

THE OHIO LEAGUE

By Bob Braunwart & Bob Carroll

Professional football came to Ohio in 1903 when the Massillon Tigers, a strong amateur team, hired four veteran Pittsburgh pros to play in their season-ending game against East Akron. The game was no small potatoes, being billed as for the "Ohio Independent Football championship," an unofficial title -- open to argument - - but taken quite seriously by the teams and fans. The pros proved a sound investment. Massillon won, 12-0, and professionalism was launched in the Buckeye State. The Tigers went a step farther by dividing the season's profits among its home talent, thereby putting the whole outfit on a professional basis.

The little city of Massillon caught flack from most of the major newspapers in northern Ohio for its transgression against the amateur code, but the following year saw players paid in Salem, Akron, Lorain, Canton, Dover, Shelby, and doubtless any number of other places that were more circumspect about what they were doing with their money. Charles Follis, an outstanding halfback, became the first black pro football player when Shelby hired him to a season-long contract. Massillon, with its team augmented by still more Pittsburgh pros, spent 1904 undefeated, winning most of its games with ridiculous ease. Cleveland's Franklin A.C. was downed 56-6, but the top performance of the season was Marion, O., crushed 148-0!

In 1905, the Canton Bulldogs were formed, primarily to beat Massillon. The two cities -- both within Stark County -- were natural rivals. Each team scrambled to hire the best players in the country. Salaries soared.

For the first time fans began talking about the formation of a "pro football league." Nothing came of it at the time, but the idea resurfaced almost every year.

The first important game involving a pro team ever to be played in Cleveland grew out of the Canton-Massillon rivalry. The Bulldogs signed to play the famous Carlisle Indian School team, the same school that produced Jim Thorpe a few years later. To keep Massillon from benefitting from the same box office attraction, Canton's contract stipulated that the Indians could not play another opponent within Stark County during 1905. Undaunted, Massillon scheduled a game against Carlisle at Cleveland, one week before the Indians were to be in Canton. Reportedly, the crowd that came to Cleveland to watch the Tigers win 8-4 matched the one that showed up in Canton to see the Bulldogs triumph 8-0. As the time approached for the big showdown game between the two Stark County rivals, money flowed like water. Each team tried to beef up its lineup by hiring an extra star or two. Canton seemingly pulled a real coup by securing Michigan's All- America halfback Willie Heston for a record \$600, but the star proved a bust, gaining only a few yards against a stacked Massillon defense. The 14-4 Thanksgiving Day win kept the championship in Massillon for the third straight year.

Except for the newly legalized forward pass, 1906 began much as 1905 ended. Canton and Massillon grabbed every able-bodied football star in sight, while the other Ohio teams provided cannon fodder in 31-0, 57-0, and 96-0 games. This time the Bulldogs and Tigers scheduled a pair of games for late November.

Canton won the opening round, 10-5, at Canton. It was the first loss for Massillon since 1903, and the Bulldogs were temporarily the toast of northern Ohio. However, the Tigers took the return match at Massillon, 13-6, and kept its state championship. By now, the title was openly called the "professional championship," rather than the "independent".

Unfortunately, things turned ugly after the game. The Massillon team manager, a newspaperman by trade, broke a story that the second game had been "fixed" by Canton coach Charles "Blondy" Wallace. Canton, which still had a game left with Pennsylvania's famous Latrobe team, responded that Massillon was simply trying to cripple its arch rival financially by destroying the Bulldog-Latrobe gate. Charges and

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countercharges fouled the air, but virtually no proof of wrongdoing emerged. In retrospect, there was a great deal more smoke than fire.

Although long on vitriol, both teams had grown short on money. After two years of shelling out shekels to every football player of note within telegraphing distance, both the Bulldogs and the Tigers had reached the end of the financial line. After the Latrobe game, Canton could not pay its players. Blaming Massillon for discouraging attendance with the fix charges, the Canton people vowed never to play the Tigers again. The decision was academic because the Bulldogs were out of business and broke.

Massillon was hurting too, reportedly several thousand dollars in the hole. With Canton out of the picture, the Tiger leaders decided to pull back from big stars and bigger salaries to field a team made up mostly of home-grown talent in 1907. As it turned out, they still had enough left to keep their championship for a fifth consecutive year, but this was largely because the opposition was only so-so.

The fix charges in '06 have been said by some modern historians to have killed pro football in Ohio for almost a decade. But a closer look reveals the problem to have been more money than moral -- the fiscal disaster brought on by salaries insupportable by attendance. More importantly, pro football had not really been killed -- only slightly wounded. For the next few years, teams across the state followed Massillon's example of fielding mostly local athletes at considerably reduced pay.

