

The Early Struggles Of Professional Football: EVANSVILLE, INDIANA, 1920-1922

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Although the National Football League today is a tremendously prosperous American sporting institution, its origins were far more humble than one might imagine for such a successful organization. The original NFL--the American Professional Football Association--contained miscellaneous midwestern squads and was held together only by the loosest of ties. One participating club was the Evansville Crimson Giants, operated by local businessmen who hoped to popularize the game of professional football in southern Indiana and bring profit to themselves. The difficulties encountered in their pursuit illustrate the experiences of most early professional football teams.

Following the First World War, enough strong professional teams played in the Midwest to warrant the formation of a unifying league. Several half-hearted efforts had been made previously, but in September 1920 key pro football leaders met in Canton, Ohio, to form a league that would make sports history. Convening in the showroom of automobile dealer Ralph Hay, managers of ten teams established the American Professional Football Association. In two years the APFA changed its name and became the National Football League.

In 1920, the southern Indiana city of Evansville was just beginning to accept the sport of football. In many ways the city's experiences with professional football typified many towns and teams. A look at Evansville's semi-pro teams of the time and its 1921-1922 National Football League entry, the Crimson Giants, reveals the problems common to early pro clubs and indicates the relatively primitive stage of development in which professional football found itself in the early 1920s. Inter-related financial, attendance, stadium, publicity, scheduling, and public relations difficulties dogged not only Evansville teams, but all professional clubs of the era.

Evansville was not unlike many league cities in 1921 and 1922. It was a small- to medium-sized industrial town with a population of 85,000. In the late nineteenth century, the city attracted many newcomers, particularly Germans, because of its location on the Ohio River and the accompanying employment opportunities. The city's blossoming manufacturing firms specialized in stoves, furniture, flour, tobacco, automobiles, and trucks. Most workers in Evansville were wage earners, but the number of white collar workers continually increased as well. A good distance from any large metropolis, Evansville was, in the words of one historian, "an urban island in a rural sea stretching one hundred miles in all directions."

At least eight other APFA/NFL franchises were of a similar size. Like many other league cities, Evansville had no popular college football squad to win acclaim and dominate newspaper coverage, although two high school teams (Central and Reitz) did have strong local followings. What set the Indiana city apart from most others in the league was that it was considerably farther south than all other franchises except for Louisville, Kentucky. The sport's popularity at the professional level was concentrated in the East and Midwest and had not yet spread to that part of the country. Thus the Crimson Giants, because of Evansville's relatively small population and the limited popularity of pro football, faced an uphill struggle to gain profits and win the favor of local sports fans.

The story of the Crimson Giants is rooted in the circumstances of Evansville's first significant semi-pro team, the "Ex-Collegians," who began play in 1920. Two players,

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newspaper worker Allen "Pat" McGinnis and lawyer E. Menzies Lindsey, managed the club. The Ex-Collegians opened their season relatively late, on October 31, by defeating the Jasper (Indiana) Independents, 52-0, while 700 fans watched at Bosse Field. After a cancellation the following week, the Evansville squad shut out the Goldberg Athletic Association of Louisville, 23-0, before the Ex-Collegians' "largest crowd ever."

After the initial two victories over modest opponents, McGinnis and Lindsey let it be known that they were considering adding the fabled Jim Thorpe and his Canton Bulldogs to their schedule on Christmas Day. Such talk was, of course, absurd. Thorpe's Bulldogs were the most celebrated pro football team in the nation. That they would even consider playing the Ex-Collegians was at best ludicrous. But McGinnis and Lindsey were doing what they could to attract attention to their new club.

During the course of the squad's five-game season, several unnamed local businessmen made an effort to assume ownership of the team. But, according to Lindsey sometime later, because of "differences between the players and the incorporators," the parties were unable to negotiate a suitable arrangement. Thus the Ex-Collegians played as a typical semi-professional outfit of the era, employing local players almost exclusively, paying them a small sum based on gate receipts and on a game-by-game basis, doing without real management other than the players themselves, and scheduling contests in a haphazard manner.

