THE FIRST NFL GAME(S)

By Bob Braunwart & Bob Carroll

We'd like to tell you about the first game ever played in the National Football League. Unfortunately, such an account has several built-in difficulties, not the least of which is deciding just what game really was the first.

Let's review the bidding. Fourteen teams are listed as belonging to the American Professional Football Association in 1920, and the NFL regards the APFA as its direct ancestor. While some purists might prefer to honor a game from the 1922 season when the league actually adopted the name "National Football League," most historians would accept the initial contest played between two APFA members in 1920 as the first. But it is on this point that we begin to have problems.

Although some APFA teams got into action as early as September of that year, the first meetings between teams listed as APFA members occurred on October 3. On that date, the Dayton Triangles defeated the Columbus Panhandles, 14-0, at Dayton, and the Rock Island Independents slaughtered the Muncie Flyers, 45-0, at Rock Island.

It is interesting to note that several histories of pro football, including the short summary contained in the NFL's Record Manual, insist that Muncie did not place a team on the field in 1920. [Ed: The NFL Record Manual has been revised since this article was written.] On the other hand, considering their poor performance at Rock Island, perhaps it would be stretching a point to call the Flyers a "team".

But back to the question of which game to count as the NFL's first -- the one at Dayton or the one at Rock Island. A glance at a map of the midwest will show that Dayton is in the Eastern Time Zone and Rock Island is in the Central. We might then guess that the Dayton game began an hour earlier -- making it the first.

And we might be right.

But, we might also be wrong.

Kickoff times were far from standardized in 1920, and, as yet, no researcher has come forward with the exact kickoff time for either game. And, we don't even want to think about Daylight Saving Time! It's possible that the Independents and Flyers actually began earlier by the clock than the Triangles and the Panhandles.

As if that wasn't enough, we have an additional problem with the Columbus Panhandles. We cannot be 100% certain that they really belonged in the APFA. No Columbus representative was present at either the August 20 or the September 17, 1920, meetings at which the APFA was organized. It has always been assumed that Columbus joined the league later in the season (but, by October 3?), but all we really know is that Joe Carr, the Columbus manager, showed up at the league's reorganizational meeting in 1921 and got himself elected league president.

Therefore, the safest thing we can say at this time is that the first NFL game was played by EITHER Dayton and Columbus OR by Rock Island and Muncie.

Let's take a look at both games.

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Sunday, October 3, 1920, at Dayton, O. (Triangle Park)

DAYTON 14		COLUMBUS 0
Dutch Thiele	E	Homer Ruh
Lee Fenner	E	Jim Flower
Harry Cutler	T	Oscar Kuehner

Ed "Tubby" Sauer	T	Joe Mulbarger
Guy Early	G	Phil Nesser
Charlie Winston	G	Oscar Wolford
George Kinderdine	C	Will Waite
Al Mahrt	Q	Hal Gaulke
Frank Bacon	H	Lee Snoots
Norb Sacksteder	H	John Schneider
Lou Partlow	F	Frank Nesser

Substitutes

DAYTON: Dave Reese - E, Glenn Tidd - G, Bill Clark - G, Dick Abrell - Q, George Roudebush - H, "Pesky" Lentz - H

COLUMBUS: Ted Nesser - T, Charlie Essman - G, Wilkie Moody - H

Dayton Triangles	0	0	7	7	- 14
Columbus Panhandles.	0	0	0	0	- 0

Scoring

DAY: TD - Partlow (run); PAT - Kinderdine
DAY: TD - Bacon (punt return); PAT-Kinderdine

The Dayton Triangles opened their 1920 season at the expense of the Columbus Panhandles. The game was hard fought and closely contested, and it was only in the second half that the Triangles were able to show their superiority.

Although the first half was scoreless, it was not without thrills. In the second quarter, Columbus gained a first down on the Dayton three yard line. Four downs later, with the home crowd cheering furiously, it was the Triangles' ball. The half ended with the Tris knocking on the Columbus goal, after a 30- yard pass from Al Mahrt to Dutch Thiele had brought them to the five.
Early in the third period, the Triangles gained possession of the ball on their own 35-yard line. Four line smashes carried them to midfield. Then Lou Partlow broke loose and raced to the Panhandle ten-yard line. Frank Bacon gained three, and then Partlow took the ball across. George Kinderdine added the extra point.

About the middle of the last quarter, big Frank Nesser of the 'Handles boomed a punt far downfield. Bacon fielded it on his own 40. He dodged and squirmed his way through the entire Columbus team to place the ball across the goal line -- a 60 year return. Again, Kinderdine kicked the extra point.

