

Tigers Roar in Tennessee

Memphis Stands Tall in the Early Years of Pro Football

By Bob Gill

In the annals of popular culture, the 1950s will be remembered for the rise to popularity of two national phenomena: rock 'n' roll and pro football. The former traces its roots to a small studio in Memphis, Tenn., where Elvis Presley and Sam Phillips synthesized the sound that soon swept the nation. The development of the second is more difficult to trace, involving as it did more than half a century. One little-known similarity, though, is that Memphis also played a role in the formative years of pro football.

Their impact was somewhat less than that of Elvis, but from 1929 to '34 the Memphis Tigers had their own place in the football sun.

In those days the NFL occupied only a small corner of the northeastern United States. And there was no national TV or radio coverage to bring the likes of Ernie Nevers or Bronko Nagurski into the living rooms of outlying areas. As a result, a number of fine football teams, sometimes of NFL quality, sprang up in regions like the West Coast and the South. The Tigers were the first major team in the latter area.

The team began in 1927 as the "New Bry's Hurricanes." (New Bry's was presumably a local business of some sort that sponsored the club.) Organized late in the season under coach Gil Reese, a former Vanderbilt star, the Hurricanes played only four games, posting a 3-0-1 record. The tie and the last win came against the St. Louis Blues, a team run by a promoter named Bud Yates. The Blues disappeared after 1927, but pro football would return to St. Louis in the near future, with Yates again a major contributor.

In 1928 Clarence Saunders sponsored the Memphis team, renamed the Tigers. Despite the change in ownership, Early Maxwell remained as the team's manager. The coach was Phil White, an Oklahoma All-American who also had NFL experience. This time the club got started a little earlier and played eight games – seven of them in Memphis, where Hodges Field was once again their home. The team compiled a so-so 4-3-1 record, losing twice to a colorful team called the Hominy (Okla.) Indians, made up almost entirely of honest-to-Tonto American Indians. They had reportedly won 26 straight games in two years, including one over the New York Giants.

The Tigers' other loss came in their opener, at the hands of the Nashville O. Geny Greenies (again, a sponsoring local business was probably to blame for that name). Along with the Hominy Indians, the Nashville club was considered the best in the South. One of their stars was last year's Memphis coach, Gil Reese.

Not content with secondary status, Saunders and Maxwell went for broke in 1929, bringing in a number of college stars from all over the South and becoming full-scale pros in the process. Only a few holdovers remained from the earlier "semi-pro" squads – tackles Otho Alford and Chris Arnoult, end Erselle "Red" Cavette and quarterback Ernie Marquette. Maxwell lined up a 12-game schedule with the best opponents he could find, and hired a new coach, Hugh Magevney, to lead the new and improved Tigers. Among the best of the new recruits were end Austin Applewhite, center Larry Bettencourt, guard Cliff Norvell and breakaway runner Bucky Moore.

It didn't take long for all the changes to start paying off. In their opener the Tigers demolished a nondescript team from Buckner, Ill., 52-7. A week later they routed a squad

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from Kansas City by a similarly decisive 38-6 margin. The following week they traveled to Nashville for a rematch with the heralded O. Geny Greenies. In the first real test of Memphis's football ambitions, the Tigers came through with flying colors, trouncing the erstwhile "best team in the South" 33-0.

The next game of significance came on Nov. 3, when the Hominy Indians returned to Hodges Field. Before a crowd of 6,500 (5,800 paid), the largest ever in Memphis for a football game, the teams traded early touchdowns, both on interception returns, before Tiny Knee (yes, it sounds like he should have been playing for the visitors, but he was a Memphis back) went over on a short run in the second quarter to give the Tigers a 13-7 lead that held up through a scoreless second half.

According to some accounts, the Tigers might have had an easier win if the crowd hadn't been quite so big. At game time there were still hundreds of fans lined up outside the stadium. A newspaper column published in 1961 told the story this way: The Tigers took the opening kickoff and marched to the Indians' 18-yard line, at which point Clarence Saunders ordered the game restarted as a concession to the still-arriving spectators – thus depriving his team of a golden opportunity to take an early lead against a tough opponent.

It's a great story to illustrate the gulf between pro football of the 1920s and the NFL of today. But it's probably an exaggeration.

The day after the game, the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* gave the real story under this headline: "More Room and Facilities Needed for Grid Games Here." Noting that "the entire playing field was fringed with people from three to five deep," the writer complained that the Tigers' management had made insufficient arrangements for accommodating such a large crowd. The article continued: "Slowness in selling tickets and taking tickets caused Mr. Saunders to resort to the novelty of stopping the game after the kickoff to permit persons outside to gain admission."

According to this report, there were 500 people still outside the gates when the game started at 2:30, and play was delayed 30 minutes until the stragglers were seated – or added to the "fringe" around the field. Though the late-arriving fans probably considered this "very considerate," the paper speculated that those who were already inside may have been less enthusiastic. Still, the article concluded, "At least it was something new in football to start a game and then stop it."

There's no mention of Memphis giving up great field position to restart the game. Instead, the 30-minute delay sounds more like an extended TV timeout. But it's easy to see how the memory of a former player, or a fan, could have embellished the story in the years between 1929 and 1961.