The Ex-Collegians played three more games, winning two before dropping their finale to the Paducah (Kentucky) All-Stars, 6-0. While they were by no means a pro football powerhouse, the Evansville squad had performed respectably and McGinnis and Lindsey proceeded to make plans for the next season.

In 1921 the same unnamed businessmen who failed in their takeover attempt the previous year decided to form their own team. Local entrepreneur Franklin L. Fausch (the Ex-Collegians' fullback) and attorney Mark B. Ingle (a lineman for the 1920 squad) left the Ex-Collegians to create a new corporation known as the American Football Association, which would own a new professional team soon dubbed the "Crimson Giants." Fausch served as president and general manager, and was almost certainly behind the failed takeover effort in 1920. Ingle served as vice-president and local bank accountant William F. Hassee was secretary-treasurer. Investors included "leading business and professional men of the city," including Evansville's popular mayor, Benjamin Bosse, and the vice-president of City National Bank, Charles Bates Enlow. The announcement of the birth of the Crimson Giants led the Evansville *Courier* to exclaim that local fans could look forward to "real football matches that make the blood tingle."

As manager of the Crimson Giants, Fausch was not unlike his American Professional Football Association/National Football League counterparts in the early 1920s. The common league owner was a local small businessman and sports enthusiast. This was certainly the case with the Canton Bulldogs' Ralph Hay (an automobile dealer), the Chicago Cardinals' Chris O'Brien (a decorating contractor), and newspaper editor Joseph F. Carr of the Columbus Panhandles. Economic support came either from that one individual or possibly from other backers in the community. Usually the owner/manager could not stand to lose too much money.

Fausch was the owner of a local storage battery company and had much experience in football. He had played and won honors at Michigan's Kalamazoo College, and became involved with professional football in that state before coming to Evansville. As president of the corporation, Fausch had local support. Important to the club was the backing of Mayor Bosse, after whom the team's stadium was named because of his encouragement of athletics. The city's Chamber of Commerce was also heavily involved, at least initially, in promoting the Crimson Giants. And, as subsequent difficulties would make obvious, Fausch and the Giants did not have a limitless supply of money.

The remaining Ex-Collegians, led by their quarterback and captain, Menzies Lindsey (Pat McGinnis was no longer affiliated with the team), at first refused to join Fausch and Ingle, hoping instead to continue to play independently, as they had the previous season.

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Lindsey and the Ex- Collegians thus far had maintained the loyalty of the local players whom the Crimson Giants would need if the new venture was to succeed.

Fausch set out to sign as many players as he could. He quickly came to an agreement with Guy Morrison--a public relations coup, as Morrison was a popular pitcher with Evansville's Three-I League baseball club--and arranged for a benefit game that would provide funds for the construction of a World War I veterans' memorial. Immediately the Giants secured the exclusive use of the only suitable stadium in Evansville, Bosse Field, thus effectively spelling doom for the Ex-Collegians. Lindsey, unwilling to yield, challenged the Giants to a contest in the benefit game. Fausch refused to respond.

Meanwhile, one by one, Fausch added to his roster. After Morrison came Bourban Bondurant, an insurance agent in Evansville having pro football experience with the Fort Wayne Friars; Joe Windbiel, a local high school coach who played college ball in Dayton, Ohio, and professionally with the Detroit Heralds; architect Earl Warweg, who had played semi-pro football for five years in Indianapolis; cigar company traffic manager Clarence Specht; and June B. Talley, an insurance adjuster also with college football experience.

In late August 1921 Fausch traveled to Chicago to secure an American Professional Football Association franchise for Evansville. His telegram to the press read: "Evansville Crimson Giants received franchise in American Professional Football [A]ssociation. Biggest men in organized football attend meeting. Big thing for Evansville." Three days later, dentist O. A. "Doc" Gorman, a halfback formerly with St. Louis University, joined the Giants, becoming the first Ex-Collegian other than Fausch and Ingle to defect. Within a week, Lindsey and Clarence Spiegel, two main cogs in the Ex-Collegians' organization, realized there was no hope for success and jumped to the Giants. Fausch offered the rest of the Ex-Collegians tryouts and effectively absorbed the older Evansville team.

