

When the Indians Roamed Buffalo's Gridiron – 1940

By Connie McGillicuddy

On Sunday, September 22, 1940, Western New York's latest venture into the world of professional football had its inception. A throng of 12,448 eager fans were on hand in Buffalo's Civic Stadium (later renamed War Memorial) to welcome the Buffalo Indians of the newly formed American Football League. Under Coach Earl "Red" Siech, the local entry, decked out in green and white uniform, were hosting the Milwaukee Chiefs, already sporting a 3-0 record. It would seem that a struggle between Chiefs and Indians would have a pre-ordained outcome and, true to form, the Chiefs prevailed, 23-0. Milwaukee's advantage in game experience, combined with the absence from the Buffalo lineup of backfield stars Larry Price and Carl Littlefield, contributed to the victor's success. Their early season accomplishments prompted the Chiefs to challenge the neighboring Green Bay Packers to a showdown contest. For the record, it never materialized.

Local fans at this gridiron inaugural were entertained by a nine-piece band in Indian regalia. The story is told of an incident that occurred in a downtown pub later that evening. Long after the game had ended an Indian band member still in his band uniform stumbled into the establishment. A bleary-eyed customer, scanning the label on his bottle of locally brewed beer, addressed the stranger by asking, "Are you an Iroquois?" "No I'm a Budweiser" came the reply.

Ten days later in the first of three successive Wednesday night contests in Buffalo, the locals defeated the Cincinnati Bengals, 17-7, in front of 8,462 fans. One of the game's highlights was a 13-yard TD pass engineered by two former Little Three rivals. Joe Szur of Canisius fame connected with St. Bonaventure's Steve Gilbert on the scoring play.

One week later the eventual league champion Columbus Bullies came to town and lived up to their name and reputation. Their 17-7 victory was highlighted by a 90-yard touchdown run on the first play from scrimmage. The 8,110 Buffalo fans received another jolt when running back Carl Littlefield was forced out of the game with a leg injury. However, they were later thrilled when two St. Bonaventure grads, Gilbert and Steve Hrysyczyn, combined with teammate Gottlieb on a long pass and lateral touchdown play.

On October 16th, the Boston Bears came to town seeking their victory. The 10-0 win by the invaders was not without controversy. The game's only touchdown came in the fourth quarter when a Boston pass receiver tossed the ball to a teammate while being tackled. According to Buffalo fans, who are seldom if ever wrong, the toss was clearly forward and hence illegal. However, the officials did not see it that way and the play set up the game's only touchdown. Sound familiar?

Abandoning their mid-week schedule, the Indians were given only three days to prepare for a return match with the Boston Bears, a Sunday clambake in historic Fenway Park. Old timers will recall that the Fenway football field stretched from the third baseline to the right field bleachers, parallel to the famous green monster. Again the Beantowners pitched a shutout, scalping the Indians, 20-0, as 10,000 "Chowderheads" looked on.

On Sunday, November 3rd, two days before the election of Franklin Roosevelt to an historic third term in the White House, the Indians traveled downstate to New York's Yankee Stadium. There, by "pitching" a 17-0 shutout, the grid Yankees improved their record to 3-2 while dropping Buffalo to 1-5. The Indians Steve Hrysyczyn was one of the few Indians to impress Gotham sportswriters.

A week later, on a rain soaked field in Columbus, Ohio, the home-standing Bullies lived up to their name by sinking Buffalo, 13-7. 3,512 shivering spectators braved the elements to watch the visitors put up a stubborn battle against the eventual league champion. The Indians lone touchdown was scored in the second period by Bill Caspsall on a "one foot" plunge. Two Buffalo second half drives were halted deep in enemy territory.

The weekend after the Columbus deluge an early season snowstorm hit the Buffalo area. Unfortunately the blanket of snow rested on top of the tarpaulin protecting the field. The stadium workmen labored into

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the early afternoon to remove the two-tiered covering but their efforts proved futile. Early arriving fans even joined in the struggle but only about 20 yards of turf was cleared. The Indians and the visiting New York Yankees emerged from the warmth of their dressing rooms to limber up on the exposed surface of the field. Unfortunately in the judgment of the game official's home team was responsible for the poor conditions of the field and a forfeit was awarded to the Yankees.

The inaugural season of the Buffalo Indians concluded on Thanksgiving Day in Milwaukee where they were scalped by the Chiefs, 3-13. The slippery turf forced both teams to take to the air as they combined for 42 passes. The result was four aerial touchdowns, three by the home team. Both Buffalo touchdowns were scored by their star halfback, Carl Littlefield.

The Indians 2-8 record earned them a fifth place finish, ahead of Cincinnati. The following year the local gridiron warriors would emerge as Tigers with a new head coach in the person of Tiny Engebretzen. Despite the Indians record, Buffalo's football faithful, as they have always done, were looking ahead to better days in 1941.

NOTE: Connie McGillicuddy is the Team Historian for the Buffalo Bills and is a member of the Pro Football Historians Association of Western New York.