After an open date the following Sunday, the Tigers hosted the Bonnycastle Club of Louisville, a team that might have been better qualified than the Nashville O. Geny Greenies (love that name!) for the title of best team in the South. Unbeaten in the past two years, the Louisville team battled Memphis through three scoreless quarters. But with about five minutes left, Memphis halfback Dick Hitt passed to Red Cavette for the game's only score. The same combination clicked for the extra point, and the Tigers had a hard-fought 7-0 win.

Incidentally, that pass for the conversion wasn't anything unusual. Lacking a reliable kicker, the Tigers passed on extra point tries about as often as they kicked – and with better results.

A week later the Tigers officially entered the big time when they hosted the fabled Chicago Bears in an unusual Saturday game. Despite the continued presence of veteran stars like Paddy Driscoll, Joey Sternaman and George Trafton, and the much-publicized return of Red Grange, George Halas's club was suffering through its first losing season – and its last until 1945. Still, they were the *Chicago Bears*, and when Grange sprinted 12 yards for a touchdown in the first quarter, it looked like a long day for the Tigers and the

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6,500 fans who turned out to root them on.

But Memphis bounced back, scoring on a 40-yard run by Bucky Moore and a 15-yarder by fullback George Mahony. A pass from Moore to Cavette after the second TD put the Tigers in front 13-7. Then a 30-yard toss from Walt Holmer to Bill Senn, followed by Sternaman's dropkick, gave the Bears a one-point lead at the half.

Buck White's touchdown plunge early in the third quarter made it 20-13, but again the Tigers came back, with Moore throwing to Cavette for six points this time. A pass for the conversion failed, and the Tigers trailed 20-19 going into the fourth quarter.

Unfortunately, that was as close as they got. Laurie Walquist threw for three TDs in the final period, one to Driscoll and two to Luke Johnsos, and the Bears left town with a 39-19 win that was a lot closer than the score indicated.

The Tigers got some measure of revenge – or at least satisfaction – the next day, when the weary Bears, now back in Chicago, dropped a 19-7 verdict to the woeful Buffalo Bisons. It was Buffalo's last game in the NFL, and its only win of the season after seven losses and a tie.

Next week the Hominy Indians returned to Memphis, but rain made the field a mess and held the crowd to a paltry 1,500. The Tigers' passing attack showed no ill effects from the poor conditions, with Moore throwing for two touchdowns and both conversions for a 14-0 halftime lead. Whitey Shelton ran 30 yards for a Hominy score in the third quarter, and Memphis added a safety on a blocked punt for a final score of 16-7.

The Tigers' next opponent was an all-star team of players from Notre Dame. Among the luminaries on hand were All-American halfback Christy Flanagan, fullback Elmer Wynne, tackles John McMullen and Joe Boland, and center Johnny Fredericks. Adam Walsh and Jack Chevigny failed to appear as scheduled, but Adam's brother Chile held down an end position and Ed Healey, no Notre Damer but a veteran NFL star, helped to fill out the squad.

For their part, the Tigers added former All-American Doug Wycoff, who had finished his season with the Staten Island Stapletons. Unfortunately, a rainy weekend held the crowd to a disappointing 4,000.

But those who braved the elements saw a good game. Moore completed two first-quarter passes to put the Tigers in scoring position, and Wycoff went over for the touchdown. Flanagan scored on a short pass in the second quarter to tie the game. That's the way it stayed until the final period, when Moore returned a punt deep into Irish territory, then followed it up with a five-yard scamper to a 12-6 win.

An even bigger game was slated for Dec. 15, when the Green Bay Packers, undefeated NFL champs, came to town. Realizing the gravity of the situation, Saunders and Maxwell augmented their team with two more NFL stars, Ken Strong and Joe Kopcha.

As it turned out, the newcomers played only small roles as the upstart Tigers handled the NFL's best with ease.

After a scoreless first half, Memphis got on the board when Austin Applewhite took a 50-yard pass from Red Strader. (Strong missed the conversion.) In the fourth quarter Strader threw to Moore for a 35-yard scoring play. A short time later, tackle R.J. Drouilhet picked off a Green Bay pass and returned it for another touchdown and a 20-0 lead. The Packers avoided a shutout when Verne Lewellen went over for a last-minute score, but it ended 20-6 – a major embarrassment for the NFL titlists, witnessed by a record turnout of 8,000.

It was the high-water mark for pro football in Memphis, and a fitting climax to an outstanding season.

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But the Tigers wanted more. In an effort to erase the only blot on their record, they booked the Chicago Bears for a rematch. (And in case you're wondering, yes, Joe Kopcha did play for Memphis against his "real" team.) After a week of practice with the Tigers, Strong played a prominent role this time, giving Memphis the early lead with a 25-yard field goal. The Bears moved in front on a pass from Holmer to Garland Grange, but Moore went 50 yards with a Strader pass before halftime to give the Tigers a lead they never lost. Strong scored the clincher in the third quarter on a short pass from Strader – Red's fourth TD pass in two games.

The 16-6 victory put the finishing touch on what proved to be the Tigers' finest season.

