

The Third Time is Charmed

1924

By PFRA Research

On Sunday, September 21, the Bears and Packers played a bang-up game at Green Bay. After a scoreless first quarter, the Pack caught Chicago's "Duke" Hanny with the football behind his own goal line and dumped him on his dignity for a safety. Green Bay held its narrow two-point lead into the final quarter when Pack veteran "Cub" Buck tacked on three more points with a perfect placekick. The Bears needed only a touchdown to win but Green Bay never gave them the chance. The final was a 5-0 Packer victory.

Green Bay gleefully chalked up a shoutout win over the team that would become through the years their most bitter rival. They still claimed the victory in their record book until only a few years ago.

Chicago knew better. They remembered the season didn't begin until the following Saturday. Anything played before that was only an exhibition. After all, co-owner "Dutch" Sternaman -- still a regular Bear halfback -- had made the motion at the league meeting in July. Ironically, Green Bay's "Curly" Lambeau had seconded it.

However, it wasn't the season's opening date that would put the 1924 championship race into dispute; it was the closing date. And that was still a long way off.

The Season Opens

On Saturday, the 27th, Frankford opened the season at home against Rochester. The Jeffs put a pretty good lineup on the field, including Bob Nash, Joe Alexander, Hank Smith, and the multi-talented Benny Boynton at tailback, but, as usual, the team had been hastily assembled by manager Leo Lyons and showed little coordination. Frankford had been practicing together for two full weeks. The Yellow Jackets won going away, 21-0.

On the other hand, Jim Thorpe had only one practice session with Rock Island when he went out against the Bears the next day, but it didn't seem to hold him back. He was outstanding on defense as the Independents managed a scoreless tie over the favored Chicagoans.

At 37, Thorpe couldn't play a full game with anything like his old skill, but he could still do the job in short spurts. He helped the Islanders get off to a strong start, winning three in a row after their tie with the Bears. Then, in one of the season's less honorable moments, the team went to Kansas City where they were forced to keep star tackle "Duke" Slater on the bench. The home club refused to play against a black man. In a triumph for bigotry, Kansas City won 23-7.

That win represented half of Kansas City's victories for the season. They spent most of their time huddled at the bottom of the standings, along with Akron, Dayton, Kenosha, Minneapolis, and Rochester.

Most of the league members, teams like Green Bay, Racine, and the Chicago Cardinals, were respectable, middle-of-the-deck performers. They pulled an occasional upset, played each other well, and were out of the race before Halloween. Nevertheless, once in a while they could do something notable.

At Chicago, in the Cardinals' opener, "Paddy" Driscoll nailed a 52-yard placekick in leading his team over Milwaukee. It would be ten years before any NFL player cashed a longer field goal.

"Curly" Lambeau put on a memorable air show all season for his Packers, gaining over a thousand yards by his passes, according to the play-by-play accounts in the Green Bay Press-Gazette.

Benny Boynton left Rochester for Buffalo and gave the Bisons (nee All-Americans) one of pro football's most spectacular triple-threats.

The championship race boiled down to three teams and an asterisk. The asterisk belonged to Duluth, hidden away in the north. Using mostly home-grown players, they won most of their games, including decisions over Green Bay and Rock Island, but did not play often enough to be eligible for the title. They were sort of in the league but not in.

The Bears were certainly in the league, but after their first two games -- the exhibition at Green Bay and the scoreless tie at Rock Island -- it looked like their offense was adrift somewhere in Lake Michigan. On October 5, they went to Cleveland for one of the most important games of the season.

George Halas had been snookered. He'd contracted to play Sam Deutsch's Indians, the 1923 team with the good record and so-so personnel. Instead, he had to face Sam Deutsch's Bulldogs, the Guy Chamberlin-led two-time league champs. Anyone could see that the winner of this battle had a leg up on the '24 title.

Despite their early problems, the Bears had a terrific lineup. Halas and "Duke" Hanny held down the ends; future Hall-of-Famer Ed Healey and reliable Hugh Blacklock were at tackle, with big Ralph Scott in reserve; the guards were two of the best ever to wear the orange and blue, rookie Jim McMillen and rugged "Hunk" Anderson; "The Beast," George Trafton still held sway at center. In the backfield, Halas had his partner "Dutch" Sternaman and "Dutch"'s kid brother Joey. The younger Sternaman had a

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sensational season, leading the league in scoring and field goals and running brilliantly from his quarterback slot. Many called him the league's best player. Other Bear backfielders included versatile Jim Kendrick, quick Johnny Bryan, and veterans Oscar Knop, Laurie Walquist, and Jake Lanum.

