

# 1944 Great Lakes

By John B. Scott

After the departure of Coach Tony Hinkle to sea duty after the 1943 season, the Great Lakes Naval Training Center obtained the best possible replacement in Lt. (JG) Paul Brown, who had become almost a coaching legend at Severn Prep, Massillon High in Ohio, and Ohio State. His Buckeye team of 1942 won the national championship in only his second year of coaching at the college level, although some of this lustre was tarnished by a 3-6 log in 1943. This slump was entirely understandable as the U.S. Army had continued to prohibit officer trainees on college campuses from competing in varsity sports, and Brown could not avail himself of the large pool of football talent on campus, including several key players from the powerful 1942 team.

Again in 1944, Great Lakes had a full compliment of home games slated at the bleacher-encircled Ross Field located within a large quadrangle at the base. The facility accommodated 25,000 and all seven games at home were attended by a full house of wildly cheering sailors, lending almost a collegiate atmosphere to the spartan setting. It was an undoubted morale-booster to the men without weekend liberty who were confined to the base on duty rosters. For the third consecutive year, Great Lakes had a challenging schedule of 12 games and looked forward to a continuation of the successful 8-3-1 and 10-2 seasons, that included taking seventh place in the final Associated Press Poll of 1943.

Two important eligibility rule changes had taken place at the outset of the 1944 season. First, the practice of allowing professional players in service to compete in the collegiate games was now prohibited. The second ruling was momentous, as it enabled schools with Army training programs for officer candidates to use these pools of talent in college games. The biggest beneficiary was Paul Brown's former school, Ohio State, which would go 9-0 in 1944, winning the Big Nine title, and finishing second to Army in the AP Poll at season's end.

Despite the ban on professionals. Brown had an array of excellent talent available from the estimated 100,000 men undergoing boot camp training, attending advanced service schools, or serving as permanent base personnel. Perhaps the biggest name belonged to Jim Mello, a small but pile-driving, shifty fullback who starred at Notre Dame in 1943. Other backfield operatives included Jim Youel, a strongarm quarterback from Iowa; Eddie Saenz, a fast running back from USC who had starred in the 1944 Rose Bowl; Chuck Avery of Minnesota, who was adept at snagging passes as well as a hard runner; Don Mangold, who distinguished himself as a frosh at Indiana in 1943; and a halfback from Brown's alma mater, Miami of Ohio, one Ara Parseghian. Handling the end positions were George Young at left end, formerly of Georgia, who was destined to play for Cleveland after the war; and Jim Keane of Iowa at right end, a skilled player for the postwar Chicago Bears. Youel and Saenz were also fated for future NFL stardom with the Washington Redskins.

The 1944 opener at Ross Field on Sept. 16 resembled a track meet more than a gridiron battle, as the Sailors swamped Fort Sheridan, 62-0. The Comets, a misnomer if ever there was one, bad

already been swamped by an outlandish 67-6 by Western Michigan, still a few decades away from becoming a Mid-American Conference power. Ft Sheridan announced after their opener that they would honor the commitment with Great Lakes, but were cancelling the rest of their schedule, citing a lack of qualified football players on the post. The Tars led by a 49-0 count at halftime, with five touchdowns scored in the second quarter alone, before Brown called off the regulars. Mello booted eight extra points, seven in succession in the first half. Ft Sheridan might have set a record of sorts by compiling a total of MINUS 100 yards rushing in 16 attempts. The Bluejackets amassed 298 yards rushing, all in the proper direction. The Comets did manage 32 yards of passing yardage, to produce a -68 yards of total offense for the day.