Sept. 29	H	52	Buckner, Ill.	7	2,000
Oct. 6	H	38	Kansas City Cowboys	6	3,000
Oct. 13	A	33	Nashville O. Geny Greenies	0	1,500
Oct. 20	H	43	Cleveland Panthers	0	5,000
Oct. 27	H	67	St. Louis Trojans	0	3,500
Nov. 3	H	13	Hominy Indians	7	6,500
Nov. 17	H	7	Bonnycastle Club	0	1,500
Nov. 23	H	19	Chicago Bears	39	6,500
Dec. 1	H	16	Hominy Indians	7	1,500
Dec. 8	H	12	Notre Dame All.Stars	6	4,000
Dec. 15	H	20	Green Bay Packers	6	8,000
Dec. 22	H	16	Chicago Bears	6	4,000

Clarence Saunders was in California when the 1930 season rolled around, and in his absence the Tigers were run by the Memphis Pro Football Association Inc. This group approach was in marked contrast to the previous year when, in recognition of his position with the team, reporters often referred to Saunders, somewhat mock-heroically, as "Sole owner," and called his team the "Sole owner Tigers."

Larry Bettencourt, star center of 1929, returned as player-coach. Other returning mainstays included ends Austin Applewhite and Red Cavette, tackle R.J. Drouilhet, guard Cliff Norvell and halfback Bucky Moore. Tackle George Ackerman and backs Butch Simas and Lee "Cowboy" Woodruff were among the best of the new recruits.

Coming as it did on the heels 1929's unexpected triumphs, 1930 was destined to go down in Memphis history as a major disappointment. But it didn't start out that way.

About the only notable feature of the first two games, routs over the Kansas City Cowboys and the no-longer-threatening Hominy Indians, was the fact that the opener against Hominy was played at night – a novel idea at the time. But the third week brought a matchup with a new NFL team, the Portsmouth Spartans, before a fine crowd of 6,500 at Hodges Field.

And the Tigers didn't let them down. Moore scored first on a pass from George Mahony; then Bettencourt recovered a fumbled punt for a 13-0 halftime lead. Portsmouth narrowed the score on Mayes McClain's short plunge in the third period, but the Tigers came right back, with Whitey Shelton going over from three yards out to give them a 20-6 lead that held up through a scoreless fourth quarter.

But perhaps the day's biggest surprise was Ackerman, who made good on two of three extra point attempts, a big improvement over the poor kicking of 1929.

A week later the Tigers hosted the Milwaukee Nitehawks, a strong team that had dropped a tough 6-0 decision to the New York Giants earlier in the season. And the invaders lived up to their press clippings with a 9-0 verdict over the Tigers. Paul Franklin returned an interception for one score, and Al Bloodgood booted a fourth-quarter field goal to put the game out of reach.

Eager for revenge, the Tigers booked Milwaukee for a return match on Nov. 16. But first they had a date with the Ironton Tanks. Like the Tigers a year earlier, the Tanks of 1930

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were in the midst of an outstanding season, posting wins over Portsmouth, the Giants and the Chicago Bears. Their best player, triple-threat back Glenn Presnell, was later an NFL star with Portsmouth and Detroit, and most of their squad eventually played in the NFL.

But they met their match Nov. 2 in Memphis. An 11-yard pass from Bill Banker to Simas, plus Ackerman's conversion, gave the Tigers a 7-0 win before a rather disappointing turnout of 3,000.

Three days before their rematch with Milwaukee, the Tigers hired Gil Reese, coach of the pioneering 1927 team, as an assistant coach and occasional halfback. His debut was a success, as the Tigers posted a 6-0 decision over the Nitehawks. Fred Getz blocked a Milwaukee punt in the second quarter and Drouilhet returned it for the only score to avenge Memphis's only defeat of the season.

Next the Tigers traveled to Chicago to take on the Ernie Nevers and the Cardinals. A crowd of 5,000 saw Nevers dominate from the start, throwing for one touchdown, running for another and booting two extra points in a 20-7 Chicago win. The Tigers' only score came on a short plunge by Simas in the final period.

Bouncing back quickly, the Tigers hosted the Wichita Panthers on Thanksgiving Day. With Hodges Field unavailable for the holiday date, the game was played at Ferguson Field; but the Tigers made themselves right at home, rolling to an easy 45-0 win – their first breather since the season's second week. Three days later they won again, posting a hard-earned 7-0 verdict over a tough team from Chicago called simply Mills Stadium, in honor of their home field.

To this point the season was going well, with a win over Portsmouth of the NFL, another over an excellent Ironton team, and the loss to Milwaukee canceled out (in the thinking of the time) by the later victory. The only blot on the Memphis slate was the loss to the Cardinals, but the first game scheduled for December was a rematch with Nevers' team, offering a chance to erase that one too. Following that were games with two more NFL teams, the Brooklyn Dodgers and the Staten Island Stapletons. The stage was set for a glorious finish, 1929-style.

But instead of taking off, this time the Tigers took a nosedive.

A big crowd of 7,000 turned out for the Cardinals game, and the Tigers gave them a much better effort this time, holding Nevers in check and limiting the visitors to a single touchdown on Bunny Belden's 14-yard run in the second quarter. Unfortunately, that one score was enough for a 6-0 Chicago win. A week later the Tigers and the Dodgers played a Saturday-Sunday "doubleheader," the first game in Atlanta and the second at Hodges Field. The result: a matched set of 13-0 Brooklyn wins. Jack McBride starred for the Dodgers, throwing for a score in the first game, running for one in the second, and booting one conversion in each.

