

THE PANHANDLES: LAST OF THE SANDLOTTERS

By Bob Braunwart & Bob Carroll

On a bright November afternoon in 1909, a curious parade took place in Dayton, Ohio. Hundreds of people lined the streets to watch five brothers -- members of a Columbus, Ohio, football team -- walk from their hotel to the ballpark. The team had donned its football togs at the hotel, but there was nothing about the brothers' maroon and gold jerseys to distinguish them from their teammates. Football jerseys had no numbers in those days. The brothers were bigger than their mates, but that wasn't why the crowd had no trouble recognizing them. Nor was it the family resemblance -- the same blocky solidity that looked like they'd been carved by Rodin. And it wasn't just the walk, that aggressive planting of one large foot after another, that confident swing in the elbows, that who-the-hell's-gonna-stop-me swagger. It was the combination. Everything went together to say: "We're the Nesses. We play football."

Later that day they did just that, disposing of the home team, the Dayton Oakwoods, 16-0, before the biggest crowd Dayton had ever seen. Brother Fred scored a touchdown. So did brother Frank. Brother Phil steamed from his tackle position with the momentum of one of Teddy Roosevelt's Great White Fleet battleships and sailed 40 yards to another TD. Brother John blocked and tackled as though he was on a personal vendetta. Brother Ted -- neither the biggest nor the fastest but obviously the leader -- played with the inspiration his station required.

When it was all over, everyone went home happy -- even the Dayton folks. After all, it was a kind of honor to lose to the Nesses and the Columbus Panhandles.

Today, few Columbus football fans have even heard of the Panhandles. At the Buckeye capital, big football means Ohio State. A book on the city library shelf announces in its tongue-in-cheek title: *Columbus Discovers Football*. Its pages detail the fabled exploits of university immortals Chic Harley and Coach John W. Wilce back around World War I but never mention the contemporary 'Handles.

No one ever wrote a book about them. They were not the stuff of which legends were made. They were neither the first nor the most successful of the early pro teams in Ohio. They played only a few pivotal games. They won no Ohio League championships. None of their players -- not even the fabled Nesses -- are enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. If they contributed anything to the greater strategy of the game, it has gone unrecorded. Just as pro football was struggling out of its nickle-and-dime days, the Panhandles faded from the scene.

But, in the rag-tag days when pro football was not quite a sport and certainly not a business, when it was more an assembly of ruffians bent on mutual destruction, the Panhandles took their lumps like spartans and handed them out like a street gang. They held their own and kept the dream going.

The chief dreamer never played. He was a little guy named Joe Carr who looked at first glance like Caspar Milquetoast. He grayed and balded early, and he wore rimless spectacles that made him appear always a little surprised. But, behind those glasses, his blue eyes were honest and tough. And his firm chin could jut forward with a determination that belied that first impression. Joseph F. Carr was a gentleman, but nobody -- not even a Nesser -- ever pushed him around.

He started as a machinist with the Panhandle Division of the Pennsylvania Railroad, but he loved sports. So at the age of twenty, just as the new century began, he started a new career as a sportswriter. Despite only a fifth-grade education, he rose to assistant sports editor with the Ohio State Journal, one of three major newspapers in Columbus at the time. During the six years he held that post he was best-known for his boxing stories.

Reporting events was all right in its way, but Joe wanted to be more at the center. He wanted to make things happen.

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He admired the Old Roman, Charles Comiskey, who'd just started the Chicago White Sox in the fledgling American Baseball League. Emulating his idol, Joe went to some of his more athletic buddies back at the railroad and launched the "Famous Panhandle White Sox" in 1901. How a baseball team could become famous in its first year while using another team's nickname was never made clear, but the squad played successfully around Columbus ballyards for many seasons.

In 1904, Joe tried his hand at his first love: football. Again he went to the Panhandle Division for players. The Panhandle football team played a couple of games, won, and then disbanded. Apparently, Columbus wasn't ready to support them.

In 1907, Carr and the 'Handles tried again. This time they stayed for twenty years.

Haven Brigham, the Panhandle center for a decade, remembered them as a "no-frills" aggregation but tough as a dollar steak. They'd tape on copies of the *Saturday Evening Post* as shin guards, take a couple of swigs of "steam" before the kickoff, and then go out and beat the bejabbers out of an opponent.

No matter what the scoreboard said at the end of the game, the 'Handles always won the Battle of the Bruises. Druggists always knew when the local team had played the Panhandles because most of the hometown players showed up at the store for bandages and iodine on Monday morning.

