

OLLIE'S ALL-STARS

By Bob Carroll

Ollie Kraehe thought he had it made.

Only one year earlier as a low-paid substitute guard for Rock Island's 1922 Independents, he'd had plenty of time to sit on the bench and count the house at little Douglas Park. A couple of thousand Islander fans usually showed up at a dollar a head. They'd never get rich in Rock Island. But if a burg like that could break even on this professional football thing, what riches might await a smart fellow with a team in a really big town like, say, St. Louis?

St. Louis came readily to his mind. Ollie was a local boy who'd done his undergrad footballing in the maroon and myrtle of Washington University. He'd been a teammate of local hero Jimmy Conzelman and captained the team in 1921. Now, only two years later, he was triumphantly returning home, clutching a National Football League franchise signed by league prexy Joe Carr. As soon as a few more details were worked out, the money could begin rolling in.

Detail number one was finding some players. Ollie had bravely christened his club the "All-Stars," but, when he started looking, he found that stars were few and far between. From the local schools -- St. Louis U. and Washington U. -- the state schools, and a few eastern colleges, he got bodies, but most of them were not very well known outside their immediate families. Years later, Ollie insisted, "There were some players who didn't want their parents to know they were in the game and some of them used fictitious names." That may have been so (although the league had a rule against it), but few fans figured to storm the gates to catch a glimpse of a.k.a. John Doe.

"Also," he admitted, "there were some who pretended to be All-Americans from the East just to get a chance to play."

It wasn't all chaff. Nebraska tackle "Bub" Weller was the genuine article, and a couple of other lineman could do the job. Ollie's one legitimate "name" player, Dick King, really had been an All-America at Harvard. But that was back in 1915, and King had left his best pro years on the fields of Indiana before World War I.

Undaunted, Ollie approached detail number two -- where to play his All-not-necessarily-Stars. He went first class. The St. Louis Browns (that's right, the Browns!) owned Sportsman's Park, and Ollie was able to work out an agreement whereby the baseball team would receive 20 percent of the gross, unless that amounted to less than \$10,000, in which case they'd settle for 15 percent.

There were two other stipulations. Ollie's team could practice on the outfield grass from October 10 to December 2 "if it does not interfere with the St. Louis University team's practice." That told him where he ranked in the pecking order. The second stipulation stated that all signals were off if there was a World Series game played in St. Louis. As neither the Browns nor their tenants the Cardinals had ever found their way into a World Series, the second stipulation didn't worry Ollie much.

Now if he could just keep from aggravating the college team

On September 30, while most of the NFL started its regular season, Ollie took his team to Murphysboro, Ill., for an out-of-town tryout. Sure enough, his players were all stars as they humbled the mighty Murphys 25-0. On to bigger fish!

The Green Bay Packers -- St. Louis writers were careful to explain that Green Bay was in Wisconsin -- were the first league team slated by Kraehe. Still on the out-of-town tour, the All-Stars journeyed to the Bay on October 7. The Green Bay Press-Gazette, as did most other newspapers around the league, called Ollie's team the "Browns." That didn't seem to impress Packer backers and only 2,831 of them showed up at Bellevue Park.

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As owner, manager, promoter, and coach of the All-Stars, Ollie wore enough hats to fill a small checkroom, but he found time to pencil his name in at starting guard. And, he did his share as his team showed the Packers a good defense.

The game followed the same pattern all the way through. Time and again the Pack drove deep into St. Louis territory, only to be foiled by Kraehe and company or their own miscues. Three times their usually reliable kickers failed on field goal tries. Meanwhile, Kraehe's Stars had almost no offense, but the excellent punting of halfback Al Casey took them out of trouble several times. The final score of 0-0 was deserved on both sides.

The Hammond Pros were a team much like Ollie's All-Stars -- big and slow, tough on defense, and nothing on offense. On October 14, Ollie had the Pros to Sportsman's Park for his home opener. The mayor and some of his friends attended, but that was about it. Kraehe lost better than \$2,000 as 719 souls rattled around in the big park. Thrills were rare. A drizzling rain kept both teams sloshing and sliding all game. The final was another scoreless tie.

