

THE COLUMBUS METROS: FORCED TO PUNT

By Kevin B. McCray

Columbus, Ohio is best known for Ohio State University's football Buckeyes. The winner of several national collegiate championships and the alma mater to dozens of All-Americans, the Buckeyes' reputation is well deserved.

But Columbus also has had a long football tradition on semi-professional and professional fields. Since 1900 fifteen teams have attempted to share in Columbus' Ohio State-generated enthusiasm for football.

Although preceded by the Barracks, Nationals and Muldoons, the first non-collegiate Columbus team to earn national football recognition was the Panhandles, a team made up of several employees from the Pennsylvania Railroad's Panhandle Division.

Unofficial members during the American Professional Football Association's (A.P.F.A.) first season in 1920, the Panhandles became full A.P.F.A. members in 1921. The A.P.F.A. became the National Football League (N.F.L.) in 1922, and the Panhandles became the Tigers in 1923.

Columbus left the N.F.L. in 1926 after compiling a combined seven-year record of eleven wins, forty-six losses and one tie. Fan support was never strong for the early teams. The 1920 Panhandles played all eight of their games on the road.

Professional football returned to Columbus in 1940 with the Bulls of the third American Football League. After winning league championships in 1940 and 1941, the team collapsed with its league at the outbreak of World War Two.

Following that edition of the American Football League, Columbus has only been able to call semi-professional teams as its own.

During the 1950's Columbus was home to the Columbus and Ohio Colts, the Capitols in the 1960's, and in the 1970's the Bucks, Barons, Wild Bunch, Merchants, Stingers, Winds and Metros.

Of all these organizations, the Columbus Metros Professional Football Club, Inc. perhaps spent the most money and had the best field success, but captured the least fan support in return.

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The Columbus Metros were conceived in the winter of 1977-78 when two different local groups, both organizing their own teams, became aware of each other's efforts.

Daryle Griffin, a brother of Archie and Ray Griffin of Ohio State and Cincinnati Bengals fame, along with John Dobbie, were organizing a team to be known as the Cougars. Griffin and Dobbie had guided the Columbus Winds to the 1977 Ohio Football League championship, but had quickly grown dissatisfied with the low caliber of competition and management of both the team and the league.

Meanwhile, Ed Spiers, a former operator of the Wild Bunch and Merchants, convinced the Ohio Football League's commissioner, Dr. Jay Lehr, an Ohio State geology professor, to leave his Ohio League position to join him in creating what they were later to label the "Twenty-Ninth Best Team in America."

Believing that duplication of effort and the possible existence of three semi-professional teams in Columbus likely would split fan support to inadequate financial levels, Griffin and Dobbie agreed to work with Spiers and Lehr.

On March 14, 1978 the Metros organization held a "kickoff" dinner at the Columbus Athletic Club. Before a gathering of less than seventy-five people, Metros President Lehr explained how to field a team in 1978, with players receiving a minimum of fifty dollars a game, and a maximum of \$200.

Capitalizing on Griffin's and Dobbie's earlier organization and scheduling efforts for their proposed Cougars, the Metros became members of the Midwest Football League on May 9, 1978, joining four

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Michigan teams, the Lansing Capitols, Kalamazoo All-Stars, Grand Rapids Cobras and Hamtramck Indians, in addition to the Caps of Indianapolis, Indiana.

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The Metros opened their first season on the road with a 14-6 win July 8 against a non-league opponent, the Mid-Atlantic Football League's (M.A.F.L.) Youngstown, Ohio Hardhats. Four thousand spectators were present.

The home season opened July 15, against Midwest League member Lansing. A thunderstorm helped limit attendance to a disappointing 1,538. The Metros won easily, 40-0.

Success continued until July 29, when the Kalamazoo All-Stars shut out Columbus, 14-0, before 1,500 persons. This was the All-Stars' largest ever home crowd.

A 51-7 win against Grand Rapids August 5 helped ease the pain of the first loss.

On August 11 Dr. Lehr told a Columbus newspaper reporter that the Metros were "operating on a \$100,000 budget this year. Since this is the first year, we expect to lose \$50,000. People have to get to know us," Lehr said, "and learn that we are for real. The past attempts have been fly-by-night organizations trying to earn a quick buck ... I cannot conceive of our attempt failing," he concluded.

Then, on August 12, Columbus was awarded a win by forfeit when the Hamtramck Indians could not schedule a game field. The Indians' Midwest franchise did not last through the season.

Ill feelings between the Metros and the Ohio Football League's Winds surfaced August 23 when the Metros filed suit in Franklin County Common Pleas Court, accusing Winds' owner Robert Ramsey of distributing promotional posters of three players then under contract to the Metros. Ramsey called the suit "crazy" and "ridiculous," and the Metros eventually failed to pursue the matter.

At the same time, Metros head coach Dennis McDonald resigned so that he could devote more time to his family. Daryle Griffin, who had been serving as assistant general manager, was named interim head coach. Griffin had been the Ohio Football League's 1977 Coach of the Year.

On September 16 Columbus was to host the Lansing Capitols in a Midwest League championship playoff semi-final game. On Wednesday of the week before the Saturday night game, Lansing officials telephoned the Metros to inform them that most of the Capitols would not travel to Columbus, and that in fact, most had quit the team. Uncertain of what to do, especially considering that this would be the Metros' final 1978 game in the \$1,400-a-night, 15,000 seat Franklin County Stadium, and that the game was to be played for a local charity, Metros officials insisted that the Lansing survivors bring whatever players and uniforms that could be gathered.

