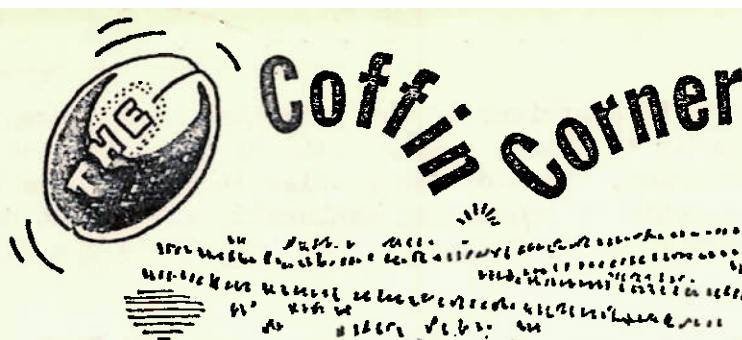




THE Coffin Corner

Vol. I, No. 3

May, 1979

THE THIRD TIME'S THE CHARM

Lo and behold! we've made it to our third issue and nothing's blown up yet. In fact, we've made progress.

First of all, the name Professional Football Research Association of America, seems to set well with most of our members. Bob Braunwart has some misgivings about "of America," wondering whether that might exclude Canadian researchers.

Dear Bob: Unless they moved it recently, Canada is still in North America. I think the "of America" makes us more, rather than less, exclusive.

* * *

We have some new members:

Pete Palmer (12 Farmcrest Avenue, Lexington, Mass. 02173) is the editor of the Barnes Encyclopedia of Football originally created by Roger Treat. He writes that he thinks the best feature of our group is that people throughout the country would become aware of what others might be doing in the same or similar areas.

Dear Pete: I heartily agree. Personally, I always feel inhibited in writing to a complete stranger (why would he care what I might have to say?), but after seeing his name in the Coffin Corner, I'd feel less embarrassed.

I'm happy to say that already some of our members have contacted others. An example is on my desk now. Jim Stewart has written to Braunwart concerning his A.F.L. article in the last issue, sending him a good deal of new and useful information.

* * *

Al Spacagna (3887 Flatlands Ave., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11234) has a question concerning the Coffin Corner's research feature. He'd like to see us start with 1920 and make a year-by-year summary-history.

Dear Al: Maybe someday. Personally, I'd like to see everything cleared up in a step-by-step approach, although I'd start with 1892 (and Joe Horrigan says I'd stop reading at 1930).

However, that kind of approach would restrict us. I envision the research feature as being open to all members as a place to try out his work on his particular interest. And, although I'm taking the liberty of including one of my own attempts in this issue, I'd be well satisfied if most of those that follow were the work of others.

* * *

Vic Frolund (240 Shields Road, Youngstown, Ohio 44512) is a veteran researcher who has contributed to several publications. I recently had the pleasure of reading an article by Vic on the Youngstown Patricians of pre-World War I vintage.

Dear Vic: You might be surprised to see your name here since it's a basic rule of the Coffin Corner never to list a member until he has contacted us. But in your case we'll make an exception. Part of the problem is that I have four or five people I'm supposed to write to concerning membership and I just haven't had time to get around to it. Since we've exchanged greetings through a mutual friend, we'll just get on with it.

I understand that Leo Lyons, who billed himself as the "N.F.L.'s Historian, once mistakenly named you as the owner of the Patricians. Let's see ... you would have been about thirteen?

* * *

Milt Roberts' interest in early black players brought in two pieces of info he might find interesting:

Dear Milt: The Massillon Evening Independent, Oct. 10, 1904, in an account of the "Tigers-Franklin A.C. game mentions that "Green and Fairfax, those two colored stars who have been playing with the Franklin team, were sadly missing." The year before, J. and D. Fairfax appeared in the lineup of All-Cleveland vs. Massillon on Nov. 21, 1903.

Bob Braunwart writes that he has found evidence of a black player in Ottawa in 1912 (a fullback named Simpson) who seems to be the earliest black player in Canadian senior football.

