

The Tigers Pounce Again: 1904

By PFRA Research

Massillon's 1903 championship convinced many Ohio independent teams that their only recourse, if they wished to be competitive, was to hire "ringers." Most of the recognized professionals had played in the Pittsburgh pro ranks, and their exodus to Ohio in search of higher salaries contributed to the decline of professional football around Pittsburgh. At the same time, pro football in western Pennsylvania was already slipping badly because of financial problems. Ohio promoters chose to ignore that little lesson in football economics either because they felt it their civic duty to absorb a gentlemanly loss or two for their town's pride or because they honestly believed that they could make a paid team show a profit.

Of course, most places decided to let the championship go hang. They preferred to stay with their inexpensive "town teams," made up strictly of local manpower. But Massillon's experience proved that any city willing to spend the dollars could make a run for the title. No one had to be told that "little Massillon" was most unlikely to find within its own environs eleven football players the equal of the best eleven players in, say, Akron. Looking at it that way, Lorain, Salem, Dover and others saw ringers as a way of competing on an equal footing with Akron and Cleveland. Hiring professionals was a way to parity.

Naturally, the idea of paying for player's services was opposed in the larger cities. There, available amateur players had produced strong teams in the past. If worse came to worst, a star player could always be found a good job in town as an inducement to joining the locals. The larger the city, the more and better the jobs. Managers of big city teams objected to the sudden change in the rules. In simple terms, their objection was "why should we pay for something we've been getting for free?" However, their arguments were couched more diplomatically when delivered to their fans. The Akron *Beacon-Journal* spoke up petulantly:

Massillon has reached the climax. Since a mob of Pittsburgh players came to Akron and defeated the Akron team at football, there is no limit to the aspirations of the Massillon fans. They are seriously wondering whether Yale or Princeton would look in against the few Massillon men and the tribe of Pittsburghers, and have actually assumed that they will have any kind of a show next year. Relying as they must on outside strength, when those outside players are playing on their own organizations, Massillon will return to her normal position as a second-rater. When Pfeifer, Shiring, and the McChesneys are playing with the East Ends of Pittsburgh, Massillon's stock will return to its level and Akron will regain what it lost through overconfidence in scorning to protest against the ringers who won a hollow victory Dec. 5. Next year Akron will insist on a game during the football season when Massillon will be unable

to secure ringers to bolster up her team to the class of Akron.

The small towns were not convinced. They began to sign their own ringers. Early in the 1904 season, it was estimated that players were being paid in Salem, Lorain, Canton, Dover and Shelby, as well as Massillon.

Akron tried to hold out. They remained steadfastly amateur through their first couple of games in 1904. Then, on October 10, an article appeared in the *Beacon-Journal* telling of Massillon's ridicule of its simon-pure rival. The Massillonians, said the article, couldn't understand how Akron could still play "for the love of the sport."

The next week Akron went out and hired some players.

Probably the *Beacon-Journal* article had little to do with Akron's change of heart. More likely, the Akron leaders were afraid that if they waited too long, all the good players would be found in their opponents' lineups. Then, too, harsh reality befell the former Ohio independent champs when they realized that they were no longer in a position to insist on favorable scheduling.

By the middle of October, 1904, at least seven teams in Ohio were said to have hired players. A *Beacon-Journal* article of September 26, referring to "Dover Canal's salaried team," has been taken as evidence that the whole squad was paid weekly for its football duties. However, it is more likely that this was *Beacon-Journal* shorthand for a team whose players had outside jobs dependent upon their playing ball. Under the rules of the day, such set-ups were not considered professional.

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It is a misnomer to refer to teams "signing" players at this time. Written contracts were almost never involved. Most teams hired their ringers by the game. If a player did well, he would usually be asked back the next week. And if he wasn't injured, and if he was in the mood to play again, and if he hadn't received a better offer, he would usually show up.

It wasn't unusual for a player to do well against a team one week and the next week be found in that team's lineup. For example, when Massillon defeated Shelby in November of 1904, one of the few bright spots for Shelby was the play of big Ted Nesser, a rugged boilermaker the Shelbyites had coaxed up from Columbus. The following week, Ted defected to Massillon. Apparently, the Tigers' power of persuasion was superior to Shelby's, because Ted stayed with Massillon for the next two years.

However, that is not to say that Ted played EXCLUSIVELY with the Tigers. Because some teams played on Sundays while others

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refused to break the sabbath (at least at home), many players saw action in two games each weekend. And, naturally, picked up two pays.