Although Akron managed the state championship in 1908 and 1909, the undoubted master of this new brand of "cut rate" pro ball was Clevelander George "Peggy" Parratt who took over the Shelby team. Parratt, who had quarterbacked the '06 Massillon Tigers, was able to bind enough good players to his personal entourage to win more often than not, yet keep them playing at rates low enough to allow him to turn a profit. He was sometimes unpopular with his own men because of his niggardly ways, but they stuck with him because they could depend on being paid.

By 1910, Parratt's Shelby Blues were able to best the Akron Indians twice and become state champs. A large part of their success was due in no small part to Parratt's still excellent playing skills.

But Peggy Parratt was more than a player, a coach, or a manager. Most of all, he was a promoter. And, he had a Master Plan for pro football -- a "parity plan" almost seventy years ahead of its time.

He'd learned from his Massillon days that one-sided victories did not fill the grandstand. Just being good wasn't good enough. To make money, a team needed close, exciting games against worthy rivals -- games that the fans would beat down the gates to see.

After his Blues repeated as state champs in 1911, Parratt moved on to rebuild the Akron Indians. He was careful to leave enough good players in Shelby to keep the team competitive. Some of the leftover talent went to the Elyria A.C., west of Cleveland, putting a third worthy challenger in the field.

Meanwhile, Canton under Jack Cusack -- Parratt's only serious rival as a football promoter -- had been revitalized for the 1912 season. The talent in Canton, Shelby, Akron, and Elyria was largely native Ohio, but -- with four first-rate teams competing -- 1912 has been called the "year of rebirth" for pro football in the state. Elyria took the title, but all of the games among the big four were close and most of them were profitable.

Parratt's Akron Indians won in 1913, but Cusack was building a powerhouse at Canton. In 1914, his club even managed a 6-0 win over the Indians, but the victory was marred by tragedy. Bulldog center Harry Turner suffered a broken back while making a tackle and died a few days later. Supposedly, his last words were "I know I must go, but I'm satisfied, for we beat Peggy Parratt!"

Sadly for legend, Parratt's Indians easily won the rematch to retain their championship.

By this time, fans often referred to the "Ohio League" as though it was a real entity. There was never anything official about it, and its makeup changed from year to year. Essentially, the "league" was made up of those teams that were strong enough to be considered "major". In any given year after 1912, that usually involved from three to five teams in northeastern Ohio and, depending on their fortunes, one or

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two from Columbus, Cincinnati, Dayton, or Toledo. The so-called "championship", which was every bit as unofficial as the "league," depended more on which team defeated what other team than it did on total won- lost record. For example, a win over Canton was worth two or three victories over lesser teams. Under these circumstances, several seasons saw more than one team claiming the championship after its final game, but usually the sportswriters and fans reached some sort of consensus.

However, 1915 saw no clear title winner. Parratt took a year off and his Akron team collapsed. Shelby and Elyria were no longer competitive. The Columbus Panhandles and Toledo Maroons were strong but lost key games, while the Youngstown Patricians went undefeated but only played a few strong opponents.

For the first time in years, Massillon fielded a major team, one that was quickly christened the "Tigers" in a nod to former glory. Naturally, Canton people began calling Jack Cusack's crew the "Bulldogs." Many fans expected the championship to hinge on the two games scheduled between the old rivals for late November.

In a move reminiscent of the old Bulldog-Tiger days, Cusack went out and hired the best football player in the world to oppose Massillon -- namely, Jim Thorpe. The great Indian was a star at any sport he set his mind to, but on a football field he was in a class by himself. Some players could run as well, some could pass, a few were on a par defensively, and a very few could kick equally well, but no one at the time -- or possible since -- combined all these skills to an equal degree of perfection. Still, when fans heard that Thorpe had been promised \$250 for each game, they figured Cusack had lost his mind.

But the Canton manager had the last laugh. Thorpe's presence so hyped the gate that the Bulldogs made a tidy profit on both games. The laugh would have been heartier had Thorpe given Canton two victories. Massillon, however, stopped him cold in the first contest to win 16-0. By the second game, the Indian had his act together. He dropkicked one field goal and placekicked another to power a 6-0 win. The split left the "Ohio League Championship" in a muddle.

More important than anything he did in any single game, Thorpe's continued presence at Canton focused attention of the whole country on Ohio professional football. More players of quality began arriving and both attendance and salaries went up. Ohio sportswriters -- without blushing -- began to trumpet the "world professional championship." True, pro and semipro teams could be found from New England to Iowa in nearly every town and hamlet with eleven able-bodied men and a flat expense of 100 yards, but they all took on the aspect of minor leaguers; Ohio held the "majors." The annual talk of forming a real pro league -- with Thorpe's Canton Bulldogs as the capstone -- became more vocal than ever before.

