

Ten Dollars and Cakes

The "Not Quite" First Pro: 1895

By PFRA Research

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Necessity may be the mother of invention, but in Latrobe it became the father of a legend. The Greensburg A.A. had been fielding a football team since 1890, and by 1894 they were beginning to attract some attention. In 1895, neighboring Latrobe decided to get in on the act. The sponsoring organization was the local Y.M.C.A., and the Y's physical instructor Russell Aukerman, a former Gettysburg College halfback, was named coach. As team manager, the Y tapped the young, promotionally-minded editor of the Latrobe *Clipper*, David J. Berry.

The slender newspaperman wasn't unlettered in football; he'd been a player, but a broken jaw suffered in a pick-up game convinced him that writing about football was better than playing it. As things turned out, he liked promoting it best of all. Over the next few seasons, Berry became an important figure on the western Pennsylvania grid scene.

All the players were locals at first; many worked in the steel mills. Starting in early August, Coach Aukerman held regular afternoon practices, but, because some of the men worked different shifts, drills were also held in the evenings under a street light on a vacant Penn Railroad lot. Stocky Harry Ryan, an experienced tackle from West Virginia University, was named captain.

The first game -- with the Jeannette A.C. -- was scheduled for an unusually early September 3. The date seems to have been related to the Labor Day celebration, but why it was to be played on the Tuesday after the Monday holiday is unclear. Labor Day had been made an official national holiday only in 1894; perhaps Berry and the Y.M.C.A. felt it inappropriate to play football on the occasion of a national day of rest.

Whatever the reason for choosing the September opening date, the choice almost ruined the Latrobe team. A few days before the contest, Latrobe quarterback Eddie Blair, who also played for the Greensburg baseball team, discovered that he had a prior commitment to play baseball on the same Tuesday. There was no forward passing in 1895, of course, so a team's quarterback did not function in that way as does a modern T-QB, but he was still the key to the offense. In the basic T offense that everyone used, he chose the plays, called the signals, and handled the ball on every offensive thrust. On defense, he usually played safety and ran back punts. With only a few days before its first game, Latrobe's spanking new team was left with nothing to fill its key position except a patch of empty Latrobe grass.

Then Dave Berry remembered hearing of a young quarterback who'd done well with the otherwise undistinguished Indiana Normal team the year before, a boy named John Brallier. He contacted the

youngster and magnanimously agreed to pay his expenses if he'd drop by to quarterback the Latrobe team. Brallier told him thanks but no thanks. In desperation, Berry dug down deep and sweetened the offer of expenses with an extra \$10 -- "\$10 and cakes."

That was different decided Brallier.

"Sal" Brallier, as he was usually called, arrived in Latrobe on the Monday evening of September 2, the day before the game. "It was a thrill," he later remarked, "seeing my first paved street." That night he practiced with the team beneath the street light.

The next day, Latrobe was bedecked in the team colors of orange and maroon. Stores closed and the mines and mills declared a half-holiday. The Latrobe and Jeannette teams in full uniform followed Billy Showalter's Cornet Band in a parade down the recently paved street all the way to the ball park.

At four o'clock before a packed house, Brallier kicked off to Jeannette. After only a few plays, the visitors fumbled and Latrobe took over. Brallier showed his worth by directing a drive, mainly up the middle, that culminated with Aukerman blasting over. The young quarterback kicked the goal to make it 6-0. Just before the half ended, Aukerman broke away for 35 yards and another touchdown. Brallier's second goal brought the score to 12-0. In the second half, Latrobe played conservatively, satisfied to hold Jeannette at bay. The game ended with no further scoring. That night, Latrobe cheered its new grid heroes, and the loudest cheers were for their young quarterback.

The "First Pro" Legend

That's what happened, but the legend that grew out of the event had some flourishes. Until the 1960s, every pro football history started with the unlikely tale that the first-ever pro football game was played in Latrobe in 1895 when the local team hired a 16-year-old kid away from his high school team for \$10.

As we have seen, John Brallier was not nearly the first pro, nor was he from a high school team. And he was 18-years-old. At least they got the \$10 right. Through careful research, sports historian Robert B. Van Atta has reconstructed Brallier's life and career. While truth may not always be stranger than fiction, it's more satisfying in the long run.

