

THE STEAM ROLLER

by John Hogrogian

The state of Rhode Island sits squarely in the shadow of Boston as far as major-league professional sports is concerned. Ocean State residents generally take a rooting interest in the Red Sox, Patriots, Celtics, and Bruins. But more than half a century ago, in 1928, Rhode Island had its own National Football League champions, the Providence Steam Roller. The story of that team is the story of an era of professional football much different from that of today.

In the Roaring Twenties, the American public found a host of popular heroes in its sporting greats. Standing with Charles Lindbergh on the pedestal of unalloyed admiration were such men as baseball player Babe Ruth, boxer Jack Dempsey, and tennis player Bill Tilden. College football players also shared in this adulation, with Red Grange of Illinois, Ernie Nevers of Stanford, and the Four Horsemen of Notre Dame national figures because of their gridiron exploits. College football was an immensely popular spectator sport, with teams such as Notre Dame, Stanford, Yale, and Dartmouth drawing huge followings both in person and through the newspapers and newsreels.

Professional football, in stark contrast, was struggling to survive, a neglected stepchild in the sports boom. The National Football League was entering only its ninth season in the fall of 1928, and instead of roaring crowds in huge metropolitan stadia, small, intimate audiences in mostly smaller fields viewed the league's contests. Pro football held the same place in 1928 that pro track and field holds today, a fledgling professional sport living in the shadow of a popular collegiate version. College stars had notional reputations; professional stars either had local followings or labored in obscurity.

Ten clubs formed the field for the 1928 NFL race. The New York Giants (the 1927 champions), the Green Bay Packers, the Chicago Bears, and the Chicago (later St. Louis) Cardinals all competed then and still compete today. Other big-city clubs in the running were the New York Yankees, the Detroit Wolverines, and the Frankford Yellowjackets (who played in a suburb of Philadelphia). Completing the pack were the Pottsville (Pa.) Maroons, the Dayton Triangles, and the Providence Steam Roller, representatives of smaller cities that still could compete in a sport struggling to achieve a big-league image. League membership had fluctuated through the NFL's nine-year history, hitting a peak in 1926 and a new low of 10 this season. Some teams ran stable operations, but others had run on financial reefs and dropped out. College stars often steered clear of pro ball after graduation and sought more secure employment.

Presiding over this precarious young NFL was Joe Carr, the league president. Carr had gained executive experience in minor-league baseball, and to him goes much of the credit for keeping the NFL alive through its lean years before World War II. Although he did much to tighten up the circuit, Carr put up with extremely loose scheduling practices in the 1920s. Instead of being fixed in the league office, the schedule was drawn up among the teams themselves. This decentralization resulted in teams playing different numbers of games; in '28, the weak Chicago Cardinals scheduled only six league contests, while Frankford arranged a high of 16 games. The Yellowjackets' unusual schedule resulted in part from a law preventing professional sports events on Sunday. Thus, the team played all its home games on Saturday and usually traveled to the home of their opponents to play a second game on Sunday. While the Frankford club played home-and-away doubleheaders, the Green Bay Packers set up an odd 13-game slate which started with four straight home games and ended with five straight road games. The Chicago Bears arranged for 10 home games and only three road games, one of them a trip across town to play the Cardinals. In addition to league games, teams frequently

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scheduled matches against non-league pro teams during the season. With only one division and no standardized schedule, the league championship was awarded on the basis of team winning percentage. Squabbles sometimes broke out over this criterion of championship, with the titles of 1920, 1921, 1924, and 1925 hotly contested in post-season arguments.

Not only the NFL but also football itself had a different look in 1928 from what it has today. One-platoon, 60-minute football was still the rule, with the league limit of 18 men per roster an indication of the conservative use of substitutes. Teams generally lined up in the single-wing formation, a deployment best suited for short yardage power plays. Only the Chicago Bears used the T-formation, and they used a conservative tight-T which also lent itself mainly to inside running. Neither the single-wing nor the basic T were good formations out of which to pass; football tacticians generally saved the aerial attack for third-and-long situations and for desperation catch-up drives. The best-known football stars in America were runners like halfback Red Grange and fullback Ernie Nevers; the era of the star passing quarterback would not dawn until the 1940s.

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In 1928, the NFL had a New England outpost in the Providence Steam Roller. Organized as a professional team in 1916, the Steam Roller had played a schedule of games mostly against New England teams (such as New London) before joining the NFL in 1925. In three league seasons the team had a 19-17-3 NFL record, while continuing to play several non-league New England rivals each year.

Three men shared in the ownership and management of the team: Charles Coppen, James E. Dooley, and Peter Laudati. Coppen wore many hats; in addition to serving as general manager of the Steam Roller, he had a budding law practice and wrote a regular sports column for the Providence Journal. Coppen had been the sports editor but his involvement with the Steam Roller and in managing boxers led to his giving up that position.

Dooley also was an attorney and was commonly addressed as "Judge." He succeeded Willis J. Knowles, who was a murder victim, as judge of the Eighth District Court in 1916 and served in that post for a year before resigning; the title nevertheless stuck to him for life. A strong advocate for legal wagering on horse racing in Rhode Island, he would become president of Narragansett Park racetrack in 1938 and hold that office until his death in 1960.