* * *

Your humble editor spent a great two days at the Hall of Fame recently, looking over the new wing, the new exhibits, and the old files. Wonderful stuff!

Steve Murfin came into town, too, and we got a chance to talk. He's still hard at work checking out the Washington pro team of 1921-22. He promises us an article.

Joe Horrigan was around, too, but he managed to stay out of the way for the most part. Seriously, Joe is deep into the 1925 Pottsville controversy and has enough new information that they're going to have to rewrite the record books.

I also got a chance to go over to the Massillon Public Library for a little research. Nice people there.

* * *

John Hogrogian, who's done so much work on the 1920's, might have the answer to this one. On Saturday, December 14, 1929, the Frankford Yellowjackets beat the Orange Tornadoes, 10-0. Yet, neither the N.F.L. nor your records include the game in the 1929 standings. How come? Other games played later were included.

* * *

Concerning the question of a rumored N.F.L. being formed in 1919, Jim Campbell reminds me of this: From the Canton Repository of November 13, 1919, headlined "Annual Gossip of 'Pro' League Bobs Up Again." The story reads: "At least once a year there bobs up a project for a professional football league, which naturally would include Canton, the hotbed of the game. A circuit for 1920 was proposed at Cleveland yesterday, with the backers of the Cleveland team at the foundation of the movement... But the Canton magnates will not consider plans for a league until after the close of the present campaign several weeks hence."

* * *

This month's research article is the result of my trip to the Massillon Public Library. I apologize for a somewhat lighthearted approach. I know that's a no-no in serious research, but I like to have fun while I'm doing this stuff.

THE TIGERS IN '03

They never played a minute in the N.F.L., but the Massillon Tigers are one of the greatest names adorning pro football's past. They are best remembered as the team that always seemed to be losing key games to Jim Thorpe's Canton Bulldogs around the time of World War I. Indeed, one exhibit at Pro Football's Hall of Fame shows scores and lineups from the Bulldog-Tiger frays between 1915 and 1919. Visiting Massillonians grit their teeth when they pass that one; sure enough, Old Jim's 'Dogs won most of the time.

However, the Massillon story has two chapters, and the first is far more satisfactory to inhabitants of Stark County's second city. The initial version of the Tigers played from 1903 to 1906. Not only were they just about as successful on the field as a team could be, but also they were at the center of one of the most significant events in early pro football history: the introduction of professionalism to the Ohio gridiron in '03.

Massillon fielded amateur teams made up of local athletes during the 1890s. Some had done well, but each year when it played arch-rival Canton, Stark County's "big city," a humiliating defeat ensued. Now, despite Canton's larger size, Massillon believed itself more than the equal of its rival. For example, Canton might boast that it was the home of President William McKinley; Massillon could counter that it was the birthplace of Jacob Sechler Coxey who led an army of hoboes in a march on Washington long before it was fashionable. And, Massillonians could add, nobody shot him. That Canton's football team could consistently zap Massillon's was more than the local folk cared to stand.

Not only was the string of losses embarrassing to Massillon pride, but they were also, and perhaps more importantly, costly in dollars and cents. Large amounts were always wagered on the outcomes of the games, and the Canton contingent always came out with the cash.

On September 3, 1903, thirty-five local businessmen and football enthusiasts gathered at Massillon's Hotel Sailer to do something about the situation.

Out of the get-together came a new football team and a determination to do whatever it took to avenge Massillon's honor and to replenish a few pocketbooks at the expense of the hated Cantonians. Jack Goodrich, who was to show himself a first-rate halfback, was named the team's manager. Ed Stewart, who had the benefit of having played football at both Western Reserve and Mt. Union College, was elected the coach. Stewart's election assured the team of a good press; he was the editor of the local Massillon Evening Independent.

A committee led by J. J. Wise, whose name echoed the opinion with which he was held in the community, set out to secure the necessary funds for equipment. In 1903, "equipment" for many teams meant nothing more than jerseys that were nearly the same color. It turned out that the local sporting goods store had only jerseys with striped sleeves in sufficient supply to outfit an entire team. Naturally, the new team was christened the "Tigers."