Three straight shutouts left the Tigers and their fans discouraged – only 2,000 showed up to watch the second Brooklyn game. As a result, the Dec. 21 date with Staten Island was canceled. The team was officially disbanded, but several of the players, calling themselves the Memphis All-Stars, stayed together to play one final game with a hastily arranged team billed as the Memphis Independents. The resulting 40-7 win did little to dispel the gloom that pervaded the Memphis sporting community as the season ended.

Looking back, though, was it that bad a season?

By way of comparison, let's look at the Ironton Tanks' 1930 season – certainly one of the best an independent team ever had. The Tanks scored three wins over NFL teams, including the Giants and the Bears, two of the best. But they also lost two of three games to Portsmouth, and won the third by scoring two quick touchdowns against the Spartans' second team, then holding on against the starters for a one-point victory.

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On the other hand, the Tigers handled Portsmouth easily. And don't forget, they *did* beat Ironton in their only meeting.

This is not to say that Memphis had a better team than Ironton in 1930. But it does seem that local reactions to their season were a bit harsh, probably colored unfairly by the successes of 1929. Basically, the Tigers were a good team that had a bad month – unfortunately, it was December, and it left a bad taste in everybody's mouth.

Oct. 5	H	43	Hominy Indians	0	3,000
Oct. 11	H	40	Kansas City Cowboys	7	3,000
Oct. 19	H	20	Portsmouth Spartans	6	6,500
Oct. 26	H	0	Milwaukee Nitehawks	9	5,500
Nov. 2	H	7	Ironton Tanks	0	3,000
Nov. 16	H	6	Milwaukee Nitehawks	0	4,500
Nov. 23	A	7	Chicago Cardinals	20	5,000
Nov. 27	H	45	Wichita Panthers	0	2,500
Nov. 30	H	7	Mills Stadium	0	1,000
Dec. 7	H	0	Chicago Cardinals	6	7,000
Dec. 13	A	0	Brooklyn Dodgers	13	3,000
Dec. 14	H	0	Brooklyn Dodgers	13	2,000
Dec. 21	H	40	Memphis Independents	7	-----

The disappointing conclusion to the 1930 season, plus the continuing effects of the Depression, brought about the end of the Memphis Pro Football Association. Old reliable Early Maxwell returned in 1931 to manage the Tigers, but he didn't have the money required to bankroll the team. Unable to find a suitable backer, Maxwell convinced the players to operate on a cooperative basis, dividing game receipts in lieu of regular salaries.

This year's new coach, Edwin "Goat" Hale, could count on returning Tiger stars like ends Austin Applewhite and Red Cavette, guard Cliff Norvell and back Bucky Moore. Last year's coach, Larry Bettencourt, was the most important no-show, but newcomer Jess Eberdt took over the center post and did a good job. Tackle Joel Moore and backs Garland Beavers and Shelby "Red" Schneider were other notable additions to the squad.

After two easy tuneup wins over teams from Dayton and Louisville, the Tigers played their first major opponent Oct. 25 when the Milwaukee Nitehawks came to town. Once again the Wisconsin club put up a good fight, and the game was still scoreless late in the fourth quarter when Schneider came in. Almost immediately he broke loose on a 23-yard run to move the Tigers deep into Milwaukee territory, then followed that with a five-yard scamper for the only score in a 6-0 win.

A week later the Tigers welcomed their old friends, the rejuvenated Hominy Indians, to Memphis. Taking the opening kickoff, they went all the way in 12 plays, with Moore carrying three times and Beavers nine, including the final two-yard plunge into the end zone. Three scoreless quarters followed, and Memphis had its second straight 6-0 decision.

After an open Sunday, the Tigers hosted the Mills Stadium team from Chicago, coached by former Ohio State star Chic Harley. Once again it was a scoreless battle for three periods. Then, as they had against Milwaukee, the Tigers mounted a drive in the final minutes, with Beavers pounding out consistent gains against the tired Chicago line. But this time the magic failed: Beavers was stopped one foot from pay dirt with only a couple of minutes left, and Mills Stadium ran out the clock to escape with a tie.

Next to visit was a new opponent, a team called the Detroit Collegians, who proved worthy adversaries by giving the Tigers all they could handle before falling by another 6-0 score. Larry Marks went 60 yards with the second-half kickoff; the drive stalled on the Detroit 5-yard line, but after a short punt Memphis came right back to score on Billy Murray's 12-yard run. As usual, the Tigers missed the extra point – the kicking woes of 1929 had returned.

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The Mills Stadium team returned a week later, and this time the Tigers prevailed, posting their seventh straight shutout and scoring a touchdown and a safety for a final score of 8-0. But rain held the crowd to 1,000, the lowest total of the season.