Semi-professional football teams situated in small cities used primarily local athletes who had played in high school or college. When intense rivalries and the resulting overwhelming desire for victory dictated such action, clubs often recruited ringers or hired collegiate stars to play for the local squad. APFA/NFL rosters, however, were filled almost exclusively with former college players. The athletes generally received somewhere between \$50 and \$100 per game, although the best players might receive somewhat more. They required some sort of off-season occupation because a player simply could not make enough money to support himself and a family if he relied solely on his earnings from the sport. One former player, Ernest Cuneo, has indicated that when he was involved in pro football in the late 1920s, many players attended graduate and professional schools and went on to become doctors, lawyers, and educators. Cuneo himself later became a successful attorney.

Evansville's Crimson Giants and the earlier Ex- Collegians epitomized two distinct types of professional teams. The 1921 Crimson Giants were representative members

TABLE 1

PROFILE OF EVANSVILLE PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL TEAMS, 1920-1921				
	1920		1921	
	Ex-Collegians		Crimson Giants	
	(Semi-Pro)		(Member, APFA)	
	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.
<u>Residence</u>				
Local	22	95.7	17	56.7
Outsiders	1	4.3	13	43.3
<u>Education</u>				
College	11	91.7	22	91.7
High School	1	8.3	2	8.3
Unknown	11	----	6	----

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Occupation

White Collar	16	94.1	19	90.5
Blue Collar	1	5.9	2	9.5
Unknown	6	---	9	---
Total on Roster	23		30	

of a league that was becoming increasingly professionalized, whereas the Ex-Collegians of 1920 were a characteristic small-town, semi-professional outfit. As indicated in Table 1, the Crimson Giants relied more on outside talent: 17 of 30 players in 1921 hailed from Evansville. And by the next season only 5 of 17 were locals. In contrast, 22 of 23 players on the 1920 Ex-Collegians were from Evansville. When faced with competition from the Giants in 1921, the Ex-Collegians brought in a few outsiders before folding, but generally semi-pro squads spent little effort on recruiting. To compete successfully in the NFL, however, the Crimson Giants found it necessary to comb the region, if not the nation, to secure the best talent available. Thus, as the NFL became more professionalized, it relied almost solely on former collegiate athletes, established rules of conduct regarding players' contracts, managed its finances more responsibly, and honored an established schedule. "Local" teams, though, were no longer composed of local players.

Based on the available information, it seems that both the Ex-Collegians and the Crimson Giants relied almost exclusively on players with college experience. A high unknown factor for the Ex-Collegians, however, may cause distortions. It is quite possible, even probable, that many of the 1920 Ex-Collegians did not attend college, given the squad's local nature and its small scale of operations. It is also probable that most of the six unknown players on the Crimson Giants had college experience because the Giants' management recruited players who had won reputations, most likely in midwestern colleges, as solid players.

The social background of most players, regardless of the type of squad, was overwhelmingly middle class. Very few blue collar workers played professional football in Evansville in the early 1920s. Again, the high unknown factor may create inaccuracies, but of those players whose occupations can be determined, virtually all were engaged in white collar jobs. The 1921 Crimson Giants even included three lawyers, one physician, and one dentist. This fact is not surprising given most players' college educations. The working class was largely excluded from participating in professional football, in part because of a lack of leisure time.

Fan support for early APFA/NFL teams was generally limited, certainly by comparison to that of college football. Ohio pro teams attracted the most local attention, especially in Canton and Akron, and to a lesser degree in Dayton, Cleveland, Columbus, and Toledo. Enthusiasm in other cities, however, was more restrained. In Green Bay, Wisconsin, for example, the 1922 Packers lost more than \$5,000 by mid-season while attracting fewer than 3,000 fans per home game.

Evansville's Bosse Field was a fine, 6,000-seat facility, built in 1915 and serving as the home of the Evas during the baseball season. But Evansville's football attendance was poor compared to other pro teams. Central High School teacher and coach Herb Henderson, a halfback for the Crimson Giants, later recalled that 1,200 to 1,500 was a large crowd for a Crimson Giants' game. This in itself would have created financial difficulties for the Giants. The team's management, though, was further hindered by the low ticket prices (\$1 for general admission; \$1.25 for box seats; half price for children under age fifteen) they charged in an effort to attract more fans from a city not yet totally familiar with pro football.

