



Tommy Hughitt

This article was written by Jeffrey J. Miller.

Tommy Hughitt was Mr. Everything to the Buffalo All-Americans, Buffalo's first NFL team. He was the team's quarterback on offense, played linebacker on defense, occasionally kicked field goals and extra points, was the on-field coach of the team, helped manage the team off the field, and later became a part-owner. While teammates such as Ockie Anderson, Swede Youngstrom, Luke Urban and Bob Nash garnered most of the headlines, Hughitt earned a reputation as a tough-as-nails, no-nonsense player through grit and hard work. As a coach, he was among the most progressive of his day, and amassed one of the best winning percentages of all the men who coached during the league's first decade. In many ways, the early history of the All-Americans is as much Hughitt's as it is the team's.



Born Ernest Frederick Hughitt in the Canadian province of British Columbia, Hughitt's family emigrated to Escanaba, Michigan, when he was still a youngster. He played his high school ball at Escanaba High but performed with such little distinction that he failed to earn a varsity letter. Things turned around as a walk-on at Michigan, where he distinguished himself well enough to earn the coveted "M." He started out as a halfback, but soon found his niche at the quarterback position, where he starred for the next three



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seasons, earning a reputation for scrappiness along with a nose permanently flattened from blows it received from would-be tacklers.

After graduating in 1915, Tommy played occasionally with the semi-pro Youngstown (Ohio) Patricians and Detroit Heralds. His playing was limited, however, since his full-time job as head football coach at the University of Maine took precedence. Employing the system he learned while at Michigan from legendary coach Fielding Yost, Hughitt's teams compiled an overall 6–7–3 record in his two seasons at the helm, including the Maine Intercollegiate Athletic Association championship in 1915.

He relocated to Buffalo in 1917. The following year, Hughitt signed on to play semi-pro ball with the Niagaras, and the following year with the Buffalo Prospects. After guiding both teams to respective championships, the diminutive Canadian—all of five feet, eight inches and 150 pounds—was the obvious choice to call the signals for Buffalo's entry in new American Professional Football Association, a national league for football based on the Major League Baseball model. An all-around athlete, Hughitt also played second base on a Municipal League baseball team and was an accomplished golfer. In his "spare time," Hughitt worked as the athletic director at Nichols School in Buffalo.

In addition to his duties as quarterback and coach, Hughitt was asked to help recruit players to fill the team's roster. Hughitt, along with Barney Lepper and team owner Frank McNeil, recruited some of the top names in the sport, among them several players selected by Walter Camp—the former Yale coach considered to be the arbiter of football talent in the game's early days—to his collegiate All-America teams. The list included ends Murray Shelton of Cornell and Henry "Heinie" Miller of Pennsylvania, backs Oscar "Ockie" Anderson of Colgate and Eddie Casey of Harvard, and guard Swede Youngstrom of Dartmouth. More Walter Camp honorees would join the team later in the year, including Pat Smith from Michigan and Jack Beckett from Oregon. The team would eventually adopt the nickname "All-Americans," making them one of the most aptly named franchises in league history.

The team contracted to play home games at the Villa on the Canisius College grounds, which had a seating capacity of approximately 12,000. As the association did not control scheduling at that early date, each team was at liberty to arrange its own slate. Since cash was at a premium for the embryonic organization, teams did whatever they could to cut corners. Travel was costly, so teams played as many home games as possible, or scheduled road games in nearby cities to keep expenses low. Thus, the All-Americans played their first game on October 3 against a local semi-pro outfit called the West Buffalos. In drubbing their over-matched opponent, the pros registered a resounding 32-6 victory. Hughitt, sporting jersey #1, scored two touchdowns, as did halfback Bodie Weldon. Lopsided victories over more semi-pro teams over the ensuing weeks brought



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Buffalo's record to 4-0 before the team finally faced an actual APFA opponent. On October 31, Buffalo hosted the Rochester Jeffersons and established themselves as a contender by beating the Flower City eleven by a 17-6 score.

The All-Americans faced their first real test on November 21 when Jim Thorpe and the mighty Canton Bulldogs came to town. Anticipating a large crowd for Thorpe's Queen City debut, Buffalo management moved the game from the usual home site at Canisius Villa to the larger Buffalo Baseball park. The move proved a wise one, as the largest crowd ever to witness a pro football game in Buffalo, some 15,000, showed up. Yet for all the hype leading up to this contest, it proved to be a rather dull affair, as the field was rendered a veritable quagmire by heavy rains. Canton came out on top, handing Buffalo its first loss, 3-0. But the AAs were back on the beam the following week against the Cleveland Tigers, scoring a 7-0 victory. On December 4, Buffalo met Canton in a rematch at New York's Polo Grounds for what was to be a showcase for the new league, pitting two of its top teams against each other in the media capital of the nation. Led by Swede Youngstrom's heroics, Buffalo came out on top, 7-3.

Immediately following the historic win, the All-Americans jumped the train bound for Buffalo and a game with Akron for the APFA title scheduled for the following afternoon. But with the Buffalo players tired and worn from the previous day's game and the long train ride, summoning the energy for this tilt with the tough Akronites was a tall order. Buffalo came in with an overall record of 9 wins and 1 loss. Akron boasted a record of 7 wins, 3 ties and no losses. All they had to do was tie and the championship was theirs. The fatigued AAs failed to muster any offense on the rain-soaked field, and Akron managed to hold on for a 0-0 deadlock. Undefeated Akron was awarded the championship.

