

AKRON PROS 1920

By Bob Carroll

It's time for a belated cheer for the 1920 Akron Pros. They won the first NFL title--officially and against the odds. Yet, they go largely unrecognized. The NFL record manual knows only that several teams claimed the title. A rooster may claim to be a race horse but bet on the one with four feet. Akron not only had the best record in 1920, but apparently unknown to the record manual folks, the Pros were officially awarded the crown.

But that's getting ahead of our story.

When the founders of the NFL got together at Canton in 1920 to form the league (and temporarily call it the American Professional Football Association), they were mostly interested in holding down salaries and keeping players from hopping from one team to another. However, they did find time to accept a loving cup from the Brunswick-Balke Collender Company that was slated to go to the APFA's top team at the end of the season.

We know this because the minutes for the September 17 meeting were kept on the stationary of the Akron Pros football team by one of the owners, young Art Ranney, an Akron businessman and former Akron U. player. For his efforts, Ranney was elected secretary-treasurer of the new association.

Akron had been fielding pro teams since 1904, producing Ohio champions in 1913 and 1914. But the last half-dozen years had seen a dip in the fortunes of the Indians (the usual Akron nickname). The 1919 edition had finished 5-5-0 and lost money despite the presence of one of the country's best breakaway runners in black star Fritz Pollard.

New owners Ranney and cigar store proprietor Frank Nied dropped the Indian monicker and went with "Pros," hoping to inspire better results, or at least better attendance.

Some of the best 1919 players -- including Pollard -- planned to return, and there were a few new players. Still, on paper, the Pros looked less formidable than the association's "class" teams. The "class" teams included Jim Thorpe's famous Canton Bulldogs and the tough Cleveland Tigers, reinforced by a healthy dose of stars from the defunct Massillon Tigers. Out in Decatur, George Halas was putting together a powerhouse, too.

Nonetheless, when Akron opened at local League Park in early October by crushing the Wheeling Stogies, 43-0, observers were impressed by the margin of victory. Veteran Al Nesser, one of the famous football-playing Nesser brothers, reportedly scored three touchdowns on fumble recoveries. The Nesses were from Columbus, but Al had been an Akron resident since 1917 and lined up at end for the Pros although he was an even better guard. He already had a dozen pro years behind him and would play until 1931.

The next week Al's brothers came to town with the Columbus Panhandles, but the Pros continued to impress with a 37-0 victory. The game saw a new star unveiled in the Akron backfield. Frank McCormick, a South Dakotan had hitherto been a long shot as a line sub, but Coach Elgie Tobin tried him out at wingback and the results were excellent.

For their third outing, the Pros entertained the Cincinnati Celts. They proved terrible hosts as they held the visitors to no first downs in a 13-0 win. One of three rookie starters for the Pros, fullback Rip King led the attack. He was a slashing runner and good defender, but his main value was that he gave the otherwise ground-bound Pros a passing attack. Fellow Mountaineers Russ Bailey and Harry Harris were doing all right too. Bailey was a sensation at center, and quarterback Harris ran the team smoothly and returned punts like a wizard.

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The fourth game out was a real challenge. The highly rated Cleveland Tigers arrived sporting a passel of ex-Massillon stars. Akron won, ironically on a brilliant play by the Pros' Bob "Nasty" Nash who'd also played for Massillon the Year before. In the first period Nash broke through just as Cleveland's Stan Cofall was punting. Nimbly, he took the ball out of Cofall's extended hands and scurried into the end zone eight yards away. The pros made that lone touchdown stand up for a 7-0 victory.

Nash was a tough customer, equally adept at tackle or end. He'd been earning his nickname as a pro in Ohio since 1916. Along with vets Al Nesser and Charley Copley, Nash gave the undersized Akron line a determined backbone of experience.