One of five children, John Kinport "Sal" Brallier was born in Cherry Tree, north of Indiana, Pa., on December 27, 1876. His father, a physician, died in 1889, a year before young Sal began playing

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football for the West Indiana Public School. By 1892, before his 16th birthday, he was captain and star halfback.

Such were the eligibility rules at the time that in 1893, while he was still in public school, he began playing for Indiana Normal, the college team. One of his teammates was the father of future movie star Jimmy Stewart. Brallier quarterbacked Indiana in both 1893 and 1894. Although the team's record was only middling, the boy signal-caller received rave notices. His play in an 1894 loss to Washington and Jefferson so impressed Presidents coach E. Gard Edwards that he asked Sal to come to W. & J. in 1895 with all expenses paid. Brallier graduated from Indiana public school in the spring of 1895 and was awaiting the start of college when the call came from Latrobe. Players had been paid since 1892, but neither they nor the clubs that hired them ever admitted it. When Dave Berry shelled out \$10 for a quarterback, he thought he was doing something new. So did Brallier. But, unlike all the secret pros before him, Brallier never told anything but the truth about his payday. In fact, he was rather proud of it.

Eventually his honesty got him recognized as the first pro football player. In the 1930s, when the National Football League at last developed an interest in the pro game's roots, the league awarded Brallier a lifetime pass to its games. By then, he was Dr. John Brallier, a successful Greensburg dentist and certainly the kind of solid citizen the NFL could point to with pride as its progenitor. He served twenty years as school director and was active in community service. Lawson Fiscus' claim that he'd been paid in 1894 made a brief stir in the 1940s but was not generally accepted at the time.

Brallier enjoyed his recognition as the first pro player. It was only after his death in 1960 (ironically, on September 17, the recognized birthdate of the NFL) that evidence came to light proving "Pudge" Heffelfinger and others to have been earlier pros. Since then, Brallier has been known as the first ADMITTED pro, in a sense a more honorable designation because it tells something of the man's character.

What is not widely recognized is his outstanding ability. The \$10 legend usually makes his exploit sound like a one-game fluke. In point of fact, with the lone exception of Heffelfinger, he may have been the best player to turn pro in the 1890s. Though small in stature (newspapers of the time universally referred to him as "little Brallier"), he was a dangerous runner, clever ball handler, excellent defender, and reliable kicker. However, his strong suit was leadership. He remained an active player through 1907, mostly with Latrobe, and it was under his stewardship as player-coach that the little Pennsylvania town had its greatest grid seasons.

After leading Latrobe to its opening victory over Jeannette, Brallier stayed on as quarterback for a September 14 game against the experienced Altoona A.A. in which Latrobe met its first defeat 18-0. Then he left for Washington and Jefferson where he won the starting quarterback job and took the Presidents to a fine 6-1-1 season.

Greensburg's Pro Team

By the time Latrobe went to Greensburg on October 5, they'd added two more victories to their record, but neither victim was a top quality team. Although the Greensburg A.A. was opening its

season, its veterans were far more experienced than Latrobe's still-green team. Moreover, at least four of the Greensburg starters were being paid. Lawson Fiscus still pulled his paycheck at one halfback. The other halfback, little Fred Robison, and fullback-coach Charley Atherton, both from Penn State, made three of the four backs salaried. In the line, guard Adam Wyant, of Bucknell and the University of Chicago, was also paid. Wyant would later become a U.S. Congressman from the Greensburg area. The G.A.A. expected its strongest team ever, and their 25-0 win over Latrobe backed the expectations. Lawson Fiscus won a new hat offered by a local clothier by scoring the season's first touchdown, and Atherton dropkicked a field goal, still a relatively rare feat in western Pennsylvania.

The next week, Robison starred as he led the Greenies to a 42-2 walloping of the Western University of Pennsylvania team. All three paid backfielders were outstanding on October 19 as Greensburg won its third home game in a row, 12-6 over Altoona. Fiscus crashed through the line for the go-ahead touchdown, and Atherton added a clinching goal.

The following week, when some fans became "hilarious" over the 44-0 rout of the Carnegie A.C. of Braddock, they threw their hats into the air. Bad move! A creek ran past the corner of Athletic Field, and it was soon full of hats. No doubt the local clothier got back his first-touchdown-hat investment and then some.

