



Coffin Corner

Vol. I, No. 4

June, 1979

What a difference four issues of The Coffin Corner has made for me! The acme of each day has become the mail delivery. Time was when all I could expect were the usual overdue bills, over-stated ads, and report from my under-worked congressman. But, now, every day brings a letter or two from Corner readers.

Unfortunately, I've also learned just what a lazy slob I am. Right now my "Letters-Owed" list is even longer than the one on overdue bills and almost as long as the one on "Reasons Not to Vote for That Congressman."

But, never fear, sooner or later, I'll get back to you.

In the meantime

Bob Van Atta wrote: "Lawson Fiscus is being inducted into the Westmoreland County Sports Hall of Fame at our annual dinner ... His daughter and granddaughter will be there to accept his plaque. Other pro footballers being inducted are Bob Kowalkowski (11 years with Detroit) and Bob Taterek (Buffalo, Detroit, and World Football League) and Willie Thrower (Chicago Bears and Canadian League).

Incidentally, let me remind you that Bob still has copies of his history of pro football in Latrobe available. Jim Stewart, who sent for one, seconds my recommendation of a fascinating piece of history.

Al Spacagna sent along an interesting chart he's prepared on team-versus-team records from 1920 until now. With his permission, we'll publish it in a later issue.

He also asked a question about a third 1930 Bear-Cardinal game not listed in the standard record books.

Dear Al: I'll quote from The NFL's Official Encyclopedic History of Professional Football: "Pro football was played indoors for the first time since the football World Series of 1902 and 1903. The nation was in a depression and the Chicago Bears and Cardinals played an exhibition for unemployment relief funds at Chicago Stadium. A layer of dirt covered the floor of the arena."

Isn't it curious that everyone remembers the charity game played by New York against Rockne's All-Stars, but this one involving two pro squads, and played indoors yet, is usually forgotten. Aside from the entry above, I found the game mentioned in the history section of the NFL Record Manual. Nowhere do I find a date or a score, which you give as 9-7 Bears. Several histories call the 1932 Bear-Portsmouth match the first indoor game since 1903. Maybe there's a story here.

Jim Stewart, who must read everything, came up with the pertinent information on the book I mentioned in the last issue. It's David Shapiro; "The 135 Greatest Pro Running Backs: How They Stack Up Against Each Other;" SportsMinded Publications, Dept. G; P.O. Box 1986; Berkeley, CA 94704. The price is \$7.95 plus \$1.50 for postage and handling. California residents please add 6% sales tax.

Jim says he enjoyed the book as I did.

Speaking of books, Pete Palmer is adding several new record sections to the next edition of The Official Encyclopedia of Football, as I mentioned in the last issue. He'd like to add a "games played" feature and needs some information on Battles, Gutowsky, Herber, and Nagurski.

Pete also needs about ten NFL Guides to complete his collection. Anyone who wants to pursue this, write to Pete.

This month's research article is a double. Vic Frolund, who lives in Youngstown, wrote the article on the Patricians, the 1915 Champs. Thomas S. Nikitas (24 Whitman Ave., Syosset, N.Y. 11791) sent the history of the Ironton Tanks. The Corner is indebted to both.

Allow me to take a moment here to suggest the kinds of articles I would like to see in future issues.

First, I enjoy team histories, especially when they concern those legendary non-NFL powers (like the Tanks and the Patricians) that I've heard of for years, but know little about. I'd also like to see some personality profiles. Let's face it, there's a bit of hero-worship in all of us. Statistical things always grab me; I keep going back to them over and over. And, I've always been a sucker for stories about famous incidents or games, particularly when they involve new material or personal reminiscences.

The maximum length for an article seems to be about 4,000 words, but there is no minimum. The Corner reserves the right to edit for space or accuracy. Or, just to keep busy.

UP FOR DISCUSSION

Stanley Grosshandler, M.D. (4905 Richland Drive, Raleigh, N.C., 27612) sent some tidbits that should elicit comments.