Laudatti came to Rhode Island from his native Italy at a young age and he developed a lucrative real estate business with large holdings in Florida. He also became Providence's leading sports promoter. In addition to staging baseball, boxing, soccer, and dog racing in Providence and neighboring cities in the state, Laudati also built in 1925 the Cycledrome, an outdoor stadium on North Main Street for bicycle racing, a spectator sport much in vogue in the 1920s. The man who managed the bicycle racing for Laudatti, Charles Turville, is often mentioned as a part-owner of the Steam Roller and even appears in the team's official picture, but he had no financial or managerial role in the football club.

The Cycledrome, located near the Providence-Pawtucket city line on the site now occupied by the E.M. Loew drive-in movie, was home for the Providence Steam Roller. The stadium sat approximately 10,000 spectators in an oval of bleachers surrounding a wooden banked cycle track. This wooden track, steeply banked around the turns and flatter on the straight-aways, enclosed just enough ground to fit a football field, with some slight problems. The track, equipped with seats and a bench for the players on each side, ran so close to the sidelines that players tacked near the boundary line frequently caromed into the front row of seats. One end zone extended a regulation ten yards, but the other end zone went only five yards before the banked track cut across it. The Cycledrome had an intimate ambiance, so that all the seats, priced at \$2, \$1.50, and \$1, were actually good seats from which to view a football game.

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The dressing quarters for the players were less agreeable. the dressing room used by the Steam Roller players had been built with a couple of bicycle racers in mind, so that a football team of 18 men found the room cramped, with only two showers at their disposal. But even that beat the accommodations for visiting teams, who had no dressing room at all. Players for the guest team had to dress at their hotel, come to the stadium, then return in uniform to the hotel to shower and change.

The place had a simple scoreboard, a no-frills press box, and a small area for parking, which was more than adequate for the number of cars on the road in 1928.

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It was at the Cycledrome that the players assembled for their first 1928 practice on Monday, September 17, under the direction of player-coach Jimmy Conzelman. The Steam Roller had played mediocre football in their first two NFL seasons, but posted a strong 8-5-1 record in 1927 in Conzelman's first year in Providence. Only 30 years old, Conzelman had played in the NFL with a number of teams ever since the inaugural campaign of 1920. He had a good reputation as a football tactician and inspirational leader, and he came to Providence after the Detroit club of which he was both coach and owner folded in debt after the 1926 season. For his per game salary of \$292, Conzelman not only coached the team but also played quarterback in the single- wing formation. Since the ball was usually hiked to the left halfback in this formation, the quarterback's duties included calling the plays, blocking, and receiving passes, but infrequently passing or running with the ball.

Practices were held daily from 11:00 to 1:00, and a practice game was played on Sunday, September 23, against the Warlow Athletic Club of Long Island. The Steam Roller won that game 48- 0 and turned their attention to their opening league game against the New York Yankees on the 30th.

Coach Conzelman released several players and came up with an 18-man roster.

The star and glamour player of the squad was halfback George "Wildcat" Wilson, who had earned a national reputation as an All- American in 1925 at the University of Washington and had joined the Steam Roller in 1927. Wildcat played tailback and carried the brunt of the offense. He ran powerfully and passed well in an era when passing was a secondary skill; indeed, the 1928 football was thicker around the middle (much like a rugby ball of today) and thus more difficult to pass accurately. He earned his nickname with his spirited play on defense. His only fault was moodiness, but that was not enough to prevent the Steam Roller from paying \$375 per game, an exorbitant sum in an era when most players received \$100 to \$150 per game.

In the backfield corps with Wilson were Conzelman, whose best playing skill was pass receiving; Curly Oden, a slightly- built local favorite from Brown University who had played with the Roller since 1922 and who shone as a kick returner and pass receiver; Pop Williams, a rookie from the Connecticut Agricultural College; Jim Simmons, who came to Providence that year from the Cleveland NFL team which folded after the 1927 campaign; and Bill and Jack Cronin, brothers who had starred for Boston College. Jack also taught and coached at LaSalle Academy, fitting his Steam Roller practices into an extended lunch break each day.

Featured on the line were two wrestlers and two stars who were new to the team. Gus Sonnenberg and John Spellman competed frequently in professional wrestling matches in the area. Sonnenberg had starred in football during his collegiate days at Dartmouth, then journeyed to the midwest and played pro ball with Conzelman in Detroit, accompanying him to Providence in 1927. Spellman had a local following from his days at Brown University, and he had reached the heights of wrestling by winning the gold medal in the light-heavyweight division in the 1924 Olympics at Paris. One measure of the toughness of both men was that

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Sonnenberg never wore a helmet and Spellman rarely did; the leather headpieces (without any face guard) were an optional protection in the 1920s.

Clyde Smith and Milt Rehnquist both wore helmets and brought glowing reputations for line play with them; like halfback Jim Simmons, they came from the remains of the defunct Cleveland club. Although he weighted only about 180 pounds, Smith won 1927 All-Pro honors at center for his accurate hiking on offense and aggressively mobile linebacking on defense. Rehnquist carried 230 solidly-packed pounds on his six-foot frame, making him the largest man on the Providence squad.