The story so far was no different than that enacted in countless Ohio and western Pennsylvania towns during these years: the gathering of community leaders, the electing of a manager and a coach, the purchase of jerseys with the team usually receiving its name from the color or pattern of its apparel. The team itself was strictly amateur and stocked with local boys and high hopes. Had the script followed the traditional pattern, the season would have produced a string of ugly defeats and the team would have been heard of no more.

An ominous off-stage rumble was that several of the expected starters hadn't touched a football in eight years. One of them, Julius "Baldy" Wittmann, 32-year old proprietor of a local cigar store and a Massillon police officer in his spare time, had never played the game at all, according to local legend.

On September 26, a little over three weeks after the Hotel Sailer meeting, the new Tigers went to Wooster College to try out their fresh jerseys. Starting at tackle

was Charles "Cy" Rigler who later became a major league baseball umpire. Wittmann opened at end, and newspaperman-coach Stewart was at quarterback.

The results were disappointing, as the collegians took a 6-0 verdict. On the bright side, Stewart's Evening Independent observed that the Tigers had really outplayed Wooster, even though some of Massillon's players had never actually practiced with the team before taking the field. And, in the second place, the paper insisted, the loss was entirely due to unfair officiating. Why, things got so bad, said the Evening Independent, that when a Wooster man ran 75 yards for the winning touchdown the Wooster fans refused to cheer because five Massillon players were so obviously held on the play. If the paper is to be believed, the Wooster crowd set a standard for sportsmanship never attained before or since.

At any rate, on the train back to Massillon, the Tigers elected Baldy Wittmann as their captain. Aside from being older than most of his teammates, Baldy was a natural leader and an athlete who learned quickly. Stewart's newspaper headlined its story of the game, "Defeated But Not Discouraged."

And things improved once the team got around to practicing together. The Tigers had some real talent, including several big, bruising linemen in center "Farmer" Boerngen, Frank Botoner, another 32-year old policeman, and 21-year old Fred Haag who tipped the scales at better than 250 pounds. Wittman and Herman Vogt were tough defenders in an age when that was an end's primary function. If the line had a weakness, it was at tackle. After the opening loss, Rigler confined himself to cheering from the sidelines. His absence from the lineup was not greatly mourned, but it took awhile to fill the tackle slots with top-drawer athletes.

The backfield boasted breakaway threats in Manager Goodrich at half and Coach Stewart at quarter. The main star of the team, however, was its 170 pound fullback, Mully Miller. He was a real stinger who could blast holes through the toughest opponents' lines.

On Saturday, October 17, the Tigers showed the results of three weeks' hard practice when they opened at home before 500 fans at the unenclosed Hospital Grounds Field. They belted Stewart's alma mater, Mt. Union, 16-0. The "hospital," by the way, was the state mental asylum.

The next Saturday, the team had a much harder time in downing the Imperials, an independent team from Akron. With only three minutes left and no score on the board, Goodrich broke away for 55 yards to win the game, 6-0. One Imperial player, tackle Walt Roepke, caught the eye of the Massillon hierarchy. Wouldn't it be nice, they thought, if we had a tackle like that?

Another Akron team, the Blues, proved easier victims on October 31, falling 38-0. Indeed, the score might have been higher yet had not the second half been limited to a mere eight minutes. Goodrich contributed a 75-yard dash and Miller, although hampered by a lame back, scored twice.

The Tigers were really rolling now. Playing their fourth straight Saturday home game on November 7, they clawed the Dennison Panhandles, 34-0. Goodrich and young Bob Featheringham, playing his first game at halfback, zipped for long runs and Miller garnered two more scores. The feature play of the game came on the second half kickoff when Stewart brought the ball back 90 yards for a touchdown.

The next opponent really counted -- Canton!

More than 400 Cantonians came over to Massillon, and the crowd at the Hospital Grounds exceeded 2,000. Bets ranged from \$5 to \$200 on the winner. The Evening Independent estimated that better than \$1,000 was risked at the game itself.