Bulldogs Still Tough

Deutsch hadn't got all the old Bulldogs. Pete Henry, the great tackle, defected, along with center Larry Conover and back Harry Robb. The trio chose to play for the independent Pottsville Maroons in the anthracite region of Pennsylvania rather than go to Cleveland. Deutsch threatened to sue, but he really had no way to compel the ex-Bulldogs to play for him and he knew it.

Besides, he still had plenty of firepower. Guy Chamberlin, "Link" Lyman, "Duke" Osborn, Rudy Comstock, "Doc" Elliott, "Wooky" Roberts, and Ben Jones gave him seven outstanding players. "Scotty" Bierce, Joe Work, Olin Smith, and Jerry Jones filled in ably along the line. Two rookies, slashing wingback Dave Noble and "Hoge" Workman, an outstanding passer from Ohio State, made the backfield super.

Cleveland broke on top of the Bears at Dunn Field (formerly League Park) when "Doc" Elliott connected on a 20-yard drop kick in the first quarter. The Bears roared back to take the lead before the period ended. Laurie Walquist flipped a short pass to Joey Sternaman who eluded several tacklers in a dazzling, 60-yard sprint for the Bears' first points of the season. When he dropkicked the extra point, the score stood 7-3.

The second quarter was scoreless as both teams exercised their defenses, but in the third quarter the Bulldogs went back to basics. Elliott and Ben Jones smashed into the Bear line again and again on a 50-yard march. It wasn't pretty, but it was certainly effective. Jones crashed over and Olin Smith drop kicked the PAT to make it 10-7, Bulldogs.

A few moments later, the big Bulldog line poured through to block a Bear attempt. Smith scooped up the bouncing ball and rumbled into the endzone for a touchdown. The goal was missed, but a 16-7 lead looked safe as the final quarter began.

It wasn't safe as far as Joey Sternaman was concerned. When the Bulldogs punted to him at his own 30, he put on a one-man show, twisting and dodging down the field 70 yards to a touchdown. His following drop kick tightened the game to 16-14.

Twice in the remaining minutes he tried for field goals that could have brought victory, but his luck had run out for the day. Deutsch's Bulldogs had survived their first challenge.

Hard Road for the Jackets

At the same time, Frankford flunked its road test. Maybe they weren't quite ready for the two-games-per-weekend schedule that would become routine for them over the next few years. Somehow they managed to lose at Dayton. The Triangles' best players were still the sandlotters who'd been okay five years before. Every time they walked on the field, they were an anachronism. Nevertheless, the gods of football decreed that they would win that day, and win they did -- 19-7. It wasn't even close!

Despite their inept performance at Dayton, the Yellow Jackets had a strong lineup. Coach Bob Berryman could call on Penn State's "Whitey" Thomas, Lafayette's Milt O'Connell and Army's Eddie Doyle at the ends. Captain Russ Stein, the former Washington & Jefferson All-America and veteran "Doggie" Gulian from Brown were the tackles. Lehigh's "Butch" Spagna, a pro since 1919, and Colgate's 250-pound Jim Welsh, an accurate kicker, were the regular guards. "Bull" Behman from little Dickinson, who would go on to become the Jackets' greatest player, backed up both the guards and tackles. The center was Herb Stein, Russ' brother and an All-America himself at Pitt. Except for the 250-pound Welsh, none of the lineman topped 210 pounds.

Dartmouth's Harvey Haws quarterbacked a small but speedy fleet of backs. Penn State's Charlie Way, a 145-pound streak who'd seen earlier service with the Canton Bulldogs, was the most famous Jacket runner, but "Tex" Hamer, the 190-pound fullback from Penn, had an even better season, scoring 72 points. Other top runners were Lehigh's John Storer, Bucknell's Harry Dayhoff, Villanova's John Finn, and Penn's George Sullivan, who joined the team at mid-season. None of these was a passer, but with a crushing running attack, the Jackets averaged better than 23 points a game.

