

The Worst Season Ever

Pittsburgh Pro Teams Find Hard Times: 1900

By PFRA Research

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The Duquesne Country and Athletic Club finished 1899 -- the eighth year of pro football -- with the best pro team yet. They also had a payroll that was out of sight. Somewhere in this period, William Chase Temple took over the payments to the athletes and thus became the first individual pro team owner. Although the fact of his ownership is accepted by historians, just when he did this is not clear. Several histories have tabbed the 1898 season, when the D.C. & A.C. was suddenly confronted with more players under contract than they'd expected. Another possibility is 1899, when several new stars were hired to keep the team on top. The NFL's official chronology states that in 1900 Temple took over the D.C. & A.C. payments.

A different timetable seems likely. The Duquesne's games were well attended in both 1898 and 1899. The D.C. & A.C.-W. & J. game drew 17,500. Despite its through-the-roof payroll, the team almost surely made a profit. Temple would have had no cause to step in and relieve the club treasury.

Then, in 1900, a rival to the D.C. & A.C. supremacy appeared -- the previously ineffectual Homestead Library A.C. Apparently backed by Carnegie Steel money, the H.L.A.C. achieved instant parity by bringing Bill Church back from Georgetown to coach and play tackle, hiring former Princeton All-America Arthur Poe to play end, Penn's two-time All-America P.D. Overfield for center, and legendary Carlisle lineman Bemis Pierce for one guard position. They also grabbed several of the Duquesne stars by offering higher salaries. John Gammons and Dave Fultz were the most important jumpers. Others were "Datz" Lawlor, John Wienstein, Otto Wagonhurst, and John Hall. Although one historian has suggested the players jumped Temple's team for the H.L.A.C., the fact seems to be that Temple himself was behind the move. Between the 1899 and 1900 seasons, Temple left off as chairman of the D.C. & A.C. team and became football chairman for the H.L.A.C.

Arthur Poe's father, John Poe, Sr., was a nephew of the poet, Edgar Allan Poe. All told, John, Sr. had nine children, six of them sons, and all six Poe boys played football at Princeton between 1880 and 1901. The second brother, named Edgar Allan after his famous great-uncle, was selected as quarterback on the first All-America team in 1889. When his nose was broken in an 1890 game, he designed and then wore the first football nose guard, a rubber affair that made him look something like an anteater. By all accounts, Arthur, the fifth son was the best player of all. He was named to Walter Camp's All-America team in 1899. Only 5'7" and 146 pounds, he was nevertheless an outstanding defensive end for the Tigers and made several long touchdown runs when given the chance to run the ball.

At the end of the H.L.A.C.'s season, Coach Bill Church was presented with a gold watch by Temple and William E. Corey, General Superintendent of the Homestead Works for Carnegie Steel. To this point, the team seems to have been "owned" by the athletic club which was in turn supported by the steel company.

But though it was successful on the field, the H.L.A.C. football team was a failure at the turnstiles. The *Pittsburgh Press* revealed that all of the major athletic club teams lost money in 1900. "This cannot be charged to any lack of enthusiasm on the part of the football public," the *Press* explained, "but rather to the overwhelming handicap of unfavorable weather conditions that has stared the clubs in the face since the opening of the season. Such a run of miserable weather has never before been encountered. Week after week good games drew very small crowds, owing to rain."

One indication that the D.C. & A.C. was still in the black with its football team by November, 1900, is that it published a remarkable program for its game with Homestead. It not only contained brief biographies of all the players, it also had -- two to a page -- full length individual photos of every player on both teams. The cost of the program could hardly have been offset by the few ads at the back, one of which suggested, "Drink The Pittsburgh Brewing Company's Beer for your health's sake. Many a one's ruddy health may be attributed to the temperate drinking of the Pittsburgh Brewing Company's Beer."

The season was an unmitigated disaster for western Pennsylvania pro football. The proud D.C. & A.C. reacted to the red ink by chucking its big-time football team forever. Greensburg lost \$1,000 and also quit pro football. Latrobe withdrew to fielding a town team for several seasons. Only the H.L.A.C. came back on the field at full strength in 1901 -- most likely with William Temple as the new and first individual team owner.