The All-Americans finished with a stellar 9-1-1 mark, scoring a league-high 258 points while surrendering just 32 all season! Hughitt finished with 52 points scored behind eight touchdowns and four conversions.

The All-Americans entered 1921 as top contenders in the APFA. The team bolstered its already powerful lineup by adding Army halfback Elmer Oliphant, tackle/end Bob Nash of Rutgers, and Boston College end Luke Urban. With the backfield of Oliphant, Pat Smith, Ockie Anderson and Hughitt, Buffalo boasted the top backfield in the league. Once again, the AAs came out smoking with lopsided victories over Hammond, Columbus, New York, Rochester and Detroit in succession.

They went into the final game of the season sporting a 9-0-2 record. Once again, the All-Americans needed a victory on the season's last day to secure the championship. But just as it had a year earlier, the team scheduled two games on the final weekend. The AAs



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faced the Akron Pros on Saturday in Buffalo, then rode the all-night Pullman to Chicago to take on George Halas' Staleys at Cubs Park on Sunday. Despite the fact that the All-Americans had beaten the Staleys two weeks earlier in Buffalo, Chicago came out on top in this one, 10-7, and claimed the 1921 title with a 9-1-1 record. Buffalo manager Frank McNeil disputed the Staleys' claim, but the league affirmed Halas' assertion that the second game of the season series, won by the Staleys, carried more weight than the first, which was won by Buffalo. Just as the AAs had come within one victory of winning the championship in 1920, the team fell one short again in 1921.

The 1922 season saw the All-Americans' fortunes begin to fade, as the team finished with a lackluster 5-4-1 record. Though Tommy's individual offensive output had declined—just two TDs on the season—his overall performance was good enough to warrant selection to a season's-end All-Pro team handpicked by George Halas.

The following year saw the All-Americans finish 5-4-3 in a rebuilding year. It would also be the last under the All-Americans banner. When the 1924 season opened, the team had a new name (Bisons) and new ownership. Hughitt threw in with a group led by local businessman Warren D. Patterson to purchase the franchise from Frank McNeil. Their first order of business was to sign top talent in an effort to return the once-mighty franchise to its former place at the upper echelon of the league. Signed were star halfback Ben Lee Boynton (the "Purple Streak" of Williams College fame), halfback Eddie Kaw of Cornell, and former Canton fullback/end Pete Calac. But untimely injuries to key players hampered the team, which limped to a disappointing 6-5-0 final mark.

Hughitt, now 32, retired after the 1924 season. His coaching tenure with the All-Americans and Bisons ran five seasons (1920 through 1924). Over that span, Hughitt compiled a record of 34 wins, 15 losses and 7 ties, for an overall winning percentage of .694, which places him sixth on the all-time list. When compared to some of the greatest coaches in league history, ol' Tommy is better than George Halas (.671), Paul Brown (.621), Curly Lambeau (.624), Tom Landry (.605) and that other, better-known Buffalo head coach, Marv Levy (.561). All Hall-of-Famers, by the way.

After retiring as an active player, Hughitt remained in Buffalo and entered the political field. Beginning in 1937, he served for a term of four years on the Buffalo Common Council, and later ran unsuccessfully for the office of sheriff of Erie County.

He remained active in the realm of football too, eventually becoming one of the most respected game officials in both pro and college ball. He is credited with helping bring an end to the mistreatment of colored players in the pro game.



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Bigotry was an accepted subculture of pro football during its first few decades. Despite the fact that several Blacks played in the National Football League in the 1920s, these men were nonetheless targeted by many of the white players who felt the races were not meant to mingle on the football field any more than they should on the bus or in the local coffee shop. After 1933, there were no Black players at all in the NFL, thanks to an unpublicized “gentlemen’s agreement” which lasted until 1946.

That year also saw the formation of the All-America Football Conference, an upstart league created to compete with the supremacy of the NFL. The AAFC was integrated right from the get-go, but some of the white players still did not graciously accept Blacks as teammates or opponents. One team that did not seem to have problems was the Cleveland Browns, which featured two African Americans in Marion Motley and Bill Willis (both future Hall-of-Famers). Cleveland head coach Paul Brown made sure that everyone on his squad was treated alike. Brown’s influence, however, did not extend to Cleveland’s opponents, many of whom went out of their way to plant a cleat or some other cheap shot on either Motley or Willis during play.

But former Buffalo All-Americans’ player/coach Tommy Hughitt, by then a highly respected game official, helped to bring an end to such shenanigans. As Motley later recalled to historian Myron Cope: “When [Hughitt] caught a guy stepping on us, he wouldn’t tell him nothing. He’d just pick up the ball and start walking off fifteen yards. They’d ask him why, and then he’d say, ‘For stepping on that man.’ The other referees saw what this ref was doing, and they looked around and saw that we were bringing in the crowds as well as the white guys, so they started to protect us.”

Hughitt’s natural leadership skills served him well during his days as a player, but his humanity served him well in setting an example for others to live by.

Hughitt passed away while on vacation in Bartow, Florida, on December 27, 1961. He was 69 years old. His body was brought back to Buffalo and buried at Forest Lawn Cemetery. He was inducted into Michigan's Upper Peninsula Sports Hall of Fame in 1992.