Early NFL teams usually lost money and the league itself was unstable, making for many franchise changes from year to year. Not until 1936 did the league field the exact same teams in consecutive seasons. Most outfits fared poorly for a variety of reasons, low

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attendance being only one of the more obvious ones. Owners often mismanaged their clubs, overpaying players in an effort to secure championship teams. Many times clubs were poorly promoted, resulting in little local recognition of the team or the league. A final and significant factor was the general portrayal of professional football by the press and college administrators. Professionalism violated an amateur ethic adhered to by the universities and various athletic clubs and valued by observers of the game. While the same standard was not applied to baseball, a sport that had long been professionalized, an anti-professional bias hindered the development of pro football.

Evansville's Crimson Giants were no doubt hurt by the public skepticism regarding professional football. The press, though, did not oppose the team. Indeed, the newspapers often attempted to spur interest in the club. But the city's sports fans were baseball advocates who did not warm to football quickly. Franklin Fausch's efforts to promote the team started off well by tying the team to the efforts to build a veterans' memorial in 1921. But advertising was a rarity, particularly late in the season. The Giants' manager instead tried to talk to reporters almost daily, thus ensuring a regular flow of at least small articles on the Giants.

The Crimson Giants fared well on the field--winning five of their first seven games. The team, however, lost a great deal of money when it suffered through a series of scheduling mishaps in the second half of November. In fact, of the eleven games originally scheduled, only five were actually played. Replacement games were hastily arranged. Furthermore, only half of the ten games ultimately played by the Giants were against league opponents.

In early November, Fausch altered the Crimson Giants' slate. Originally set to play the Dayton Flyers in Evansville, the team instead travelled to Green Bay, Wisconsin, to face the APFA's Packers. Although Fausch intended to play every game in Evansville, he chose at this point to receive a guaranteed sum from the Packers' organization rather than risk losing more money in Evansville, where attendance had been disappointing. With several players unable to leave Evansville for the weekend, Fausch found replacements, but the revamped Crimson Giants were embarrassed in Green Bay, 43-6.

Despite the thrashing, Fausch made further plans for an extended road trip. After a home victory against the Kentucky All-Stars, Fausch arranged for a "two-week tour of the east." The first game of the road trip, against the Morris Packers of Chicago, was cancelled, however, because of heavy snow in the Windy City.

Meanwhile, in college football, tiny Centre College of Danville, Kentucky, defeated perennial powerhouse Harvard, 6-0, in what was a major upset. Perhaps indicating his financial difficulties, Fausch announced the possibility of signing Centre's All-American quarterback, Bo McMillin, to a Giants' contract. McMillan would not play with Evansville, of course, and Fausch's actions were reminiscent of the Ex-Collegians' proposed game with the Canton Bulldogs in 1920.

Centre's victory over Harvard inadvertently caused difficulties for the Crimson Giants. With the eastern swing an apparent washout, Fausch and the Giants returned to Evansville with no opponent scheduled for Sunday, November 20. The Petersburg (Indiana) Ramblers, a light-weight semi-professional club, then challenged the Giants by claiming that "It only takes eleven men to make a football team. Centre showed," they went on, "what a little place can do to a big one. . . . If our challenge is not accepted we will claim the championship of Southern Indiana anyway."

Under normal circumstances, Fausch no doubt would have ignored what was basically a nuisance as the Ramblers were obviously no match for the Crimson Giants. Yet Fausch, with nothing else scheduled for Sunday, agreed to the challenge. Three days before the "grudge match," however, the Ramblers had second and perhaps more rational thoughts and backed out. Fausch quickly scrambled to add the Cincinnati Celts to the Giants' slate. When rain consistently fell in Evansville for the next two days, Fausch himself made a last-minute cancellation. Rather than play before another small crowd and lose more money, he decided not to play at all.