High Hopes in Greensburg

At the beginning, of course, 1900 looked to be the finest season yet for western Pennsylvania Pro Football. Greensburg and Latrobe both planned strong comebacks. The D.C. & A.C. was still strong, having found excellent replacements for their pirated players. And the H.L.A.C. obviously was loaded.

The Greensburg team was financed by local stockholders. The treasury wasn't stocked until mid-August, when a tardy search for talent began. Letters and then contracts were sent out. By late September, the Greenies had a team of "men of brawn and muscle gathered from the stars of the American gridiron," according to the Greensburg *Daily Tribune*.

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Isaac Seneca, a former Carlisle All-America, had been secured for the backfield, along with returnee Fred Robison. "Tiger" McFarland was the top lineman. As coach, Greensburg brought in Princeton's 1899 All-America Ralph L. Hutchinson, "the most brilliant quarterback playing the game last year" and "in greater demand this season than any player in the country," according to the Daily Tribune. Hutchinson was "a thorough student of the game; neither drinks, smokes, nor chews the weed; and is an excellent handler of men." However, he was a tad indecisive. Just before the first game, he decided to go back to Princeton for another year.

The Greenies certainly didn't need him as they pounded Altoona 23-0. Then a day or so later Hutchinson changed his mind again and returned. No damage was done by his vacation, but it wasn't an especially auspicious omen.

The team struggled. Indiana Normal was downed 11-0 when it should have been crushed by at least thirty points. The East End A.C., the second-rate successors to the old P.A.C., were only tied, 0-0. Then the Pittsburgh Cottage Club, one of the many minor A.C.'s the big clubs used for warm-ups, beat the 6-5.

On Saturday, October 20, the Greenies gained a measure of respect despite losing their second straight. The mighty Homestead team came to Greensburg's Athletic Field and barely edged the home team, 6-5. After a scoreless first half, Bemus Pierce blocked a field goal attempt by Hutchinson. Numerous line smashes moved the ball to the one-yard-line, where Bill Church crashed over from a "tackles back" formation. George Young, the H.L.A.C. quarterback, kicked the extra point. Hutchinson's 40-yard field goal on the game's last play left Greensburg a point shy, but the Daily Tribune trumpeted the moral victory, insisting the 2,200 fans had viewed "the greatest contest ever witnessed on a Greensburg gridiron."

The Greenies' season turned on the games with Latrobe. Three had been scheduled, with the first at Greensburg on October 27. A disappointing but spirited crowd of a little over 2,000 showed. When a fight broke out between Greensburg's Isaac Seneca and Latrobe's Al Kennedy, the crowd joined in to produce a general donnybrook. That was most of the excitement for Greensburg fans, as Latrobe handed their heroes a third straight loss, 6-0.

When the D.C. & A.C. made it four straight, 24-0, at Exposition Park, the heretofore loyal Daily Tribune turned vicious, suggesting "a tinge of yellow in the locals' play." Another win over Altoona stopped the losing streak, but a rematch with Homestead got it started again, 12-0.

Although the Westmoreland County sheriff put on extra police for the second Greensburg-Latrobe game, fewer than 1,000 attended. Clearly the romance was gone from what had once been one of football's most fierce rivalries. Latrobe won easily, 11-0.

Although they didn't know it then, Greensburg was done for the year -- and forever. A game with the D.C. & A.C. was cancelled by snow. The crusher came when Latrobe's Dave Berry paid a \$400 guarantee and cancelled his scheduled Thanksgiving Day game with the Greenies to play in Pittsburgh instead. If Latrobe couldn't drum up enthusiasm for a Greensburg game, pro football was dead in the Westmoreland County city.

"Greensburg quits a loser," the *Daily Tribune* mourned. The team had been "up against a chain of unfortunate circumstances from the first. A late start, bad weather, and bad faith form a combination that is hard to beat."