

Three A's for Football

The A.A.A. Introduces Football to Pittsburgh: 1890

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Pittsburgh was built by three rivers. In a literal sense, the city stands where the Monongahela and the Allegheny meet to form the Ohio. In a figurative sense, the rivers built the city by bringing iron ore and coal to be transformed into steel, the source of Pittsburgh's wealth. Today, a gleaming civic edifice, Three Rivers Stadium stands at the confluence and across the water from an area called "The Golden Triangle." The juxtaposition of people, water, and gold is more than symbolic.

In 1900, Andrew Carnegie, that canny Scot turned steelmaker, had an income in excess of 23 million dollars, with no income tax. Other steelmen, though lagging behind Carnegie, still had "more money than they knew what to do with", as the saying goes. It is likely that Pittsburgh in the 1890s had the highest per capita income of any fair-size city in the world.

Although only a few dollars a week filtered down to the men who actually sweated to make the steel in grimy mills along the soot-encrusted banks of the Monongahela and Allegheny, several thousand professional people -- doctors, lawyers, company executives, and such -- were doing very well, thank you. Predictably, many of Pittsburgh's New Rich looked to athletic clubs for their leisure activities.

The Pittsburgh Athletic Club had been around for some years in 1890. At first known as the East End Gyms, a name that hung on in the public's mind throughout the club's existence, the P.A.C. had erected in the East Liberty section of town the best-equipped gymnasium in western Pennsylvania. Naturally enough, its pride was in its gymnasts, but under the leadership of Professor William Kirschner, the club's highly respected instructor of physical education, it competed successfully in track and other sports. However, prior to 1890, the P.A.C. did not attempt a football team.

As a matter of fact, there apparently were no football games worth noting in western Pennsylvania before 1890, although rugby and soccer were common. No doubt soccer, with its European history, appealed strongly to the many immigrants who worked in the mills. But American football remained an eastern game throughout the 1880s.

Some oldtimers have suggested the poor baseball team provided the impetus toward the establishment of football in Pittsburgh. The disastrous season experienced by the local major-league baseball teams in 1890, goes the thinking, put Pittsburghers of a mind to welcome a new outdoor spectator sport, namely football. This psychological push is speculative at best. By the time football teams actually took the field in mid-October, the diamond season

was only a bitter memory. More likely, the sudden appearance of several football teams in the area resulted from other causes.

One cause may have been the increasing publicity from the east about the Big Four college teams. Certainly that must have caused a number of healthy young Pittsburghers to say to themselves, "Hey, that sounds like a lot of fun! I'd like to try it." But, on the less wholesome side, the publicity must have sparked some sectional envy throughout the Midwest. The jealousy would have been particularly virulent in Pittsburgh for the Steel City has always maintained a rivalry with Philadelphia, and it was at this time that the University of Pennsylvania was in the process of achieving football parity with Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. Pittsburghers believed they could do anything Philadelphians could do, and do it a damn sight better!

Once one Pittsburgh group announced its intention to play football, other locals were certain to take up the challenge. After all, it was easier to form a football squad in 1890 than to start a baseball team. In those padless days, the only necessary bit of grid equipment was a football. To play baseball, a team needed a ball AND a bat.

Technically, the first western Pennsylvania football team was not formed in Pittsburgh. Until 1906, what is now Pittsburgh's north side was a separate city called Allegheny. Encompassing the area north of its namesake river, it had in 1890 slightly less than half of Pittsburgh's population, 105,287 to 238,617.

The year before, in 1889, some of the wealthy young men of Allegheny formed their own athletic club, the Allegheny Athletic Association, popularly called the "Three A's". The new club was a natural rival to the older Pittsburgh Athletic Club but labored under several disadvantages.

Not only did the P.A.C. have several years' headstart on the Three A's, but, more important, the older club had its excellent east end gymnasium. The Three A's had nothing better to offer its members than one end of the field at old Exposition Park, a relic that had been standing since the Civil War, when it was patriotically dubbed Union Park. His outdoor "gym" was less than adequate under the best of circumstances and totally impossible during spells of bad weather.

Moreover, the P.A.C. had its admirable instructor, Professor Kirschner; the Three A's had only its resources. While several of the Alleghenys were -- or had been -- fine athletes, they all had their own careers to pursue. None of them could devote full time to running the club's affairs.