Other linemen were Norm Harvey and Duke Hanny, veteran ends who had more skills as blockers and defenders than as pass receivers; Orland Smith, a Brown alumnus who was attending medical school at Boston U. during the week; Jack Fleischman, a stubby 5'6" guard; Jim Laird, a vet of many pro seasons; Abe Wilson, whose primary asset was that he was George Wilson's brother; and a man who played under the name of Perry Jackson. Conzelman had heard of a star lineman by that name playing at Southwest State University in Oklahoma in 1927 and sent him a cable offering a tryout with the Steam Roller. Jackson unfortunately was ill that summer and in no shape to play football, so his friend and teammate, Arnold Shockley, showed up in Providence under the name of Jackson. Shockley made the team and played three years under the assumed name. The real Jackson, meanwhile, tried out with the Steam Roller in 1929 under the name of Arnold Shockley, was cut, and played one season under his buddy's name with a pro team in Boston.

Players who came from the New England area generally had living quarters, but those from the midwest had to find places to stay during the season. Conzelman, Clyde Smith, Rehnquist, "Jackson," Simmons, and a few others rented rooms in the home of Pearce Johnson on High Service Avenue in North Providence. Johnson had helped found the Steam Roller in 1916, performed services like caring for equipment, and later ran the team after it dropped out of the NFL and returned to local independent ball in the 1930s. Johnson's mother kept the players under her roof well-fed until she was killed by a streetcar the day after Thanksgiving. The Steam Roller players also ate many a meal served by Pete Laudati's wife Madeline.

Although Jack Cronin and Orland Smith had extensive activities besides football, most of the players held no outside employment during the season.

With the 18-man roster set, Conzelman and his men turned their efforts towards unseating the New York Giants as NFL titlists. The Steam Roller faced a schedule of 11 league games, eight at home, plus two non-league contests against Pere Marquette, a strong independent pro team from Boston. They would not meet the Chicago Bears or Chicago Cardinals, but would clash with the other seven clubs in the NFL.

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The temperature hovered around the 50 degree mark on the afternoon of September 30, a drizzly, overcast Sunday. On that autumnal afternoon, the Steam Roller faced their first NFL opponent of 1928. An audience numbering about 5,000 assembled in the Cycledrome by the kickoff time of 2:30 to see the home team take on the New York Yankees. The Yankees had had Red Grange, the nation's most famous football player, in their lineup the year before, but he sat out 1928 with a bad knee. In his place, the Yankees signed another well-known All-American back, Gibby Welch of the University of Pittsburgh. The Yankees, of course, arrived at the field already in their football gear. The crowd applauded the Steam Roller players as they came into the field in their black jerseys with yellow stripes around the sleeves and a large number on the back (each player was issued one jersey and was expected to make it last the entire season). The Steam Roller band, a 30-piece unit which did no marching but simply sat in the bleachers, played the National Anthem and the game began.

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With only one pre-season contest against a semipro club to go on, Conzelman did not know how his team would fare against the Yankees. The first half of the game established the Steam Roller character for the rest of the season. The team shone on defense, completely foiling Welch and the New York offense, while the Providence boys controlled the ball on offense with strong power running and an occasional pass by Wildcat Wilson to backs Conzelman and Simmons (the single-wing as deployed by Conzelman used the ends primarily for blocking and only infrequently for pass receiving). The first half ended 20-7 in favor of Providence, and after the band played some more during the halftime intermission, the two clubs returned to battle to a scoreless second half. The Steam Roller chalked up 234 yards on offense during the game, while the Yankees gained a mere 54 yards, scoring only on an interception return by Welch. Pop Williams starred with his ball-carrying, scoring two of the Providence touchdowns, while the Providence Journal singled out wrestler Sonnenberg for his fine play in the line. Peter Laudati, every inch the sports enthusiast, held the pole of the first down marker, as he would at every home game.

During the following week, the team had its usual daily practice around midday in preparation for a visit by the Frankford Yellowjackets on Sunday. The Yellowjackets began their season with victories on both Saturday and Sunday and brought a tough, well-regarded squad to Providence. A rather large advance sale was spurred in part by the promise of periodic announcements of the score of the World Series game between the New York Yankees and the Cardinals at St. Louis.

As the Western Union reports were announced that Sunday afternoon, the crowd of 8,000 learned how the Yankees used two home runs by Lou Gehrig to beat the Cards 7-3. Unfortunately, they also saw the Steam Roller drop a disappointing 10-6 decision to the visitors. Providence scored in the first half on a bit of deception, with Wildcat Wilson dropping to his knees to hold the ball for a Sonnenberg field goal attempt. When the ball was snapped to him, Wilson jumped up and threw a pass to Conzelman for a surprise touchdown. But the Yellowjackets began moving the ball against the Steam Roller in the third period, and in the fourth period scored a touchdown, an extra point, and a late field goal for a 10-6 victory.

Next Sunday's game against the Dayton Triangles provided an easy opportunity to get back into a winning habit. A charter member of the NFL, the Triangles by 1928 played all their games on the road and had an offense so anemic that their chief offensive tactic was to punt the ball on second or third down and hope that their opponents fumbled the ball. In seven games during the season the Tris managed only nine points. The Steam Roller, as expected, had little trouble in beating the Triangles 28-0.

