

Thorpe Arrives

1915

By PFRA Research

During the summer of 1914, members of the Massillon Chamber of Commerce asked Canton Manager Jack Cusack to come over for a secret meeting to discuss a proposed new Massillon Tigers football team. From Cusack's point of view, a game against a strong Massillon team -- with its historic Canton rivalry -- was bound to bring fans flocking to Canton's League (Lakeside) Park. But, much as he loved the idea in the abstract, he had a large reservation about one of the particulars.

"Where will you get your players?" he asked.

Simple, he was told. Massillon's team backers would offer "Peggy" Parratt's top Akron players more money to perform for the new Tigers. Cusack didn't bother to mention the secret agreement among Ohio team managers to refrain from raiding other teams. He had a more cogent argument than that. Raids by Massillon would start a bidding war, raise players' salaries for all teams, and destroy the fragile profit margin he and a few other managers had established. It would be 1906 all over again.

The Massillon people were unimpressed. Cusack played his ace. He would refuse to play any Massillon team built by raiding Akron. At first they didn't believe him, but finally he convinced them he wasn't bluffing. With no Canton-Massillon game, both teams would be hurt financially. But Massillon's wounds would be fatal. Plans for a new "Tigers" were put on hold.

But, by the time the 1915 season rolled around, the situation had changed drastically. And as a result, Massillon raided Parratt with never a peep out of Canton. Cusack then took his share of weakened Akron, and the Youngstown Patricians, hoping to move up in class, applied the *coup de grace* by gathering up Parratt's few remaining stars. Predictably, Massillon followed with a new round of expensive ringers. And Cusack responded with perhaps the single most important pro football action ever taken up till then: he hired Jim Thorpe. Over the remainder of the decade, escalation piled on escalation until all of it eventually necessitated the long talked about creation of a pro football league. Historically, the National Football League "began" in 1920, but its "beginnings" were in 1915.

Three factors brought about a small pro football explosion in Ohio in 1915.

First, the game of football itself became more popular with spectators everywhere. The single most important cause of this was Notre Dame's phenomenal success with forward passing

against Army in 1913. Quarterback Charles "Gus" Dorais' tosses to end Knute Rockne keyed a 35-13 victory for the "little school from the West." That victory helped stamp the Fighting Irish indelibly on the American sporting scene.

Today, many fans believe that Notre Dame invented forward passing in that game. Not so. The pass had been legal since 1906 but it wasn't very popular as a mode of attack, primarily because at first throws were limited to no more than 20 yards. Dorais-to-Rockne took advantage of a 1912 rule change that allowed passes of any length down the field. Their success, added an exciting new dimension to the game.

In the next few years, the passer became football's glamour boy. By modern standards, his glamour was rather dingey -- ten attempts in a game were still a lot and, with the fat football of the time, an "ace" was lucky to complete three of those. Nevertheless, fans welcomed the new "wide-open" style and attendance increased at college games. By 1915, some of the new popularity was rubbing off on pro ball.

A second factor in the pro football mini-explosion was caused by the war in Europe that began in 1914. While the British, French, Germans, and the rest of the Europeans destroyed themselves on the battlefield, America sat blithely at peace, reaping the gains. In the American Midwest, one effect of an economy booming to wartime orders for goods and foodstuffs was that money was available to invest in local sports teams, football included. Moreover, the increased chauvinism of Americans for their clever, peace-loving country seeped down to a similar pride in city, town, village or hamlet, bringing on rampant "boosterism." Many a local businessman believed it his civic duty to use a few of his new dollars to bring "the championship" -- whether city, county or state - - to his hometown. Translated, that meant paying more for better players -- importing ringers.

With increased interest in football and boosterism taking place all across the midwest, strong teams began appearing in places other than Ohio. Some Michigan and Indiana teams scheduled Ohio teams and held their own. The secret agreement among Ohio managers to refrain from raiding each other for players went by the boards when Ohio stars began receiving offers of higher pay from outside the state.

Some of the new, strong teams, such as the Detroit Heralds, were the products of local success. The Heralds had been playing semi-pro football for a decade when they defeated Ann Arbor, 7-6, for the Michigan championship in 1914. The victory helped them upgrade their lineup for 1915, as Detroit sandlot players and a few

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University of Michigan, Michigan A & M (Michigan State), and Detroit University grads looked to the Heralds for their post-graduate football. At the same time, Heralds' Manager-Coach Billy Marshall sought to expand his team's world by scheduling other strong midwest clubs such as Cusack's Canton team and the Evanston North Ends.