For example, Milt Roberts might like to reply to this one: "In a letter from Jack Cusack, 4/6/71, he stated that Charles Smith was the only black player on his Canton team. He played in 1916. Cusack implied he was the first black professional."

And, here's one for Pete Palmer: "The Official Encyclopedia of Football lists Larry Kelley as having played for the Boston Shamrocks in '37. In 1974 Larry told me he had just played an exhibition game for them and never played pro football. He said he had been told by his coaches that Ivy League men did not play pro sports and rejected contracts from the baseball Cardinals and the N.F.L."

This suggestion by the good doctor really turned me on: "Several years ago SABR conducted a poll called 'Ten Best Players Not in Hall of Fame.' This was featured as an editorial in The Sporting News and several of those names did get into H.F. I also feel it gave SABR tremendous publicity. The Coffin Corner might consider same. I am sure the results would be interesting.

Well, Doc, I think the results would be downright fascinating. I'll even go out on a limb and be the first to list ten choices -- although I'll make it "Ten Pros" instead of "Ten Players" in order to include some builders that I think richly deserve being honored. My choices, which probably reveal my "early years bias," are: John K. Brallier, Jack Cusack, Lavvie Dilweg, Bennie Friedman, Frank Gatski, Verne Lewellen, Ted Nesser, Peggy Parratt, Fritz Pollard, and Arnie Weinmeister.

Okay, folks, having put my foot in my mouth, I can almost hear your angry screams. "How can you list so-and-so and leave out such-and-such!" Well, if that's how you feel about it, say so. Your chance is on the questionnaire with this month's issue.

Dr. Grosshandler's suggestion brings another idea to mind. Ever since I was a kid, I've loved All-Time Teams. I can't resist anything from "The All-Time Blue-eyed Team" to "The Best of the Miami Seahawks" or "Truman Capote Names His All-Stars."

It strikes me that we have out there in Readerland an all-star panel of pickers. So, here's announcing the PFRAA All-Time Pro Teams.

Here are the rules: Each month we'll vote on a different N.F.L. team. All ballots must be in by the 15th of the month. The results will be announced in the next issue.

For each team pick one coach, two wide receivers, a tight end, two offensive tackles, two guards, one center, one quarterback, two running backs, four defensive linemen, three linebackers, four defensive backs, one kicker, and one punter. Active players are eligible. A player need not have played the position for which he is picked exclusively -- in fact, you could pick a tight end from the '30s when there was no such position. However, a player (or coach) may be named in only one slot on each ballot. The criteria for choosing one player over another may include ability, length of service, team contributions, or anything else you personally believe rates one player higher than another.

The first team to be picked and the one we'll announce in the July issue has to be the one that has spent the most years in continuous operation in one place -- the Green Bay Packers.

Get those ballots in!

TAKE-WITH-A-CARLOAD-OF-SALT DEPARTMENT

Everyone tells Jim Thorpe stories. The only problem is that most of the stories end up being the same one. This personal experience has to be the ultimate of something. But it must be true because I heard it from a guy who never lied to me unless it was convenient.

"It was my first visit to the Hall. I went early on a weekday morning in spring, so the place was empty as I entered. The first thing I saw was this huge statue of Jim Thorpe, posed on one leg as though racing down the field. I started toward it. Then, another exhibit caught my eye and I tried to turn. Somehow, I tripped. Wham! I fell into the statue, smashing my shoulder into its mid-section. The statue swayed and then righted itself while I held my breath. Perhaps I was dazed, but, even though there was no one in sight, I thought I heard a voice close by my ear, warning me to let Jim do something-or-other. I jerked my head up and banged my forehead on the statue's arm. I saw stars! I guess I staggered around quite a bit because, when my vision cleared, I was lying on the floor behind the statue. It was at that moment that I heard the voice again and I swear it came straight from the statue. It said, 'Thanks, Sonny, for letting Ol' Jim run.'"

Further contributions to this department will be taken under advisement. And, we'll try not to step in them.