The players, of course, were simon-pure amateurs, regardless of how much they might wager on their own performances. Some in the crowd might have remarked on the happy coincidence that the Tiger line which heretofore had been characterized as "heavy but slow" was sporting two new tackles for the big game. And some may have wondered why former Imperial star and Akron native Walt Roepke chose just this moment to join the Massillon team. No doubt his reasons had something to do with sportsmanship and camaraderie. Certainly, no mention of monetary inducement ever reached the pages of the Massillon Evening Independent.

Before the game, the Massillon Military Band, led by Drum Major Edward Ertle who doubled as chief of police, paraded through the streets. During the game, Mully Miller and company paraded through the Canton line. When darkness finally halted the contest, the Tigers held a 16-0 lead, Massillon held its head high, and local fans held a lot of Canton money.

With Canton in the bag, it probably seemed that any further games would be anticlimactic. However, the Tiger backers had more ambitions for their athletes. They lusted after the Ohio state championship.

The championship had nothing official about it; it was acclaimed by popular opinion at the end of each season. The custom dated back to the mid-1890s. For several years, the East End team of Akron had been recognized as the champs. When the Massillon people approached the Akron leaders, they were told, in effect, "Go play for a couple of years until you're good enough to challenge us." Despite the rebuff, Massillon continued to press for a meeting.

They also continued to win, easily kayoing the All-Clevelands, 29-0, on Saturday, November 21. Apparently all of Cleveland held only eleven players because when J. Fairfax, one of their halfbacks, went out with an injury, they had to recruit a Massillon sub. Reportedly, a second-stringer named Klein acquitted himself well against his mates.

On Thanksgiving, Wooster College -- the same outfit that had handed the Tigers their only loss -- came to Massillon. The day proved snowy and miserable, but a thousand Massillonians showed up to watch their heroes get revenge. The one-sided game and 34-0 score lent support to the Tigers' contention that they had been robbed by bad officiating at Wooster. Miller and Goodrich each scored a touchdown, and Roepke, the Akronite, scored three times.

At long last an agreement was reached with the Akron East Enders. A game at Akron was slated for Saturday, December 5. The contract called for a 75-25 split of the gate, with the winner taking the main portion.

Fans from both towns began putting their money where their mouths had been. Then, a cloud appeared to darken the Tigers' horizon. By the week of the game, the team had more cripples than a help-the-handicapped poster. Farmer Boerngen had just had a finger amputated, making his centering questionable to say the least. Harry Anderson, a lineman who had seen plenty of action, had a broken bone in his right hand. Feathering-ham's ankle was hurting, Goodrich was limping, and Haag, the big guard, was suffering from a bum shoulder. Captain Wittmann and Mully Miller were definitely out of the game. Baldy had a sprained ankle; Miller's arm was in a sling, the result of a dislocated collar bone.

The Massillon squad was deep enough to put players on the field in place of the regulars, but the reserves were not deemed of a caliber to compete for the state championship. Manager Goodrich sent for reinforcements.

And so it happened that midway through the week four Pennsylvanians came to Massillon to battle for the championship of Ohio. All were veterans of the pro football scene in Pittsburgh. A burly individual whose name was spelled Pfeifer in the Pittsburgh papers but Piper or Peiper in the Massillon daily possessed a sterling reputation as a tackle no matter what he was called. Big Bob Shiring was a 250 pound giant who'd held down the center position for the Pittsburgh Stars in 1902. That meant he was the best available man at the position in western Pennsylvania. The best-known of the quartet were the two McChesney brothers, Harry and Doc. Harry McChesney was a back who immediately set Massillon buzzing with his gargantuan punts at practice. At end or tackle, Doc McChesney was considered the equal of any lineman around. And the new recruits were ready to play, all of them having just completed a good season with Pittsburgh's East End team.

The Evening Independent trumpeted the imports' prowess but neglected to mention just what had induced them to spend a week in Ohio. A reader of the local press might assume that four famous Pittsburgh pros had arrived on the scene in order to breathe Massillon's fresh air.