Ollie blamed the low attendance on the miserable weather and the fact that most sports fans were concentrating on the World Series being played in New York. On the other hand, St. Louis folk may have been reluctant to shell out \$1.65 for reserved seats or even \$1.10 for general admission to watch a team that had not yet shown it could score a touchdown in the NFL. Ollie said he could have called the game off at kickoff time when the rain was falling steadily, but he didn't want to disappoint those hardy souls who had come out. The All-Stars finished out October with two road games, both 6-0 losses. The games were carbon copies. First at Cleveland and then at Milwaukee, the All-Stars held things scoreless through the first half and then yielded winning points to pass attacks in the late stages. In neither game did Ollie's team show any inclination to score themselves. Most of the damage at Milwaukee was caused by Ollie's old teammate Jimmy Conzelman, who passed the Badgers down the field and then smashed over the touchdown himself.

After the Cleveland game, Ollie released end Dolly Gray to Green Bay for a sum of much-needed cash. Dolly Gray had been an All-American at Princeton the year before, so Kraehe on the surface appeared to be giving up one of his best players. In truth, however, Gray had not played like an All-American. As a matter of fact, there was more to the story, but Green Bay would not learn that until later in the season.

Winless in four games -- pointless in four games -- Ollie's All-Stars returned to St. Louis for a scheduled string of home games, the first being a visit by the Green Bay (as in Wisconsin) Packers.

It was *deja vu*. The weather was rainy and cold -- "pneumonia weather" -- and once more a near-empty house, 750 this time. The All-Stars showed their usual inability to move the ball, but the Packers weren't much better. The Packers' large tackle Howard "Cub" Buck punted an incredible 19 times (the "official" NFL record is 14) for a 36-yard average. The combination of St. Louis mud and St. Louis defense might have held off the Pack indefinitely had not Ollie's team fumbled at its own 16 in the third quarter. From there, Buck placekicked a 28-yard field goal. That was how it ended -- 3-0.

After the game, Curly Lambeau buttonholed Ollie to ask him about Dolly Gray. It seems the end had put in one game with the Pack and had played poorly. Then, after boarding the train for St. Louis, he'd disappeared. Just what was going on?

Well, explained Ollie -- chuckle, chuckle -- it had all been a joke. The end who'd played for both St. Louis and Green Bay -- ha, ha -- wasn't THE Dolly Gray, just some impostor. So when -- heh, heh -- Ollie found out the trick that had been played on him, he -- yuk, yuk -- thought he'd play the same trick on Curly. Naturally, he'd intended all along to -- uh -- return the -- uh -- money that -- er -- Curly had paid. All along.

The next day, the St. Louis *Post Dispatch* summed up the situation: "Thus far the effort has proved a 'flop' financially. The promoters are something like \$4,500 in the hole. Rain wrecked local attendance at games played here. With a weekly pay roll of \$1,200 and almost as much more in guarantees to the visiting teams, there is no way for the eleven to get by under a paid attendance of 2,000 to 2,500 The team's performance has been strangely dull The Kraehe eleven has failed to score a single point Defensive football is all right but it fails to thrill without a corresponding attack."

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Ollie Kraeche's dreams of fortune were turning into red ink nightmares, but he had high hopes for the next weekend. Jim Thorpe and his Oorang Indians were a popular attraction all over the NFL. They were not very good, raising hopes for a victory, but they put on a good show, raising hopes for a decent crowd.

For once the weatherman cooperated. November 11 came up perfect, and nearly 5,000 fans came out to give the All-Stars a look-see. Surprisingly, they saw touchdowns -- two by the All-Stars in a 14-7 win. Al Casey scored both of the Kraehemen's TDs on runs in the first half. Thorpe played well for the losers, throwing a pass for their touchdown.