With four straight victories under their belts, the Pros were attracting some respect when they headed for Canton to get their expected comeuppance on the last day in October. Jim Thorpe's Bulldogs were the cre`me de la cre`me of pro football, but --shockingly -- the Pros won 10-0! Canton fans had plenty of excuses, of course. After Charley Copley booted a 38-yard field goal to give the Pros a narrow lead, they added a touchdown on a fluke play when he tipped a Canton pass into the hands of the other Akron tackle, "Pike" Johnson, who ran 55 yards to score. There may have been a heavy dose of luck in the touchdown, but the most die-hard Canton backer had trouble explaining why a team with Thorpe, Joe Guyon, and Pete Calac in the backfield and a pair of tackles in Pete Henry and Cub Buck who outweighed their Akron opposites by two motorcycles and a sidecar could be held scoreless.

Copley was the holler guy of the Akron line. At 190 pounds, he was small for a tackle even in those days, and, at 31, he was considerably older than most of his teammates. They'd made him captain although rumor had it that Al Nesser could not be numbered among his admirers. Pike Johnson, the other tackle, weighed five pounds less than Copley and was quieter but faster. The guards, Alf Cobb and Brad Tomlin, were only slightly bigger than the tackles. But, together with Bailey, Nash and Nesser, the group had held five opponents to zero points.

The victory over Canton made Ohio sit-up take notice. Akron fans actually began to consider the possibility of a championship team, but they had to wait to see their heroes in action when a scheduled meeting with the Detroit Heralds was rained out. On November 14, the Pros went to Cleveland to meet a reorganized Cleveland Tiger team. Tuffy Conn, an e`migre` from Oregon, caught a long pass for Cleveland to score the first points of the season against Akron, but the Pros stayed undefeated with a 7-7 tie.

Several APFA teams had yet to taste defeat, including Akron's next foe--the Dayton Triangles. On the Sunday before Thanksgiving, the Tri's and the Pros battled for three scoreless quarters at Akron in a bang-up game. Then Rip King shot a pass to McCormick for a touchdown. Pollard followed with a twisting end run for a second TD, and the Pros had a 13-0 win.

For Thanksgiving, Canton arrived still smarting from their earlier "fluke defeat." In the opening quarter, Tex Grigg, the usually reliable Canton safety fumbled a punt to give Akron the ball at the 32. Two quick King passes brought a touchdown. Then the defense took over to preserve a 7-0 win. Canton was out of excuses.

When the Pros stopped the Triangles again at Dayton three days later, they were recognized as the top team in Ohio. In past years that would have been equivalent to the U.S. championship, but the new APFA had widened the battlefield. Buffalo felt itself of championship caliber, despite a narrow loss in mud to Canton. Out west, Halas' Decatur Staleys had only a one-point loss to Paddy Driscoll's Chicago Cardinals to mar their record.

In their haste to get the APFA started, the founders hadn't decided how to determine their champion. Even Canton still had eyes for that loving cup. Games against non-APFA teams were counted to beef-up records, and none of the team managers were shy in proclaiming their minions' virtues.

Although there was nothing official about it, a tournament of sorts was set up. On Saturday, December 4, Buffalo took a revenge win over the Canton Bulldogs at New York's Polo Grounds, Sunday football still being illegal in the Big Apple. At Chicago, the Staleys defeated the Cards on Sunday to make up for their

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earlier loss. Meanwhile, back in Buffalo, Akron faced the locals, the winner to go to Chicago the next week to face the Staleys.

The fly in all this ointment was that both Buffalo and Decatur needed to win. Akron needed only to avoid losing.

The Buffalo crowd of only 3,000 was disappointing -- held down by intermittent rain. Perhaps that was part of the reason Nied and Ranney agreed to sell "Nasty" Nash to Buffalo for \$300 and five per cent of the gate. Certainly it was a surprising move, as well as the first known player deal between clubs. Since Nasty appeared in neither line-up, he may have already gone home for the winter. Anyway, Scotty Bierce, at a mere 160 pounds took over at end for Akron and did just fine.

The rain, exhaustion from two games in two days, and the undersized Akron line held Buffalo scoreless. The rain and the All-American studded Buffalo line did the same to Pollard and company, but the 0-0 game was a "win" for Akron.

The Pros headed for Chicago still undefeated.