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Clearly, if the Three A's hoped to compete successfully with the established P.A.C. for the area's most prestigious membership, it needed a gimmick. It found it in football.

As one critic pointed out, the Three A's chose to form a football team because several of its members already knew how to play. Two men in particular took the lead.

John Moorehead, the club president, had been an all-around athlete at Yale in the late 1870s, running the 100-yard dash in under eleven seconds, hoisting an oar for the rowing team, and competing in several other sports, including football. Since leaving New Haven, his membership in the firm of Moorehead Brothers & Co., which operated the Vesuvius Iron Works, kept him well-supplied with the good things of this life and allowed him to indulge his passion for breeding bull terriers. Moorehead remained fit as he entered his thirties, and, when the Three A's formed a football team, he took over the position of center.

By divine right, the leader of the football team was Oliver David Thompson, another Yale man. It was O.D. Thompson, Esq. -- his preferred appellation -- who had played the "other" halfback alongside Walter Camp at New Haven from 1876 through 1878. By 1890, Camp's reputation had so inflated that to share a conversation with him on a street corner could get one a reputation as a football expert. That Thompson had worked in such close proximity to the Great Man for three years qualified him as the foremost gridiron authority in western Pennsylvania.

Thompson probably deserved the honor. After his graduation from Yale, he continued to play football, or at least rugby, with great success throughout the 1880s. Although he was now 35-years old, many still regarded him as the best player of kicking games to be found in the area. In addition to his athletic skills, he brought to his position of leadership the exemplary talents of judgment and persuasion that were fast making him one of the most successful lawyers around.

An Innovation

While at Yale, Thompson and Camp perpetrated the first "legal" forward pass in football history. On November 30, 1876, the Elis were locked in a close contest with Princeton at Hoboken, N.Y. Early in the game, Camp ran for a good gain but was finally tackled. As he fell, he threw the ball FORWARD to Thompson. O.D. was no doubt as surprised as anyone when he caught the ball, but he was not so flabbergasted that he forgot to turn and run like hell all the way into the end zone. While Thompson stood puffing beneath the goal posts and Camp climbed manfully to his feet, the Princeton players screamed bloody murder.

The referee, C.B. Bushnell, a Yale undergraduate, hesitated. He couldn't remember that it was actually written anywhere that the ball could not be thrown forward. His point was well-taken (although, of course, Princeton did not take it well at all), for rules in 1876 were at best written only sketchily. Additionally, they could be thrown out the window during any Yale game because of the Elis' practice of extracting special rule concessions from their opponents before taking the field.

There was also the fact that, as a Yale man himself, Bushnell preferred to allow the touchdown.

But, fair was fair. Since he couldn't remember the rule, Bushnell did the honorable thing -- he flipped a coin!

To the complete exasperation of Princeton, it came up Yale. The touchdown stood. According to one of Yale's special rules, the TD didn't count in the scoring, but the goal that they were allowed to kick after it did. Yale one, Princeton 0.

Later in the game, O.D. Thompson -- who knew a good thing when he saw it -- also successfully threw the ball forward as he was being tackled. This time, Princeton didn't bother to protest; the boys from New Jersey just gritted their teeth and glared at Bushnell. Yale eventually got a second goal out of it and won 2-0.

Needless to say, Princeton made it clear that from then on there would be no more of Mr. Camp's forward passes allowed in any football games played by the Tigers. Ironically, when the time finally came to legalize the forward pass in 1906, one opponent of the idea was Walter Camp.

The A.A.A. Begins

The Allegheny Athletic Association scheduled its first football match for Saturday, October 11, 1890, at old Exposition Park against a local prep school, the Shadyside Academy. About 500 people showed up, but, for reasons best known to themselves, the Shadyside team was not among them. According to a brief account in the Pittsburgh POST the following Monday, their place was taken by the Western University of Pennsylvania team. Reading between the lines, one can guess that the "team" was made up of eleven W.U.P. students who just happened to be there as spectators and volunteered to perform when one of the scheduled participants ducked out. Anyway, they were all from W.U.P. Well, they SAID they were.