The Greenies added two more easy victories at home, 12-0 over the Wheeling (W.Va.) Tigers and 40-0 over Connellsville. Then, with a perfect 6-0 record, they headed for Pittsburgh for their most serious challenge -- a November 9 meeting with the Pittsburgh Athletic Club.

New Team in Town

In late September, the Allegheny Athletic Association was predicting a powerhouse. Rumors had Heffelfinger, Stevenson, and several other nationally-known stars joining the A's. "Sport" Donnelly was expected back, as were Rafferty, Valentine, and Van Cleve. The Three A's planned not only to defend its 1894 football championship in high style, but to put a team on the field that would equal even the great eastern college elevens.

Then the bomb dropped. The A's learned they were under investigation by the Amateur Athletic Union. The Alleghenys had gained the top of Pittsburgh's football heap by secretly paying players, but the secret was in danger of going public. If the A.A.U. dropped the hammer on the A.A.A. by declaring them professionals, none of the amateur teams they'd been playing would dare schedule them. And that applied to all sports, not just football. Left with no one to compete against, the club would simply dry up. The irony was that the A's were not the only local club to employ pros, only the first and most effective.

In hope of dodging the A.A.U. bullet, the Three A's decided to field no football team for the fall of 1895. That left a big empty spot on the Pittsburgh grid scene.

A new club, the Duquesne Country and Athletic Club, stepped forward and volunteered to fill the void. The D.C. & A.C. challenged the Pittsburgh A.C. to a series of games to decide the local championship, similar to the series won by the Three A's the year

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before. Because the D.C. & A.C. was a new team, inexperienced in playing together, few observers gave them much of a chance. Those expectations were not increased by an announcement made by William C. Temple, the Duquesnes' football manager. Temple, the local steelman better known as the president of the baseball Pirates, declared the team would employ only amateur players.

The Pittsburgh A.C. made no such promises. They had their usual tough lineup. Charley Aull returned to play quarterback. Lineman Charley Heppenstall and backs Tommy Roderick and "Buck" Martin gave the team both quality and experience. The most important new player, former Penn State fullback Bill Stuart, was a topnotch kicker.

Beginning in late September, the P.A.C. rolled through its first four games, humbling Beaver Falls Y.M.C.A., Shadyside A.C., Grove City College, and Geneva College by an aggregate 114-0. On October 19, they handed Washington and Jefferson, with John Brallier at quarterback, its only 1895 loss 18-4. After a 34-0 laugh over the Kiskiminetas, the P.A.C. stood 6-0 as they readied for their Election Day game with the upstart D.C. & A.C.

The Duquesnes had been up and down in their early season games. They'd begun well with a 36-0 win over W.U.P. on October 5, but the next week Carlisle's Indians visited Pittsburgh again and gave the Duquesnes a 16-4 football lesson. Seven days later, the D.C. & A.C. flew high again with a 26-0 victory over the University of Cincinnati. On Wednesday, October 23, the University of Pennsylvania team, on its way to a national championship, cruised through town and hardly worked up a sweat in crushing the Duquesnes 30-0. Losing to the powerful Penns was certainly no disgrace, but local fans would have liked to see a closer score.

The D.C. & A.C. had thirteen days to prepare for the P.A.C. They needed help. Manager Temple's fine pledge to use only amateur players went out the window.

Actually, it may have been junked before the first game because Jim Van Cleve, a two-year regular with the Three A's, and Ed Young, late of the P.A.C., opened in the starting lineup against W.U.P. Van Cleve had been paid for his footballing before, and Young probably had too. Additionally, center Jim Wagonhurst held the line together and could have collected a paycheck if he asked for it. As the season progressed, more ex-college men filled out the Duquesne lineup. W. Greenwood of Lehigh, a strong guard, arrived after the Carlisle game. In late October, the club offered Greensburg's touchdown trio of Fiscus, Atherton, and Robison \$125 a month each to play in Pittsburgh, but Greensburg kept its stars' loyal by raising a bonus from among the town's businessmen.

Regardless of whether the Duquesnes had paid anyone through their first four games, they definitely were paying by the time they met the P.A.C. The most significant newcomer was "Bucky" Vaill, a former Penn quarterback, who took over the coaching.