THE STORY OF THE PATRICIAN FOOTBALL TEAM

By Vic Frolund

In the year of 1914, the Patrician Club, a men's group from St. Patrick's Parish on Youngstown's near South Side, whose objects were to advance the moral, social and physical welfare of its members, organized a football team. This team was comprised of players with little or no high school or college training and therefore was on the sandlot or semi-pro level. Most of the squad came from within a 25 mile radius of Youngstown, Niles and Girard, Ohio.

So, with about 18 players and a motto that read, "With Malice to None and a Square Deal to All," the Patricians entered the football wars of 1914 with an eight game schedule against teams in Ohio and nearby Pennsylvania. Their season's record was a very respectable eight wins, one loss -- that to Salem, Ohio, 7 to 0. These, by the way, were the only points scored on them. The Pats scored 148 points on their opponents.

The big game of the year was the season's finale against the Crescent A.C., also from the south side of Youngstown, which was won by the Patricians 3 to 0 on a field goal by fullback John Dillon. The Crescents had been local champs for the past few years and, with this victory, the Pats laid claim to the Mahoning Valley title.

Highly elated over the success of their first venture into this comparatively new Sunday afternoon diversion, the Patrician club decided to go into the pro football game on a larger scale. As a result of this decision, a longer -- 9 games -- and tougher schedule was arranged. In addition to four opponents from the previous year, the Pats slated Akron, the McKeesport Olympics, the Pitcairn Quakers, the Columbus Panhandles, and the Washington D.C. Vigilants.

In order to meet this kind of opposition, more experienced and more "NAME" players were necessary. The squad was increased to 25 players, with only seven carried over from 1914. The eighteen new men were for the most part former college stars. A few were still in school but could pick up some much needed "E Pluribus Unum" by playing on Sundays under assumed names. Contracts were practically unheard of in the early days of the pro game. Consequently, a player could be with a different team every Sunday. His services were open to the highest bidder each week. Among the players garnered for the 1915 season were Ray Miller of Notre Dame; Elgie Tobin, Penn State; "Busty" Ashbaugh, who had just begun coaching at South High School in Youngstown after receiving All-American mention at Brown University; George Vedernach, Carlisle; Eberhart of Penn State; Getz, Duvall and Benson from Akron; Jarvis from the Columbus Panhandles; and "The Man of the Hour," player-coach Ray L. Thomas, another local just out of school and entering the practice of law.

Under the brilliant playing of the brainy Thomas who guided the team at quarterback, the Pats won eight, tied one, and lost none, scoring 271 points to their opponents' 22. A scoreless tie with the Columbus Panhandles marred an otherwise perfect season. Included among the eight wins was an outstanding, 13 to 7, victory over the Washington Vigilants. Over a span of nine years, the Vigilants had won 90 games, lost but three, and had one tie. They had claimed the World's Championship of professional football since 1907, defeating such teams as the famous Philadelphia Blues, Jersey City Pros, Harrisburg Giants, Altoona All-Stars, Baltimore and New York Pros, Albany, Camden, Boston, Reading, Scranton, and Savannah. The three losses were by the slimmest of margins -- 3-0, 7-6, and 3-0 -- to All-Star College teams at the ends of seasons, after the Vigilants had broken training. The Patricians were the first pro team to win from Washington in nine years, and, by virtue of the win, laid claim to the title of World Champs.

To further strengthen their claim to the title, the Pats cited the following facts: Massillon defeated Toledo; Toledo defeated Columbus; Dayton defeated Toledo; Columbus defeated Massillon, Dayton and Detroit, western champs; Massillon defeated and lost to Canton; the Detroit Maroons lost to Massillon; and the Patricians tied Columbus. Or, to sum up, Massillon and Canton and Toledo all lost twice, and Columbus lost three times. Youngstown offered to play Canton, Massillon and Toledo in post-season games but each of these teams rejected the offer. The Patricians believed that they deserved to be called the 1915 Champions.

