

Parratt Stays On Top

1914

By PFRA Research

"Finances continued to create problems," Jack Cusack wrote in remembering the 1914 season. He explored the idea of selling season tickets to "bolster the treasury," but the Merchants Association objected to his soliciting its members.

"Then, just before the start of the 1914 season, a friend of mine, J.J. Foley, president of the Home Brewing Company, asked me, in a casual conversation about football, how the team was coming along and if I felt I could make any money.

"I told him that if rain didn't fall too often I was certain success was assured, but explained that a couple of rainy days could put us in a serious financial bind. He next asked if I thought I could make money with some financial backing, even if we were rained out for a couple of games, and I replied that we certainly could. Without any further ado, he took me to the First National Bank and set up, in my name, a \$10,000 credit on which I could draw in case of necessity, and with this generous support I knew that the Canton team was on its way."

Cusack said proudly that he never had to draw a penny from that account because the weather held and attendance increased. As a result, the young manager was able to concentrate on the most important problem -- how to beat Peggy Parratt.

Parratt had the golden touch. He coached and quarterbacked the Ohio State Professional Football Championship Team in 1910 and 1911 at Shelby, then moved on to Akron for a third title with his Indians in 1913. As the 1914 season opened, he was the odds-on favorite to do it again.

Although the "Ohio League" and its championship were as mythical as Santa Claus and Rudolph, as a little girl named Virginia learned, some mythical things really exist. Ohioans might argue about which team really deserved the title, but the consensus choice was able to take its title to the bank, figuratively and monetarily. With everyone operating on a shoestring, the extra few paying customers a credible championship claim could bring in might make the difference between profit and loss -- and the difference between closing up shop and playing another season.

No one had done it better than Peggy Parratt.

The 1914 Indians were a typical Parratt creation, in that the lineup changed from week to week, with just enough stars on hand to guarantee a win -- usually. At various times during 1914, Parratt filled out his team with former Notre Dame stars Knute Rockne,

Howard "Horse" Edwards, "Deke" Jones, and Joe Collins. Ohioans Ed Kagy, Dwight Wertz, Homer Davidson, Dutch Powell, Frank Nesser, Ralph "Fat" Waldsmith, and Parratt himself brought their considerable talents to Akron for differing numbers of games, with only Center Waldsmith appearing in every encounter.

However, early in the season -- in games he considered more or less warm-ups, Parratt tended to round out his lineup with Akron sandlotters, who naturally worked for lower wages than the imports he used for important encounters. The system worked fine for the Indians' first two games, easy home victories over the faded Elyria Athletics and the never-were Buffalo Oakdales. Then the famous Columbus Panhandles came to town. Despite boasting the big, bad Nesser brothers, the 'Handles had never given Parratt's teams much trouble, and he expected little this time. That was a miscalculation.

The 1914 Panhandle team was one of the best ever seen wearing the club's gold and maroon. Managed by future National Football League president Joe Carr, the backbone of the team was as always the six Nesser brothers, hefty boilermakers who played football with rugged distinction. Ted, Frank, Phil, Fred, John, and Al never made any All-America teams because they never played college football, but they spent long careers knocking the B.S. out of degreed footballers.

The Nessers relied on brawn. But, for once, the Panhandles had some speed to go with their strength. Scatbacks Emmett Ruh and Lee Snoots had the same number of college degrees as the Nessers, but they mastered in Breakaway. Presumably, this was news to Peggy Parratt.

On Sunday, October 4, the Panhandles ambushed Parratt at Akron. Ruh zipped for a touchdown. Then the Indians twice fumbled punts with first Frank Nesser and then Snoots picking up the ball and taking it into the end zone. Just before the first half ended, Al Nesser plunged over for a fourth touchdown. The 'Handles sat on their 26-0 lead through the scoreless second half.

A week later, the Indians suffered a second dent in their record. The Youngstown Pros brought in a lineup of stars that glittered as brightly as Parratt's. Prominent among the Pros were Wertz, Powell, and end Harry Axtell, all of whom would finish the season as Indians. Jay Ingersoll, an import from Dartmouth, led the Youngstown attack to a first half touchdown as Akron floundered. In the second half, the Indians perked up. Parratt, Kagy, and Collins took turns at short but effective plunges until Kagy cracked over from five yards out. He added the goal that knotted the count at 7-7, but that ended the scoring for the day.