In some circles, Vaill was credited with creating the quarterback-kick while at Penn. This was a sort of cave-age forward pass that stemmed from a rule which said anyone standing behind a punter when he kicked could recover the ball. The idea then evolved for the quarterback in the T-formation to take the ball on the snap (old

time T-quarterbacks stood a few yards behind the center rather than snug up against him like modern T-QBs) and quickly punt it to a planned spot downfield. The halfbacks and fullback, knowing where the ball was headed, tried to outrace the opposition to recover. If all went well, the play resulted in either a well-placed punt or a long gain.

The D.C. & A.C. played their games at Exposition Park, the Pirates' field and former home of the A.A.A. On Election Day, November 5, a crowd of 4,300 showed up. Red and white P.A.C. banners were as much in evidence as red and black Duquesne banners. Newspapers had been referring to the Duquesnes as the Red and Blacks, a more concise appellation than the Duquesne Country and Athletic Club.

Coach Vaill started himself at fullback for the D.C. & A.C., but his kicking was no match for the P.A.C.'s Stuart. His coaching, however, produced a more cohesive offense. Once in the first half, the Duquesnes drove to the P.A.C. four-yard-line before a fumble ended their hopes for a touchdown. That was as close as either team came to scoring as the game ended 0-0. The P.A.C. could still boast an undefeated record, and the D.C. & A.C. could claim that they'd matched them.

On Saturday, November 9, the Greensburg A.A. invaded P.A.C. Park in a battle of unbeaten. Unfortunately, heavy rain also invaded Pittsburgh and the rain won. The teams struggled across a "very sloppy and slushy" field to a scoreless tie, the second in a row for the P.A.C. The East Enders came closest to scoring, but sharp defensive work by Greensburg's Adam Wyant and Richard Laird stopped them at the five. Laird, the Greenie quarterback, had captained a good Grove City team the year before.

Meanwhile, across the Allegheny at Exposition Park, the D.C. & A.C. hosted the Chicago A.A., still the toughest "amateur" team in the country. Big Stevenson, the Chicago center, lost a few friends in Pittsburgh because of his slugging tactics. That kind of performance really wasn't necessary as Chicago romped through the rain to a 34-4 victory. The Duquesnes sported a new halfback for this game -- Russ Aukerman, the Latrobe coach.

Both the Red and Black and the Red and White had important games on Saturday, November 16. The P.A.C. received a visit from the Penn State University team. The Staters did not have one of their better teams in 1895, but they were favored to knock the Red and White out of the unbeaten ranks.

P.A.C. scored first on a break when State fumbled at the 45-yard-line. P.A.C.'s Bill Stuart, an ex-Penn State star, picked up the loose ball and returned it to the State ten. Several plunges later, red-haired Tommy Roderick took the ball over, and Stuart added the goal to make it 6-0. Penn State rallied for two TDs and a goal to lead 10-6 at the half.

Despite Stuart's fine work, the East Enders were unable to put any more points on the scoreboard through most of the second half. Then, with time running out, the Pittsburghers worked the ball from their own 30 down to the State 35 before their drive stalled. Stuart went back and dropkicked a field goal for five points and an 11-10 victory. P.A.C. still stood unbeaten.

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At the same time, at Exposition Park, the D.C. & A.C. hosted the area's other unbeaten team, the Greensburg A.A. A disappointing crowd, despite the presence of 300 Greenie fans, saw the Duquesnes score a touchdown within the first four minutes. A Greensburg punt was blocked at their ten-yard-line. Aukerman, Van Cleve, and Young brought the ball to the goal line, and Aukerman went over for the touchdown. Young missed the goal, and the rest of the first half was scoreless. The Duquesnes added a safety in the second half. Then, just before the game ended, Ed Young broke away on a long run to score a second D.C. touchdown. Bucky Vaill added the goal to make the final 12-0.

The game was filled with fights and arguments. The complaining became so loud and abusive that the umpire, A.S. Valentine, refused to return for the second half. His replacement helped bring things under control by ordering some of the most obvious sluggers out of the game, but that caused each side to complain it was being discriminated against.

An Attempt to Reduce the Mayhem

Rulemakers moved to outlaw momentum mass plays like the flying wedge in 1895, mainly because the number of serious injuries caused by trappings was turning public opinion against football. An 1894 rule that "no momentum mass plays shall be allowed" seemed clear enough, but teams quickly learned to camouflage their wedges. So in 1895, the rule was made very specific: "Not more than one man shall start forward before the ball is put in play and not more than three men shall group behind the line of scrimmage. Seven must be on the line of scrimmage until the ball is snapped, except that the end rush may drop back, but must stand outside the adjacent tackle." This was the first mention of the number of men who had to be on the line of scrimmage and signalled the beginning of the end for the nastiest side of football.