The Railroaders never won the Ohio championship, but they played the teams that did. And sometimes they beat them.

They were a good attraction in the years before World War I. They played rough, and they had all those Nessers. Eventually, eight of them wore 'Handle jerseys -- seven brothers and a son. Brother acts weren't unusual at the time. In addition to the Nessers, the Panhandles had speedy Emmett Ruh and his equally quick brother Homer, and the Kuehner brothers, Oscar and Roscoe, usually held down a couple of line positions. Plenty of teams had two or three siblings playing together. The Nessers were unique because there were so MANY and they were so GOOD.

They never went to college, although they didn't want for offers even after they were well-established as pros. But, as Jim Durfee, a Columbus newspaperman who refereed more than a hundred Panhandle games, was fond of saying: "You had to be an All-American to beat the Nessers."

Boilermakers with the railroad by trade, the Nessers were as rugged as three weeks in the desert. None of them was ever accused of using niceties on the gridiron. Newspaper accounts of Panhandle games teem with reports of rival players sent to the sideline with broken bones and other assorted injuries. At least once a year, a story would commend the team for playing a clean game. It's easy to read the unprinted footnote: "Unlike their normal style."

However, though the Nessers played football like the Wild Bunch toured cow towns, they also had very real ability.

Their father, Theodore Nesser, hailed from Alsace-Lorraine and was a veteran of the Franco-Prussian War. Having had it with Europe, he took a boat to America and settled in Columbus where he found a job as a boilermaker for the railroad. A year or so later, Katherine Nesser joined her husband, bringing along their five children -- Pete, John, Phil, Minnie, and Anna. In Columbus, six more children, including five boys, were born. All were delivered "within hearing of the Panhandle whistle."

There's a famous story that when the boys grew up and the football team was going strong, Theodore served as water "boy" and Katherine washed and ironed the team's uniforms. The first part is probably an exaggeration, although old Theodore may have gone out on the field a couple of times during time outs to give his boys hell if they were losing. The second part of the story has to be true to some extent. If Mrs. Nesser cleaned only her own boys' uniforms, she was practically laundress for the team.

And what oversized uniforms they were!

The largest Nesser, big brother Pete at 350 pounds, did not play football, saving Mama Nesser hours of washing and opposing teams seasons of grief. But there was more than enough Nesser bulk spread among the remaining clan.

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John, the oldest of those who played, was the midget of the family -- a mere 185 pounds. He usually played quarterback, a position that called primarily for blocking and tackling ability in the days before the modern T-formation. He was so good at what he did that one year he won a medal as champion all-around athlete of the Pennsylvania Railway System. His main competitors were his own brothers.

Next in age came Phil at 236 pounds. A steady Gibraltar of a man, his usual position was tackle. In addition to playing football, he was a champion hammer-thrower.

They called Ted "the greatest of all the Nessesers." He was about ten years younger than John and a good 40 pounds heavier. He could and did play any position well but halfback was probably his best spot. He had an uncanny ability to stay on his feet no matter what or how many hit him. A natural leader, he usually coached the team.

Fred was the tallest Nesser at 6-5, but he was no string bean, filling out at close to 250. He played mostly at tackle and end, but every once in a while he'd switch into the backfield where he could be awesome.

Fred was a professional boxer, rated as a contender for the heavyweight crown. One day in Toledo, the 'Handles were playing the Maroons, and Big Fred at tackle was opposed by the smallest man on the Toledo squad, end Monk Sala who weighed 140 pounds when he was carrying a pocketful of marbles. It was an absurd mismatch, and Fred was pushing Sala around the way a tiger might do with a rabbit before gobbling him up. Sala was not amused.

Finally, Fred deposited Monk on the seat of his pants in a most unceremonious fashion and went trotting on to better things. Little Sala leaped to his feet and ran across the field, catching up with Fred just as the big guy turned around. Sala was too short to reach Fred's chin so he jumped into the air and swung his little fist with all his tiny might. More from astonishment than from the blow, Fred went over backwards into a very embarrassing position for a heavyweight contender.

Before murder could ensue, a quick-witted official tossed both Sala AND Fred out of the game. As the big guy went to the sideline shaking his head, still not quite sure what had happened, both teams dissolved in laughter.

Blond Frank Nesser could do unbelievable things with a football. Weighing in at 250 pounds, he had more than his share of speed and grace. A marvelous punter, reports of his 70-yard boots are common in game stories. He could dropkick and placekick, too. One of his efforts from placement in 1908 was given as a mind-boggling 63 yards. Even making allowances for the air-filled watermelon they used for a football then, that was no chip shot!