Fausch's scheduling woes persisted. Thanksgiving Day fell on the following Thursday. The autumn holiday was traditionally the big money-maker for both college and professional teams. But Fausch, once again, had no opponent. On Thanksgiving morning the *Evansville Courier* announced that the Louisville Athletics--a non-league team--had been scheduled. An important drawing card was to be the preliminary match between Central High School and Reitz High School. Fausch learned Thursday morning that, because of rain, the high school game would be postponed. He, in turn, quickly cancelled the Giants' game with Louisville. As it turned out, though, the weather cleared up and Central and Reitz did play. It was too late, however, for Fausch to arrange another contest. Thus, the Crimson Giants had now cancelled their last three games, one of which was to be played on the biggest football day of the year. In the meantime, the players received no money, and Fausch had to pay rent for an unused Bosse Field.

Fausch made sure the next game would be played. The Cincinnati Celts were re-scheduled and the Giants' player/manager informed the press that the game would be played "rain or shine." Then he maintained that three more games--two against league opponents--would be played in Evansville.

Despite the fact that heavy rains made Bosse Field "look almost like a lake," and that a portion of the Cincinnati squad was unable to make the trip to Evansville because of flooding north of Louisville, the game was indeed played, with the Giants gaining their sixth win of the year, 48-0. But a small crowd made the game another financial loser.

By this time, the disgruntled Giants' players took matters into their own hands. Fausch was forced to surrender management of the squad to a "Committee of Five" led by former Ex-Collegians Menzies Lindsey and Clarence Spiegel. The Committee quickly arranged a game with the Indianapolis Independents, which brought victory to the Crimson Giants but monetary losses to the new managers. The contest also brought to an end the playing career of one of the Giants' top players. Herb Henderson, an Ohio State graduate, suffered a severe knee injury when, as he later recalled, "a bunch of big bruisers ganged up on [him] . . . on purpose." A scoreless tie against Paducah (Kentucky) two weeks later ended the 1921 season for the Crimson Giants with their future hanging in doubt.

The "Committee of Five" did not, by any means, reverse the Giants' financial fortunes. The Committee lost money in its only contests and was unable to reimburse the Indianapolis Independents until December 1922. Frank Fausch and his American Football Association corporation, though, lost much more money--probably more than ten thousand dollars over the course of the season--despite playing a total of nine games at home and only one on the road.

Expenses for the Crimson Giants included rent for Bosse Field; some advertising; bands which played during halftime at each home game; referees', groundskeepers', and ticketsellers' fees; players' salaries; and the visiting teams' guarantees. With attendance for home games probably averaging fewer than one thousand, and tickets priced at approximately one dollar apiece, the thousand dollars or less the Giants brought in each game was simply not enough. The Giants usually had about fifteen men in uniform for each contest. At fifty dollars per man (and \$100 for Henderson), salaries came to \$800. The visitor's guarantee was approximately \$1,500. Officials' fees totaled somewhere around \$150. Miscellaneous expenses probably stood at about \$50. The rent for the field was an unspecified figure. Confronted with similar expenses, the 1922 Green Bay Packers estimated that \$3,600 was needed just to break even in a given contest. Thus the 1921 Crimson Giants conceivably lost about \$2,000 in each of their nine home games. And this estimation does not include the cost of uniforms and laundering them or the fact that the first game's proceeds went to charity.

But Fausch refused to give up and instead engaged in a battle with his former teammates for the hearts and dollars of Evansville's relatively few football fans. In July 1922 Fausch asserted publicly that it was he who held the franchise rights in the American Professional Football Association, and thus owned the Crimson Giants. Acknowledging

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that fan support was poor the previous season, he suggested his team might play all its games away from Evansville.

Finances were not Fausch's only problem--he also no longer had any players. In August several former Giants announced they would play for the local Knights of Columbus squad. One day later, Menzies Lindsey re-formed the Ex- Collegians and made Herb Henderson the coach. Within a couple of days, Lindsey's club secured the financial backing of the Evansville Baseball Fans' Association, headed by William Asplan. Johnny Nee, manager of the baseball Evas, assumed the role of business manager. Asplan maintained that his group would not yet seek an APFA franchise, instead preferring to see if local fans would respond favorably to the club, which he said would be composed of former Crimson Giants' players.