The Climax of the Pittsburgh Season

P.A.C. Park was a more popular place to watch a football game than Exposition Park where the stands were too far from the field. Additionally, the East End Park could handle larger crowds. As the P.A.C. readied for their crucial Thanksgiving Day meeting with the D.C. & A.C., they added still more seats on the track in front of the stands to bring the capacity to nearly 10,000.

Neither club scheduled a game on the weekend before the big one. Three days before the game, the P.A.C. imported U.S. Military Academy coach Harmon Graves to add some eastern polish to their play. While the teams got in some extra practices, fans got in some extra speculations. The usual rumors of impending ringers filled Pittsburgh's already smoke-laden air. It was almost disappointing when the P.A.C. lined up with the same players they'd used all season, and the Duquesnes had only one new man, former Cornell guard Joe Colnon. In part, the absence of a whole crew of ringers may have been because neither team wanted to fall under the hard, cold stare of the A.A.U. But it also indicated that Pittsburgh football was improving. Teams felt few available outsiders would represent significant improvement over the practiced players already assembled.

Betting was even and heavy on both sides. The crowd of between eight and nine thousand at P.A.C. Park was the largest in six years of Pittsburgh football.

They were not disappointed. The game was both exciting and close. The first half had its share of thrills and belonged to the P.A.C. when Tommy Roderick fell on a fumble for a touchdown. With the Duquesnes trailing 6-0 in the second half, the Red and Black's Ed Young broke through the line at the 20, brushed past Bill Stuart and zipped 90 yards to a touchdown. The goal was missed.

As time ran down, the P.A.C. clung tenaciously to a 6-4 lead. Suddenly, from about 30 yards out, Donovan of Duquesne broke clear on a reverse. Again Stuart had a chance to stop him but missed. As he neared the goal line, a P.A.C. man tackled him, but it was too late. Donovan was over for a touchdown. Young added the goal, and when the game ended a few moments later, the Red and Black had a 10-6 win.

The victory gave the Duquesne Country and Athletic Club the local championship with their first football team. Although their record was only a mediocre 4-3-1, the losses had all been at the hands of teams with national reputations, and they'd beaten both the P.A.C. and the Greensburg A.A. Additionally, they'd amassed a nice profit of over \$4,000 for the season. The P.A.C.'s 7-1-2 record was nothing to sneeze at, and their profit was nearly \$4,500.

Pittsburgh football was getting better and certainly more profitable.

The Westmoreland County Championship

To the east of Pittsburgh, the Westmoreland County championship had as yet to be decided, although it seemed only a formality. After losing to the D.C. & A.C. in Pittsburgh, the Greensburg A.A. regained its winning touch with easy victories at Altoona and at home on Thanksgiving Day against Beaver Falls Y.M.C.A. To wrap up the title, the Greenies needed only to repeat their earlier win over Latrobe.

Although Latrobe's record stood at a creditable 7-3, the Orange and Crimson had not beaten any team of consequence. However, John Brallier had finished his season at Washington and Jefferson on Thanksgiving, allowing him to rejoin Latrobe for the Greensburg game scheduled at Latrobe the next Saturday. Then, for some reason, the Greenies showed up for the game without Atherton, Robison, Wyant, or Charley Copeland, a regular lineman. The lineup changes made the teams about equal in strength.

The game was a tight one. Neither team could score in the first half, and the second half looked like more of the same for the first fifteen minutes. Then, just as one dramatic play suddenly resolved the outcome in Pittsburgh two days before, the Greensburg-Latrobe game came down to a single run by Latrobe's Welch. The former Lehigh star, playing halfback for the Orange and Crimson, broke wide open at midfield around Greensburg's right end. The only man near him for 30 yards was fellow Latrobe halfback Walter Howard, running interference. The breakaway was so stunning that for a few seconds there was silence from the Latrobe fans, but as Welch crossed the goal line they erupted in a mighty roar. The goal was missed, but Greensburg was unable to score in the remaining time.

Latrobe celebrated far into the night. The narrow victory could be considered the real beginning of what would become a legendary rivalry.

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