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An abortive try was made in Columbus in October to start a team with Ted Nesser as the centerpiece. The man behind the move was an intense little ex-machinist-turned-newspaperman named Joe Carr. He'd already had success with a baseball team he'd formed three years before which he called the "Panhandle White Sox" -- "Panhandle" because the bulk of the players worked for the Panhandle Division of the Pennsylvania Railroad and "White Sox" because the Chicago A.L. team was a favorite of Carr's. There had been some Panhandle-connected football teams in earlier years, but they seem to have been strictly amateur. Carr's new entry -- featuring several of the larger Panhandlers, including Ted Nesser and a couple of his brothers -- was probably at least "pass-the-hat" pro.

On October 9, a team of soldiers from the Columbus Barracks was humbled 32-0, as Ted Nesser scored four touchdowns. The following week, a group of "all-stars" were blitzed, 21-0.

But, after that auspicious start, the team ceased operation. Perhaps they could find no one else to play them. More likely they were not making any money.

Although the Columbus Panhandles' 1904 season didn't amount to much, they and the Nesses and Joe Carr would become an important part of the Ohio pro football scene in the future.

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Some teams found the use of ringers a mixed blessing.

In addition to his own play, a ringer could sometimes raise the quality of his teammates by teaching them a few niceties of the game. Most of the local players had played football only on a high school level (or less!), but anyone good enough to be imported had experience beyond that, sometimes even college play!

On the other hand, most ringers were paid more than they were worth at the turnstiles. The going rate for a player's services might be anywhere from ten to one hundred dollars or more a game, depending on the team, the importance of the game, and, of course, the player. He often received expenses on top of his pay. But few crowds exceeded a thousand and attendances of less than half that were more common. Admission went for fifty cents or less. Such economics almost guaranteed that a team would lose money if it hired a few pros.

Often a team facing an "easy" opponent might prefer to play without their ringers for that particular game. But, in so doing, they ran the risk of later finding the outsiders unavailable for an important contest.

Importing outsiders always bruised a few local egos, and the "big money" paid to a few ringers inevitably spawned petty jealousies among their temporary teammates. Sometimes these proved

justified when the expensive import failed to live up to his advance billing. Soon, talented locals were demanding to be paid.

Morale aside, many questioned how much a team's overall performance was really enhanced by hiring ringers. Most of them arrived in a city shortly before game time, allowing themselves only enough time to change into their football togs and to review their team's signals. Even with the standardized and simplified offenses of the day, this lack of team practice made for some very sloppy football. Newspaper accounts of games again and again point out the lack of "team play."

Supremely talented players like Doc McChesney, Bob Shiring and Ted Nesser could earn their keep, of course, which was why hiring ringers flourished. But many teams hired lesser lights and played to regret it.

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Charles Follis played for the Shelby A.C. for two years before he was finally paid to take the field in 1904. He was a big, fast running back who could go through or around any line he faced. Plenty of stars were being paid in 1904, of course. What makes Follis' turning pro memorable was that he was the first verified black professional player.

The Shelby *Globe* of September 16, 1904, commemorated his signing:

The Shelby Athletic Association has secured the services of Charles Follis for this season. The contract has been signed up and football enthusiasts will be pleased to know Follis will be on the local team again this year. Follis plays halfback and there is no finer in the state.

With all sorts of teams scurrying around and hiring stars, it is small wonder that Follis suddenly was asked to turn pro. Shelby manager Frank C. Schiffer no doubt breathed much easier with his star halfback bound to the team in writing. Apparently, Schiffer felt strongly enough to take the unusual step of offering Follis a full season's contract instead of hiring him by the game. During his first two years in Shelby -- 1902 and 1903 -- Follis had been provided with a job at a local hardware store, one that was not so demanding of his time or energy as to interfere with his ball playing. In his first game as a real pro, Follis ran 83 yards to a touchdown in leading a 29-0 win over Marion. He went on to a brilliant season that saw Shelby rack up an 8-1-1 record.

But he paid for it. The star of any team was the target of fists, kicks and other illegal means aimed at putting him safely on the bench. In Follis' case, the physical abuse was compounded by a steady stream of racial slurs from his opponents and their fans. By all accounts, he bore it all stoically, winning wide respect.

In the midst of a game in Toledo in 1905, Jack Tattersall, the Toledo captain and quarterback, suddenly stopped play and glared at the crowd. "Don't call Follis a nigger!" he shouted. "He is a gentleman and a clean player, and please don't call him that!"

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After a second's shock, the fans applauded. The abuse ceased for at least one game.

Follis stood six feet tall and weighed nearly 200 pounds, making him as big as many of the linemen he played against. To his natural power he added great quickness. "Follis the Speedy" he was called in the local press.