The next weekend some real competition arrived at the base in the form of the Purdue Boilermakers, who had enjoyed a perfect season the year before, sharing the Big Nine conference crown with Michigan. Purdue still had above-average talent, with a blend of civilian players and trainees under the naval and marine programs that were still functioning at West Lafayette. But Purdue's new head coach, Cecil Isbell, the famed passer of the Green Bay Packers, had his debut spoiled by the Tars who rallied to win, 27-18. The Boilermakers' speedy backfield trio of Boris Dimancheff, Ed Cody, and Chalmers "Bump" Elliott, actually accounted for over 200 yards of rushing, and had the sailor boys groggy right up to the very end. Purdue led 18-14 going into the final period, when Mello's line-crashing brought the Tars to the Purdue 33 yard line. From there Youel whipped a pass to the rangy Keane, who snared it at the goal line and fell over for the score. The extra point attempt was blocked, but Great Lakes was in the lead at 20-18. Then came the real clincher on a Purdue punt that was taken by Youel at the five yard line, fumbled at the 10, but immediately scooped up by the agile quarterback, who proceeded to ramble 95 yards altogether for the final touchdown as the stands erupted.

Liberty-less sailors on duty the next week were in for another exciting show, as Illinois showed up on the huge quadrangle with a team much like Purdue's; a very fleet backfield paced by the redoubtable Buddy Young and other fast runners, and an inexperienced line well under Great Lakes' average weight. The result was a pulsating 26-26 deadlock which kept the spectators on the edge of their seats to the very end. Young, who would be heard from often on both college and pro gridirons after the war, left a wake of Bluejackets in futile pursuit on the Illini's first play from scrimmage, going 93 yards in a scintillating scoring sprint. Before the quarter ended, Avery scored the equalizer on a 17-yard thrust over tackle. The 6-6 tie was dissolved by the Illini in the second quarter. as Paul Patterson set-up one score with a 73-yard dash, and then Don Greenwood's deft quarterbacking produced another, for a shocking 19-6 Illini lead at intermission.

Great Lakes then made some adjustments in the third quarter and posted three touchdowns in the stanza. Jimmy Mello's fine fullback thrusts and two extra point kicks gave Great Lakes a 20-19 lead. Then, Don Hanlon, another ex-Notre Damer, got into the act with a 58-yard scoring run. Mello's extra point try hit the crossbar, teetered on the top for an agonizing second, and then dropped back on the wrong side amidst groans from the stands. Down 26-19 with two and a half minutes left to play in the game, Patterson snared a pass in the end zone for Illinois, and freshman Orville Bell tacked on the conversion for the tie.

The fourth game of the season, and the first road game, was just a short hop over to Evanston for a comparatively relaxing game versus Northwestern before a good turnout of 35,000. Otto Graham and his sterling supporting cast of naval cadets from 1943 were now on active duty, and the remaining civilians were no match for the Tars as they ambled to a 25-0 victory. It was Chuck Avery's turn to star as he totaled 114 rushing yards on only 13 attempts. Back home the following week, Great Lakes posted another easy shutout win, this one achieved at the expense

of Western Michigan. Brown made liberal use of substitutes as the team prepared for the upcoming test against Ohio State the following weekend. The starting personnel saw some action, but most of the 310 rushing yards was accomplished by the reserves. Final score: 38-0.

Finally, the bittersweet homecoming day for Paul Brown arrived on October 21 at Ohio Stadium. This meeting of unbeaten powers attracted a huge throng of 73,477. as wartime tensions had abated to a large extent as reports from all the combat areas were almost universally encouraging. There was another war waging in Paul Brown's mind, and he later stated that he never felt less like coaching a football game as this one. So much of the talent on the other side of the field were men recruited by him, and a good number had starred for him during the glorious season of 1942. He had been denied their services in 1943, and now his former assistant, Carroll Widdoes, was to reap the rewards of the rescinding of the Army's ban on using college military trainees. Another contributing factor to his unease were the approaches from the new AAFC pro football league which would be launched immediately after the war.

Thanks to a three touchdown outburst in the final quarter that broke open a 6-6 deadlocked ballgame, the Buckeyes triumphed 26-6. A 1942 star, Les Horvath, led the charge and this worthy was to average more than 100 yards rushing per game, a feat that earned him the 1944 Heisman Trophy. Perhaps the biggest factor of all was the powerful Ohio State line, not in the least intimidated by the Sailors' big linemen. Ohio State had the likes of Bill Willis, Warren Amling, Bill Hackett, and Gordon Appleby to clear the way for the backs, and their fearsome charge caused Jim Youel to have his worst day of the year as a passer.