In 1916, the Patricians were faced with the problem of retaining their championship, and this against much stiffer opposition. To begin with, the schedule was increased to eleven games. For the first time Canton and Massillon were to appear on the Patrician schedule, Massillon to be played twice on a home and home basis.

The season opened with a sound beating of Lisbon, Ohio, 21 to 0. Altoona was trounced, 41 to 0. Jamestown, N.Y., was smothered, 33 to 0. Wheeling, W.Va., bowed 7-0, and the Pitcairn Quakers went down by the same count. The Pats were off and running with five straight wins and nary a point scored against them. However, in the sixth game, the first against the Tigers of Massillon, the Pats went down in a hard fought struggle, 3 to 0.

In the next contest, the McKeesport Olympics were swamped, 20 to 3, but the powerful Canton Bulldogs proved too formidable as they won, 6 to 0. Then, in the ninth game, the Washington Vigilants were edged by the slimmest of margins, 10 to 9. But in the second Massillon game, the Tigers romped, 26 to 0. The season closed with a sad, 0-13, loss to the Columbus Panhandles.

This mediocre, 7-4, season could be attributable to the departure of key players to more fertile fields and the decision of player-coach Ray Thomas to confine his duties to manager. He was replaced at quarterback by Tommy Hughitt of Michigan. Also brought in were Sanooke from Carlisle; "By" Morgan, a local semi-pro; Palmer of Ohio State; and Loos from Akron. But their inability to win the big games proved to be their undoing, and the Patricians, 1915 Champs, surrendered the 1916 laurels to the Canton Bulldogs.

In 1917, the Patricians were determined to win back the pro title. An all new squad that included five All-Americans was signed. Such names as Hughitt, Gormley of Georgetown, Bart Macomber of Illinois, and Fitzgerald, Kelleher, and Ward of Notre Dame adorned the roster. But the master stroke was the signing of Stan Cofall, All-American fresh out of Notre Dame to be player-coach of this star-studded aggregation.

After the warm-up and fairly tough games were out of the way, the big ones began. The first of these came on November 3 when the great Jim Thorpe and his Canton Bulldogs invaded Youngstown. The game was played at Wright Field before a record crowd of 7,000 wild and hysterical fans. The Bulldogs won this thriller on a field goal by "Black" (probably Dartmouth's Doc Spears). With the score, 3 to 0, against them, the Pats had three field goals missed by their specialist, Bart Macomber.

As an indication of what a titanic struggle this game was, Thorpe, who very seldom played a full game, played every minute of this one. Starting for Canton were Sefton of Colgate and Greasy Neale at ends, Notre Dame's Horse Edwards and Kellison of W. Va. Wesleyan at tackles, Russell of Penn and "Black" at guards, Fat Waldsmith of Akron at center, Milt Ghee of Dartmouth at quarter, Dunn of Dickinson and Thorpe at the halves, and Pete Calac at full. Youngstown presented Marion of Georgetown and Kelleher of Notre Dame at the ends, Gormley of Georgetown and Watkins of Rutgers at the tackles, Barron of Georgetown and Notre Dame's Fitzgerald at the guards, Bob Peck of Pitt at center, Hughitt at quarter, Barrett of W. & L. and Macomber at halves, and Cofall at fullback. Even after we make allowances for a few assumed names by college undergrads picking up a buck or two, the lineups read like a who's-who of post-graduate football, circa 1917.

The next week, the Patricians took the measure of the Massillon Tigers, 14 to 6. The Massillon touchdown was scored by Tuss McLaughery who went on to become a great college coach.

On November 19, the Patricians journeyed over to Canton for their second game with the Bulldogs. This was a different story from the previous encounter and the Pats went down, 13 to 0.

This game wrapped up the season for the Youngstowners, albeit rather abruptly. With the menacing clouds of World War I hovering over the U.S., some football stars were joining up with Uncle Sam and it was becoming difficult to muster a team on the field. The remaining players were free to line up with other clubs. Cofall, Peck and Fitzgerald finished the season with Massillon.