The Dayton offense made little headway, while Wildcat Wilson enjoyed a fine day both as a runner and as a passer. With the game well in hand, Conzelman removed Wilson in the fourth quarter and shifted Gus Sonnenberg into the backfield. Revelling in his opportunity to handle the ball, the burly 5'6" wrestler threw a 19-yard touchdown pass and then scored the extra point with a barreling end run. The only disappointing note of the afternoon was the dislocated left shoulder suffered by halfback Jim Simmons.

On Tuesday night, Sonnenberg and Spellman both won pro wrestling matches in the Arcadia Ballroom in downtown Providence. On Sunday afternoon, the Arcadia was equipped with a Western Union wire to receive the play-by-play account of the Steam Roller's game at Yankee Stadium in New York. Fans in Providence could pay 50 cents and hear the announcing of the game either at the Arcadia or at the Empire Theater. Some other fans accompanied the team to New York on the Saturday night Fall River Line boat. The boat pulled into New York in time for the team to check into a hotel and get a good night's sleep. The next afternoon, Conzelman and company stepped into the glamorous turf of Yankee Stadium, then only six years old and the home of Babe Ruth and the other Bronx Bombers. The football Yankees, however, shared none of the aura surrounding the baseball club, and a crowd of 8,000 fans

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filled less than 20% of the seats for this game. Star back Gibby Welch had led an upset victory over Frankford the previous weekend, but he could not gain much against the Steam Roller defense. Although both teams passed the ball well, the first half ended without a score. The Yankees went ahead 6-0 early in the third quarter, and early in the fourth quarter, the Steam Roller suffered another backfield injury. Conzelman ran out for a pass from Wilson, and when it was short, he tried to cut back for it. The coach's spikes caught in the turf and he tore cartilage in a knee. Curly Oden shifted from right half-back to quarterback.

A 42-yard pass play from Wilson to Norm Harvey moved the Steam Roller close to the goal line, and Wilson plunged over to tie the score at 6-6. Sonnenberg missed the extra point.

The game seemed fated to end at 6-6 until Duke Hanny intercepted a wayward Yankee pass in the final minutes and returned it 38 yards for a touchdown and a 12-6 triumph.

On Monday morning, the Journal complimented Welch for a valiant effort in defeat and praised the Providence defense, singling out Spellman, Orland Smith, and Abe Wilson for their work in the line and applauding the linebacking of Clyde Smith and Al Hadden, a hard-working fullback acquired during the week from the Chicago Bears.

But a 3-1 record did not hide the injury problems in the Providence backfield. With the Pottsville Maroons coming to the Cycledrome the next Sunday (October 28), Simmons was out with his injured shoulder while Conzelman was hospitalized to repair his knee; he would not play again that season and would never regain his full playing skills.

Wildcat Wilson took over as acting coach and devised a backfield alinement of himself and Williams at the halfbacks, Oden at quarterback, and Hadden at fullback, with the Cronin brothers in reserve. This combination played well against the Maroons, a tough outfit from the coal-mining district of eastern Pennsylvania.

Before a crowd of 8,000, the Steam Roller took the opening kickoff and then drove 73 yards in seven plays for a touchdown, with Wildcat Wilson completing two long passes to Oden and capping the march with a one-yard plunge. Wilson threw a TD pass to Oden in the second quarter, with the extra point running the score to 13-0.

The Maroons, bottled up by the Providence defense most of the day, suddenly began grinding out yardage in the fourth quarter on off-tackle runs and short passes.

They scored a touchdown and missed the extra point early in the period to close to 13-6, and they drove deep into Providence territory in the waning minutes. On fourth down, with the ball on the three yard line, the Maroons tried a final pass which Bill Cronin knocked down in the end zone to preserve the 13-6 decision.

Although the Steam Roller was now 4-1, their next opponent was the sensation of the league. The Detroit Wolverines had rung up a 3-0 record with a high-scoring attack built around tailback Benny Friedman, the NFL's most famous passer. A consensus All-American at the University of Michigan in 1926, Friedman pioneered the extensive use of the forward pass as a standard offensive weapon. As signal-caller, he never hesitated to call his own number to pass the ball, usually slinging the bulbous pigskin to his receiver with exceptional accuracy. His additional skills as a runner, place-kicker, and defensive back only added to the box-office lure of his name.

Interest in the upcoming visit of Friedman led Charlie Copen to install 500 extra temporary seats to accommodate an expected overflow crowd. A threat of rain held the audience down to 8,500 to see the confrontation. The Wolverines arrived in town a weary team, having played in Frankford on Saturday and suffered a 25-7 beating on a muddy field. The Steam Roller, on the other hand, was boosted by the presence of Conzelman, who came out of the hospital on Thursday to coach the team from the sideline on crutches.

A good Providence pass rush, led by stubby Jack Fleischman, kept Friedman off-balance, and the first half boiled down to a punting dual between Wildcat Wilson and Detroit's Ossie Wiberg.

