to 5-0 with a 12-3 win over another Akron challenger, the East End Blues. A third straight state title seemed in the Indians' future.

The Akron Tigers weren't in the Indians' class, even though they managed to lose a late-season game to their betters by a mere 5-0. But after their first, more one-sided loss to the Indians, they pulled off a pair of surprising wins.

On October 16, they surprised the Simpson Tigers at Canton, 15-11. The next week, the Columbus Panhandles came to Akron and were annihilated 40-0. The 'Handles were one of the most famous teams in Ohio because of the presence of the Nesser brothers in their lineup. By 1910, they numbered six: John, Phil, Ted, Fred, Frank and Al, the latter playing his first season with the team. All were burly boilermakers for the Panhandle Division of the Pennsylvania Railroad who'd learned their football on rugged sandlots. Finesse was not their style, and if they lost as often as they won, they usually left their opponents battered. Why they collapsed against the heretofore-ordinary Tigers is anybody's guess. Perhaps part of the problem was that neither Frank nor Al Nesser appear to have played in the game -- not too surprising, the Nessers were hired guns in Ohio football and often picked up extra dollars by playing for anyone who'd pay.

For the Akron Tigers, the Panhandle game marked the high point of their season. In November, they lost to the Canton Nutshell Tigers, the Akron Indians, and were blown out, 23-0, when they visited the Panhandles in Columbus.

By November, the race for the state independent football championship -- mythical but coveted -- boiled down to the defending champion Akron Indians and Shelby. Little Shelby had been in dogged pursuit of the Ohio State Championship ever since the 1890's. They'd claimed the title around the turn of the century when the competition was nearly all amateur, and even in those '05-'06 seasons when Canton and Massillon were far more potent than any other Ohio combatants, Shelby was generally regarded as the state's third best team. For the past two years, Shelby had been unsuccessfully challenging the Akron Indians for the crown.

In 1910, Shelby was not to be denied. The only question was which Shelby team to crown. The little town of 5,000 produced not one but two claimants.

The Sheby Blues, named after the blue sweaters they were fitted with in their first season, were a team that had been chasing Akron for two seasons. They'd replaced the old Shelby A.C. as the town's major football effort in 1905 and been consistent winners if not quite champions ever since. John Miller, a halfback who'd captained the Blues in their first year, managed and coached the team in 1910, but quarterback Peggy Parratt was usually thought of as in charge. Certainly his in-put into team decisions outweighed that of any other Blue. Another important veteran was center Guy

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"Germany" Schulz, brother of Adolph "Germany" Schulz, the three-time University of Michigan All-America. Guy Schulz was an outstanding player, but it's a little hard to believe he was better than Adolph, as some accounts would have it. Adolph was still being chosen to all-time collegiate teams fifty years after his last game for the Wolverines; Guy, who apparently had no college training, was a big fish in the then-small pond of Ohio independents.

The second Shelby claimant to the championship was the Tigers, managed by Frank C. Schiffer, Sr., who'd been in charge of the old A.C. when they first started paying players, including first black pro Charles Follis. As coach and quarterback, Schiffer enlisted former Blues' star Homer Davidson, conceded to be the best kicker of the day, at least as far as Ohio was concerned. Schulz also played for the Tigers at times, as well as Ben Sutter, a pocket-size end who'd been around for years. Several other players moved back and forth between the two teams, a situation that ultimately was to be the key to solving the dilemma the Blues and Tigers found themselves in at the end of the season.

The Tigers roared through their early games while the only blemish on the Blues' record was the 6-6 tie with the Canton Simpsons on October 23. Shortly after that, John Miller approached Frank Schiffer and suggested that the two teams merge instead of fighting each other for the limited fandom of Shelby. When Schiffer turned him down, Miller tried playing the Blues' next couple of games at Mansfield. Although those fans who showed up were enthusiastic, most of the people of Mansfield regarded the Blues as foreigners and attendance was considerably lower than what the team had been used to back in Shelby. After another disappointing turnout, the Shelby-Mansfield Blues became once more the Shelby Blues.

On November 13, the Blues traveled to Akron for a showdown with the Indians. To the shock of the Akronites, the Blues dominated the game throughout and walked off with a 16-6 win.

Meanwhile, the Shelby Tigers were rolling unscathed through their games. A couple of ringers including veteran runner "Bullet" Riley joined the team, but they were all Ohioans from the northern part of the state. The main show was Homer Davidson, who dropkicked a 45-yard field goal in one game and ran and passed well every time he played.

The Blues' schedule appeared more demanding than the Tigers', but the key to their season was their victory over Akron's two-time champion Indians in mid-November. That pushed the Blues to the top in the competition for state honors. However, the Shelby Tigers had a signed contract to play the Indians at Shelby on Thanksgiving Day.

But, when the Blues beat the Indians on November 13, it left only one way open for the Akron team to hold onto its title -- they needed a rematch with the Blues.

The Indians' manager telephoned Frank Schiffer with the bad news: the Indians cancelled their game with the Tigers and forfeited their \$100 guarantee. Instead, they would play at home on Thanksgiving; their opponent -- the Blues.

John Miller was roundly criticized by some in Shelby for agreeing to what amounted to a dirty trick from the Tigers' point of view. Schiffer challenged the Blues to a game to settle on a Shelby champion, but Miller would have been six kinds of a fool to accept at that point. Not with the Indians game coming up.

Instead, he did the intelligent thing and brought in a ringer for the big game. Glen Gray was regarded in some circles as the greatest runner ever produced in Ohio when he performed for Oberlin in 1907-09. No small part of his reputation came from a 109-yard touchdown run he'd made against Cornell College in 1908. It's still the longest run from scrimmage ever made on an Ohio gridiron (and isn't likely to be challenged since the field was shortened to a hundred yards in 1912).

Gray made no monster runs against the Akron Indians, but he helped his new team score a touchdown and conversion plus a safety. That was enough to settle Akron's hash and bring an 8-5 win back to Shelby.

And now the arguments became rabid. Certainly the state championship belonged to Shelby. But which Shelby? The Blues were unbeaten if once tied and had those two big victories over the Akron Indians. The Tigers were unbeaten, untied, and unscored upon! The Blues played the harder schedule, but the Tigers won more convincingly. Frank Schiffer renewed his challenge to play off the differences, suggesting the entire gate and \$500 go to the winner.

In fact, a true play-off was impossible because too many players had seen action for both teams over the season. Any game between the Blues and Tigers would force several men to choose sides. And, the outcome of the game would depend simply on how their loyalties divided up.

Finally, someone suggested that since both teams were from Shelby (more or less), they should simply share the championship in the name of the city. Most Shelbyites accepted that solution, and, since most of the rest of the state couldn't tell a Blue from a Tiger anyway, the 1910 Ohio Independent Football Championship was generally credited to the Shelby What-ever's, whose combined record was a glittering 13-0-1.