

THE HARTFORD BLUES
Part 2

by John Hogrogian

Hartford, Connecticut, is one of those cities that somehow got lost in the shuffle of medium-sized East Coast metropolises that ring New York like static electrons. There haven't been any popular songs written about Hartford. Broadway plays traditionally open for previews downstate in New Haven. Even W.C. Fields gave it short shrift, aiming his barbs at another locale, Philadelphia.

Likewise, all of Hartford's ventures into big-league sports have ended in frustration. The Connecticut capital fielded a baseball team in the newborn National League in 1876 but dropped out after one season. The New England Whalers of the World Hockey Association of recent years drew healthy crowds, but the collapse of the roof of the Hartford Civic Center left the team homeless and it moved to Springfield, Massachusetts.

Hartford even had a fling with pro football as a member of the National Football League in 1926.

There were semipro football teams throughout Connecticut in 1925 with the All-New Britains and the Waterbury Blues the best. George Mulligan, the leading boxing promoter in the state, operated the Waterbury team; Mulligan planned to bring Connecticut into the national football scene.

While the other semipro teams used local sandlot players and New England collegians, Mulligan daringly hired Harry Stuhldreher, one of the famed Four Horsemen of Notre Dame, to play in the Blues' backfield in 1925. When the Hartford semipro team folded in November, Mulligan transferred his team's home games to the capital city, where the larger population provided better box office potential.

This was the autumn in which Red Grange turned professional with the Chicago Bears immediately after the end of his college season at Illinois. The most famous college player of his time, Grange spurred interest in the NFL and drew record-breaking crowds, including more than 70,000 in New York and Los Angeles.

In 1926, with visions of profit and publicity, Mulligan petitioned for membership in the NFL for his Blues. The league accepted his application and Hartford became one of the 22 franchises that stretched from the East Coast to Kansas City. League president Joe Carr did not issue schedules for the teams, allowing each franchise to arrange its own. So several teams played their entire schedules on the road. And the schedules varied so that some clubs played as few as 4 league games while others played as many as 16.

The NFL also faced another challenge in its seventh year. Grange inspired the birth of the first American Football League, which had nine teams, centered around Grange's New York Yankees. Mulligan also lost his biggest name, Stuhldreher, to the AFL. Still, Mulligan had no competition from the AFL in Hartford. He had only to convince fans who supported semipro ball to turn out in large numbers for the higher-quality NFL.

Mulligan signed a contract for use of the Velodrome, a new bicycle track just across the Connecticut River in East Hartford. The Velodrome was an oval with about 8,000 seats around the banked wooden track. There was enough room inside the track to lay out a football field.

With a stadium to play in, Mulligan went to work forming his team. He signed Jack Keough, an assistant at the University of Pennsylvania, as coach. Keough was a dentist in Philadelphia and his \$7,500 contract with Mulligan allowed him to practice in that city three days each week.

Keough urged caution in his first press conference.

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"I don't want the fans of Hartford and vicinity to expect too much in our first season," he said, "but we will do our best. When they see the opposition, they will know the caliber of the men now in professional football."

Mulligan provided Keough with few players of renown. For a backfield he would have to rely on the speed of Enid Thomas, Jim Foley, and Eddie McEvoy, all of whom weighed under 175 pounds. Thomas was fresh out of Penn. Foley, who was known as Shrimp, had been a Hartford high school star before attending Syracuse. McEvoy was a southern player out of Spring Hill College. The best-known player was fullback Ed Barnikow, former star of the All-New Britain team. None had ever played in the NFL.

The Blues' line was composed of local semipro and three NFL veterans -- end Howard (Dutch) Webber, tackle Hec Garvey, and center Elmer McCormick. Garvey could not practice with the team, since he was acting in a film being shot on Long Island. He was allowed to report only for games until the movie -- The Quarterback, starring Richard Dix -- was completed.

Two young Connecticut natives with contrasting physiques were signed as guards. Ed Keenan of Waterbury weighed 320 pounds; Dick Noble, a recent graduate of Trinity College in Hartford, weighed 178.

Another lineman, Ernie McCann from Penn State, doubled as the assistant coach.

Training camp began September 11 at the state armory, since the Velodrome was being seeded and would not be available for another week. Only 18 players ran through the first-day noncontact drills. The Hartford *Courant* reported that a "Blockley performed his halfback role clad in golf trousers," since uniforms were scarce.

Players drifted in and out of camp during the week. McCann took charge while Keough pursued dentistry in Philadelphia.

Prior to the first -- and only -- pre-season game, the players were issued uniforms with royal blue jerseys and helmets. The Hartford Blues played their first game Sunday, September 19, beating a team from the Brooklyn Naval Hospital 33-7.

A week later, they made their NFL debut against the New York Giants in the Velodrome. A crowd of 6,500 paid from \$1.15 for general admission to \$2.50 for a box seat to see the home team go against the Giants, who had finished with an 8-4 record in their inaugural season of 1925. The Giants featured breakaway runner Hinkey Haines and passer Jack McBride behind a line headed by tackle Steve Owen (who was beginning a 28-year association with the Giants) and guard Joe Alexander, who also was head coach and a physician.