The Professional Football Researchers Association

A tie with mighty Akron brought Youngstown into the championship race, but they quickly took themselves back out by their inability to hold on to their star players. One week later, with Ingersoll out of the lineup, the Pros could not once get past Canton's 20-yard line in losing a 31-0 embarrassment.

Canton, under Manager Jack Cusack, was surprising everyone. After opening with a narrow 7-0 win over New Philadelphia, the team reeled off victories over the Cleveland's Broadway A.C. by 60-0, the Dayton Citizens, 90-0, and Altoona, 52-0. When they popped Youngstown, there was no denying that they were a power.

Cusack had put together an interesting team, one that nicely blended college and sandlot talent. Quarterback Don Hamilton and halfback P.A. McDonald were ex-Notre Dame men, jarring fullback Floyd Peters was from Ohio Northern, and lineman Carl Erb had played for Allegheny College. Canton sandlotters included popular center Harry Turner, ageless guard "Dutch" Speck who had begun playing for Canton teams more than a dozen years before and would still be performing a decade later, interior lineman Art Schlott, and two sets of brothers: the two Dagenharts and the three Van Allmans. Cleveland sandlotter Dud Schreiner was the team's biggest threat, scoring 100 points for the season from his halfback slot.

Canton fans had not yet resurrected the name "Bulldogs", but those who remembered the glory years of '05 and '06 were beginning to make comparisons not totally unfavorable to the '14 crew. A critical test came the week after the Youngstown game when the Panhandles visited Canton. Fully 4,000 fans turned out at Lakeside Park.

Joe Carr's Panhandles had an extra week to prepare for Canton after a rainout of a scheduled game with the Dayton Oakwoods, but they must have used their practice time to make more boilers. Canton collected numerous long runs, including an 80-yard dash by Peters and a 52-yard punt return by Hamilton on the last play of the game that made the final score 40-10.

A week later, on November 1, Akron climbed back into the championship race over the Panhandles' nearly lifeless bodies with a revenge win at Akron. Parratt threw a first half TD pass in leading the 14-0 triumph. With consecutive losses to both the leading contenders, Columbus was out of the race. To their credit, they righted their sinking boat and finished strong with four straight wins, including a 13-0 whitewash of the highly-regarded Wabash, Indiana, A.A.

Far to the south, the Dayton (formerly St. Mary's) Cadets had entertained hopes of vying for the title in 1914 after wresting the city championship from the established Oakwoods the year before. Through their first five games, they showed a powerful offense, based on the passing of Al Mahrt and the running and all-around excellent play of "Babe" Zimmerman. Then, in a game played at Cincinnati against the Catholic A.C. of Covington, Kentucky, all the saints frowned on the Cadets. Both Mahrt and Zimmerman suffered broken arms! Shorn of all their offense, the Cadets lost three straight games without scoring a single point. The most critical defeat was a November 15 dunking by the Oakwoods, putting the Cadets in danger of losing their hard-won city title.

Finally, in games played on Thanksgiving and the following Sunday, the Cadets were able to get a few GOOD breaks for a change. That and their strong defense gave them a pair of wins over the Oakwoods to retain their local crown. Any hopes for statewide honors would have to wait.

* * * * *

Meanwhile back in Canton, Cusack's crew followed its big win over Columbus with a 39-3 cuffing of the McKeesport (Pa.) Olympics. After a scheduled meeting with Shelby -- no longer a power -- was rained out, the undefeated Canton bunch readied for the season's biggest game, the crucial test against Peggy Parratt's Akron Indians.

Cusack beefed up by importing a legitimate All-America tackle: Robert "Butts" Butler, formerly of the University of Wisconsin, a choice by Walter Camp for his 1912 A.A. team. Butts was the first honor-squad designee to play for a Canton team since 1906.

