

## **KEN HAYCRAFT REMEMBERS THE WAY IT WAS**

By James E. Odenkirk

Little has been written about the behind-the-scenes events which caused professional football in the 1930's to grow and receive an ever-widening basis of support from American sports fans. This early development of pro football is highlighted with a description of the brief, but eventful pro career of one Ken Haycraft, All-American end at the University of Minnesota in 1928. Subsequently, Haycraft's playing days extended to the Minneapolis Redjackets, the Green Bay Packers, and finally, a local semi-professional team in Minneapolis.

A brief overview of Haycraft's playing career represents a micro-cosm of the trials and tribulations of the early development of professional football. In several ways, his career was quite different from modern-day norms. First of all, he did not play football at his high school, Central High School in Washington, D.C. Then, he did not go out for the football team his freshman year at the University of Minnesota in 1924. However, in 1925, he became a so-called "walk-on" candidate for the team. His coach, Dr. Clarence Spears, who helped to revive football at the University of Minnesota prior to the Golden Gopher era of Bernie Bierman, encouraged Haycraft to try out for the team, where he played sparingly as a substitute tackle. But Haycraft, six feet tall and weighing 175 pounds, showed Coach Spears enough football savvy to be retained on the team in 1926. Eventually, the "walk-on" played regularly on Minnesota's undefeated team of 1927 and earned the honor of being selected to Grantland Rice's All-American team in 1928.

In the fall of 1929, some ex-collegiate players in the Minneapolis area formulated plans to enter a professional team, the Minneapolis Redjackets, in the National Football League. Franchises were being added, dropped or moved to other cities frequently during this period of development in the NFL. Val Ness, a butcher, and John Dunn, a postal clerk, provided the necessary money for a Minneapolis franchise in good standing, a total of \$2500. Although an insignificant figure by modern-day standards, this was a considerable increase from the original entry fee of \$100 in 1920.

The team was coached by George Gibson, an All-American guard at Minnesota. Haycraft assisted.

A professional team was composed of not more than eighteen players, since this era preceded the two-platoon system. Naturally, players were expected to play both offense and defense and at least two positions. Games were sixty minutes in length, as in present-day games, and the contests were played in minor league or major league baseball parks where a rental fee was assessed for the use of the park. League teams, such as the Brooklyn Dodgers, Chicago Bears, Chicago Cardinals, Frankford Yellow Jackets, Green Bay Packers, New York Giants, Newark Tornadoes, Portsmouth Spartans, Providence Steam Roller, and the Staten Island Stapletons, were located throughout the Midwest and along the Eastern Coast. Travel was mainly by train, although ships were sometimes used to transport teams along the Eastern seaboard and from New York City to Providence, Rhode Island.

Schedules consisted of approximately sixteen games, including a maximum of four exhibition games. Haycraft received \$100 per game during the 1929 season, plus \$25 per game for coaching the team. Crowds of 5,000 were considered average at this time, except for games involving Red Grange and the Chicago Bears, which might attract anywhere from 10,000 to 35,000 spectators, depending on the size of the baseball park.

## **THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 2, No. 12 (1980)**

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Generally, admission prices were \$2.00 for adults and \$1.00 for children, a far cry from the cost today. Players were provided food and lodging while traveling to another city. Normally, gate receipts were split on a 60-40 basis, with the home team retaining 60% of the gate.

The Redjackets completed their first season in 1929, winning only one game. The club finished in the "red" financially, but not far from breaking even, primarily because of three games with the Chicago Bears.

As the 1930 season approached, the Redjackets planned to play their four home games in October at Nicollet Park in Minneapolis. They hoped for good weather in October in Minnesota, thus stimulating better attendance. Unfortunately, it either rained or snowed on each scheduled date and the team went broke. It is reported that Val Ness, one of the financial backers of the team, believed his butcher shop also suffered financially as a result of his venture.

By now the Depression had taken a heavy toll and efforts to rescue the Redjackets were fruitless. So ten of the players were sold to the Frankford Yellow Jackets, and three players, including Haycraft, were sold to the Green Bay Packers.

Here, Haycraft was associated with a first-rate operation, coached by the flamboyant Curly Lambeau. The smallest lineman on the team, he was teamed with huge Cal Hubbard, number of the Pro Football Hall of Fame and later a famous baseball umpire.

The average lineman's pay at Green Bay was \$75.00 a game. It was reported that Mike Michalske, another member of the HOF, earned six dollars for every minute he played in a game. These figures, even in a non-inflationary period, are a far cry from modern-day salaries. The Packers possessed a broader base of financial backing because they were a community-owned franchise.

Unfortunately for Haycraft, the Packers were detected by a league official to be carrying 22 players, instead of the maximum of 18. This caused him to be released, along with three others, after he had appeared in only one game for the Pack.

He attempted to sign with the Portsmouth Spartans for 1931. George "Potsy" Clark, former backfield coach at Minnesota, had been named coach there, but the deal fell through. Thus ended Haycraft's career in the NFL.

He returned to Minneapolis to pursue a law degree at the University of Minnesota. There he organized a semi-professional football team, in which he was owner, general manager, coach, and player. Using only thirteen players, the team played in a semi-pro league for six seasons during the peak of the Depression, against other teams from Minnesota and the neighboring states of Wisconsin, Iowa, and Illinois. During this time, Haycraft earned his law degree from the University of Minnesota.