In that W.U.P. underwent a name change in 1908 to become the University of Pittsburgh, its first football game has some historical significance. Unfortunately for the Panthers, the Three A's had size, practice, and experience on its side and rather humiliated the college volunteers to the tune of 38-0.

The following Saturday, the Shadyside Academy did indeed appear at Exposition Park before a "large" attendance of several hundred spectators. The boys proved to be quick and "nimble". Under different rules, they might have done well. But the grown men of the Allegheny Athletic Association were bigger and stronger, and that was the name of the game in 1890. The final score was 32-0.

The A's presented a backfield that had A.S. Valentine, a former University of Pennsylvania man at quarterback; two track stars in Harry Oliver and Harry C. Fry at the halves; and the indestructible O.D. Thompson at fullback. Moorehead anchored the line at center and Ed Brainard, formerly of Andover, was a decent tackle, but most of the line was only ordinary. The best players on Three A's teams seemed always to be in the backfield, with a corresponding shortage of guards and tackles, much like a children's pick-up game where the "big kids" insist on running with the ball and the "small fry" are only allowed to block.

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The analogy is apt. For their third outing, the Three A's scheduled a pick-up squad. Although the eleven players styled themselves the "All-Pittsburghs", there was no disguising the fact that they were nothing more than an ad lib collection of local athletes masquerading as a team.

Significantly, several of the pick-ups were members of the Pittsburgh Athletic Club. Dr. George Proctor and Grant Dibert would show themselves to be outstanding players when the Gyms formed their own football team. Professor Kirschner went in at center for the pick-ups so he could square off against Moorehead.

It was obvious from the start that this was to be more than just a friendly game. The *Post* was moved to observe that "both sides played earnestly and felt that way, too, as the harsh things said to the umpire and the glaring looks which passed from side to side indicated." Most of the earnestness, harsh words, and glaring looks stemmed, no doubt, from the budding rivalry between the A.A.A. and the P.A.C. Poor Mr. Campbell, the referee and a member of the Three A's, apparently proved unable to satisfy either friend or foe. Overall, the Three A's team was a little stronger than the pick-ups and certainly more experienced in playing together. The *Post*, using one of its favorite adjectives, called them "nimble", probably meaning that only a few of them ran into each other when the ball was snapped. It all paid off in a third straight victory, 22-6.

Having negotiated the month of October with a perfect record, the Three A's believed it had no more local worlds to conquer. For Saturday, November 1, they imported the Princeton University Preparatory team, paying them \$150. The prep team was a far cry from the Princeton varsity. The players -- divinity students all -- were "experiments" with little football experience but "destined to shine on the Varsity eleven." In other words, they were reserves. Because of the strict rules on substitution, these players had virtually no chance of seeing action with the varsity during the season, short of a catastrophic rash of injuries. In playing a schedule against other reserve teams and second-rate elevens, the reserves could gain much-needed game experience.

The leader of the prep team was an all-time Princeton hero, Hector W. Cowan. This young man had starred as a Tiger tackle for five years during the 1880s, climaxing his career by being named to Caspar Whitney's first All-American squad in 1889. The primitive eligibility rules of the time are apparent in Cowan's five years of varsity football and the fact that he now played a regular left tackle for the preps.

When he arrived in Pittsburgh the day before the game, he sent the *Post* into paroxysms of praise: "He is a young giant in build and disposition. A more agreeable and courteous gentleman never studied theology or played football."

That evening a banquet was held in Cowan's honor. The next day, he had a feast of a different kind. The Three A's put their best tackle, Ed Brainard, up against him, but the "young giant" had few problems and none whatsoever after Brainard went to the sideline with an arm injury. As a matter of fact, the entire prep squad had no difficulty in slaughtering the Three A's, 44 to 6, before a crowd of several hundred, including "quite a few ladies".

Their performance against a team of reserves effectively put an end to what had been growing speculation as to how the Three A's might fare against the famous varsities of the east. Clearly, the Alleghenys were not as good as they had thought themselves to be.

Meanwhile, the P.A.C.