Two days after the defection of the bulk of his team, Fausch attended the APFA's meeting in Columbus, Ohio, and posted a newly required \$1,000 bond, thus securing his claim to the franchise. At that gathering, upon the suggestion of the Chicago Bears' George Halas, the league changed its name to the National Football League. In Evansville, the Crimson Giants' membership meant that no other local squad could play league teams. Thus the Fans' Association team would be forced to play second-rate opponents, as the NFL included most of the top-flight clubs in the East and Midwest.

Ten days later, the Fans' Association squad announced it had signed more former "important cogs in the Crimson Giants machine," including Clarence Spiegel, Jerry Zeller, and Alleck Fishman. More significantly, the newly created club had secured an exclusive lease to Bosse Field for the entire football season. Thus the NFL's Crimson Giants, like the Ex-Collegians of the previous year, had no home park.

Later in September, the Fans' Association team released its 1922 schedule, which included seven minor opponents. Johnny Nee, however, was attempting to negotiate with several NFL clubs, including the Hammond Pros, the Dayton Triangles, and the Louisville Brecks. Shortly thereafter, Nee dropped the clumsy moniker of "Fans' Association team," and instead named his squad the Evansville "Professionals."

Franklin Fausch, however, was not about to let his Crimson Giants wither away. In the *Courier*, Fausch remarked that, "It would appear that football fans in Evansville have been laboring under a false impression, having been led to believe that the team being managed by Johnny Nee is scheduling games with teams which are members of [the NFL]." He then publicized a letter he had received from NFL President Joe Carr, who reaffirmed what had already been known: Johnny Nee's Evansville Pros were not members of the NFL and league clubs would only be allowed to play Fausch's Crimson Giants.

Fortunately for Fausch, the NFL schedule announced at the end of September called for the Crimson Giants to play their first three games away from home. The Giants' only hope for financial success in 1922 rested on the renegade Pros folding before the end of October.

That was exactly what happened. The black-and-white- clad Pros, despite extensive promotion for their opener against Princeton (Kentucky), drew poorly and could manage only a scoreless tie with the small-town team. The following week a 28-0 shellacking at the hands of the Moline (Illinois) Indians finished the Pros. The club had not drawn sufficient numbers to make the venture a financial success, and the ineptitude of the team made it unlikely that it would win new supporters. Consequently, on October 18, the Fans' Association disbanded the Evansville Professionals. The players vowed to form a new club that would play exclusively on the road, but no such team ever emerged.

The failure of the Pros gave Fausch and his new backers, local banker Thomas J. Morton and realtor Eli G. Huber, the opportunity for which they had been hoping. Bosse Field would now be left unused for the next two months, giving the Giants a chance to work out an agreement with Johnny Nee (who held the lease) and the Evansville Board of Education (which owned the field). The Giants' negotiations with Nee quickly broke

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down, however, as Fausch, Morton, and Huber refused to accept the same terms to which Nee and the Fans' Association had agreed. Perhaps animosity between the two groups made such an agreement impossible. In any case, the Giants announced they would cancel the remaining home contests and play only the road games on their schedule. Ultimately the team played just three games in 1922, losing each one.

Fausch talked briefly about re-organizing a new club for the following year, but ultimately made no such effort. Evansville's days in the National Football League had thus come to an end.

The Ex-Collegians, Crimson Giants, and Pros gave Evansville residents a taste of professional football and its attendant problems for three seasons. The loose structure of the American Professional Football Association (and National Football League), scheduling misadventures, and management problems made survival for the Evansville Crimson Giants unlikely. The team conceivably could have endured, however, had the local sporting enthusiasts responded more favorably. Professional football in the early 1920s, though, had not aroused the interest necessary to make the sport viable in Evansville. Thus, big-time pro football disappeared from the city after 1922. Several of the Evansville Pros' top players announced their retirements from the game after the season's final game. Those local players who continued to play, did so on either the Knights of Columbus squad or a new semi-pro organization known as the Evansville Comets. Several of the Crimson Giants went on to play professional football for other NFL teams. Evansville College, however, began its football program in 1923, thus providing weekly collegiate games for local fans to enjoy and obviating further efforts to sell professional football to the city of Evansville.