Quite possibly, football was only his second best game. In baseball he was a fine catcher who hit with power and consistency. Nearly everyone who saw him play agreed he would have been a sure thing for the major leagues ... had he been white.

Fate seemed against him.

An injury in Shelby's 1906 Thanksgiving Day game ended Follis' football career. For the next three years, he played professional baseball only, with the famous Cuban Giants in '08 and '09, a superstar barred by his skin from the major stage.

In April of 1910 he died of pneumonia. He was only 31.

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By mid-season 1904, several teams were becoming nervous over the high cost of ringers. The Akron *Beacon-Journal* broke the story on October 22, under the headline: "Plans Afoot to Organize a State League; Professional Football Teams See the Need of It." The story read, in part:

The plan for the preservation of professional football is to have a meeting of the representatives of Massillon, Akron, Salem, Lorain, Shelby and one or two more cities. During the first year of an organization of this kind, there is no doubt that some clubs would hire a number of ex-college stars at high salaries but, as that plan would kill the goose that lays the golden egg, it would necessarily have to be abandoned.

This turned out to be only the first of a long line of ill-fated calls for the formation of a professional football league in Ohio. Almost yearly the suggestion was renewed. Each time it failed and always for the same reasons. Teams were never able to agree on maximum salaries or on a way to keep players from jumping from one team to another.

Sixteen seasons were to pass before a league got past the talking stage.

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The 1904 edition of the Massillon Tigers repeated its championship of the year before, this time winning seven games without a loss. Rainouts and, apparently, some difficulty in finding willing opponents limited the number of games, but there was no question that the Tigers had the top record in the state.

Bob Shiring and Doc McChesney, the two Pittsburgh pros, were regulars on the team from the beginning. Most of the lineup for the first game was made up of local veterans. Roepke opened at end with Herman Vogt. At tackle opposite McChesney was old reliable,

Baldy Wittmann. Harry Anderson and Frank Botoner were the guards. Coach Stewart and Mully Miller, along with Bob Featheringham and Emery Powell, formed the backfield.

Significantly, Hospital Grounds Field was enclosed with a fence before the first game -- an attempt to put the team on a more professional basis. The Canal Dover Giants were expected to provide some strong competition in the Tigers' opener on September 24. Instead, Massillon rolled over the visitors for ten touchdowns in piling up a 57-0 win. Two real giants, Shiring and Botoner, were just too big for the Dovers to handle.

Two weeks later, the Franklin A.C. of Cleveland was humbled, 56-6. That lone Franklin touchdown, which came as the result of a fumble by Stewart, cost Massillon bettors considerable money. After their powerful opening victory, no one wanted to bet against the Tigers. Instead, the local gambling fraternity had to scratch up what wagers they could find by betting on the margin of victory or that the opponents would not score at all.

Many Massillonians were bored with the ease of the Tigers' wins, even at this early stage. Only 526 fans showed up to watch the Franklin slaughter.

Things approached absurdity the next week when the Tigers destroyed hapless Marion, 148-0. According to the Massillon *Evening Independent*, the score represented a new high in Ohio football. Because so many games had been played over the years, often going unreported by the press, the accuracy of the newspaper's claims cannot be verified. What must be accepted is that this game represented a new low in one-sided massacres.

Modern fans are aghast at some of the high scores racked up by old-time teams, particularly when they realize that a touchdown counted only five points until 1912. It took Massillon twenty-six touchdowns and eighteen extra points to gain their total against poor Marion.

One key to these one-sided slaughters was that, under the rules of the time, the team that scored turned around and received the next kickoff. In the Massillon-Marion "game," the latter received the opening kickoff and tried a couple of futile rushes against the Tigers' big line. When they attempted to punt, the ball was snapped badly and Roepke dashed in to pick it up and scoot for a touchdown. Marion never got another chance to handle the ball, as Massillon took kickoff after kickoff and paraded down the field to touchdown after touchdown.

The only unfortunate happenstance for the Tigers came late in the game when Roepke, the Akron man, suffered a fractured collar bone. After his broken nose in the championship game the year before, he must have had enough, because he never again appeared in a Massillon lineup.

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The Tigers expected to have problems with their next opponent. The Pittsburgh Lyceum team was regarded as one of the top elevens in the Smoky City. One indication of the nervousness of the Massillon leaders was that they imported yet another Pittsburgh pro to join Shiring and McChesney. Herman Kerchoffe stood six-

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five and crushed the scales at 235 or more. He was mammoth in ability as well as stature, and he usually set up shop at guard, where he could lead the blocking on offense and anchor the defense.

He was a revelation for Massillon fans, who had never seen his equal, as he smashed the Lyceum to tinder. The final score was Massillon 44, Lyceum 0.