For the big game, Halas had added Paddy Driscoll to his squad. A record crowd of 12,000 showed up at Cub Park. They saw a whale of a game, but the midget Pros were once more up to the challenge. Again, neither team scored, although most newspapers gave Akron an edge in play.

Both Buffalo and the Staleys made newspaper noise about a championship, arguing that Akron had not defeated them. Akron savored its 1.000 percentage, but they were not officially the APFA champs until April 30, 1921. Then the team managers got together at Canton and -- lacking a better method -- voted the title to Akron and gave them that cup.

What happened to the cup after that is a mystery. League minutes never mention it again. Perhaps it's hidden in some Akron attic -- the dusty symbol of the NFL's first championship.

AKRON PROS 1920

Record: 8-0-3 1.000 1st APFA
Coach: Elgie Tobin

DATE	AT	OPPONENT	SC-OP	R
O- 3	H	Wheeling Stogies	43- 0	W
O-10	H	Columbus Panhandles	37- 0	W
O-17	H	Cincinnati Celts	13- 0	W
O-24	H	Cleveland Tigers	7- 0	W
O-31	A	Canton Bulldogs	10- 0	W
N- 7	H	Detroit Heralds	RAIN	
N-14	A	Cleveland Tigers	7- 7	T
N-21	H	Dayton Triangles	13- 0	W
N-25	H	Canton Bulldogs	7- 0	W
N-28	A	Dayton Triangles	14- 0	W
D- 5	A	Buffalo All-Americans	0- 0	T
D-12	A*	Decatur Staleys	0- 0	T

*-Played at Chicago, Illinois.

SCORING	TR	TP	TM	TD	XP	XA	FG	SF	PTS
Pollard	5	1	1	7	0	0	0	0	42
Copley	0	0	0	0	15	17	1	0	18
McCormick	2	1	0	3	0	0	0	0	18
Nash	0	1	2	3	0	0	0	0	18
Nesser	0	0	3	3	0	0	0	0	18
Harris	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	12

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King	1	0	0	1	3	4	0	0	9
Johnson	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	6
Sweetland	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>6</u>
Akron	11	3	7	21	18	21	1	2	145
Opp. Totals	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	7

TD Passes: King 3

Roster (23)	POS	HGT	WGT	AG	YR	SCHOOL	GM
Bailey, Russ	C	5-11	183	23	1	W Virginia	11
Bierce, Bruce "Scotty"	E	5-9	160	23	1	Akron U.	10
Brown, Matt	H				1	Syracuse	1
Cobb, Alf	G	6-0	210	25	1	Syracuse	11
Conn, Geo. "Tuffy" (1)	H				1	Oregon St	3
Copley, Charley	T	5-9	190	31	1	Mo. Mines	11
Crawford, Ken	HF		190	24	1	Miami-Ohio	7
Garrett, Al	GTE				1	Rutgers	7
Harris, Harry	Q		178		1	W Virginia	11
Holleran	Q				1		1
Johnson, Frank "Pike"	T	5-11	185		1	Wash & Lee	10
King, Andy "Rip"	F	6-1	195	23	1	W Virginia	11
McCormick, Frank	HE		184	26	1	South Dakota	11
Miles, Mark	H				1	Wash & Lee	1
Moran, Frank (2)	T	6-4	285	28	1	none	1
Nash, Bob "Nasty" (3)	ET		205	27	1	Rutgers	9
Nesser, Al "Happy"	E	6-0	195	27	1	none	11
Pierotti, Al (4)	C	5-10	195	24	1	Wash & Lee	1
Pollard, Fred "Fritz"	H	5-7	145	25	1	Brown	11
Preston	T				1		1
Sweetland, Fred	H		175		1	Wash & Lee	4
Tobin, Elgie	Q	5-9	160	28	1	Penn State	1
Tomlin, Brad	G	5-10	195		1	Syracuse	11

(1) from Cleveland

(2) from Hammond

(3) sold to Buffalo on or about December 5 for \$300 and a percentage of Akron vs. Buffalo gate; first player deal in league history.

(4) to Cleveland