The North Ends, with a lineup made up mostly of talented sandlotters, became a power in the Chicago area much in the same way the Heralds had succeeded in Detroit -- by beating the locals and then expanding. Their best-known player, stocky fullback Guil Falcon, was a sandlotter who would eventually become an NFL player, coach, and even owner.

Teams such as the North Ends, Heralds, Toledo Maroons, Dayton Triangles, and Wabash A.A. began as neighborhood clubs. As their nucleus of players matured, they also added good players from other neighborhood teams until they were the cream of their respective towns. By 1915, such teams were bringing in ringers from other nearby cities. Some of the ringers were sandlotters, but others were former college players.

A few teams such as the Massillon Tigers took a shortcut to championship contention by starting with ringers, some from Michigan and Indiana. In Fort Wayne, the Friars Club set its sights on instant success by hiring a covey of competent players, with an emphasis on former Notre Dame stars.

Perhaps the most surprising development in Indiana took place in Pine Village. The Village semi-pro team had gone undefeated for at least a decade, knocking off other small town teams. Although the community had a population of only 300 (a former resident called it "a half-horse town"), team manager-coach-and-starting center Clare Rhode decided it should become fully professional in 1915 and play some of the larger teams. His first major move was to bring in former Indiana U. tackle Ed "Doc" Davis.

Massillon jumped to instant parity with Canton by signing up former Akronites Joe Collins, Ed Kagy, "Deke" Jones, and a half dozen more. Homer Davidson, the great kicker, started the first few games at quarterback until Massillon hired passer "Gus" Dorais away from Ft. Wayne. Rockne played five games at end for the Tigers.

At Canton, where the "Bulldog" nickname was resurrected by sportswriters as soon as Massillon's Tigers entered the field, Cusack countered by bringing in former Shelby center Guy "Dutch" Schulz and halfback John "Hube" Wagner, who'd starred at Pitt. The bidding war was on.

One of Cusack's imports was John Kellison, a big tackle who played as "Ketcham" because he was also the assistant football coach at West Virginia Wesleyan and the college administration frowned on pro football. After the game, Kellison/Ketcham went to Cusack and insisted that he knew an end who was better than anyone Canton had put on the field that day. This end was so good, said John, that he would personally guarantee his worth -- if Cusack wasn't satisfied, he could pay the end with "Ketcham's" salary.

"Bring him along next week," said Cusack, figuring he had nothing to lose.

Kellison's end-friend, introduced as "Fisher," was a revelation in the next game and for the rest of the season. Most Cantonites quickly discovered that "Fisher" was really Earle "Greasy" Neale, the head coach at West Virginia Wesleyan.

Akron was reduced to an also-ran and Parratt went home to Cleveland to brood, but other Ohio teams improved, largely by using the forward pass. The Toledo Maroons were dangerous with quarterback Billy Marshall (no relation to the Detroit Heralds' coach). Possibly the best thrower in the state was little Al Mahrt of the Dayton Cadets. Thirty years later, Daytonites ranked Sammy Baugh as second to their Al. The Columbus Panhandles added Ohio State's sharpshooting passer Bill Pickeral to their six Nessers, but brute force was still their main weapon.

Until a broken wrist ended his boxing career, Fred Nesser was a legitimate contender for Jess Willard's heavyweight crown. At 6'5" and 250 pounds, he was awesome both in the ring and on the football field.

One day while playing tackle against Toledo, he spent most of the game blocking end "Monk" Sala, who was a foot shorter and 100 pounds lighter. The mismatch was so absurd that players on both teams began laughing, but Sala became more frustrated with each play. Near the end of the game big Fred blocked little Monk one time too many. Fred started down the field, trailing the play. Sala scrambled after him. Just as Fred turned around, Sala leaped into the air, swinging his right fist as hard as he could. More from surprise than the force of the blow, Fred fell backward onto the seat of his pants -- a very embarrassing position for a heavyweight contender. Before murder could ensue, the quick-witted referee threw both players out of the game.

What might have happened was demonstrated a few years later when a much larger Canton tackle surreptitiously punched Fred during a play. Fred warned the fellow, but the Bulldog punched him again on the next play. One warning was plenty. On the third play, the ball was snapped, Fred's right fist whipped out, and the Canton tackle went down as though shot. He was still unconscious when they carried him to the sideline and reportedly stayed that way for three more hours.

No single team emerged as the class of the Midwest in '15. Canton lost an early game to the Detroit Heralds. Detroit lost to Evanston. Evanston beat the Ft. Wayne Friars but lost to Wabash, which in turn lost to Ft. Wayne. Toledo beat Columbus but lost to Dayton and Massillon. Dayton lost to Columbus. Columbus lost to Canton but topped Massillon. Two teams went undefeated.

