

THE IRONTON TANKS: 1919-30

By Thomas S. Nikitas

Ironton, Ohio, is one of the largest cities in the Kentucky-Ohio-West Virginia, tri-state area. It's situated on the Ohio River, near Ashland, Kentucky, and Huntington, West Virginia. Before the Ironton-Russell (KY) Bridge was built in 1922, ferry boats were the only means of traveling across the river. Still, the Tanks became a tourist attraction when they were formed, and due to their fame, the Marting Hotel and the First National Bank were built and completed in 1922. The population of the town at that time was 15,000 and remained around that more than fifty years later.

It was in 1919 that the Ohio Valley first heard of the Tanks as a football team, and on opening day, nearly 200 people came out to see what the team looked like and how well they would do. "Tank" was a symbol of power. The team, formed right after World War I, lived up to it.

Not all the players were hometown boys. Many of them lived in outlying areas and would come by bus on Saturday, go through their plays that afternoon, and then play on Sunday. For the twelve years from the start until they finally disbanded for good, the Tanks were the scourge of the Ohio Valley and the Tri-State area. One hundred and nineteen games were scheduled. The Tanks won 86, tied 14, and lost only 19.

In 1930, the Tanks defeated the Chicago Bears, 26-13, and the New York Giants, 13-12. The Long Island *Star-Journal* refused to believe the score until they double-checked. A 1964 Ironton news article said: "Can you imagine a team like the Tanks in the one season of 1930 bowling over both the Bears and Giants? When you stop to think that the Bears had a couple of guys named Red Grange and Bronko Nagurski, and the Giants had the silver bullet passer Benny Friedman, not to mention a horde of line crushers and line backers, the feat takes on a greater glow."

The feat becomes more understandable when one realizes that more than half the men in the Tanks'

starting lineup played regularly in the NFL the next season. Star quarterback Glenn Presnell led the NFL in scoring in 1933. Nor were these victories isolated wonders. Such teams as the Kansas City Cowboys, Canton Bulldogs, Akron Pros, and Portsmouth Spartans played in Ironton.

The Ironton *Tribune* had a most enthusiastic article about the early games between the Tanks and the Portsmouth Spartans. Part of the article said, "During the seasons 1919 to 1923, Portsmouth had not won a game against Ironton ... Five games had been played, two were ties and three were lost ... The Portsmouth team came to this city first in the 1923 season and was defeated 40- 0 ... The return game at Portsmouth was a revenge move sponsored by down river fans who had been heavy losers making bets.

"On the field at Portsmouth there seemed to be strange goings-on ... Only a few players warmed up before game time ... Bettors were plentiful ... Three minutes before they were ready to blow the whistle, a large moving van drove up to the sideline and players began trotting out on the field ... They were recognized as the Columbus West Side Club, a team that had held the Tanks to a 7-6 score the month before ... What excitement! ... Portsmouth had two teams ready to try to wear Ironton down ... Police failed to keep the excited rooters off the field but the game proceeded ... Five minutes before the end of the final quarter, it is said that the referee cried out, 'Game called -- all bets off!' ... The score at that time was 21-6 in favor of the Tanks."

The stadium where the Tanks played is now named Tank Memorial Stadium. The high school bought the stadium from the Tanks in 1933 after the team had disbanded. The cost of the stadium was \$33,500. The seating capacity is 3,112 seats and 40 boxes, seating 4 and 6 people. Today a Tank uniform is on display in the Pro Football Hall of Fame as a sample of what uniforms looked like in the early years of pro football. Many of the Tank players went on to further fame as college and pro coaches.