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Providence drew first blood in the third quarter when Wilson hit Pop Williams on the run for a 45-yard touchdown pass. Curly Oden scored the extra-point on a drop-kick. The Steam Roller continued its pressure and choked off the only Detroit drive in the final quarter on the 13-yard line. The game ended with the score 7-0.

Meanwhile, the Yellowjackets were held to a scoreless tie by the Giants at New York, throwing the NFL race into a deadlock between Frankford (5-1-1) and Providence (5-1-0).

That Tuesday was Election Day, and while a national Republican landslide swept Herbert Hoover into the White House, Rhode Island threw its five electoral votes to Democratic candidate Al Smith.

With the political season reaching its climax, the Steam Roller had a more mellow weekend in store as the team played Saturday and Sunday games against Pere Marquette, a non-league team from Boston. With many former Boston College and Holy Cross players, Pere Marquette had shut-out a string of local opponents but lost to the Yellowjackets 14-0 in their only previous meeting with an NFL club. Nevertheless, the series was billed as for the "New England Championship." The Saturday meeting at Braves Field in Boston was won by Providence 14-7, and an audience of 6,000 saw the Steam Roller take an easy 20-0 decision on Sunday in the Cycledrome. The only blot on the weekend was a hip injury suffered on Sunday by Pop Williams.

But while the two Providence victories did not count in the NFL standings, the Yellowjackets beat Pottsville both Saturday and Sunday to move into sole possession of first place.

The top spot, however, would pivot around the results of the next weekend, November 17-18, for the Steam Roller and Yellowjackets would play on Saturday in Frankford and Sunday in Providence. Despite their October loss to the Yellowjackets and the injuries in the backfield, the Steam Roller rode the crest of a four game winning streak (six including the Pere Marquette games) into this weekend. Coach Conzelman and his squad took a Friday afternoon train to Philadelphia, stayed overnight at the Hotel Adelpia, and traveled by train Saturday morning to the simple stadium in the suburb of Frankford. A full house of 15,000 fans turned out to watch the confrontation between the seasoned Yellowjackets and the up-and-coming Steam Roller. Both clubs prided themselves on tough forward lines and stubborn defenses, and the first half of the game turned into a bitterly-fought scoreless duel.

The first break of the new game came in the third period. With the ball on their own 20 yard line, Providence decided to punt. The Frankford line broke through, blocked Wilson's kick, recovered it on the five yard line, and carried it for a touchdown. Although the extra point failed, the 6-0 lead appeared impregnable against the Frankford defense.

But late in the fourth period, the Steam Roller benefited from a Frankford mistake. A poor punt gave Providence the ball on the Frankford 25-yard line. With the front line blocking effectively, the Steam Roller charged to the end zone on seven straight running plays, with Wildcat Wilson carrying for all but two of the yards. With time very short, Curly Oden attempted a drop-kick for the extra point, but drove the ball just under the crossbar. The clock ran out shortly thereafter, and the two teams had a 6-6 tie and many bruises to show for their troubles.

After relaxing for a few hours, both teams boarded sleeping cars on a midnight train back to Providence. The Yellowjackets played weekend doubleheaders as a rule, but the Steam Roller players most likely felt the wear-and-tear of extended action. They had played two games the weekend before, battled the first-place club to a tie on Saturday, and spent the night in a sleeping car on a speeding railroad. To make matters worse, fullback Al Hadden's knee, injured in Frankford, stiffened up overnight. With Conzelman and Williams sidelined altogether and Simmons and Hadden able to play only sparingly, the backfield of Wilson, Oden, and the two Cronins had to play almost the entire game.

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Rain threatened to drench the Cycledrome, but an overflow crowd of approximately 11,000 showed up at the new starting time of 2:15 (the days were growing shorter, and there were no lights) to root for the local favorites.

Early in the game, the Steam Roller had the ball on the Frankford 46-yard line. Wilson took the hike, dropped back, and shot a short pass to Oden on the 40-yard line. The slippery quarterback dodged a few tacklers and sprinted to the end zone for a touchdown. His drop-kick for the extra point was low, so the Steam Roller had to settle for an early 6-0 lead. For the rest of the afternoon, the Frankford defense stifled the Steam Roller attack, but the Providence defense allowed the Yellowjackets only three first downs for the entire contest. When the final gun sounded, the scoreboard still read 6-0, and the Steam Roller had rolled into first place in the NFL.

This perch at the head of the standings made the visit of the New York Giants on Sunday, November 25, a much anticipated event among the pro football fans in Providence. Although they held a mediocre 4-3-2 record for 1928, the Giants were the defending NFL champions and a popular attraction around the league. Complacency and dissension had dulled the New York team's performance, but it still featured a very strong forward line including end Cal Hubbard, considered today as one of the best pro linemen ever, and tackle Century Milstead, a former Yale All-American. Another Yale alumnus on the Giant roster was Bruce Caldwell, the sensation of the 1927 college season.

A native of Ashton, R.I., Caldwell was honored by a committee of notables from his home town in a five-minute ceremony in the Cycledrome just before the opening kickoff. After seeing Caldwell presented with a traveling bag, the record crowd of approximately 13,000 bundled up in the early winter cold and snow flurries to watch the game.