The Tigers were becoming progressively more professionalized. In addition to McChesney, Shiring, and Kerchoffe, several others were likely receiving regular pay.

Dan Riley, for example, was a Canton man whose real name was Policowski. He was a speedy and clever halfback who quickly replaced Featheringham in the starting lineup. The presence of any Canton man in a Massillon lineup was prima facie evidence that he was being paid.

On November 5, the Tigers met the undefeated Shelby A.C. Pfeifer, one of the imports of the year before, was brought back to play tackle. Four of the five interior line positions were manned by ringers -- McChesney, Kerchoffe, Shiring, and Pfeifer. Only veteran guard Frank Botoner was a Massillonian.

Nearly 3,000 people -- the best crowd of the season -- came to the Hospital Grounds to watch the Tigers' first real test.

They passed with flying colors. Shelby's great black star, Charles Follis, was injured and didn't play in the first half. By the time he entered the game, it was already lost. Mully Miller punched over two touchdowns and the big Massillon line swarmed all over the Shelby ball carriers. At the half the score stood 22-0.

It had been agreed that the second half would be shortened to only fifteen minutes. Although Shelby played better ball once Follis entered the game, Massillon still added one more touchdown to make the final 28-0.

Bill Laub, the captain of the Akron A.C. (formerly the Akron East Ends), was one of the 3,000 who watched the game. Although impressed with the Tigers' showing, he expressed confidence that he could gather a group of players together capable of bringing the championship back to Akron.

One occurrence during the game appeared likely to make Laub's job easier. Doc McChesney suffered an injury and was out for the season, leaving a big empty spot at one tackle. That was when brawny Ted Nesser was prevailed upon to desert Shelby and replace Doc.

The Sharon Buhl Club pretended to the title of champions of western Pennsylvania, but they provided no competition at all as the Tigers, with Nesser at tackle, blasted them 63-0. Only 500 Massillonians watched the blitz, apparently suspicious of Sharon's pre-game build-up.

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The Tigers' final game, scheduled for Thanksgiving Day, was once again against Akron and for the championship. Captain Laub took a

page out of Massillon's book and recruited heavily. His Akron team was practically an all-star Ohio squad.

However, Massillon had not been idle. Once again they set out to prove that in a battle for the Ohio championship, Pennsylvania pros were superior to the natives. The Tigers added Jack Lang, a veteran tackle, and Clark Schrontz, an excellent end with a knack for coming up with big plays.

More than half the Massillon lineup and an equal number for Akron were on salary, making this the "most pro" game yet played in Ohio. A monstrous crowd of 5,288 paid to see the game, but estimates were that nearly 2,000 more got in, most over the new Hospital Grounds fence. A special train brought 1,500 Akronites over. Everyone who managed to be on hand saw what was later widely heralded as "the best game ever played in Massillon."

The Tigers dominated play during the first half, but fumbles cost them at least two touchdowns. Finally, after twenty minutes of play, Emery Powell crossed the goal line. Coach Stewart kicked the extra point and the Tigers led 6-0 at the half.

Akron came back strong in the second half, but the big Massillon line held them off again and again.

Fifteen minutes into the second half darkness had fallen to such an extent that it was obvious to all that the game would soon be called. Akron had the ball. Streibenger took the snap and pitched out to Murphy, who fumbled, then picked up the ball and shot past the right side of Massillon's line. As he neared the goal line, a Massillon back caught up and dropped him.

Just where Murphy went down became the subject of a fierce debate. Akron, with the backing of their 1,500 eagle-eyed fans, insisted vehemently that Murphy had crossed the goal line. The Tigers and their 5,500 hawk-eyed faithful shouted with equal force that poor Murphy had been dumped at least ten feet shy of the mark. Referee Merrell, no believer in majority rule, signalled a touchdown.

Massillon players and fans screamed. They explained that even if Murphy had indeed ended up across the goal line it was only because one of his own players had carried him across. Referee Merrell said that somehow he had not seen that happen.

Well, said Massillon, way back at the beginning of the play, that pass that Murphy got from Streibenger was an illegal forward, wasn't it? No, said Merrell, that was not how he saw it.

Meanwhile, it was getting darker and darker.

Akron began setting up for the extra point. Under the rules of the time, an extra point came on a free kick straight out from where the touchdown was scored. This one was from a difficult angle with a crosswind blowing. Joe Fogg, the Akron quarterback, needed an exceptional kick to make it. On the line was the Ohio state championship. A successful kick meant a share for Akron; a miss meant Massillon reigned alone.

Fogg swung his foot. Thousands of hearts stopped as his toe thumped the ball.

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| Then, the ball bounded away to one side.