The Pittsburgh Athletic Club announced its intention to field a football team in early October, but for one reason or another they attempted no games for a month, although Kirschner, Proctor, and Dibert logged some experience in the All-Pittsburgh's game against the Three A's. The Gyms finally scheduled a game for Saturday, November 1 -- the same day Princeton Prep humbled the Alleghenys. Unfortunately, their scheduled opponents were the reluctant boys from the Shadyside Academy, and, once again, the prep school team backed out. At the last minute, Shadyside sent word that its players had voted to play henceforth only by the rules of association football (soccer). While that game was certainly more suitable to the Shadysides' "nimbleness", the decision forced the Gyms to postpone their football baptism until the following week.

On November 8, the P.A.C. team traveled to little Washington, Pa., to oppose the Washington & Jefferson College eleven, a team that had enjoyed handing W.U.P. another one-sided plastering only a short time before. In a game the Pittsburgh *Press* with limited perspective called "the most exciting match" ever held in Washington, the Gyms put up a good fight, but the Presidents came on during the second half to win 10-0.

With that, the P.A.C. decided to pack it in for the year as far as football was concerned. They had barely made a ripple in the local grid stream.

About thirty miles east of downtown Pittsburgh, another athletic club that was destined to field important grid teams during the '90s made its debut with only slight success. The scores of only two games survive from the Greensburg A.A.'s 1890 season -- a 6-6 tie with the Indiana (Pa.) Normal School and a 4-34 pounding at the hands of the Kiskiminetas Springs School (Kiski Prep) in the G.A.A.'s first home game. Later, a group of college boys home for Thanksgiving vacation supplemented the team for a game with an unidentified Pittsburgh club team at the Fairgrounds, but they lost again by a narrow margin.

Back at the A's

Meanwhile, a week after their debacle with the Princeton Prep, a much-chastened Three A's team returned to Exposition Park against the experienced Detroit A.C. It wasn't exactly do-or-die, but the A's badly needed an acceptable performance to rescue their prestige. The Detroiters arrived in town with a reputation for rough play. As soon as the game started, they showed their notoriety to be deserved, hurling themselves into the contest with abandon. A major portion of their game turned out to be their ability to slug. The A's quickly got the message and returned the favors. Then, the Detroit boys used a little finesse, complaining vociferously to the referee, Professor Gault, about the home team's illegal tactics. And, again, the Alleghenys followed suit.

Each team scored a touchdown and a goal in the first half, but neither could get any points in the second, despite some furious

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work on both sides. The Post described the play as "more forcible than elegant," and everyone agreed that the 6-6 score was a fair result. At the conclusion of the game, Detroit exhibited a little class by giving three hearty cheers for their hosts, followed by three more for the much-harried Professor Gault. Big Ed Malley, the large right tackle of the Detroiters and the longest and loudest complainer throughout the game, magnanimously pronounced the good professor "the best referee the team ever ran up against."

Considering the quality of the opposition, the tie may have been the high point of the season for the Three A's. The next Saturday, they completed their schedule with a low, a frustrating loss to the tough Cleveland A.C.

The gamblers at Exposition Park were giving two-to-one odds in favor of the A's before the game, trusting to the Pennsylvanians' superior size to pull them through. In an effort to shore up his line, O.D. Thompson persuaded the P.A.C.'s Professor Kirschner to take a guard position. By the end of the first half, those who had backed the Alleghenys were already planning ways to spend their winnings, as the A's dominated play while pushing over a touchdown. No one was particularly concerned when Harry Fry missed the try for goal, leaving the score at 4-0.

But the story changed in the second half. Though small, the Clevelanders were in better condition than the home squad. Their endurance and quickness took a toll on the winded A's until the Ohioans were able to shove across a touchdown. A successful goal try brought the score to 6-4. And, although the Alleghenys fought back bravely, once huffing and puffing to within twelve feet of the goal line, that remained the score at the end.

Western Pennsylvania's first season of football had been a success, all things considered. Of the college teams, Washington & Jefferson had done well, winning two out of three. W.U.P. and little Geneva College had learned to play the game, even if the lessons had been mostly painful. The same could be said for the Pittsburgh Athletic Club.

The Allegheny Athletic Association was regarded -- and regarded themselves -- as the local champions. DIS-regarding one horrendous outing against the Princeton Preps, they could look back on a successful first season in which they slaughtered area opponents and played well, if not victoriously, against invaders from Detroit and Cleveland. They planned to be stronger in 1891. But then, so did everyone else.