A week after the Jackets' loss to Dayton, the Cleveland Bulldogs came to Frankford. Before a large home crowd, both teams moved the ball between the 20-yard lines but could not score a touchdown. Finn's dropkick from the 25 put the Jackets in front 3-0 in the third period. Cleveland's "Hoge" Workman matched that with a successful dropkick from the 30 in the final period, and the game ended in a 3-3 tie. The next day, the 'Dogs increased their league lead with a 29-14 whipping of Akron, while the Bears were tied by Racine, 10-10.

Both the Bears and the Yellow Jackets got their seasons turned around, but the Bulldogs stayed in front with an impressive string of wins.

On Saturday, October 25, the Jackets defeated the strong independent Providence Steam Roller, 21-10, at Frankford Stadium. Then, they traveled to Chicago to take on the powerful Bears. Apparently, they still weren't ready for back-to-back games with tough foes. The 33-3 pummeling was the worst defeat in Yellow Jacket history.

For the first three or four minutes, things looked bright for the Jackets. Taking the opening kickoff, Frankford waded down the field on line smashes and tricky reverses. The Bears stopped them short of the goal line, but big Welsh booted a field goal to give the Jackets the lead.

By the second quarter, the momentum had changed sides. Bear quarterback Joey Sternaman tied the score on a 30-yard field goal. A little later, halfback Laurie Walquist broke away for 25-yards to set up a touchdown by Sternaman. The Bears led 10-7 at the half.

The second half was all Bears. A punt attempt by Frankford's Hamer was blocked for a Chicago safety. Sternaman passed for a touchdown on a fake field goal. Walquist and Joey Sternaman's big brother "Dutch" ran for touchdowns in the final period before time mercifully ran out.

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November Streak

The Yellow Jackets finished October of '24 with a so-so 3-2-1 mark, but they roared through November with eight straight league victories, surely a one-month record.

On November 16, the Jackets took on the undefeated Cleveland Bulldogs. A bitter winter wind wailed across Dunn Field, but Welsh's toe was accurate for a pair of first half field goals of 33 and 40 yards. Way broke loose for 48 yards to set up a third quarter touchdown plunge by Hamer. Cleveland didn't get untracked until the final period when they marched 90-yards to a touchdown, but a desperation pass in the final seconds fell incomplete.

The loss was the first ever suffered by a Guy Chamberlin-coached team. It also temporarily dropped Cleveland into a first-place tie with Rock Island, both at 5-1. Frankford, at 7-2, was second. The early upset by Dayton was coming back to haunt them. The Bears, who again tied Racine on that day, had an odd 3-1-4 record were still in the race with two weeks to go.

It was really no contest. Rock Island removed itself from further consideration by losing to Duluth on November 23. Cleveland finished with two easy wins over Columbus and Milwaukee, only a few steps removed from shooting fish in a barrel. The Milwaukee game was played at Canton on Thanksgiving, giving old Bulldog fans a chance to see what they'd been missing all season. The 'Dogs celebrated their homecoming by piling up a 53-10 score. On a less festive note, the decision to play outside Cleveland was a sure tipoff that the Bulldogs were not being well supported at home. Also on Thanksgiving, Frankford showed exactly how they really compared with the Dayton Triangles by squashing them 32-7. It was too late. The upset by the Tris in early October had cost the Jackets the league championship. Had the Jackets beaten the Triangles on October 5 (as they surely should have even had they been forced to walk all the way to Dayton), they would have reached the season-ending November 30 date at 12-1-1 for .923. Instead, they ended at .846, behind Cleveland (7-1-1 .875) and the Bears (6-1-4 .857).

Choosing a Champ

Had everyone stopped playing right there, the Cleveland Bulldogs' championship would have been cut and dried, just as had been the Canton Bulldogs' titles of 1922 and 1923. The equanimity of those two seasons, however, came only because no team had been able to defeat Guy Chamberlin's team. This time, with a defeat on their record, the 'Dogs were not so clearly the best around.

Moreover, the general public was not at all clear how the NFL champion was to be chosen. In the days before a league existed, the buccaneer days of state and city titles, championships had been settled by the "last win" method in which a victory at the end of the season took precedence in any dispute between two teams with fairly similar records.

Certainly the Bears, with six wins and one loss, could argue "similarity" to the Bulldogs' seven-and-one.