A good runner, Frank's greatest value in the backfield was as a passer. He could wing the ball like a bullet fifty or sixty yards downfield with excellent accuracy. His brothers always swore he once completed a pass that traveled 83 yards in the air. Of course, the brothers were big enough and strong enough that they could have said the ball flew from Columbus to Cincinnati and no one would have argued.

As good as he was in the backfield, Frank often played in the line where he was just as effective. From time to time, a brother would get a good offer from another team and go off to play for a game or a season. In 1913, Frank accepted an offer to play for Peggy Parratt's championship Akron Indians. When it came time to play the Akron-Panhandle game, Frank was at tackle. Lined up across from him for the Panhandles was brother Ted who had inserted himself at tackle for the occasion. Supposedly, most of the 2,000 Akron fans stopped watching the game shortly after the kickoff and concentrated on the titanic struggle going on between the two Nessesers. Although Akron won the game, the more important contest was declared a draw.

Frank was also a star baseball player who never ranked below third in batting in the Ohio State League and the Southern Association during six years as a pro.

Al Nesser was a good end and better guard who played at 190 to 200 pounds. He started with some of the sandlot teams in Columbus while he was still in his mid-teens and graduated to the Panhandles before he turned twenty. In 1917, he moved to Akron where he played for many years, finally retiring in 1931 after almost a quarter of a century at football wars. Although no Nesser has been named to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Al was named to the professional branch of the Helms Foundation Hall in 1952.

The youngest of the Nesser brothers was Raymond, who was a rangy 193 pounds. He's the mystery man of the family because he seems to have almost never played even though he was often advertised as being on the team in pre-game publicity. There's a story that Raymond didn't like football and didn't play it very well, but that may be a recent invention. It's known that he was an athlete and did some boxing. It's also said that he did not follow his brothers into the boilermaker trade but, instead, became a policeman. Possibly he simply worked a shift that kept him away from games.

In 1921, while Ted was still active, his son Charlie played tailback for the team. The father-son duo is unique in NFL history.

To round out the family, a brother-in-law named Schneider played for several years.

The Panhandles had one financial advantage over other clubs, one that kept them solvent while others were folding like they played on dotted lines. Because most of the players were railroad employees, the 'Handles road the trains for free. By playing most of their games on the road, the team paid no stadium rental and yet had few traveling expenses. On long trips they had to find places to stay overnight, but, according to one ex- Panhandle, they sometimes slept in haylofts to save money.

Lee Snoots, a longtime Panhandle halfback, recalled: "Our trips were wonderful. We preferred the yearly trek to Toledo. We would leave on Saturday night and stay over at a small town called Carrothers. Here I learned to eat, Nesser style. P. Regula owned a saloon and boarding house in Carrothers. In the rear of the house was a barn with the upstairs furnished somewhat. The Nesser boys preferred this barn to the house and after a card session, off to bed they would go. The snoring coming from that barn was a fright from midnight on. There wasn't a tenor among them. All bassos."

The snoring, however, wouldn't have bothered the Nessers; they admitted that their years in the boiler factory had made them all a little deaf.

Playing on the road almost exclusively may have helped the Panhandle pocketbook, but it couldn't have improved their performance. Finding time to practice was another problem. "There was an athletic field just outside the gates," Al Nesser recalled of his days with the railroad. "We toiled for five hours, ate lunch and then practiced on full stomachs before going back to work."

For the record, the "athletic field" was topped with cinders. However, Lee Snoots insisted they never scrimmaged. "There weren't enough of us to make two teams."

After work, there was more practice, according to Snoots. "Sometimes we would hop a street car and head for Indianola Park. The entrance there had two swell electric carbon arc lights that provided fine illumination. Sometimes Mr. Carr would take us to a hole in the ground at Naghten and High Streets just south of Union Depot. We used to draw crowds there at night. The lights on High Street were perfect to guide our practices."

The Panhandles best years were from 1914 through 1916 when they challenged for "Ohio League" honors. Only Joe Carr's insistence on scheduling every strong team in the state saddled them with enough losses to keep them from the top.

In 1917, Al Nesser moved to Akron and Frank spent the season with the Detroit Heralds. 1918 was washed out by the war, and by the time the Panhandles got together in 1919, most of them were over the hill.