The fans could readily see that the Giants no longer had the championship edge. Sticking mostly to the ground, the Steam Roller drove 41 yards on nine plays in the second quarter for a touchdown, with Jack Cronin carrying the ball over from the two-yard line. Gus Sonnenberg missed the extra point, but he made up for it later in the period by tackling New York's Hinkey Haines so hard as to cause a fumble and then kicking a 28-yard field goal. Providence had Hadden, Simmons, and Williams all back in action, but Wildcat Wilson was shaken up in the first half by Giant tacklers. With his team ahead 9-0 and the Giants unable to move the ball, coach Conzelman sat his star back down for the second half and turned to Jack Cronin to handle the ball more often.

Cronin evidently enjoyed the added duties, as he ran for another touchdown in the fourth quarter and four times in the final period punted the ball so that it was downed within the Giant 10-yard line. The crowd left the 16-0 content content with a hometown victory, and Mssrs. Copen, Dooley, and Laudati realized a tidy \$4,467 profit.

Caldwell, incidentally, carried the ball only twice in the game, and the Giants released him before the season was out, an early example of the collegiate star who fails to transfer his effectiveness to the professional field. The Giants proceeded from this game to lose their final three contests of the season and sink into the bottom half of the league.

With this victory, the Providence Journal trumpeted the likelihood of an NFL championship. The newspaper pointed out that the Roller had only two games left on the schedule, both against weaker opponents. The team would travel to Pottsville for a Thanksgiving Day contest and then conclude the season on Sunday against the Green Bay Packers at the Cycledrome. Climbing aboard a train on Wednesday afternoon in Providence, the 18 players stayed that night in a Philadelphia hotel and traveled in the morning about 60 miles to the northwest to Pottsville, a small city in the anthracite coal-mining region. In this stark setting of rock and stripped ground, the miners patronized the football team in large numbers. The Maroons' best back, a fullback named Tony Latone, worked in the mines as an adolescent until he showed an aptitude

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for running and tackling. Latone was one of three Pottsville players who had no college experience, a high number even for these early years of the NFL.

The Maroons played a bruising style of football, but although they had contended for the league championship in 1925 and 1926, they had slipped into a tailender's status by 1928. The Providence players did not take this opponent lightly, however, because the Maroons were most difficult to beat on their home field and were coming off a 26-0 upset over Green Bay. That game had been played in a blinding snow storm the previous Sunday, leaving the field a muddy mess for this Thanksgiving contest.

With overcast skies threatening more precipitation, a full house of 10,000 fans jammed the small Pottsville stadium to view a defensive battle. The mud made footing unsure and the offenses erratic. The Steam Roller launched one of the few sustained drives of the game in the second period, with a 10-yard end run by Jack Cronin scoring a touchdown. Sonnenberg's extra point on a place kick made the score 7-0, and, by snuffing out two Pottsville scoring threats by holding for four downs within the 10 yard line, the Steam Roller made that 7-0 margin stand up. Conzelman used the same 11 players until late in the game, when Jack Cronin carried the ball into the line in the fourth quarter and emerged from the pileup with a broken nose. Jim Simmons took his place for the final minutes.

Back in Providence that afternoon, football fans celebrated Brown's 16-13 victory over Colgate, closing out a very successful 8-1-0 season. Only a loss to unbeaten Yale kept the Ivy League title out of Providence.

The city's professional team, however, had a championship full in its sights as it arrived home by train that night. With the team record at 8-1-1, the Steam Roller could wrap up the NFL crown with a tie or victory against the Green Bay Packers on Sunday. The second-place Yellowjackets stood at 9-2-2 with three games left to play and could not catch up without the help of the Packers.

The Providence players came into this contest somewhat worn down by the Pottsville game and only two days of rest after it. Jack Cronin, for instance, had a broken nose to care for. He approached Jack MacKinnon, the trainer at Brown, for help. MacKinnon rigged a primitive face mask for him that somewhat resembled a horse's blinders over his nose. With this device attached to his helmet, Cronin could play against the Packers.

The Green Bay players also had reason for fatigue, as they were concluding a three-week trip to the East. They had beaten the Giants 7-0 in the Polo Grounds on November 18, been soundly thrashed in Pottsville 26-0 on November 25, and had dropped a rugged 2-0 game in Frankford on Thanksgiving.

The Packers brought a 5-4-2 mark into this contest along with one of the NFL's best backs, halfback Verne Lewellen. A good runner and defender and the league's premier punter, Lewellen also was a lawyer and had just been elected District Attorney of Brown County, of which little Green Bay was a part.

But regardless of the strengths of the Packers, the crowd of 10,500 at the Cycledrome had every reason to expect their local powerhouse to clinch the NFL title. Both teams blew scoring opportunities in the opening quarter. After Curly Oden shook loose on a punt return and brought the ball all the way down to the five-yard line, Wildcat Wilson tried a pass which was intercepted in the end zone. Later in the period, the Packers drove down to the Providence five-yard line but lost the ball on a fumble. The remainder of the first half boiled down to a punting match between Verne Lewellen and Wildcat Wilson. With the score still 0-0, the Packers broke the ice in the third quarter on a 30-yard touchdown pass from Lewellen to Larry Marks. The extra point made the score 7-0.