The poor turnout only emphasized what had been happening all year: Despite a string of wins against strong opponents, the Tigers weren't drawing. A year earlier, nine of the 12 games had drawn more than 2,500 – a figure the team had yet to surpass after seven games in 1931. This may have been a carryover effect from the sad conclusion to the 1930 season, or just another result of the nation's continuing economic troubles. Either way, it must have been a real disappointment to the players who had agreed to forego salaries and divide the gate receipts instead.

But there was hope on the horizon for the financially strapped squad: Maxwell had scheduled back-to-back games in December with the Providence Steam Roller and the Chicago Cardinals of the NFL.

As a prelude to the anticipated big-money dates, the Tigers played what was essentially a warm up game with a team from Kansas City and eked out a 64-0 win. With a good workout under their belts, they were ready for the arrival of Providence on Sunday, Dec. 13. But inexplicably, Maxwell arranged a game in Louisville against the Bonnycastle Club of that city – to be played Saturday, Dec. 12! Though the Tigers prevailed, 12-4, they surely weren't in the best of shape for the Steam Roller game after returning to Memphis on the night train.

On top of that, it rained Sunday, and only 1,000 fans made it out to Hodges Field to watch what should have been the season's top draw.

Still, the teams put on a good show for those who braved the elements. Despite the rain and the muddy field, Providence came out throwing, and before the first quarter was out Deck Shelley had tossed two touchdown passes (the first scores against Memphis that season) for a 12-0 lead. It stayed that way until the fourth quarter, when Bucky Moore got the Tigers on the board with a three-yard run. A pass for the conversion failed, and Memphis still trailed by a touchdown with time running out.

Then, in the game's final minutes, Red Cavette broke through to block a Steam Roller punt and give the Tigers a chance at a victory. But Jackie Miller fumbled the wet ball on the 3-yard line. Providence recovered, and the opportunity was gone.

Hoping to make the most of the season finale against Nevers and the Cardinals, Maxwell signed Ken Strong, who had finished his season with the Staten Island Stapletons. (It's a good bet that Strong got more than just a share of the gate receipts.) But the combination of an NFL opponent and two future Hall of Famers on the same field attracted only 3,000 fans – though it was the season's best crowd. They saw Nevers get all the best of it in his "duel" with Strong, leading the Cards to an easy 24-7 win.

Ernie carried 31 times for 108 yards, scored two touchdowns, and punted six times for a 42-yard average. His only failing came in the place-kicking department: He missed the conversion after each of the visitors' four scores. Strong, playing only 10 minutes and short on practice with his new team, carried five times, losing yardage each time; but he did punt well, averaging 50 yards on four kicks.

The Cards' other scores came on an 18-yard run by Gene Rose and a 65-yard punt return by Bunny Belden. The Tigers averted a shutout on a 50-yard pass play from Beavers to Miller. In recognition of their season-long kicking problems, the Tigers returned to their 1929 strategy of passing for the extra point, with Beavers throwing to Harold Gillespie. (Strong apparently wasn't in the game at that point.)

In later years, Memphis football fans tended to look back on 1931 as the Tigers' best season other than 1929 – at least that's how it was remembered in the aforementioned 1961 retrospective in the *Commercial Appeal*. But it's hard to see how it was an improvement on the maligned 1930 season.

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It's true that the overall record for 1931 was better. 8-2-1 against 7-5-0; but despite several wins against good opposition in 1931, there was nothing to match the 1930 conquests of Portsmouth and Ironton. And the difference showed up in the attendance, too: The average crowd dipped to 2,000 per home game, a 50 percent drop from the 1929-30 figure of 4,000.

Still, it was a successful season, and the improved won-lost record may have helped to re-establish the Tigers with Memphis's more fickle football fans.

Oct. 4	H	26	Dayton Guards	0	1,500
Oct. 18	H	39	Crescent Hill Blues	0	2,500
Oct. 25	H	6	Milwaukee Nitehawks	0	2,500
Nov. 1	H	6	Hominy Indians	0	2,500
Nov. 15	H	0	Mills Stadium	0	2,500
Nov. 22	H	6	Detroit Collegians	0	2,500
Nov. 29	H	8	Mills Stadium	0	1,000
Dec. 6	H	64	Kansas City Cowboys	0	1,500
Dec. 12	A	12	Bonnycastle Club	4	
Dec. 13	H	6	Providence Steam Roller	12	1,000
Dec. 20	H	7	Chicago Cardinals	24	3,000

In 1932, for the first time, the Tigers failed to name a new head coach. Goat Hale returned for another season, and even did some playing in the backfield this time around. But as usual, there was a new financial arrangement, with the return of New Bry's as the team's sponsor. The three principal backers were S.A. Goodman, George Treadwell and Ben Croner; all presumably had connections to New Bry's. (Goodman was the major figure, serving as vice president.) This arrangement allowed the team to end its days as a cooperative and pay regular salaries to its players again.

That fact, combined with a late start (only one game before Oct. 23), allowed the Tigers to strengthen themselves by signing a number of early cuts by NFL teams. These included tackles Chang Artman and Al Culver, guards Danny McMullen and Clyde Van Sickle, and backs Frosty Peters and Gene Rose. They also reacquired Jess Eberdt, center from the 1931 squad, in the same way. Another notable newcomer was halfback Bunny Belden, who had starred against Memphis in 1930 and '31 while playing with the Chicago Cardinals. The best of the returnees were end Red Cavette, tackle Joel Moore and guard Cliff Norvell.