One highlight of his team's history was an exhibition game played against the Chicago Bears in 1935. The Bears, coached by George Halas and featuring Haycraft's former college teammate Bronko Nagurski, were given all the opposition they desired before winning 14-3. After 1936, Haycraft served his relationship with the All-Stars, to devote more time to his law practice.

Looking back, Haycraft reflected that the quality of play would be hard to compare with the modern-day game, except that it was his opinion that players were in better condition in the earlier days. The limited number of team players (18) placed great stress on conditioning. The coaching strategy was to substitute frequently and have as many fresh players ready for the final quarter as possible. A scoring lead was always in jeopardy in the fourth quarter.

## **THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 2, No. 12 (1980)**

---

Basic offensive strategy centered around the single-wing, double-wing, and short punt formations. Defenses were basic, consisting of a five or six man line and a minimum of "stunting" or "blitzing," and generally, the defensive center or middle guard, who was strong, fast, and agile, was at liberty to move anywhere he wished on any play.

This early era did not lack for great football players. Bronko Nagurski, generally considered to be the greatest player to don a uniform at the University of Minnesota, was sought by the Redjackets in 1930 but signed a contract for \$5,000 to play with the Bears instead. Haycraft considered Nagurski, Grange, Ken Strong, Cal Hubbard, and Ernie Nevers as the top players he either played with or against. His viewpoint carried an element of validity, for he played against fourteen of the first seventeen members selected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

A pro football player's endurance and stamina were often taxed. Haycraft recalled playing a game in Frankford, Pennsylvania, on a Saturday, then traveling by train to New York City to play Ken Strong and the Staten Island team on Sunday. Games were played on Saturday in Pennsylvania because of strict Blue Laws which did not permit professional sports on Sunday.

While in New York City, the team stayed in a first class hotel near Central Park. The players dressed in their uniforms while in their rooms, then walked from their hotel to Central Park in tennis shoes and practiced, often to the delight of pedestrians.

Haycraft doubled as trainer for the Redjackets on road trips. For home games, Lloyd Stern, the trainer at the University of Minnesota, would be on duty for taping and first-aid purposes. A doctor was either in the stands or on call.

Playing equipment was not fancy. Leather helmets were standard, but faceguards were non-existent. If, by chance, a player suffered a broken nose, a leather face guard was taped on his face during the game, but this was a nuisance. The player perspired and the protective guard would come loose.

Shoulder pads were made of leather and were heavier than modern pads. Leather and fiber hip pads were worn and thigh pads were either inserted within the duckcloth pants or taped directly to the legs. The jerseys were made of woolen materials.

Shoes were leather and of the high cut style to help prevent ankle injuries. Three types of cleats were used: leather cleats shaped in a triangle, regular rubber cleats, and mud cleats which were longer and made out of rubber in a cone-like shape.

Taping of the uniform was legal and players were also permitted to tape hard, fibrous materials to the arms for protection. The forearm lift was legal for a defensive player and was an effective way for a smaller defensive player to move a larger opponent off balance.

Haycraft, who could reflect from both the intercollegiate and professional viewpoint, believed that pro football was not as "dirty" as the college game in the late 1920's and early 1930's. Although early stories reported that George Trafton of the Chicago Bears used some disreputable tactics, generally a player's own teammates would tell a player like Trafton to "clean it up," lest he aggravate the opposing team into a slugfest. No team could afford to have a player ejected from the game.

At this time, intercollegiate play in the Big Ten Conference was like warfare, where efforts were made to harm key players and force them out of the game. However, Haycraft insisted that one celebrated incident -- a shoulder injury Red Grange incurred during the third quarter of the Minnesota-Illinois game of 1924 -- was legitimate and not an act of "dirty play." Grange was forced to leave the game and Minnesota won 20-7.

## **THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 2, No. 12 (1980)**

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Overall, the officiating was good. Four officials were assigned to a game, usually one head official from the league office and three officials from the home team's community. Fees for working a game approximately \$50.00. Haycraft did not speak as highly of collegiate officiating, where constant reports of being "homered" circulated throughout the Big Ten.

By 1930, the passing game had improved significantly, opening up a more offensive style of football. Coaches were not overly scientific in their game plans. It was Haycraft's judgment that the renowned Lambeau was more a "manager" than "coach" of the Green Bay Packers.

In the one game he played for Green Bay, the Packers were upset by the Cardinals, largely, Haycraft believed, due to Lambeau's questionable coaching strategy. Curly insisted that his men play a "diverging" defense. Such strategy would stop the Cardinal's reverse from the Warner double wing formation but would also not tighten up the defense in the middle of the line. Adjustments weren't made and Ernie Nevers made huge gains up the middle, helping the Cardinals win 13-6 before 10,000 spectators.

It was Haycraft's opinion that in the 1920's one did not have to play football in high school to be successful in college play, citing himself as one of many examples. He believed that modern day coaches concentrate so heavily on the boys who receive the headlines and are selected to All-Star teams that nonexperienced athletes or walk-on students are too frequently ignored or shunted to the sidelines.

In retrospect, pro football in the late 1920's and early 1930's reflected an aspect of the American sporting scene which was exciting, entertaining, and almost unbelievable in some respects, by present-day standards. The modern game provides the viewer with many instant thrills, but, in its own way, the younger and less sophisticated game of fifty years ago provided its own colorful and interesting spectacle.