Although it was Ohio's largest city, Cleveland had never put together a top flight professional football team, but things looked to be different in 1916. Native son Peggy Parratt announced he was coming back to the football wars with a team he called the Cleveland Indians. In addition to some of the players from his championship Akron squads, he talked Shorty Des Jardien, an All-American center from Chicago, into migrating from the shore of Lake Michigan to that of Lake Erie.

The results were good, but not good enough. Although the team was able to gain a tie with star-laden Massillon, two losses to Thorpe's Bulldogs in early November finished its championship pretensions. Cleveland fans quickly lost interest and Parratt's Indians vanished after a single season.

Meanwhile, led by Thorpe, the Bulldogs were easily the class of the state. Massillon, a close second, got a tie and a one- sided loss out of two games with the champs.

Things continued in the same track during the 1917 season. The Bulldogs seemed even stronger until they were upset in their last game by Massillon, 6-0. But the Tigers had accumulated three losses by then, and no one paid much attention when they argued that a single upset over the Bulldogs constituted a legitimate claim to the state title. The "Ohio League" was loose, but it wasn't unhinged.

Talk of a real league kept circulating but remained only talk. None of the team managers wanted to bind himself to the rules of a formal organization. Each preferred to be free to steal a good player or two from

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a rival by offering a little more money. As a consequence, salaries were getting out of hand. Massillon lost over \$5,000 in 1917.

Thoughts of leagues and football took a sabbatical for the most part in 1918, as World War I with its "work for fight" orders closed down most of the major teams. Only the Dayton Triangles among the top clubs played a full schedule. Coached and fullbacked by Earle "Greasy" Neale, the Triangles easily romped through eight indifferent opponents to claim a title that no one cared much about.

By 1919, some things had changed but many were the same as before the War. Parratt was unable to put together a strong team, but Jimmy O'Donnell, a minor promoter in Cleveland, found the financial backing to field a good club to go with a lease to play at League Park. He called them the Tigers. Akron had a new edition of the Indians.

Midway through the season, they talked former Brown U. All-American Fritz Pollard into joining the team, giving them a running threat to match Thorpe at Canton. In addition to opposition muscle, Pollard -- one of the greatest black pros -- often had to contend with vicious opposition prejudice. But even the most rabid bigots could be silenced by his brilliant breakaway runs.

Some of the greatest names in football, including Gus Dorias and Knute Rockne, played at Massillon. The Tigers were up to their jocks in stars and over their helmets in debt.

At Canton, Thorpe had two Indian running mates in Joe Guyon and Pete Calac and a financial interest in the team. Jack Cusack was off in the Oklahoma oil fields seeking his fortune. The team was left in charge of Thorpe and Ralph Hay, an auto salesman. No matter who ran the show, the Bulldogs were still the best in the business.

One thing had gotten much worse. The salary spiral, intensified by player-bidding from strong new teams in Chicago, Buffalo, Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania coal fields, had put almost every team in Ohio in the red. By mid-season, the Cleveland backers were practically pleading for a formal league structure to put a clamp on costs.

By the time Thorpe nailed down still another championship with a 40-yard field goal against Massillon in the traditional season-ender, the handwriting was virtually screaming on the wall -- form a pro football league or go under!

Finally, in 1920 -- with the Ohio teams leading the way -- football managers from most of the important pro teams in the country got together at Canton to form the American Professional Football Association, the forerunner of today's National Football League. Pro football was not exactly saved in Ohio. Indeed, within a decade all of the "Ohio League" teams would go out of business, but -- despite enough red ink to paint the entire midwest -- the real league that they spawned would survive and grow.

"OHIO LEAGUE" CHAMPS, 1903-1919

1903	Massillon Tigers,	8-1-0
1904	Massillon Tigers,	7-0-0
1905	Massillon Tigers,	10-0-0
1906	Massillon Tigers,	10-1-0
1907	All-Massillons,	7-0-1
1908	Akron Indians,	8-0-1
1909	Akron Indians,	9-0-0
1910	Shelby Blues,	undefeated
1911	Shelby Blues,	undefeated
1912	Elyria Athletics,	8-0-0
1913	Akron Indians,	8-1-2
1914	Akron Indians,	8-2-1
1915	no clear champion	
1916	Canton Bulldogs,	9-0-1
1917	Canton Bulldogs,	9-1-0
1918	Dayton Triangles,	8-0-0
1919	Canton Bulldogs,	9-0-1