After an opening-game romp over Dayton, the Tigers' season started in earnest when a new team called the St. Louis Veterans came to town. The Vets' stars included player-coach Garland Grange (Red's brother) and two former Tigers: center Larry Bettencourt and halfback Whitey Shelton. But the current Tigers had all the best of it, rolling up a 13-0 lead on a pass from Peters to Gerry Sieberling and a short plunge by fullback Solly Cohen, then holding on for a 13-6 win. Grange returned an interception for the lone St. Louis score.

A week later the Tigers hosted another St. Louis team, this one called the Gunners. Formed in 1931, they found themselves fighting the upstart Veterans (something of an oxymoron) for football supremacy in 1932. The established team's mainstays included tailback Dick Thornton, ends Mack Gladden and Chuck Delmege, and Ted "Red" Saussele, a 175-pound scatback who had run wild in 1931 and was probably the most popular player in St. Louis.

Unfortunately for the Tigers, the invaders lived up to their advance billing. The Gunners scored on a Saussele plunge following a long Thornton-to-Saussele pass, then held the home team in check the rest of the way for a 6-0 win.

It was a bad day for Memphis, but that game *made* the St. Louis Gunners. It established them as a legitimate contender for Memphis' title of "best team in the South," and thereby established a rivalry that helped to spawn a number of fine teams in the region in 1933 and '34. Just as important, it ended the Veterans' challenge in St. Louis. The new team

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disbanded a few days later, leaving the Gunners as undisputed monarchs of the realm. Memphis got something out of the deal, too, signing Garland Grange to strengthen its corps of ends.

Grange was in uniform when the Tigers took on a familiar opponent, the Mills Stadium team. But either the Tigers were a lot better this time around or the Chicago club was a lot worse, because the game was no contest at all: 40-0 Tigers.

A week later the St. Louis Gunners returned to Hodges Field for a much-anticipated rematch. A disappointing crowd of 2,500 showed up to see the home team get even with a 12-0 win. Grange opened the scoring with a seven-yard run, and the Tigers added another tally on a pass from Peters to halfback Gene Rose. Peters missed both extra points, failing on a pair of dropkicks.

The Milwaukee Nitehawks came to Memphis the following week, but like the Mills Stadium eleven before them, they proved to be woefully outclassed, and the Tigers posted a 41-0 win in what was really little more than a workout. That was just as well, because the Tigers' thoughts were probably on their next game, a rubber match with the Gunners in St. Louis to decide the "independent pro championship" for 1932. In addition, the teams had agreed that the winners would get all the gate receipts and the losers would go home empty-handed.

Despite the high-stakes attraction, only 4,000 fans turned out – but that was still more than the largest crowd of the season in Memphis. The game itself developed into a punting duel between Peters and the Gunners' Joe Lintzenich. Memphis had a slight edge, and got close enough for Peters to try five field goals. But he missed them all, and the game ended in a scoreless tie.

It didn't decide anything, but it did mean everybody got a paycheck.

Back home on Dec. 4, the Tigers hosted their old friends the Hominy Indians, and the teams combined for probably the season's most entertaining 30 minutes of football in the first half. Rose threw to Red Cavette to give Memphis an early lead, but the visitors came back later in the first period when a back named Fixico broke loose for a 45-yard touchdown run. The ensuing extra point gave Hominy a 7-6 lead. But Memphis took control in the second quarter, with Goat Hale scoring on a 12-yard run and Cohen returning a fumbled punt for another touchdown.

That last score was disputed, because the Indians claimed their player had simply *set the ball down* after he was tackled. But there was no instant replay in those unenlightened days, so the original call – and Cohen's touchdown – was allowed to stand, making the score at halftime 20-7 Memphis. And that's how it ended, after a scoreless second half.

Unfortunately, only 2,000 fans had been on hand to witness the first-half fireworks, continuing another season of consistently poor attendance. But the Tigers' management had reason to expect a better turnout the following week, with the Chicago Cardinals booked for their third visit to Memphis. And this time the Tigers were loaded for bear – well, for Cardinal, anyway. With Bunny Belden, a thorn in their side in previous meetings with the Cards, already on their roster, they scored a major coup during the week by signing the great Ernie Nevers for the Chicago game. Nevers had retired after the 1931 season and probably wasn't in the best of shape, but he was still one of the biggest names in football, and the Tigers hoped his presence would give them a boost at the gate as well as on the field.

But in the financial world of independent pro football, it sometimes seems that every silver lining is obscured by clouds – in this case, rain clouds, which dumped enough rain on Memphis to make Hodges Field unplayable that Sunday. Not willing to give up on the natural matchup of Nevers vs. his former teammates, the Tigers persuaded the Cardinals to stick around until Tuesday night and try again. But the rains returned, the big leaguers left town, and the game was canceled.

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At least Nevers did agree to stick around for the next week's game against the new Boston Braves, soon to be renamed the Redskins (and shortly thereafter to relocate in Washington). Besides Nevers, Boston brought two future Hall of Famers of its own in rookies Cliff Battles and Turk Edwards. But it was very cold on the day of the game, and only 1,000 fans came out to see it. They might as well have stayed home, because the cold stifled both teams' offenses and the result was a dull scoreless tie.