The Blues ventured into the NFL with a break when Alexander fumbled the opening kickoff and the Blues recovered on New York's 30 yard line. But reality came quickly as three plays gained nothing and Barnikow's field goal attempt missed. That was the Blues' high point of the day; in fact, they failed to make a first down the entire game. The Giants drove 80 yards to score on a pass from McBride to Jack Hagerty in the second quarter, and a plunge by McBride capped a 52-yard third-quarter drive. The Giants finished the 21-0 victory by recovering a bad center pass in the Blues' end zone in the third period.

During the following week, Mulligan responded by cutting several players, including Noble. Keough left for his Philadelphia practice on Tuesday. His players would join him there for a Saturday game against the Frankford Yellowjackets.

The Blues left Hartford at 5:40 A.M. Friday for the train ride to Philadelphia. They arrived at mid-day and worked out on a local golf course in the afternoon. After dinner, they went to a local theater to watch a film of the Jack Dempsey-Gene Tunney fight in which Tunney won the heavyweight championship.

Frankford Stadium was located in the northeast section of Philadelphia and, since the city forbade Sunday spectator sports, the Yellowjackets played home games on Saturday, usually followed by a road game on Sunday. This weekend they also would play the Blues in Hartford on Sunday.

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The Yellowjackets were among the NFL's best teams, featuring a versatile offense and one of the league's best defenses. They were coached by Guy Chamberlin, a future Pro Football Hall of Famer.

Warm weather lured a full house of 15,000 to see the Yellowjackets win 13-0. After the game, both teams caught a train back to Hartford for Sunday's game where a crowd of 3,000 paid to see the Yellowjackets make it two in a row with a 10-0 victory.

Three straight shutouts led Mulligan and Keough to overhaul the offense. They added three new backs in Lou Smythe, Chuck Corgan, and Jim Manning. Smythe was a 29-year-old fullback who had starred for the champion Canton Bulldogs of 1923. In the interim, however, he had fallen out of his best condition and had been cut by the Yellowjackets at the start of the season. Corgan had played two years in the NFL with Kansas City Cowboys and also played professional baseball. Manning had graduated from Fordham in June and had been cut by the Providence Steam Roller. To make room for the newcomers, Foley and McEvoy were demoted to reserves. Ed Barnikow had resolved his own status in the second game against Frankford. When Keough kept him on the bench through most of the first half, he stormed off the field and went home, rejoining his All-New Britain squad during the week.

The new backfield made its debut in Brooklyn October 10. On a cold, rainy Sunday, fewer than 1,000 fans came to Ebbets Field to see the new Brooklyn Lions take on their expansion mates from Hartford. The only score of the game was a Brooklyn pass in the fourth quarter.

While the Blues were in Brooklyn, Red Grange's New York Yankees played an exhibition game at Clarkin Field in Hartford. The stadium's seating capacity was almost doubled to 15,000 in anticipation of a large turnout to see the fabled Grange in his first Connecticut appearance. The rain and cold, however, made the extra seats unnecessary. A crowd of only 4,000 saw the Yankees beat All-New Britain 19-0. Grange scored one touchdown. Ed Barnikow starred for New Britain.

The bad weather continued into the next weekend against the Providence Steam Roller. On Sunday, 75 cars carrying fans from Providence came to Hartford. An all-day rain turned the Velodrome field into a swamp, however, and Mulligan called off the game at 2 P.M., a half hour before the scheduled kickoff. He expressed hopes of rescheduling the game for a few weeks later, but it never happened.

The rain continued during the week, forcing the Blues to run through noncontact drills in the state armory. Mulligan signed two more backs, Harry Brian, a rookie out of Grove City College, and Jack Perrin, a 33-year-old semipro veteran. Hec Garvey, with his acting chores completed decided to jump to the Brooklyn team of the AFL.

October 24 was the third consecutive Sunday of miserable weather. The Brooklyn Lions came to the Velodrome for a rematch, and fewer than 1,000 fans showed up in a cold rainstorm to see the Blues win their first NFL game 16-6. Mulligan's joy, however, was tempered by the scarcity of paying fans.

Things got worse, both financially and artistically, the following Sunday. The Kansas City Cowboys, a strong team that traveled in full cowboy gear and played almost all of its games on the road, were the opponents. Only 500 fans showed up at the Velodrome to sit through a pouring rain at the roofless cycle track. The water at midfield was ankle-deep, and the ball floated when it fell in the area. Yard lines were impossible to see and players quickly became anonymous in muddy uniforms. The conditions nullified the Cowboys' superior talent but they finally won in the end of the miserable game 7-2.