The Akron Beacon-Journal knew better and said so two days before the game:

Since the fact has leaked out that Massillon has employed a number of outsiders to play on the "Massillon" team in their efforts to wrest the state championship from Akron, it is noticeable that little has been said by the Massillon men about the "amateur" football players of that place. Before the professionals of Pittsburgh were hired, all their talk was of a team composed exclusively of Massillon boys who were just going to "act up +ur'ble" when they came to Akron to show the locals how to play the game. But whether it be Massillon, Pittsburgh, or any other city that is represented, it makes little difference to the fast local bunch, so long as the visitors can play the game and put up a stiff fight.

It is the old wail about the exclusively Massillon team, whose star by the way is Roepke, the Akron tackle ..., that makes grins come to Akron faces. The game Saturday will be a game between the Akron champs and a picked professional team. If they were paid players who had been in Massillon's lineup all along during the season, it would not seem so laughable. Now the Akron lineup will be the same as it has been right along this season. All the men live in Akron. All are members of the Akron Athletic Club and were previous to the opening of the football season.

The reaction to Massillon's new policy was less outraged in Canton, but considerably more practical; they began laying plans to bring in pros for the 1904 season.

Some day a researcher may find evidence of earlier under-the-table payments to Ohio footballers. The case of the Akronite Roepke certainly looks suspicious. But when the four Pittsburghers took the field on December 5, they introduced acknowledged professionalism to the Ohio gridiron. That acknowledgement had not yet been made in Massillon, of course, but if there was a football fan in northern Ohio who didn't know what was really happening on that Akron field, he was the same guy who believed in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, and the honesty of politicians.

The game proved a real bruiser. The "traitor" Roepke opened at fullback in Mully Miller's place for the Tigers, but he didn't last long. Almost immediately he was put out of action when a well-aimed kick broke his nose. Goodrich limped on in his place. The Evening Independent said later that Roepke cried on the sidelines because he was unable to continue in the game. A few more cynical souls suggested that the tears might have resulted from the fact that his nose was nearly hanging out his ear.

The Pittsburgh pros lived up to their advance notices. Pfeifer, Shiring, and Doc McChesney were magnificent as they completely stopped the Akron line smashes. Harry McChesney kept the East Enders back on their east ends with his long-distance punts. Akron fought back gamely, but when Akron's quarterback mishandled one of Harry's boots, his brother Doc was there to fall on the ball for a touchdown. Massillon led 6-0 at the half.

The Akron fans were even more frustrated than their team. About 800 Massillonians, including the Military Band, had swelled the attendance to over 2,000. Things began to turn ugly. The Evening Independent described the scene:

During the intermission ... headed by the Military Band, with Chief of Police Ertle leading, the Massillon fans paraded around the gridiron. Such audacity was a new thing on an Akron field ... and the hoodlums, rowdies, and even policemen joined in one of the most ruffianly attacks which it has ever been the misfortune of the Massillon crowd to undergo.

A large clod of frozen mud struck Chief Ertle on the back of the head. Sticks and stones flew through the air. The ribbons of the fans were snatched. The players in the band were bumped and jostled about by the crowd until in several instances their instruments were damaged. The Massillon fans were offered absolutely no protection by the corps of policemen about the field. Officer Wittmann, the Tiger captain, who was acting as linesman was deliberately assaulted by a gang of five men, and only prompt action on the part of the Massillon fans saved him.

Then, before the second half began, Bill Laub, the Akron coach, insisted that the officials be changed. The intent was probably psychological, but the result bordered on inflammatory. Play resumed with the distinct possibility that the game might explode into a full scale riot at any moment.

However, the Tigers were so patently in charge during the second half that Akron's fans lost their anger in the gloom of defeat. A second Massillon touchdown was registered when Doc McChesney on a tackle-around play fumbled conveniently into the end zone, allowing Vogt to recover for the score.

When time was finally called, Massillon had the state championship and 75% of the receipts. How much was won in wagers could only be guessed, but the day before 350 Massillon dollars were sent over to Akron to be bet at even money.

On the train home, they took up a collection for Roepke. He netted \$40 as an "expression of gratitude." Eventually, the native Massillon players were paid too -- \$10 for the season. Just what the Pittsburgh pros took home is open to conjecture. The Beacon-Journal insisted that they walked off with all the Massillon profits for 1903, but the estimate may have been inflated by an injection of sour grapes. The paper also termed the Massillon win "hollow."