Still looking for a big payday against an NFL team, the Tigers arranged for a rematch with Boston on Christmas Day. Nevers declined to take part this time, and so did most of the fans – an even smaller crowd turned out. With more favorable weather, and no Nevers to contend with, the Braves rolled up 13 first downs to the Tigers' two, but once again both teams failed to score. Boston made the game's only real threat, driving to the Tigers' 1-yard line at the end of the first half. But Cliff Norvell broke through to spill Oran Pape for a loss, and Memphis escaped with another tie.

A less optimistic organization would have called it quits at that point, but the Tigers lined up another game with the old reliable Hominy Indians on New Year's Day. An added attraction was the presence of Boston's Turk Edwards on the Tigers' squad, and baseball star Pepper Martin in the Indians' lineup. Martin proved to be a real player, scoring two touchdowns -- one a 75-yard run, the other a great catch of a 25-yard pass. (Former Tiger Whitey Shelton added the extra point after the first score.) But the Tigers' Johnny Faulkner, a converted tackle doing service in the backfield to make room for Edwards, matched Martin's two scores on a 25-yard run and a pass from Peters. Combined with a short scoring run by Cohen, that gave Memphis a 19-13 win.

But the fans in Memphis were apparently too hung over to worry about football that day – if they had any interest to start with. Whatever the reason, fewer than 500 “filled” the stands at Hodges Field for what was probably the season's most exciting game, with the possible exception of the first game with Hominy.

With a persistence that bordered on masochism, the Tigers and the Indians scheduled another game for the next day, this one in Blytheville, Ark. It seemed impossible, but the folks in Arkansas were even more apathetic than those in Memphis about the prospect of a pro football game in their midst. Fewer than 50 fans had arrived by game time, and the managers mercifully called off the debacle before it started.

It was a sad ending to the season, but it aroused little sympathy in Memphis, where most of the populace probably thought the Tigers' season had ended weeks earlier.

Oct. 9	H	28	Dayton Guards	0	1,500
Oct. 23	H	13	St. Louis Veterans	6	2,000
Oct. 30	H	0	St. Louis Gunners	6	2,500
Nov. 6	H	40	Mills Stadium	0	
Nov. 13	H	12	St. Louis Gunners	0	2,500
Nov. 20	H	41	Milwaukee Nitehawks	0	2,000
Nov. 27	A	0	St. Louis Gunners	0	4,000
Dec. 4	H	20	Hominy Indians	7	2,000
Dec. 11	H	--	Chicago Cardinals	--	(can.)
Dec. 18	H	0	Boston Braves	0	1,000
Dec. 25	H	0	Boston Braves	0	1,000
Jan. 1	H	19	Hominy Indians	13	500
Jan. 2	A	--	Hominy Indians	--	(can.)

The New Bry's connection dried up during the offseason, but S.A. Goodman returned for 1933 as the Tigers' second “sole owner.” This time, though, the *Commercial Appeal* didn't capitalize the sobriquet as it had in 1929 for Clarence Saunders, who must have been something of a character. Coach Hale also departed, Frosty Peters replacing him as player-coach.

Other returning mainstays were end Red Cavette, tackle Johnny Faulkner (back at his accustomed spot in the line), guards Cliff Norvell and Danny McMullen, center Jess Eberdt and fullback Solly Cohen. They were joined by some top-notch newcomers,

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headed by tackle Harvey Long, end Vic Saufley, and backs Marvin (Swede) Ellstrom and Ed Storm.

The season opened with a visit from the Cincinnati Reds, a new NFL team. The attendance of 1,500 was disappointing, but so was the Tigers' performance: They showed little on offense or defense in a 17-0 loss. Seaman Squyres ran for one touchdown and threw for another in leading the Reds to an easy win.

A week later the Tigers welcomed the Oklahoma City Chiefs, a very strong team that had been organized late in 1932 and managed a win over the St. Louis Gunners in their abbreviated season. The Chiefs featured a potent backfield of Joe (Dummy) Anderson, Mike Massad, Ted Hand, Ray Schwab and player-coach Len Sedbrook, and the Tigers weren't able to keep up. Massad ran for one score, Anderson hit end Bob Eaton for another, and the result was a 14-0 Tiger loss.

Next to visit Memphis were the Charlotte Bantams, another team formed in 1932. Player-coach Johnny Branch, 5-foot-5 Bantam quarterback, snagged a touchdown pass from Earl Dunlap in the second quarter to tie the game after an early Memphis score – the home team's first of the season. When Charlotte end J.B. Copeland added a field goal for a 10-7 halftime lead, it looked like the Tigers were headed for their third straight loss. But the struggling Memphis offense finally shifted into high gear, the defense followed suit, and after a 20-0 second half the Tigers had their first victory.

Ed Storm went over on a short plunge for the first Memphis score; he was followed in the touchdown parade by Earl Pate, Ellstrom and Saufley, the latter on a pass from Ellstrom. Storm also added three conversions in the Tigers' biggest offensive explosion against a good team since 1929.