[Source: Dayton *Journal Herald*, Oct. 4, 1920]

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Sunday, October 3, 1920, at Rock Island, Ill. (Douglas Park)

ROCK ISLAND 45		**MUNCIE 0**
Oke Smith	E	Jess Reno
Bobby Marshall	E	Chuck Helvie
Ed Shaw	T	Bill Berns
Walt Buland	T	Doc Davis
Dewey Lyle	G	Ernie Hole
Pudge Wyland	G	Russ Hathaway
Freeman Fitzgerald	C	Floyd
Rube Ursella	Q	Coonie Checkaye
Fred Chicken	H	Mickey Hole
Arnie Wyman	H	Arch Erehart
Jerry Mansfield	F	Ken Huffine

Substitutions

ROCK ISLAND: Frank Gardner - E, "Polly" Koch - G, Charlie Mockmore-G, "Waddy" Kuehl - Q, Sid Nichols - H, "Paddy" Quinn- H, Eddie Novak- F
MUNCIE: Pope - E, Joe Smith - G, "Kip" Baldwin - H

R. I. Independents	21	10	7	7	- 45
Muncie Flyers	0	0	0	0	- 0

Scoring

R.I.: TD - Wyman (blocked punt return), PAT- Ursella
R.I.: TD - Wyman (blocked punt recovery), PAT - Ursella
R.I.: TD - Ursella (run), PAT - Ursella
R.I.: TD - Wyman (kickoff return), PAT - Ursella
R.I.: TD - Nichols (run), PAT - Marshall
R.I.: TD - Kuehl (run), PAT - Marshall

As 3,100 fans looked on, the Rock Island Independents swamped the Muncie Flyers by a lopsided 45-0 score. Arnie Wyman, former Minnesota great, made a glittering debut for the Islanders, scoring three touchdowns.

The Independents put the game out of reach early, using blocked punts to score three touchdowns in the first quarter. Ed Shaw blocked Ken Huffine's first attempt and Wyman scooped it up to run 35 yards for the score. Then, after Huffine got off a successful punt, the Islanders drove to the Muncie two-yard line, only to fumble.

But, when Huffine went into the end zone for yet another punt attempt, Walt Buland broke through to block, and Wyman scored again by falling on the ball in the end zone.

As soon as Huffine was called upon to punt again, Shaw and Oke Smith blocked another one. This time Dewey Lyle recovered but stepped out of bounds on the 15-yard line. A few moments later, Rube Ursella blasted across.

With the game well in hand, Ursella, who had booted the first three extra points, added a 25-yard second quarterfield goal. Then came the game's most spectacular play. Wyman took a kickoff on his own 14 and went all the way to score the fourth touchdown of the half. Again, Ursella kicked the PAT.

The Islanders used their bench throughout the second half, but they still managed to add two more TDs to their total. All told, Rock Island racked up 215 rushing yard, plus ten more on a single completed pass. Meanwhile, the Flyers could pick up only 33 yards on the ground and 13 passing. The Flyers got only two first downs for the entire game, and one of those came when Rock Island was caught off-sides.

[Source: Rock Island *Argus*, Oct. 4, 1920]

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With the above as a shaky starting point, we may proceed with a list of "firsts" that took place in one game or the other on October 3, 1920.

First TD: Lou Partlow, Dayton, or Arnie Wyman, R.I.
First TD Rushing: Partlow, Day., or Rube Ursella, R.I.
First TD on Punt Return: Frank Bacon, Day.
First TD on Blocked Punt: Wyman, R.I.
First TD on Kickoff: Wyman, R.I.
First PAT: George Kinderdine, Day., or Ursella, R.I.
First Field Goal: Ursella, R.I.
First Player to Score More Than One TD in a Game:
     Wyman, R.I.
First Black Player in League: Bobby Marshall, R.I.

Fritz Pollard is often listed as the league's first black player, but Akron played Wheeling, W.Va., on October 3 in a game that cannot be counted as between two league members. The following week, on October 10, Akron played Columbus at Akron's League Park in a game that had a couple of firsts. Bob Nash became the first player to score a touchdown on a fumble recovery, and, when the Panhandles misplayed a center snap in the fourth quarter, Akron scored the league's first safety.

On the same date out in Rock Island, Arnie Wyman got into the act again by throwing the league's first touchdown pass, a 35-yard strike to Waddy Kuehl against Hammond.

The first interception to be returned all the way for a touchdown did not occur until two weeks after that (October 24) in Detroit. Once more Columbus found itself on the wrong end of a "first." Frank Nesser of the Panhandles misdirected one of his passes and a Detroit Herald end named Fitzgerald snagged it and raced 85 yards to a touchdown. The rest of the game was scoreless, so the interception turned out to be the decider in a 6-0 Detroit win.

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