

THE MINNEAPOLIS MARINES: MINNESOTA'S FORGOTTEN NFL TEAM

by Jim Quirk

There are many obscure small town teams that show up briefly in the records of the NFL for the early 1920s, but one of the least well known is the Minneapolis Marines (APFA 1921, NFL 1922-1924). The Marines, owned by locals Johnny Dunn and Val Ness, had a dismal APFA/NFL W-L-T record entirely consistent with the team's obscurity in the annals of pro football: 1921 1-3-0, 1922 1-3-0, 1923 2-5-2, 1924 0-6-0. But the NFL record of the Marines gives a misleading picture of the team's true standing among the earliest pro football teams, because it was in the pre-APFA/NFL years that the Marines reached their peak as a team.

The Marines were organized way back in 1905, as a team of working class teenagers, most of whom lived close to the Cedar/Washington avenue district of the near south side of Minneapolis, about a mile or so south of the present-day Metrodome.

The team began play in the 115-pound weight class, and by 1907 had moved up to the 145-pound weight class. It was also in 1907 that the Marines acquired the group of players who constituted the core of the team for the next ten years: Rube Ursella (qb), Walt "Big Boy" Buland (t), Clarence "Sheepy" Redeen (e), Arthur "Dutch" Gaustad (g), Harry Wegfors (c), and Johnny Dunn (hb and captain). In 1909, the team added Mike Palmer (t), Harold Selvig (c,g), Oswald Sundby (fb) and Labe Safro, "the Jewish Lion", (hb) to its list of regulars.

Rube Ursella was the true super-star of the team, had a long and successful pro football career with the Marines and the Rock Island Independents, and also played several seasons of minor league baseball (Northern League). Despite his size (5'9, 170 pounds), Ursella was both an offensive and defensive standout, but it was his skill as a kicker -- punting and drop kicking -- that highlighted his 22-year pro football career. Johnny Dunn was the breakaway scat back in the Marines' offense, but, as with the other successful early pro teams, it was the Marines rock solid defense that won most of their games, headed by Buland and Gaustad.

The Marines were a rather remarkable team. Up to the 1913 season, no players on the team had any high school or college playing experience -- this was truly a blue collar team. The core personnel of the team remained unchanged for almost ten years. And, once the kids forming the team had grown into the unlimited weight category, from 1910 on, the Marines became the best and then the absolutely dominant "independent" team in the upper Midwest region, right up to World War I.

Between 1910 and 1914, the big game of the year in Minneapolis independent football was between the Beavers and the Marines. The Beavers were also a south side team, but from a more affluent area of town. In contrast to the Marines, most of the Beaver players had college playing experience, many at the college of St. Thomas over in St. Paul. The undefeated Marines won the city title in 1910 by beating the Beavers 6-0, and then saw undefeated seasons go by the boards in 1911 and 1912 with upset victories by the Beavers in the title games, 6-0 and 7-3.

After the 1912 loss to the Beavers, there were major changes made in the organization of the team. For the first time the Marines hired an outside coach in Ossie Solem, a standout end with Doc Williams' 1912 Minnesota Gophers, and later a coach at Syracuse and then at Iowa. Solem stayed with the Marines through the 1915 season, and introduced the Minnesota shift and the single wing formation to the team, which had played the old fashioned T-formation up to that time.

And, again for the first time, the Marines added ex-college players, headed by the best semi-pro player in the Twin Cities, Bobby Marshall, the first great black player at the University of Minnesota (1903-1906). At 6'2" and 195 pounds, Marshall was a big, tough end, who was almost indestructible. He was still playing charity football games in the Twin Cities in the mid-1930s, when he was over 50 years old. The Marines also added ex-collegians Dewey Lyle and Frank Dries, as well as the future pro star, Fred Chicken.

The Marines peaked as a team in the pre-World War I years (1913-1917), under the leadership of Johnny Dunn, who combined playing time with time spent in the front office as manager of the team, before retiring from playing in 1920. In 1913, the Marines won their annual battle with the Beavers 33-0, and in 1914 it was another rout, 48-0.

