

(Ed. note: The following article was published in the Bear Report, August 25, 1983, accounting for the rather anachronistic opening.)

Massacre in Cincinnati

By Bob Barnett

As George "Pappa Bear" Halas continues to recover from surgery, his mind may wander back to the early days of the NFL when pre-season games were called exhibition games and were not always played before the NFL race began.

In the 1920's and early 1930's NFL teams seldom played exhibition games against each other. Instead, they could choose from a number of semi-pro town teams, such as the St. Louis Gunners, Akron Awnings, Bobbs Chevrolet of Columbus, or the Ironton (Ohio) Tanks.

These games offered the local semi-pros a chance to match their skills against the big league NFL teams and gave the local fans a chance to see players such as Red Grange and Bronko Nagurski in the flesh. For the NFL players it was an easy pay day (they were paid on a per-game basis) and for the owners a chance to cover training camp expenses.

Often during the early years the NFL owners would schedule exhibition games with semi-pro teams during the season, usually as part of a road trip, to cover travel expenses and to serve as a tune-up for league games. In 1930 occurred one such mid-season exhibition game which Halas would like to forget.

The game looked perfect for the Bears. Near the end of the 1930 season they had a two-game road trip scheduled in which they would play the New York Giants on Sunday, November 16, and the Frankford Yellow Jackets on Saturday, November 22, before returning home to play the Chicago Cardinals on Thanksgiving Day, November 27.

The NFL Yellow Jackets, located in Frankford, a suburb of Philadelphia, were prohibited from playing on Sunday because of the Pennsylvania "Blue Laws," so Halas was faced with an open Sunday on the road. To fill that gap he arranged a game with the Ironton (Ohio) Tanks, a semi-pro team composed mostly of high school teachers and coaches. But the game was not scheduled to be played in Ironton, a town of only 16,670, but was to take place instead 160 miles down the Ohio River in Redland Field, home of the baseball Cincinnati Reds. The whole thing appeared to be a stroke of genius on Halas' part.

In 1930, the Bears were rebuilding from a disastrous 4-9-2 record the previous season. With future Hall of Famers George Trafton at center, Red Grange at halfback and rookie Bronko Nagurski at fullback, the Bears began to jell by midseason. Going into New York with a 4-4-1 record, they surprised the Giants 12-0, avenging an earlier defeat at home.

The following Saturday they defeated the Yellow Jackets 13-6 to push their record to 6-4-1. On the overnight train ride between Philadelphia and Cincinnati, Halas and the Bears didn't suspect the ambush that lay ahead the following day. Ironton was a hard-nosed Ohio River town which had reached its peak in the early 1900's. Untouched by the prosperity of the 1920's, it had one main source of pride, the Tanks. The Tanks had begun in 1919 using only local players. They took their name from a newspaper headline: "Ironton Rolls Over Portsmouth Like Tanks."

During the early 1920's the Tanks began to import outsiders, particularly for big games against local rival Portsmouth. From 1919 through 1925 the Tanks rolled to a 51-6-4 record against semi-pro teams and a sprinkling of NFL teams. In 1926 Ironton got serious. The town (which owned the team) raised \$33,500 to build a 3,112 seat stadium and began to import players in earnest.

The Tanks were often successful in bidding against NFL teams for players because they had the support of the Lawrence County School System. Glenn Presnell, a 1927 All-American tailback at Nebraska, recently explained why he rejected an offer from the New York Giants to play for the Tanks.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 6, No. 2 (1984)

"I had an offer from the Giants for about \$150 to \$170 a game. But that was just for three months. I also had an offer to coach and teach at one of the best high schools in Nebraska for \$1,600 per year, which was pretty good. The Tanks offered almost as much per game as the Giants, plus they offered me a job teaching at Ironton High School at \$1,600 for nine months. I took it."

The Tanks continued to build an awesome semi-pro team over the next couple of years using teacher/players. "It was common knowledge that if you played for the Tanks you could get a job teaching in Lawrence County. The school system had about 12 or 13 high schools and a Tank coached or taught at every one of them. It worked out very well because all of the players who were given teaching jobs had degrees from good schools," added Harold Rolph, a former Tank lineman.

In 1930, the Tanks reached their zenith. They hired Earle "Greasy" Neale as the head coach. Neale, who coached Washington and Jefferson College to the Rose Bowl in 1922 and would later lead the Philadelphia Eagles to NFL championships, recruited heavily to supplement a strong nucleus of Tank holdovers. In addition, Keith Molesworth joined the team just before the season began after being cut from the NFL Portsmouth (Ohio) Spartans.