Historically, they are charter members of the National Football League because of their assumed membership in the American Professional Football Association (the NFL's original name) in 1920, but they were fish out of their own water. The Panhandles were sandlotters -- very good sandlotters at one time, admittedly -- but that time had past. Once a league structure was formed, the quality of pro football was bound to improve. Successful teams would be built around college-trained athletes. The Panhandles couldn't afford the salaries. As much as by age, the Panhandles were doomed by the league they helped found.

Of all the "memorable" moments that no one remembers anymore, one sums up the 'Handles. It happened in December of 1921, long after the squad stopped intimidating anyone, in a "who cares?" game against the little-

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known Louisville Brecks. The Brecks had delighted their home fans by pushing the graying Railroaders around the Louisville park all afternoon, but the game remained scoreless into the last quarter.

The Brecks had the advantage of youth, but the Panhandles had the Nessers and a bunch of other guys who'd been together too long to lie down. Probably they knew this was the last game for most of them, the last time they'd play football together. Maybe they'd talked about it on the train to Louisville.

Somehow, as the minutes ran out, the 'Handles got a drive going. With much huffing and puffing, and with hurts they couldn't shake off the way they did twenty years before, they got the ball to the Brecks' thirty-yard-line.

And that was it. As a team, they'd never go any farther. Ted Nesser called his brother Frank together with Emmett Ruh and whispered to them briefly. The Louisville players knew what was coming. Ruh was the fastest Columbus man and Frank was a passer.

The ball was snapped. Phil and Ted and Fred and the others pushed off on aching and creaking legs, blocking desperately to give Frank a chance. Ruh fought his way downfield and into the endzone, but he was still covered. The Louisville linemen were almost on Frank; there was no more time.

Suddenly Frank Nesser's right arm moved in a blur. A thunderbolt exploded on a slightly rising path into the endzone. Ruh leaped. The ball hit him like a cannon shell, turning him over in midair. He came down on his shoulder with a crash.

He still held the ball!

A few moments later, the game was over. The Panhandles began limping toward their train. They were too tired to celebrate, too sore to smile ... too old to cry. But for one last moment, it had been as it had been so long ago when the Columbus Panhandles were the toughest crew in Ohio. The long ride home -- for most of them, the final ride as football players -- would be good.

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The Panhandles gave professional football's rag-tag days the Nessers, a hard-as-nails attitude, and colorful stories. They symbolized pro football's past. By 1920, the day when a whole team of rugged sandlottery could compete on an equal footing with college-trained pros was over. Many sandlottery still played useful roles with good pro teams, but the key men had earned varsity letters at colleges.

Of course, the Nessers weren't just "any" sandlottery. The fact that Al Nesser continued to play well through the decade of the '20s and that Frank Nesser still had a few more good years at the beginning of the era suggests that age more than lack of college training caught up with the family. Nevertheless, the overall talent on the Panhandles by the time the APFA was formed was considerably less than that found on even the middling association teams. And their record showed it.

But, if the 'Handles brought very little in the way of good football to the association, they did bring the man who more than any other deserves credit for turning the loose group into a real league during the 1920s -- Joe Carr. As National Football League president from 1921 to 1938, he built pro football into a sport that could challenge baseball for the nation's loyalty. The Columbus Panhandles and the Nessers symbolized pro football's past. Joe Carr represented its future.

THE PANHANDLES' RECORD

YEAR	W	L	T	PCT.	PTS-OPP
1904	2	0	0	1.000	53- 0
1905-06					No Team
1907	2	3	1	.400	115- 36
1908	3	3	1	.500	109- 19
1909	7	1	1	.875	217- 13
1910	3	2	2	.600	68- 57
1911	5	4	1	.555	52- 88
1912	3	5	1	.375	81- 83

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1913	3 - 4 - 1	.429	117- 46
1914	7 - 2 - 0	.778	210- 60
1915	8 - 3 - 1	.728	192- 37
1916	7 - 5 - 0	.584	186- 68
1917	2 - 6 - 0	.250	51-151
1918	0 - 1 - 0	.000	0- 12
1919	3 - 6 - 1	.333	77-122
1920*	2 - 6 - 2	.250	41-121
1921*	2 - 8 - 0	.200	64-229
1922*	3 - 8 - 0	.273	52-180
1923*t	5 - 4 - 1	.555	119- 35
1924*t	4 - 4 - 0	.500	91- 68
1925*t	2 - 9 - 0	.182	54-127
1926*t	1 - 7 - 0	.125	26- 99
21 yrs	74 -91 -13	.448	2026-1651

*-Member NFL, but non-league games included in record.
t-Columbus "Tigers" (Re-organized team)