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The Beavers disbanded after the 1914 season. Until that time, the Marines had played their home games in the North Side Park; from 1915 on, the Marines made the AA Minneapolis Millers' Nicollet Park their home field.

With the Beavers out of the picture, the Marines had no strong local opposition. Johnny Dunn began scheduling out of town games with teams from Duluth, Davenport, and Rock Island, to fill in the Marines' schedule.

The annual city independent title game was replaced by a Thanksgiving Day game at Nicollet Park against a team of college All-Stars, featuring ex-Gopher players. The Marines played in this game every year from 1913 through 1923, (excluding the war years of 1917 and 1918) against such players as Johnny McGovern, Bert Baston, George Hauser, Paul Flinn, Paul DesJardien, and the like. From 1913 through 1917, the Marines were undefeated and untied in 34 successive regular season games, but lost to the All-Stars twice and tied them once in the Thanksgiving Day game.

Independent football shut down completely in 1918, due to the flu epidemic. When the 1919 season rolled around, Johnny Dunn still headed the Marines, but Marshall, Ursella, Buland, Lyle, and Chicken all moved to the Rock Island Independents, which posted a 9-1-0 record for the year, and staked claim to the pro championship of the country. Four ex-Marines were listed as starters or honorable mentions on the the first all-pro team ever compiled (admittedly, by a Rock Island paper).

With their core players gone, the Marines never regained their pre-war form, nor did they draw crowds like the pre-war teams. Johnny Dunn tried valiantly to find a way to keep the team solvent, including joining the APFA in 1921 to bring quality competition into the Twin Cities, but the team went under after the 1924 season.

Dunn and co-owner Val Ness attempted to resurrect Twin Cities pro football in 1929 with a new version of the Marines, the Minneapolis Red Jackets (the Marines had worn a uniform featuring red jerseys with red and white striped sleeves), but after one and one half seasons, the Red Jackets also went broke, merged with the Philadelphia Yellow Jackets, and went out of existence.

Season Records: 1905-1924

| | | | | | |
|--------------|---------------------|--------------|--|--|----------------------------|
| 1905 | 3-0-0 | 42-0 | | | |
| 1906 | no record | | | | Tackles: Palmer, Schroeder |
| 1907 | <u>4-1-1</u> | <u>57-18</u> | | | Guards: Gaustad, Selvig |
| Ends: | Benson, Redeen | | | | Center: Wegfors |
| Tackles: | Buland, Barbour | | | | Quarterback: Ursella |
| Guards: | Gaustad, Lindquist | | | | Halfbacks: Dunn, Larson |
| Center: | Wegfors | | | | Fullback: Sundby |
| Quarterback: | Ursella | | | | 1911 |
| Halfbacks: | Nordly, Hoffman | | | | <u>3-1-1</u> |
| Fullback: | Larson | | | | <u>86-11</u> |
| 1908 | <u>6-0-0</u> | <u>92-5</u> | | | Ends: Redeen, C. Jonassen |
| Ends: | Benson, Redeen | | | | Tackles: Buland, Palmer |
| Tackles: | Buland, H. Jonassen | | | | Guards: Gaustad, Selvig |
| Guards: | Gaustad, Lindquist | | | | Center: Wegfors |
| Center: | Wegfors | | | | Quarterback: Ursella |
| Quarterback: | Ursella | | | | Halfbacks: Dunn, Hoffman |
| Halfbacks: | Dunn, C. Jonassen | | | | Fullback: Sundby |
| Fullback: | Larson | | | | 1912 |
| 1909 | <u>4-1-0</u> | <u>68-5</u> | | | <u>8-2-0</u> |
| Ends: | Redeen, Mullen | | | | <u>293-37</u> |
| Tackles: | Buland, Palmer | | | | Ends: Methven, C. Jonassen |
| Guards: | Gaustad, Peterson | | | | Tackles: Buland, Palmer |
| Center: | Wegfors | | | | Guards: Gaustad, Tallukson |
| Quarterback: | Ursella | | | | Center: Wegfors |
| Halfbacks: | Dunn, Larson | | | | Quarterback: Ursella |
| Fullback: | Sundby | | | | Halfbacks: Dunn, Larson |
| 1910 | <u>4-0-1</u> | <u>51-0</u> | | | Fullback: Sundby |
| Ends: | Redeen, Mullen | | | | 1913 |
| | | | | | <u>8-1-0 *</u> |
| | | | | | <u>254-39</u> |
| | | | | | Ends: Redeen, C. Jonassen |
| | | | | | Tackles: Buland, Palmer |
| | | | | | Guards: Gaustad, Selvig |
| | | | | | Center: Wegfors |
| | | | | | Quarterback: Ursella |
| | | | | | Halfbacks: Marshall, Safro |