A Lansing team of less than fifteen players, well below the Midwest League's twenty-five player minimum, walked on the field at 7:35 p.m., five minutes after the scheduled kickoff. Intent on avoiding embarrassment and financial loss because of a game cancellation, four Metros players, several trainers and even several spectators were secretly enlisted for the Lansing roster. When the news media discovered the scam, the Metros' public relations firm reported that while some had dressed in Lansing uniforms, no Metros' players actually participated in the game for Lansing. In fact, however, several did. Columbus defeated the Capitols/Metros, 50-7.

Finally, on September 23, the Metros won the Midwest championship with a 38-6 defeat of Kalamazoo. This ended the league season for Columbus at eight wins and one loss.

In hopes of being named national semi-professional champions by way of a number one ranking in the final selections by the Chicago-based tabloid, Pro Football Weekly, the Metros then played a series of non-league games.

After again defeating Youngstown, 14-6, the Metros tackled the independent Grizzlies of Toronto, Ontario. The Grizzlies were an interesting team for two reasons. The Grizzlies played American-rules football, although the Canadian Football League's (C.F.L.) rules are significantly different from those of

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the American professional game. Also, Joe Gilliam, the one-time Pittsburgh Steelers' quarterback, was now playing for Toronto, although at the time Gilliam was living in Nashville, Tennessee.

Recognizing that Gilliam could be a potential box office attraction, the Metros wired Gilliam \$350 for his travel expenses.

Gilliam was at the game, although he did not arrive until just forty-eight seconds remained and Columbus had won, 48-21.

To help keep the financially strapped team going, Dr. Lehr purchased an additional \$100,000 of Metros stock on October 4.

Despite a final-seconds, 17-14 victory against Pro Football Weekly's then number one ranked Delavan, Wisconsin Red Devils of the Northern States Football League (N.S.F.L.), the Metros closed their inaugural campaign with a twelve and one record, but only a number two national ranking.

Quarterback Bob Kramer, a former Indiana University player, was the Metros' 1978 Most Valuable Player. He had completed 115 of 233 passing attempts for 1,937 yards and 18 touchdowns. On the receiving end of most of Kramer's tosses was former Ohio State All-American quarterback Cornelius Green, who caught 46 passes for 922 yards and 7 touchdowns as a Metros wide receiver. Green was named to Pro Football Weekly's all-star team, while Kramer signed a contract with the C.F.L.'s Toronto Argonauts. Tight end Steve Bell signed with the Green Bay Packers of the N.F.L. Neither player made his major-league club's roster.

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Hal Dyer, a former major college, C.F.L. and Metros assistant coach, was named to the head coach's position prior to the start of the 1979 season.

With the off-season collapse of the Midwest League, the Metros were sought by the Mid-Atlantic Football League. The Mid-Atlantic featured the Cleveland Academes and Youngstown Hardhats in Ohio, the Pittsburgh Colts in Pennsylvania, and the Toronto Grizzlies in Ontario.

After a season-opening thirteen to nothing victory in Pittsburgh, the Metros played their first home game in a thunderstorm for the second year in a row, defeating Youngstown seventeen to nothing July 28.

Columbus began the 1979 season in a precarious financial status, placing hope for economic renewal on the home opener. Club officials calculated that home game attendance needed to be 3,700 persons for the team to break even. After the severe weather limited attendance to only 1,478, the club was forced to stop all player and field personnel payroll after the Youngstown game. The players voted to continue the season.

Columbus easily won the Mid-Atlantic title with a seven and one record, including a September 22 humiliation of the Cleveland Academes, ninety-two to nothing.

One bright spot in an otherwise dreary off-the-field season was N.B.C. reporter Dick Schaap's national television report on the Metros.

Again in conquest of the elusive number one Pro Football Weekly rating, the Metros closed out 1979 with another series of non-league games. After surviving the last-minute franchise collapse of scheduled opponents Kalamazoo and Indianapolis (1979 N.S.F.L. members), the Metros were again able to defeat Delavan in the final seconds, 17-15, in the first Arthur S. Arkush Memorial Bowl. The Arkush Bowl, named in honor of the late publisher of Pro Football Weekly, was then followed by a 21-14 Columbus victory against the then first ranked Chambersburg, Pennsylvania Cardinals of the Interstate League. But for the second season, Columbus would finish ranked second nationally, although with an eleven and two record this year.

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Staggering financially, the Metros organization pinned its hope of survival in 1980 on what has been called the most unique sports even yet conceived and carried out.

With most of the original organizers now gone, the Metros entered into an off-season agreement with a Columbus cable television system, Warner-AmEx QUBE, to play a televised game for \$2,500 and a \$2,500 winner-take-all purse against the Racine, Wisconsin Gladiators of the N.S.F.L. in Columbus, July 12.

The unique element would be that QUBE's home viewers, using the cable system's interactive television push-button consoles, would direct the Metros' offense and defense against the Racine coaching staff. The home viewers, given several options designed in respect to field position and game situation, would push their play selection, with the plurality's choice then being relayed to the players on the field.

"Your Call Football" turned to disaster as a severe thunderstorm washed away Franklin County Stadium's synthetic surface's markings and much of the stadium crowd. It marked the third time in three years that the Metros began their home season in a cloudburst.

After a long delay, play began with the Metros scoring first on a first quarter end around by Cornelius Green. However, the Metros' armchair coaches were not able to continue their early success and Racine dominated the rest of the game, winning ten to seven.

With Lehr's interest and \$175,000 of his own money now gone, several Metros' players and some coaches attempted to continue operating the team for two games before finally giving up and jumping to the other Columbus semi-professional team, the Winds of the Ohio Football League.

The Winds managed to reach the playoffs of the newly created Minor Professional Football Association, only to be eliminated by the Delavan Red Devils by a score of 28 to 0.

Remnants of the Metros organization spent the remainder of 1980 attempting to meet the club's financial obligations and in remembering the good moments in the team's short-lived history.

They knew, however, that the Columbus Metros had been forced to punt.