The Bears invited the Bulldogs to Wrigley Field for a December 7 meeting. Chicago newspapers billed the game as "for the championship." Chicago fans must have remembered that the

then-Staleys had used a December "post-season" game with Buffalo to win the 1921 title. Here we go again!

Cleveland regarded the game as an exhibition and played it with all the fire such a meaningless contest deserved. They trailed 7-0 into the fourth quarter and then let everything slide to make the final 23-0, Chicago.

Chicago's newspapers immediately awarded the Bears the championship. Other papers around the country tended to agree. Not only did the Bruins have the "last win," their overall mark was now better than Cleveland's. Oddly, those who wanted to add the December victory over Cleveland to the Bears' regular-season record never seemed to remember the 5-0 Chicago loss to the Packers back in September.

Furthermore, Chicago continued to play. The self-proclaimed champions trained to Philadelphia the next Saturday and took on the Yellow Jackets before a full house of 15,000. With the game tied in the third quarter, Joey Sternaman dropkicked a 20-yard field goal to make the final score 13-10. Until then, some Frankford folks had argued for the Yellow Jackets as champions because they'd totaled more wins than any other team.

After disposing of the Jackets, the Bears jumped back on a train and rode overnight to Rock Island. The Bears and Independents had twice tied during the season, but this time the tired Bruins weren't quite up to the challenge. They trailed 7-0 with two minutes left when Joey Sternaman scored a touchdown. But with a third tie in sight, Joey missed the extra point.

At this point, the Bears could still claim the '24 championship, but they had to be careful of their argument. The loss at Rock Island meant "overall percentage" wouldn't work even if they ignored the early loss to Green Bay. The "last win" theory would make the Independents champs, and no one outside the Rock Island city limits believed that. That left the "championship game" contention. If the December 7 victory over the Bulldogs was -- as the Bears claimed -- "for the championship," George Halas could begin warming up his flag pole for the '24 pennant.

Although the question of the title seemed on the surface to involve only an awarding of honors to one of two teams, the ramifications went much deeper. Would the league go back on itself and ignore its own November 30 end-date and accept instead Chicago's contention of a de facto championship game? Certainly a decision for the Bears would please more fans (and newspaper columnists) than one favoring Cleveland. Considering the still-shaky prestige of the NFL, taking the popular road was something worth thinking about. Moreover, Cleveland was a limping franchise with a questionable shot at survival; the Bears were the league's most important team. They easily had the most box-office "clout." With schedules still being arranged between team managers, could any league team afford to cross George Halas?

At the root of the controversy, was a very basic question, one that had been hovering for five years ever since the idea of a league had first surfaced in Ralph Hay's Hupmobile office back in August of 1920: was this a league of equals, all following the same rules, or was it a business in which economic might made right?

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At the league meeting in January, the NFL came down on the side of the angels and Cleveland by abiding by its own rules. The championship would go to the team with the best winning percentage on November 30, just as they'd decided the summer before. Furthermore, the league had no such thing as a "championship game," and individual clubs -- like the Bears -- had no right to invent one. In other words, even had the Bulldogs regarded the December 7 game as for the championship (which they didn't), it would make no difference. Only the league could establish a title game.

Guy Chamberlin had his third championship in a row. Sam Deutsch had his first. It only took him two teams to do it.

FINAL STANDINGS: NFL 1924

Teams	W	L	T	P-PA
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Cleveland Bulldogs	7	1	1	229- 60

Chicago Bears	6	1	4	136- 55
Frankford Yellowjackets	11	2	1	326-109
Duluth Kelleys	5	1	0	56- 16
Rock Island Independents	5	2	2	88- 38
Green Bay Packers	7	4	0	108- 38
Racine Legion	4	3	3	69- 47
Chicago Cardinals	5	4	1	90- 67
Buffalo Bisons	6	5	0	120-140
Columbus Tigers	4	4	0	91- 68
Hammond Pros	2	2	1	18- 45
Milwaukee Badgers	5	8	0	142-188
Akron Indians	2	6	0	59-132
Dayton Triangles	2	6	0	45-148
Kansas City Blues	2	7	0	46-124
Kenosha Maroons	0	4	1	12-117
Minneapolis Marines	0	6	0	14-108
Rochester Jeffersons	0	7	0	7-156