Pro football in 1918 was virtually abandoned. However, with the war over, the Pats were back in business in 1919 and 1920. Gone were the All-Americans and stars. These teams were more on the semi-pro level. They were coached by "Busty" Ashbaugh, who with end Bob Kling had played on the "big" Patrician teams of former years. The result was one of the strongest semi-pro teams in the state of Ohio.

THE IRONTON TANKS: OHIO VALLEY INDEPENDENT - 1919 to 1931

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 has 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. For the twelve years from their start until they disbanded, they were the scourge of the Ohio Valley and the tri-state area, as any team that played them will attest.

Not all the players were hometown boys. In fact, most of the players lived throughout Ohio and the tri-state area and would come by bus on Saturday, go through their plays that day, and play a game Sunday afternoon.

"Tank" was a symbol of power, and, since the team was formed after World War I, the title seemed quite appropriate, as they lived up to it.

The Tanks played twelve seasons. One hundred and nineteen games were scheduled, the Tanks won 86, tied 14, and lost 19 games. 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. An article in the Ironton paper in 1964 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 crashers 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 N.F.L. the next season. The coach and quarterback was the great Glenn Presnell who led the N.F.L. in scoring in 1933.

Nor were these victories isolated wonders. Such teams as the Kansas City Cowboys, the Canton Bulldogs, the Akron Pros, and the 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 were ready to blow the whistle, a large moving van drove up to the side line 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 playing 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.

Ironton will long remember the Tanks.

DON'T FORGET: JUNE 21, 22, 23 IN CANTON!

I am particularly indebted to L. Robert Davids (4424 Chesapeake St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20016) who sent information on the organization and structure of SABR. He also added some cautionary notes re-PFRAA, pointing out how much time and effort establishing such a group demands. He's right; he's been there. Anything worth doing involves work.

But I'm not worried. All of you have shown by your research efforts a willingness to go farther than to just sit in front of the tube and let the world flow over you in living color.

Right now, we're looking forward to meeting you in Canton this month. Let's talk about that.

Several of you have asked if the meeting could be postponed until the Hall of Fame game.

I'm sorry to say that's not possible. In the first place, the game is sold out, and Joe Horrigan tells me that the Hall itself is scheduled to the gills for that week. Secondly, there are several pressing questions that can best be handled face-to-face, and the sooner the better.

A few have already sent regrets that for various valid reasons you cannot attend. We're such a small group right now that any absence hurts, but everyone understands that there are plenty of personal conflicts. Don't apologize; just keep on truckin'. However, even if you cannot attend, we would like some input from you. That is why the questionnaire is included with this issue.

Please -- even if you're certain that you will be there -- send it in. Some of you have friends who apparently read the Corner second hand. Ask them to fill in a duplicate. Lend them a stamp. Lick the envelope for them!

Obviously, those who come to Canton will be most responsible for what PFRAA finally becomes, but we want everyone to get a say.