But Parratt was far from idle. He had a new brace of guards ready for the Cantons. He also sent for Homer Davidson. Every time Parratt really needed a victory, it seemed he called in Davidson to play quarterback. There are some slight indications that the two were not really fond of each other, but Davidson usually answered Peggy's summons.

At least one veteran Ohio sportswriter rated Davidson the equal of Walter Eckersall, the great University of Chicago signal caller who was generally conceded for decades to have been the last word in quarterbacking. Perhaps the writer betrayed a touch of local pride, but Davidson, the sandlotter, was the greatest pro kicker of his time. He'd been winning games for Parratt with his punts and field goals ever since Peggy first took over at Shelby in 1908.

The game, an exciting affair, drew a festive crowd of 3,000 to Canton's Lakeside Park despite inclement weather. For more than three quarters the teams raged back and forth, neither able to score. The play was rough but clean. Harry Turner, Canton's veteran center, suffered a serious back injury shortly before the end of the first half and was carried from the field. Art Schlott moved over from guard and did a bang-up job for the rest of the game.

As time ran down, Canton took over on Akron's 42. Peters ripped for ten yards. Two short passes and two line plunges brought Canton to the 16. McDonald flipped a short pass over the line to Hank Dagenhart, who took the ball just as he was crossing the goal line. With only three and a half minutes to play, Canton had a 6-0 leg up on the Ohio championship.

Parratt tried to pass his team back into the game, but on the final play, Hank Dagenhart sacked him. Canton had won!

The next day, they learned what they'd lost.

Harry Turner's injury was far more serious than had been suspected. His back was broken and his spinal cord had been completely severed. The announcement was made that his death was imminent. Cusack later wrote: "He showed a rare type of

The Professional Football Researchers Association

courage and spirit. I was at his bedside when he died. He was conscious almost to the end, and his last words left an indelible imprint on my memory.

"I know I must go,' he said, 'but I'm satisfied, for we beat Peggy Parratt.'"

Turner's death turned Canton's great win to ashes. Several players quit then and there. The heart went out of those who remained. But the season went on.

The following Sunday, Canton managed a 13-3 win over Shelby, and Akron knocked off Cuyahoga Falls 14-0. The big rematch -- again at Canton -- was scheduled for Thanksgiving Day.

Cusack bolstered his team with Ted and Al Nesser from the Columbus Panhandles. Parratt brought in Rockne and Frank Nesser, but he could have saved the money. The dispirited Canton team went through the motions and accepted a 21-0 drubbing.

It was Canton's only loss in a 9-1 season, but coming when it did -- in the finale -- and at the hands of Akron, it dropped Canton behind the Indians in the estimates of most state opinion-makers.

Parratt's team polished off the year with a 7-3 win over the surprisingly tough Maroons the next Sunday at Toledo. The Indians' 8-2-1 record was not as impressive as Canton's or much better than the Panhandles', but their victories came when they needed them.

* * * * *

"Late in 1914," Cusack wrote, "I was faced with a personal career decision. After seven years [working] in the gas company office I was now, at twenty-three, the chief clerk, the only employee entrusted with the combination of the money vault, my principal duty being to take charge of the daily cash receipts and make the bank deposits. A year before, I had been told by Ralph Gallagher, the general Superintendent (and later president of the Standard Oil of New Jersey), that I would have to give up football or resign from the company, and I promptly resigned. Mr. Gallagher, however, relented and gave me a year's extension, and now my time of grace was up.

"Well,' said Mr. Gallagher, 'what shall it be -- football or the company?'

"Football,' I replied -- for I felt that the professional setup had a bright financial future.

* * * * *

Although the 1914 season seemed -- except for Turner's death -- much like 1913 or '12, a closer look at the lineups shows it was actually a transitional year. The quality of play was significantly upgraded by the importation of more ex-college players from more distant and more prestigious schools. Symbolic of that was Cusack's hiring of Butts Butler.

Similarly Turner's tragic death symbolized the passing of the sandlot player from the mainstream of action. It would be several seasons before the transition would be completed -- sandlot players could still be found on major teams a decade later -- but 1914 saw the beginning of dominance by college-trained players on pro gridirons and 1915 witnessed a tremendous acceleration in that direction.