The Youngstown (Ohio) Patricians were organized in 1914 to represent St. Patrick's Parish on the city's south side. Strictly a sandlot outfit, they won seven of eight games against other sandlot teams from the area. In their final game of the season, the Patricians knocked off the Crescent A.C., the reigning local champs. Encouraged by success, they decided to move up in class

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in 1915. New players were brought in, including Elgie Tobin of Penn State, Ray "Red" Miller of Motre Dame, George Vederneck of Carlisle, "Busty" Ashbaugh of Brown, and several of Peggy Parratt's former Akron players. The coach and quarterback was Ray L. Thomas, a talented local.

They managed to get the Columbus Panhandles on their slate and the second-line Pennsylvania duo, the Pitcairn Quakers and McKeesport Olympics. But either because they scheduled too late or more likely because they weren't taken seriously, they were unable to book games with either Canton or Massillon.

The Pats negotiated a nine-game schedule without a defeat and claimed the championships of Ohio, the U.S. and the World, but without being tested by either Canton or Massillon, they got little support outside of Mahoning County. Their only major opponent, the Panhandles, held the Pats to a scoreless tie.

Late in the season the Patricians defeated the Washington D.C. Vigilants who styled themselves "East Coast Champions" and claimed a string of undefeated seasons. Youngstown got some good publicity out of the 13-7 win, but in truth it was the Vigilants who were stepping up in class.

Clare Rhodes' new pros at Pine Village went through yet another perfect year, and, though they played none of the top Ohio teams, their claim of the "U.S. Professional Championship" was no more unreasonable than Youngstown's.

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Canton and Massillon scheduled each other for November games, the second and last Sundays. Neither team had a clear cut claim to the Ohio League championship, but bragging rights for Stark County and the long history of bitter rivalry were at stake. That was plenty.

Cusack knew that the Tigers would "beef up" for the games. He decided to go them one better. Jim Thorpe was coaching the backs at Indiana University. Cusack sent Bill Gardner, once a Thorpe teammate at Carlisle, over to Bloomington with an offer that Jim (or any other footballer in his right mind) couldn't refuse -- \$250 a game.

Later generations tend to remember that Thorpe was a great kicker and little else about his playing ability. There is much more. Physically, he was perfect for his time. At 6'1" and 195-to-205 pounds he was bigger than most linemen of his day. He was extremely strong. His favorite running trick in an open field was to lower his shoulder and charge straight at a defender. Then at the moment of impact, he would lift and "peel back" the defender. A generation later, "Bronko" Nagurski used the same style. Yet Thorpe was also a dash man on the Carlisle track team, and his speed on a football field enabled him to break away for long runs. He was an evasive runner, but probably not so much so as "Red" Grange. However, his combination of power and speed made him a more versatile runner than either Nagurski or Grange.

Knut Rockne was a popular after-dinner speaker in the 1920's. He told hundreds of football stories, but one of his favorites was the one in which he managed to tackle Jim Thorpe for a loss. "You

shouldn't do that, Sonny," said Thorpe. "All these people came to watch old Jim run." On the next play, Rockne -- determined to make an even more spectacular tackle -- crashed in on Thorpe, only to be leveled by his shoulder. By the time Rock got to his feet, Thorpe was 40 yards downfield for a touchdown. He came trotting back to the still-dazed Rockne. "That's good, Sonny, you let old Jim run."

The story always brought gales of laughter, and got the same reaction when Steve Owen, the New York Giants coach, told it with himself as "Sonny." Dozens of other "Sonny's" told the same story with equal results. The point is not whether Owen or Rockne or Whoever was the real Sonny, or even if there was ever a real Sonny. The appreciative audiences recognized the more important truth -- no one "let" Jim run but, when he was of a mind to do it, no one could stop him.

Passing was not a major weapon in the Thorpe arsenal, but he was usually his team's best thrower. According to some accounts he could throw "long" better than most. He was also a good receiver, although he had few opportunities to exhibit that skill.

On defense, he was considered a very rough player, but not a dirty one. When he had a runner cornered, his favorite tactic was to launch his body in what amounted to a cross-body block, a technique calculated to produce a fumble.

As a punter he was thought of as one of the best. His ability to place-kick and drop-kick remained long after his other skills eroded. When nearing 40 he could still give pre-game exhibitions in which he would stand at the 50-yard line and dropkick over the goal posts at one end of the field then turn and dropkick over the posts at the other end. He was quite durable. Although he was the main target for every opponent -- and they often used extra-legal tactics -- he was forced out of only two games by injury before 1921.