Three consecutive home games with poor crowds plunged Mulligan into the red, but he had reason to expect a good ticket sale for November 7. The Canton Bulldogs were coming to town and local newspapers trumpeted the impending visit of Jim Thorpe, the legendary Olympic athlete and professional halfback. Thorpe and the Bulldogs had outlived their fame by 1926. Thorpe was 38 years old and only a ghost of his athletic greatness in the years before and immediately after World War I. The Bulldogs were a weak team on the way to a 1-9-3 record. But fans, who had to rely on newspaper articles in deciding whether to attend an event, were led by the Hartford press to believe Canton was an attractive opponent. A parade celebrating Armistice Day was scheduled for mid-day. So Mulligan postponed the kickoff until 2:45 instead of the usual 2:15 to allow parade-goers to make it to the Velodrome for the game. The

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Canton bus left the hotel late and was caught in a traffic jam caused by the parade. By the time the Bulldogs arrived in East Hartford it was already three o'clock. A crowd in excess of 4,000, the best turnout since opening day, waited impatiently. Before the kickoff, the public address announcer, megaphone in hand, introduced Thorpe to the crowd and told them that he would not play because of a shoulder injury in last week's game against Detroit.

Even without Thorpe, the game was interesting, to say the least. Because of the late start, the inadequate Velodrome lights (which illuminated only the cycle track and had little effect on the playing field) had to be turned on early in the fourth quarter. The fans, having trouble following the action, spilled onto the darkening field, lining the side lines. After a darkness-inspired fake play on which one Bulldogs player ran with a helmet under his arm while a teammate ran the other way with the ball, a fight broke out between some fans and the Canton end split wide near the side lines. The game was finally called with a little less than eight minutes to play, making the Blues 16-7 winners.

Things were looking up for George Mulligan. His team had won two of its last three games, and the crowd of 4,000 was not a bad showing. But for the next game against the Buffalo Rangers, attendance was poor despite pleasant weather. The Blues lost to Buffalo 13-7, causing Mulligan to reduce his payroll by cutting some veterans whose erratic play, he felt, did not justify their higher salaries. The cuts didn't seem to hurt as the Blues came back in their next outing, beating a weak Dayton Triangles team 16-0 before another modest crowd.

The Blues had two games scheduled for the next weekend. On Saturday, they played the Duluth Eskimos, and on Sunday they had an exhibition game against All-New Britain.

The Eskimos featured one of the most famous players in the NFL, Ernie Nevers. The big rookie fullback could run with power, pass, kick, and play linebacker. Nevers had come out of Stanford with a reputation almost as glamorous as Grange. To increase attendance throughout the league, the Eskimos played one home game in September, then went on the road for the rest of the season. They played 13 NFL games and 16 non-league games on the tour, traveling with a squad that sometimes fell below 15 men. With Nevers the centerpiece both on the field and in press relations, the Eskimos drew well and played .500 ball against NFL opponents.

But when Saturday, November 27, arrived, rain was falling again on the muddy Velodrome turf. Attendance was poor despite the lure of Nevers. It was Nevers's show all the way. Though the muddy field made running nearly impossible, the blond Eskimos fullback scored the only touchdown of the game, carrying three Blues into the end zone with him and leaving scattered tacklers in his wake. Nevers also kicked the extra point to go with his three earlier field goals of 39, 45, and 22 yards in the one-sided 16-0 victory.

The *Courant* raved about Nevers's performance, declaring it superior to that of Red Grange in October. Nevers met with the press after the game and discussed the future of the sport. "Professional football will grow if it is kept clean," he said. "This league had had some rattling games this season, and I think it will prosper. It takes a long time for sport to gain friends, but once gained they are seldom lost."

George Mulligan's team indeed was slow in gaining paying friends, but Sunday's game with local New Britain drew a crowd of 6,000, the second highest of the year at the Velodrome. While fans had been reluctant to see the Blues play visiting NFL clubs, they still had an interest in seeing the best Connecticut teams. All-New Britain gave the Blues a strong fight before Hartford won 10-2. While the game did not go into the NFL standings, the gate proceeds greatly helped George Mulligan's finances.

The only date remaining on the schedule was a trip to face the Steam Roller for the unofficial championship of New England. On the morning of the game, a deep snow blanketed the Northeast. The Hartford players boarded a bus and rode three hours to Providence, only to learn that the game had been canceled. They climbed back onto the bus, rode back to Hartford, then disbanded.

The Blues finished with a 3-7-0 NFL record, good for a thirteenth-place finish in the 22-team league. The Frankford Yellowjackets won the championship with a 14-1-1 record. The AFL barely made it to the end of its schedule. Only four of its teams were still playing in December, with the Philadelphia Quakers

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winning the title with a 7-2-0 record. Over the summer, the AFL went out of business, a victim of bad weather and an over-reliance on Grange's name.

The NFL owners persevered despite the financial losses of 1926. George Mulligan was willing to keep his Blues in business. But the owners of the teams in the larger cities wanted a more streamlined league. They voted to cut back to 12 teams. Grange's New York Yankees would be included in that number. Half of the 1926 NFL teams were scrapped, including the Hartford Blues.

But George Mulligan was not through with football. In 1927, he ran the Hartford Giants, a semipro team with many of the players from the Blues. Pro football in Connecticut returned to local, minor-league teams and continued into the 1970s.

Only the memories remain today...of George Mulligan...of the Velodrome stadium...and of the Hartford Blues, a team that lasted only one season in the NFL's seventh year of operation.