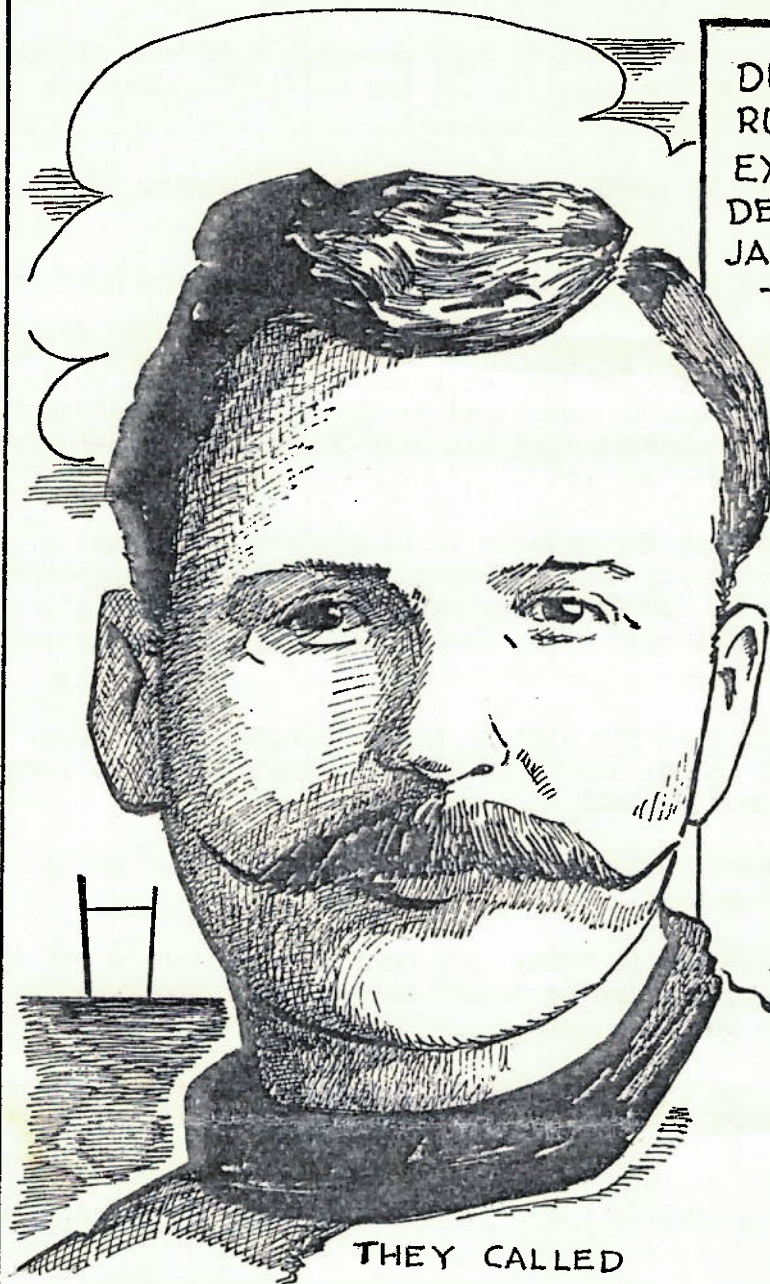
About the meeting itself, my thinking is this: I'm coming to Canton to get some work done, not for entertainment. Frankly, we plan no social hours, guest speakers, or films. We won't even have a naked lady jump out of a cake.

However, those of you who have not been to the Hall (or have not been there recently) will want to tour. Some may want research time, and some may just want to sleep late. We'll keep the mornings free.

On Thursday, June 21, we will be holding preliminary discussions in the Hall's library from 1:30 to 4:30 P.M.

We hope to be far enough along by Friday to have an actual business meeting that afternoon. Saturday afternoon is being left open to see what develops.

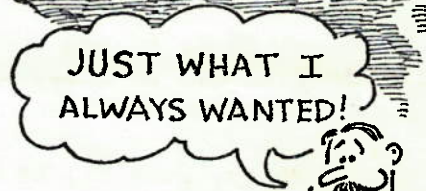
If this sounds a little loose, that's because it is. Right now I have a host of suggestions and questions on my desk (and swimming in my head). But, until the hands go up, nothing is definite. See you in June!



DESPITE HIS MANY FINE RUNS, FISCUS' BEST-KNOWN EXPLOIT WAS A KICK—ONE DELIVERED TO A RIVAL'S JAW—A CASE OF MAYHEM THAT ENDED THE GAME WHEN GREENSBURG'S OPPONENT REFUSED TO CONTINUE.



AFTER HE QUIT FOOTBALL, FISCUS BECAME A HIGHLY RESPECTED LOCAL POLICE CHIEF.



THEY CALLED

LAWSON FISCUS

"THE SAMSON OF PRINCETON"

WHEN HE TORE UP AND DOWN THE FIELD FOR GREENSBURG IN THE GAY 90'S. HE WAS SO GOOD, IN FACT, THAT THEY MADE HIM THE FIRST PRO TO RECEIVE A REGULAR WEEKLY SALARY *in* \$20!



Carroll