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Fullback: Sundby
 * Loss to All Star team

1914 5-1-0 * 233-14

Ends: Redeem, Marshall
 Tackles: Buland, Palmer
 Guards: Gaustad, Selvig
 Center: Wegfors
 Quarterback: Ursella
 Halfbacks: Costello, Dries
 Fullback: Sundby
 * Loss to All Star team

1915 6-1-0 * 134-7

Ends: Redeem, Marshall
 Tackles: Buland, Lyle
 Guards: Gaustad, Palmer
 Center: Selvig
 Quarterback: Ursella
 Halfbacks: Safro, Costello
 Fullback: Chicken
 * Loss to All Star team

1916 8-0-1 ** 217-3

Ends: Redeem, Marshall
 Tackles: Buland, Lyle
 Guards: Gaustad, Selvig
 Center: Gunderson
 Quarterback: Ursella
 Halfbacks: Safro, Chicken
 Fullback: Sampson
 **Tied All Star team

1917 7-0-0 239-38

Ends: Redeem, Marshall
 Tackles: Buland, Halloran
 Guards: Gaustad, Dunne
 Center: Gunderson
 Quarterback: Ursella
 Halfbacks: Chicken, Novak
 Fullback: Sampson

1918 No team

1919 5-2-1 104-67

Ends: Redeem, Christiansen
 Tackles: Erickson, Palmer
 Guards: Gaustad, Norbeck
 Center: Gunderson
 Quarterback: Dunn
 Halfbacks: Tersch, Jordan
 Fullback: Sundby

1920 5-1-2 74-3

Ends: Redeem, Christiansen
 Tackles: Erickson, Palmer
 Guards: Gaustad, Tersch
 Center: Nelson
 Quarterback: Irgens
 Halfbacks: Cleve, Sampson
 Fullback: Jordan

1921 3-4-0 53-55
 (APFA 1-3-0 37-41)

Ends: Redeem, Christiansen
 Tackles: Erickson, Palmer
 Guards: Gaustad, Kramer
 Center: Gunderson
 Quarterback: Ursella
 Halfbacks: Regnier, Dvorak
 Fullback: Sampson

1922 5-3-0 47-40
 (NFL 1-3-0 19-40)

Ends: Flinn, Kraft
 Tackles: Erickson, Tersch
 Guards: Gaustad, Kramer
 Center: Mehre
 Quarterback: Norton
 Halfbacks: Irgens, Cleve
 Fullback: Sampson

1923 4-5-2 62-87
 (NFL 2-5-2 48-81)

Ends: Flinn, Mohe
 Tackles: Baril, Tersch
 Guards: Gaustad, Tierney
 Center: Mehre
 Quarterback: Kaplan
 Halfbacks: Cleve, Pahl
 Fullback: Sampson

1924 2-6-0 28-116
 (NFL 0-6-0 14-108)

Ends: Christiansen, Mohe
 Tackles: Dunnegan, Scott
 Guards: Tierney, Kramer
 Center: Madigan
 Quarterback: Houle
 Halfbacks: Norton, Novak
 Fullback: Simons

Red Jackets

1929 1-9-0 48-185

Ends: Haycraft, Lundell
 Tackles: Franta, Widerquist
 Guards: Charpe, Lovis
 Center: Young
 Quarterback: Willigalle
 Halfbacks: Nydahl, Erickson
 Fullback: Joesting

1930 1-7-1 31-165

Ends: Haycraft, Lundell
 Tackles: Franta, Ward
 Guards: Gibson, Steponovich
 Center: Barrager
 Quarterback: Pederson
 Halfbacks: Pharmer, Pape
 Fullback: Joesting