Facing possible defeat, the Steam Roller took the kickoff and drove 72 yards in 11 plays, with a 23-yard pass play from Wilson to Oden scoring the touchdown. Gus Sonnenberg added

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the extra point with a place kick, and Wilson's well-placed punts kept the Packers in poor field position for the rest of the afternoon.

The game ended at 7-7, making the Steam Roller the champion of the NFL. The Yellowjackets lost 28-6 to the Chicago Bears this day, making their two remaining games academic. The Steam Roller finished their season with an 8-1-2 league record, two non-league victories, and the highest honor in the world of professional football.

Unlike today's Super Bowl winners, however, the Steam Roller players picked up no huge bonus checks for their championship. As befit the low-key, unestablished state of pro football, the team members simply received their normal pay for the final game. But there was one reward for the team, a "victory banquet" at the Hotel Biltmore on the following Tuesday evening at 6:30.

The entire team, a delegation of city and state officials, and approximately 200 paying fans celebrated the successful football season with food and talk. Each member of the team received a gold watch as a memento of the season, and a loving cup for the Most Valuable Player of the team was presented to Conzelman. The players themselves voted to decide the MVP, settling upon their popular, good-natured coach despite the knee injury which sidelined him for the bulk of the schedule. In a short speech, Conzelman praised the morale of the team, saying that "there had not been a cross word between any two of the players in three months, on or off the field."

A variety of speakers took the floor, but the far-sighted words of State Attorney General Charles P. Sisson most deserve reprinting:

"I've seen the Roller play and talked with other men who have seen them in action, and I want to say to you in all seriousness, in my opinion professional football as played by the Steam Roller is really better football than we see on our college gridirons. I think it is harder football, and I think it is cleaner football. Every man on the Roller is a college man. He knows what a sportsmanlike game is, and he carries into professional football all the fine ethical principles that he might have gathered in college, and with it he has gained the maturity that comes to older men. The type of football you play may act as a stimulus to college and younger teams' football. I think the day is coming when pro football, if it follows the example set by the Roller, will take its place with baseball as the great national professional sport."

This undoubtedly was bravado before a chosen audience of partisans, but his final prediction, so preposterous in the face of pro football's relative poverty and obscurity in 1928, did come true in a later age.

* * * *

The winter of 1928-9 was a time of relishing the achievements of the past football season. Charlie Coppen, Pete Laudati, and Judge Dooley had sizable profits to reflect upon, products of the unprecedented enthusiasm which Providence fans showed as the team picked up momentum with important victories in November.

Five of the Steam Roller players gained All-League honors when the NFL issued its official honor roll on December 23. Wildcat Wilson and Clyde Smith were named to the first team, while Curly Oden, Milt Rehnquist, and Gus Sonnenberg were placed on the second team.

Sonnenberg reached the top of the ladder in his other sport when, on January 4, 1929, before 20,000 fans in the new Boston Garden, he beat Strangler Lewis in two straight falls to capture the world heavyweight championship in professional wrestling.

* * * *

All this affluence did the Steam Roller no good in 1929. Sonnenberg stayed out of football to make better money defending his title, Oden quit to take a job with an insurance company in

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Boston, and Clyde Smith decided to stay back in his native Missouri as a coach. Conzelman didn't fully recover from his knee injury, Rehnquist missed the first portion of the schedule because of illness, and Wildcat Wilson played with a complacency that turned him into a run-of-the-mill back. The 1929 Steam Roller turned in a limp 4-6-2 record, and the fans who kept the turnstiles spinning during the championship season stayed away in droves.

When the Depression gripped the nation, not even a title contender could have cured the sick gate. At the conclusion of the 1931 season, the three partners in the team gave up and turned the franchise back to the NFL.

Providence no longer had a place on the NFL circuit, but it continued to have post-collegiate football. Pearce Johnson, one of the original founders, organized a semi-pro version of the Steam Roller to play small-scale local teams in 1932. Off and on through 1964, the Providence Steam Roller played independent and minor-league pro football.

The Cycledrome continued to host cycling and football until the city closed it down on November 8, 1934, citing the decrepit and dangerous condition of the bleachers. As owner of the property, Pete Laudati turned this administrative misfortune to his advantage by leveling the Cycledrome and building on the site an E.M. Lowe drive-in movie theater. Opened in 1937, as only the second drive-in theater in the nation (Jersey City, N.J., had the first), it operates to this day.