Massillonians were so embarrassed at winning with pros that they celebrated far into Sunday morning. In fact, Pfeifer and Doc McChesney didn't catch their train back to Pittsburgh until late Sunday night, vowing to return for the 1904 season.

For several weeks after that, the argument for and against professionalism raged throughout northern Ohio. In Massillon there was no divergence of opinion. Plans were made immediately after the Akron game to raise \$1,000 to pay for the 1904 Tigers.

By the time the next season began, at least a half dozen Ohio teams were paying some or all of their men. There was even talk of forming an association to hold down salaries.

Professionalism was triumphant in Ohio.

SOURCES: This is the first part of a longer article in progress, one that will attempt to detail the Tigers' history through 1906. The main source I used was the Massillon Evening Independent which, despite its bias, covered the Tiger games in quite a bit of detail. Unfortunately, the paper gave no space to opponents' scores. It would be interesting to know just whom the East Enders defeated and by how much before taking on Massillon. The second most important source was a program from the Canton-Massillon game of 1905 which gives a brief history of the Tigers. The program is to be found at the Hall of Fame. Also at the Hall is the famous "Nelson Ross" Manuscript which contains the information from the Akron Beacon-Journal. A final source is Dr. Harry March's Pro Football: Its "Ups" and "Downs", a book that is fun to read, but extremely unreliable as a source. However, Dr. March lived in the Canton-Massillon area at about the time in question and, hopefully, his memory was better than his credulity in writing other parts of his book. Inasmuch as virtually every standard history takes its account of football's early years from Dr. March's book, there is a great need to check each of his assertions. Unfortunately, I was not able to do this in every case.

I would be more than interested in hearing any further Massillon tidbits from sources other than those above. And, of course, any reactions to the article itself.

* * *

IS MY FACE RED? DEPARTMENT

Bob Braunwart: "I'm afraid there are some errata in my article in the last issue of Coffin Corner. On the first line of page 4 "Syracuse" should read "Rochester". (This is particularly embarrassing after my crack about confusion in the following paragraph.) Also, in the last sentence of the third paragraph on page 5, "Blades" should read "Bengals". I guess I'll have to start proofreading my stuff more carefully."

Dear Bob: You and me both! I missed it too, but no harm done. I keep a copy of the Corner with "corrected copy" labeled at the top. On this I mark in all of my own typos and errors.

BOOK REVIEWS:

While I was at the Hall, I got a chance to look over a new book by David Shapiro. It's called, if memory serves, The 135 Greatest Running Backs. Basically, it's an evaluation, using several new statistical criteria, on pro running backs from Bronko Nagurski to Walter Payton. I found it fascinating, although I'm not certain I completely agree with all of Shapiro's evaluation techniques. However, it does cast some fresh light on the tired old rushing standards.

Being basically a careless slob, I neglected to note either the price or the publisher. But it did occur to me that we should use the Corner's pages to review some of the publications each of us comes across. Particularly interesting articles in sports (and other) magazines should also be noted. Calling all reviewers!

QUESTIONS:

Pete Palmer would like some information on the 1949 AAFC Playoff Game between Cleveland and Buffalo: how many catches by Dante Lavelli and for how many yards? And how many rushes and for how many yards for Otto Graham?

John Hogrogian has several research suggestions, and I'll be passing them along piecemeal in future issues. One of the most useful and practical is that we compile a list of homeparks with street addresses and capacities. It would also be interesting to know what, if anything, stands on the present site. I know that I am constantly wondering just where a specific game was played. And, I think the capacities had a lot to do with the eventual makeup of the N.F.L.

FINAL NOTES:

Don't forget that we're hoping to get together in Canton to nail down this organization. The dates are pretty definite now: Thursday, Friday, and Saturday; June 21, 22, 23.

And, finally, Members, get those guys that you've mentioned to me as being interested on the ball and have them drop me a line so that they can be put on the mailing list.

Bob Carroll
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