Others might rival him in individual skills. There were other feared runners, strong blockers, rugged defenders, accurate kickers, and good passers, but no one combined all of these to the same degree of perfection. He was much criticized for loafing in practice. Some said he was never as good as he could have been. The fact was that, until his later years when he seldom had competent teammates, his teams won nearly all their games.

Nevertheless, despite Thorpe's awesome reputation, Cusack's \$250-per-game offer seemed outlandish to Canton fans, at least \$150 over what the highest-paid players were receiving. Even the most loyal Cantonites thought Cusack had lost his mind and would soon lose his shirt, but when 6,000 showed up for the first Canton-Massillon game and 8,000 for the second, the Canton manager realized a tidy profit.

More than the big money he received was involved in Big Jim's appeal. Thorpe was not just a great football player; he was the quintessential American athlete. Twice All-America at Carlisle, winner of two gold medals in the 1912 Olympics, professional baseball player with the New York Giants. There has never been anything like him.

In the 1912 Olympics held in Sweden, Thorpe won both the pentathlon and decathlon while compiling 8,412 of a possible

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10,000 points. King Gustav presented the two gold medals, proclaiming, "You are the greatest athlete in the world."

Thorpe modestly responded, "Thanks, King."

Within a year it was learned that Thorpe had played professional baseball for Rocky Mount, N.C., of the Eastern Carolina League in 1909 and 1910, earning \$60 a month. Many student-athletes played summer baseball in those days but normally under pseudonyms to protect their amateur status. At the time, the strict rules of the Olympics made a professional in one sport a professional in all sports. The International Olympic Committee removed his name from its records and demanded Thorpe send back his medals. It was said Thorpe mourned the loss of the medals until his dying day. In 1982, 29 years after his death, the Olympic Committee responded to numerous pleas and petitions and returned the medals to his family.

After leaving Carlisle in the spring of 1913, Thorpe signed to play baseball with the New York Giants. For two seasons and part of a third, he was a seldom-used outfielder with a batting average that hovered around .200. Giant Manager John McGraw insisted Thorpe couldn't hit a curve ball, but part of Thorpe's troubles stemmed from the fact that he and McGraw did not care for each other. The intense, dictatorial McGraw was the exact opposite of the easy-going Indian.

After spending a season and a half in the minors, Thorpe returned to the majors in 1917 and stayed until 1919. In his final major league year, he hit .327 in 62 games for New York and Boston of the National League. With Akron of the International League in 1920, he hit .360, with 16 home runs. In 1921, he played for Toledo of the American Association, batted .358 and had 112 RBI. After one more season, he retired from baseball.

But football was his game. When Thorpe turned to professional football in 1915, he put the sport on the front pages because he was bigger than the game itself.

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Although Thorpe's gate appeal brought out a big crowd, his first game as a pro was a failure on the field. The Bulldog's coach, Harry Hazlett, decided to keep Thorpe on the bench at the opening of the game, held at Massillon's Driving Park. Hazlett's strategem was either because the great Indian had not practiced with the team or because he resented Thorpe's high pay. Whatever the reason, the Tigers led 3-0 on a field goal by Dorais when Thorpe entered the game with a minute left in the first quarter. Then Bulldog quarterback Don Hamilton, presumably on orders from Coach Hazlett, called Thorpe's number only intermittently. Thorpe ended the game back on the bench. Meanwhile, Dorais dropkicked two more field goals and set up a touchdown with a pass. Massillon 16, Canton 0.

Cusack was angry. With the second Massillon game scheduled for two weeks later, he replaced Hazlett as coach with Thorpe. Quarterback Hamilton quit the team in a huff and a new signal-caller was imported from Indiana.

Cusack left the Sunday before the Massillon rematch and Thanksgiving Day open. In theory, open dates would keep his stars from being injured, but most of them simply played for another team on those days. Massillon, in the meantime, went to Toledo the Sunday after the first Canton game to take on the tough Maroons. Despite making seventeen first downs to the Maroons' one, the Tigers found themselves in a scoreless tie as the final gun approached. Then Dorais kicked a field goal from the 28-yard-line to send the Tigers home with a victory.

New Bulldog coach Thorpe was unavailable to practice his team on Thanksgiving Day. He was back in Indiana earning another \$250 with Clare Rhode's Pine Village team in his second pro game. Rhode kept him off the bench and in the game and Jim scored two touchdowns.