* * * *

STEAM ROLLER 1925 6-5-1 .545 10th NFL

Coach: Archie Golembeski

| | | | |
|------|---|---------------------------|-------|
| 0- 3 | A | Frankford..... | 0- 7 |
| 0- 4 | A | Pottsville | 6- 0 |
| 0-11 | H | New York Giants | 14- 0 |
| 0-18 | H | Pottsville | 0-34 |
| N- 1 | H | Rochester | 17- 0 |
| N- 8 | H | Buffalo | 10- 0 |
| N-15 | A | New York Giants | 12-13 |
| N-22 | H | Frankford | 20- 7 |
| N-29 | H | Cleveland | 7- 7 |
| D- 6 | H | Green Bay | 10-13 |
| D- 9 | H | Chi. Bears(at Boston).... | 9- 6 |
| D-13 | H | Frankford | 6-14 |

STEAM ROLLER 1926 5-7-1 .417 11th NFL

Coach: Jim Laird

| | | | |
|------|---|------------------------|-------|
| S-26 | H | Brooklyn Lions | 13- 0 |
| 0- 3 | H | New York Giants | 0- 7 |
| 0-10 | H | Columbus | 19- 0 |
| 0-24 | H | Pottsville | 14- 0 |
| 0-30 | A | Frankford | 7- 6 |
| 0-31 | H | Frankford | 3- 6 |
| N- 7 | H | Los Angeles Bucs | 6- 7 |
| N-11 | H | Canton | 21- 2 |
| N-14 | H | Kansas City | 0-22 |
| N-21 | A | New York Giants | 0-21 |
| N-25 | A | Pottsville | 0- 8 |
| N-28 | H | Duluth | 0- 0 |
| D-11 | A | Frankford | 0-24 |

STEAM ROLLER 1927 8-5-1 .615 5th NFL

Coach: Jim Conzelman

| | | | |
|------|---|-----------------------|-------|
| S-25 | H | New York Giants | 0- 8 |
| 0- 2 | H | Buffalo | 5- 0 |
| 0-16 | H | Pottsville | 3- 6 |
| 0-23 | H | Dayton | 7- 0 |
| 0-29 | A | Frankford | 20- 7 |
| 0-30 | H | Frankford | 14- 0 |

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| | | | |
|------|---|---------------------------|-------|
| N- 6 | A | Chicago Bears | 0- 0 |
| N- 8 | A | New York Giants | 0-25 |
| N-13 | H | Duluth | 13- 7 |
| N-20 | H | Cleveland | 0-22 |
| N-24 | A | Pottsville | 0- 6 |
| N-27 | H | New York Yankees | 14- 7 |
| D- 3 | H | N.Y.Ynks(at Syracuse).... | 9- 0 |
| D- 4 | H | Pottsville | 20- 0 |

STEAM ROLLER 1928 8-1-2 .889 1st NFL

Coach: Jim Conzelman

| | | | |
|------|---|------------------------|-------|
| S-30 | H | New York Yankees | 20- 7 |
| 0- 7 | H | Frankford | 6-10 |
| 0-14 | H | Dayton | 28- 0 |
| 0-21 | A | New York Yankees | 12- 6 |
| 0-28 | H | Pottsville | 13- 6 |
| N- 4 | H | Detroit | 7- 0 |
| N-17 | A | Frankford | 6- 6 |
| N-18 | H | Frankford | 6- 0 |
| N-25 | H | New York Giants | 16- 0 |
| N-29 | A | Pottsville | 7- 0 |
| D- 2 | H | Green Bay | 7- 7 |

STEAM ROLLER 1929 4-6-2 .400 7th NFL

Coach: Jim Conzelman

| | | | |
|------|---|-------------------------|-------|
| S-29 | H | Dayton | 41- 0 |
| 0- 6 | H | New York Giants | 0- 7 |
| 0-13 | H | Orange | 7- 0 |
| 0-20 | H | Buffalo | 7- 7 |
| 0-27 | A | New York Giants | 0-19 |
| N- 5 | A | Stapletons | 7- 7 |
| N- 6 | H | Chicago Cardinals | 0-16 |
| N- 9 | A | Frankford | 0- 7 |
| N-10 | H | Frankford | 6- 7 |
| N-17 | H | Minneapolis | 19-16 |
| N-24 | H | Boston | 20- 6 |
| D- 1 | H | Green Bay | 0-25 |

STEAM ROLLER 1930 6-4-1 .600 5th NFL

Coach: Jim Conzelman

| | | | |
|------|---|-------------------------|-------|
| S-28 | H | New York Giants | 7-27 |
| 0- 1 | H | Frankford | 14- 0 |
| 0- 5 | H | Newark | 14- 0 |
| 0-12 | H | Chicago Cardinals | 9- 7 |
| 0-19 | H | Stapletons | 7- 6 |
| 0-26 | A | New York Giants | 0-25 |
| N- 2 | H | Brooklyn | 3- 0 |
| N- 8 | A | Frankford | 7-20 |
| N- 9 | H | Frankford | 7- 7 |
| N-23 | H | Minneapolis | 10- 0 |
| N-27 | A | Brooklyn | 12-33 |

STEAM ROLLER 1931 4-4-3 .500 6th NFL

Coach: Ed Robinson

| | | | |
|------|---|-----------------------|-------|
| S-27 | H | New York Giants | 6-14 |
| 0- 4 | H | Frankford | 0- 0 |
| 0-10 | A | Frankford | 6- 0 |
| 0-18 | H | Cleveland | 6-13 |
| 0-25 | A | Green Bay | 20-48 |
| N- 1 | A | Stapletons | 7- 7 |
| N- 8 | H | Brooklyn | 7- 0 |
| N-15 | H | Stapletons | 6- 0 |
| N-21 | H | Cleveland | 13- 7 |
| N-26 | H | Green Bay | 7-38 |

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N-29 A New York Giants 0- 0