Rumor had it that Molesworth had been cut from the Spartans because he stole (and later married) the coach's girlfriend. The Tanks opened the season with a narrow 7-6 loss to the Spartans, but later defeated them 16-15. On November 11 they played the New York Giants in Cincinnati and defeated them 13-12 to set up the Bears-Tanks showdown.

On game day Redland Field was packed. That morning, a Norfolk and Western excursion train bound for Cincinnati had pulled out of the Ironton station with virtually the whole town aboard. But the majority of the crowd were cynical Cincinnatians anxious to see Red Grange – expecting the Bears to roll – but yet hoping that the underdog Tanks could pull off an upset.

The Tanks, excited by the big crowd, were not over-awed by being on the same field with the Bears. "Sure we were excited about playing the Bears, but we knew they were human," said Harold Rolph. "We knew they put their pants on the same way we did," added Tank center John Wager, "or at least we thought they did."

The Bears, obviously tired from the previous day's game and the all night train ride, had problems early in the game. Following a short Bears kickoff, the Tanks began to drive the ball deep into Chicago territory with both halfbacks, Glenn Presnell and Molesworth, carrying the ball. Presnell went into the end zone after a four-yard run. Tanks 6, Bears 0.

The Bears then began a drive of their own, using both Grange and Nagurski. Neither could break away from the sticky Ironton defense however, and the Tanks took over on their own 12-yard line. Still in the first quarter, Presnell broke over the left side of the Bears line, angled between two crushing downfield blocks and out-raced the last Bears defender down the sideline for a spectacular 88-yard touchdown run.

Rolph remembers the play: "I can still see Glenn weaving and bobbing down the field. A beautiful run." The extra-point attempt was successful. Tanks 13, Bears 0.

Early in the second quarter, the Bears intercepted an Ironton pass deep in their own territory, but on the next play they fumbled the ball back to the Tanks. Ironton ran an end sweep for no gain, then Molesworth broke over right guard and ran 22 yards for the Tanks' third touchdown. Tanks 19, Bears 0.

The Bears were able to pull themselves together enough to push across a touchdown before halftime, and as the teams went into the locker room, the Tanks held a 12-point lead. Cincinnati fans were shocked at the ease with which the Tanks had scored the three first-half TDs against the Bears – but not as shocked as the Bears themselves.

Rolph recalls: "The Bears thought they were going to come in and have a big time rolling over us, but when we scored those quick touchdowns and they could not gain against us, they got kind of frustrated. They just could not seem to get going."

Early in the second half, the Bears narrowed the gap when Carl Brumbaugh threw a 40-yard touchdown pass to Joe Lintzenich. The Tanks roared back with a long pass from Presnell to Molesworth to put

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 6, No. 2 (1984)

Ironton deep into Bears territory. Molesworth then scored on a five-yard run. The final score was Tanks 26, Bears 13.

Following the Tanks game the Bears pulled themselves together and won their final three NFL games, including a 21-0 rout over the hated Green Bay Packers. The Bears finished the season in third place in the 11 team league with a respectable 9-4-1 record. The Tanks loss of their final game of the season, 12-0 to the Portsmouth Spartans, was quickly forgotten by Ironton fans for their Tanks had beaten the NFL second place Giants and third place Bears on a neutral field.

Unfortunately, that was the Tanks' final season. The team was disbanded according to George Brown, a former manager for the Tanks, "Because Ironton was too small to support even a semi-pro team, particularly during the Depression." Many of the Tank players remained in Ironton, but ironically a number of them applied to the Bears for positions.

"A bunch of us wrote to Halas," said John Wager shortly before his recent death, "but the only one they took was Molesworth." Molesworth made the Bears the following year and played with the team from 1931 through 1937.

Four Tank players including Wager and Presnell moved to Portsmouth to join the Spartans. In 1932, with Presnell at tailback and Wager at guard, the Portsmouth Spartans faced the Chicago Bears with Grange, Nagurski and Molesworth in the backfield indoors at Chicago Stadium for the NFL Championship. But that's another story.

For the people of Ironton, Ohio, the memory of the Tanks lives on. The Ironton High School Tigers, the 1982 state of Ohio high school football runner-up, play their home games in Tank Memorial Stadium, and old-timers still sit around the courthouse square and reminisce about the time that their very own Tanks beat the big city Chicago Bears.