The Oorangs' visit cut some of the financial losses; the next attraction might do even better. Kraeche had no one scheduled for the following week, but on Saturday, November 25, Jimmy Conzelman and his Milwaukee Badgers were due in. The fact that Conzelman was one of St. Louis' most popular athletes and that neither the local colleges or high schools had games scheduled because of the coming Thanksgiving festivities, made this the All-Stars' best shot at a big crowd. Ollie had 300 temporary field boxes built along the north side of the playing field. These went on sale for \$2.20 each.

Conzelman lived up to expectations, but the crowd didn't. Only 2,395 paid to see Jimmy run and pass his Badgers to an easy 17-0 win. The All-Stars did their share, playing what John Holland of the *Post Dispatch* called "probably ... its poorest game of the year." He estimated the financial losses at \$1,300 for the day and \$6,300 for the season.

Adding to Ollie's difficulties, his team was so badly beat up that he was forced to cancel his last scheduled game against Cleveland. At least, injuries were the excuse; the cancellation also kept down the red ink flood.

He talked bravely of "next year," promising a "reformed team" with two new backfielders who were "widely known stars of the present season." In the meantime, he took what was left of his team to Benld, Ill., and somehow managed to lose there 9-7.

Maybe that was the last straw. If you couldn't beat Benld, you'd best avoid Green Bay (which is in Wisconsin). Besides, Ollie had only so many shirts to lose.

The following September the NFL canceled the precious franchise; St. Louis could support two major league baseball teams, but major league football would have to wait. Ollie Kraeche was only about 40 years ahead of his time.

ST. LOUIS ALL-STARS 1923

1-4-2 .200 14th NFL

Coach & Manager: Ollie Kraeche

Home Field: Sportsman's Park

<u>DATE</u>	<u>AT</u>	<u>OPPONENT</u>	<u>SL-OP</u>
S-30	A	*Murpheyboro All-Stars	25- 0
O- 7	A	Green Bay Packers	0- 0
O-14	H	Hammond Pros	0- 0
O-21	A	Cleveland Indians	0- 6
O-28	A	Milwaukee Badgers	0- 6
N- 4	H	Green Bay Packers	0- 3
N-11	H	Oorang Indians	14- 7
N-24	H	Milwaukee Badgers	0-17
N-29	H	Cleveland Indians	Canc.
D-12	A	*Benld, Ill	7- 9

* - Non-league

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<u>Roster (19)</u>	<u>POS</u>	<u>YR</u>	<u>HGT</u>	<u>WGT</u>	<u>AG</u>	<u>SCHOOL</u>	<u>GM</u>
Andrews, Leroy "Bull"	G	1	6-0	220	26	Pittsburg St	5
Cardwell, John	H	1		170	28	none	2
Casey, Al	H	1		180		Arkansas	7
Finnegan, Jim	EQ	1	5-8	160	22	St. Louis	2
a-Gray, Jack (Pseud.)	E	1					3
King, Dick	F	4	5-8	175	28	Harvard	7
Kraehe, Ollie	GE	2	5-10	180	25	Wash. (StL)	7
Kreinleder, Walt	C	2	6-2	204	23	Michigan	6
Meese, Ward	E	2	5-10	175	21	Wabash	5
Meinhardt, George	GC	1	5-9	200	25	St. Louis	5
Milton, Johnny	E	1		175	24	USC	5
Murrah, Bill	GC	2	5-10	215	22	Texas A & M	6
Siegfried, Orville	H	1	5-10	160	24	W & J	7
Simpson, Jimmy	Q	2	5-10	160	23	Detroit	7
Travis, Ed "Brick"	T	2	6-1	210	26	Missouri	7
Weller, Ray "Bub"	T	1	6-4	200	21	Nebraska	7
Wilder, Hal	G	1	5-10	190	21	Nebrasda	2
Winburn, Ernie	E	1	5-11	175	26	Cent. Mo. St.	1
Wycoff, Lee	FH	1	6-1	195	25	Washburn	3

a = to Green Bay