In addition to turning the Bulldog reins over to Thorpe, Cusack moved to shore up his line. He imported tackles Earl Abell of Colgate and Bob Butler of Wisconsin, both legitimate All-Americans. Then, as an afterthought, he brought in a third tackle, Charlie Smith from Michigan State. Smith, one of the few early black pros, would play only one game in a Canton uniform, but he would be at the center of one of the most riotous endings ever to take place on a football field.

A standing-room-only crowd that ringed the field at League Park was equally split between Bulldog and Tiger fans. Thorpe lived up to his reputation, running well and leading the Canton defense. In the opening quarter, he dropkicked a 21-yard field goal to put Canton in front. He added a third-quarter placekick from 37 yards out to make the score 6-0.

Cusack's only criticism of Thorpe as a coach was that the Indian was sometimes reluctant to replace a player on the field. Before the game, he and Big Jim agreed that Cusack would control Canton substitutions from the Bulldog bench. As the game entered the final quarter, Massillon began gaining freely through Abell, the Colgate All-American. Cusack sent in Charlie Smith at tackle. When Abell reached the sideline, he was near collapse from a heavy cold.

Smith played well and the Bulldogs held the Tigers in check until the very end. Suddenly, Dorais shot a pass to Maury "Windy" Briggs, formerly of Ohio State. Briggs raced down the sideline toward the goal line as the crowd surged closer. At the two-yard line, he disappeared into a wall of spectators. Suddenly, the ball came bounding out onto the field and Smith, the replacement tackle, fell on the fumble, apparently preserving the Canton victory. But Briggs was apoplectic. He had NOT fumbled, he screamed. Indeed a Canton fan -- a uniformed policeman, no less -- had kicked the ball out of his hands. Briggs wasn't helping his case because everyone knew that Canton had no uniformed policemen at that time. Nevertheless, the halfback continued to describe the alleged football-kicking cop right down to the brass buttons on his blue coat.

By now the crowd was all over the field and the game was effectively over. But what was the score? If Briggs' story was believed, it was a 6-6 tie. If he was lying (or crazy), Canton had the win. At stake were the championship of Stark County, an argument for the "Ohio League Championship," and -- most important -- more

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than a thousand dollars in bets. However, the referee knew he'd have 4,000 people after his hide no matter what his decision.

The ref was no fool. He agreed to render a sealed decision, not to be revealed until 12:30 that night, by which time he would be far away on a train bound for home. That night, at thirty minutes after midnight, the envelope was opened at Canton's Courtland Hotel. Although couched in statesmanlike language, the basic message was "No buttons, no policeman, no kicker, no touchdown. Canton, 6-0."

There was a coda to the story. About ten years later, Cusack met a man who claimed that he had indeed kicked the ball out of Briggs' hands because he'd bet \$30, his whole week's pay, on Canton. Cusack believed the fellow. Who wouldn't believe the open-faced streetcar conductor in his blue coat with shiney brass buttons?

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There was no majority opinion favoring any single team for the Ohio League title. Massillon people insisted they'd won the final meeting with Canton, blithely assuming their team would have made the extra point after Briggs' touchdown. The Columbus Panhandles claimed a share on their victory over Massillon. But the Toledo Maroons had whipped the 'Handles, and the Dayton Gym-Cadets had topped the Maroons but lost to Columbus. And on and on.

One point emerged from all the arguing. At season's end, the Canton Bulldogs had Jim Thorpe. With Big Jim in the lineup, Canton would be favored to beat any other team in Ohio. So, for

what Thorpe could do more than what he actually accomplished, he gave Canton the strongest claim to the state crown.

A rough (and thoroughly unofficial) estimate of the pecking order among the contenders:

1. Canton Bulldogs	5-2-0
2. Massillon Tigers	5-2-0
3. Columbus Panhandles	8-3-1
4. Dayton Gym-Cadets	7-1-1
5. Toledo Maroons	6-2-2
6. Youngstown Patricians	8-0-1
7. Cincinnati Celts	4-1-2 (incomplete)

In the long run, what was most important about the 1915 season was not who won or lost games but who played and how much it had cost. After years of careful "independent" football dominated by local sandlotters, the game moved into a new stage where college-trained players would lead the way. The influx of better-prepared players meant a major increase in the quality of football played.

However, it also brought a great increase in the cost of doing business as player salaries jumped. Those teams willing to pay for superior players usually prospered on the field if not in their ledger books; those that refused to spend money on talent and attempted to continue with lower-paid sandlotters usually dropped to second-class status -- and third-class incomes. One anonymous Massillon official revealed it had taken between \$1,500 and \$2,000 to bring in the Tigers lineup that opposed Canton in the final game. In the future, now that a full-scale bidding war had opened, the cost could only go up.