Another road game on Oct. 28 was against Wisconsin in Madison before 24,000 fans. Great Lakes encountered another front wall they could push around, in an easy 40-12 win that was a virtual stampede as 10 different ball carriers took turns lugging the pigskin. The most effective was Eddie Saenz who ripped off 111 yards on a mere 12 carries, including a 40-yard romp for a touchdown. The one Badger who warranted attention was a newcomer, Earl "Jug" Girard, who led the way to two consolation scores in the final period after the Tars had accumulated all their points.

Next up was a Sunday game in Milwaukee, where Great Lakes flattened a weak Marquette squad, 45-7, with Mello, Saenz, and Youel at their best. Two weeks later, the two teams staged a rematch at Ross Field, with the Sailors again disposing of their overmatched opponents, 32-0. This time the offensive reins were turned over to sub Al Vogt, an ex-Marquette quarterback, as the first team spent most of the day on the bench.

In between these two mismatches, Great Lakes had an epic battle on its hands at home against Morris Air Force Base of Charlotte, N.C., sometimes called the Third Air Force. The airmen had

won six of their seven games, including a pair of wins over a tough North Carolina Pre-Flight team, and the Flyers biggest star was the immensely talented Charlie Trippi who starred before and after the war for the Georgia Bulldogs. The sailors' audience was in for another competitive treat as the two service squads battled fiercely through a scoreless first half. In the third quarter the Third Air Force Gremlins scored on a 27-yard field goal, and Trippi hurdled to a six-yard touchdown that put the airmen ahead 10-0. Then in the fourth quarter Great Lakes fought back, as Youel connected with George Young for a 24-yard touchdown, and then continued the aerial barrage to set-up a short scoring plunge by Mello. Two missed extra points turned out to be harmless, as the Tars pulled out a 12-10 win.

Great Lakes continued to dominate its fellow service outfits in its last home game of the season, which was versus Fort Warren from out in Wyoming, winning 28-7 on a very cold day with high winds sweeping across the gridiron. After a scoreless first quarter, the Tars got the wind at their backs for the second period and poured over three touchdowns. The last touchdown for Great Lakes came shortly after the start of the second half. The regulars played most of the way as the Fort Warren squad was kept off the scoreboard until the fourth quarter, when it tallied on a 53-yard run Great Lakes now enjoyed a 9-1-1 record as they prepared for the final game of the season against Notre Dame at South Bend on December 2.

The Fighting Irish had won their first five games of the season with little trouble, before running into the twin buzzsaws that represented Navy and Army. The loss to the Cadets was by a horrendous score of 59-0, the worst margin of defeat in Notre Dame's history. After that, the Irish rallied nicely with identical 21-0 shutouts of Northwestern and Georgia Tech. Still, the oddsmakers had the Irish as underdogs against Great Lakes. The Tars seemed to be justifying their favorite's role, as Youel's crisp passing set-up a short plunge from one yard out by Mello, as he scored against his old teammates. From there on, however, Notre Dame dominated the game to the finish, winning by a count of 28-7. Ironically, three of the Irish standouts – quarterback George Terlep, end Bucky O'Connor, and linebacker Marty Wendell – were to play key roles in the revenge win by Great Lakes at Ross Field in the 1945 matchup.

Great Lakes ended up the 1944 season with a 9-2-1 record, good for the number 17 position in the final Associated Press Poll of the year. Meanwhile, Paul Brown was giving careful consideration to the idea of not returning to Ohio State in the post-war years, and instead accepting a bid to become the coach of the new Cleveland franchise in the proposed second major league pro football circuit. But assuming that the war was going to continue until at least the end of 1945, Brown was resigned to the task of coaching the Great Lakes Sailors for one more season.

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