The Tigers' next game was in St. Louis against the Gunners, and during the week they bolstered their squad by picking up two former Gunners – back Ted Saussele, St. Louis's first pro football star, and tackle Dave "Tex" Ribble. Saussele paid immediate dividends on Sunday when he took a 53-yard touchdown pass from Storm in the first quarter against his former mates. Coming on the heels of a scoring run by Ellstrom and a conversion by Storm (who missed the next one), it gave the Tigers a surprising 13-0 lead that held up through the first half.

In the second, though, the Gunners started to battle back. Swede Johnston went over for a score in the third quarter, and Joe Spudich added the extra point. Then, in the final period, Dick Frahm threw to Charley Malone for the tying touchdown. Spudich had a chance to win it with the point-after, but his kick went awry, and Memphis escaped with a 13-13 tie in the season's best game so far.

The Tigers had a breather the following week, when the Chicago Shamrocks came to Hodges Field. (This was quite possibly the Mills Stadium team under a new name, or at least a later incarnation of the same squad.) A crowd of 2,500 – a slight improvement, anyway – saw the Tigers put on another good offensive show en route to a 30-6 win.

After an open date Nov. 5, the Tigers traveled to Charlotte for a rematch with the Bantams. Memphis took an early lead on a field goal by Peters, but Charlotte came right back on a short plunge by Ed McIntosh for a 6-3 halftime lead. A third-quarter touchdown pass from Dunlap to Branch made it 13-3. The Tigers never seriously threatened after that, and the Bantams came away with the biggest victory in their two-year existence.

The Memphis organization had to face the fact that at this point two teams on the southern circuit – St. Louis and Oklahoma City – had surpassed them, and now the Bantams had at least established themselves on equal footing with the Tigers. Instead of lamenting this state of affairs, S.A. Goodman saw it as an opportunity, and took the lead in a move to organize a new league to rival the NFL. He announced these plans two days after the loss to Charlotte (a day on which the Tigers' scheduled game in Chattanooga on the trip home was canceled).

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As originally conceived, the league – dubbed the AFL – was to open the 1934 season with teams in Washington, Baltimore, New Orleans, Birmingham, Winston-Salem, Montgomery, Nashville, Chattanooga and Tulsa, in addition to the four teams that had prompted the idea. As it turned out, only Tulsa made it from the drawing board to the playing field, along with new teams in Dallas and Louisville. NFL president Joe Carr, always a supporter of minor league football, endorsed the venture; but Goodman, at least, wasn't necessarily thinking in those terms.

"We don't want a southern league, nor a secondary league," he told the press, implying that this league would *compete* with the established NFL. Emphasizing his point, he added that his Tigers played "as good football as in the NFL" – which was debatable by that time – and that St. Louis and Oklahoma City "can win in the NFL any time."

The second part of that statement was certainly true as far as the Gunners were concerned. One day later, on Nov. 15, they drubbed the NFL's Brooklyn Dodgers 21-2, and a month later they routed the Chicago Cardinals 28-7.

For their part, the Tigers spent the next couple of weekends helping to reinforce the reputations of St. Louis and Oklahoma City: They lost to the Gunners, 14-3, and the Chiefs, 20-7.

Playing at home, Memphis got the jump on the Gunners on Storm's field goal; but from that point it was all St. Louis. The visitors rolled up 487 yards total offense, 361 of it on the ground, and the Tigers were lucky the score wasn't more lopsided. Swede Johnston did most of the damage, taking a pass from Blake Workman for the first touchdown and running 12 yards for the other.

The Tigers started fast again in Oklahoma City, with Saussele passing to Joe Gee for a first-period touchdown. But it was all downhill from there. Anderson and Hand each ran for scores, Anderson passed to Eaton for another, and the Tigers' offense sputtered for the rest of the afternoon.

Badly in need of a victory, the Tigers stepped down a couple of notches Dec. 2 (a Saturday) and hosted the Atlanta Bears. The final score was 48-0, but few fans turned out for the mismatch. So the very next day, in search of better competition and a better crowd, the team traveled to Jackson, Tenn., to play a hastily assembled squad called the West Tennessee All-Stars. The All-Stars put up a good fight, and it was all the Tigers could do to escape with a 6-3 win. Unfortunately, the game was a failure at the turnstiles: Only 1,000 people showed up.

Still, it had been a good game, and the Tigers had hopes of a decent turnout at Hodges Field when they scheduled a rematch for the following week. But it didn't pan out. Another slim "crowd" watched the Tigers demonstrate the meaning of the home-field advantage with a resounding 35-0 triumph.

With a record of only 5-5-1, and no wins against top-level teams, the Tigers abandoned their usual practice of finishing up with a couple of games against NFL teams. Of course, the disappointing attendance (an average of less than 2,000 per game) may have had something to do with that decision too. And perhaps as important, S.A. Goodman had more than just *his* team on his mind as the 1933 season came to an end. In 1934 he would have a whole league to worry about.

Oct. 1	H	0	Cincinnati Reds	17	1,500
Oct. 8	H	0	Oklahoma City Chiefs	14	
Oct. 15	H	27	Charlotte Bantams	10	1,500
Oct. 22	A	13	St. Louis Gunners	13	1,500
Oct. 29	H	30	Chicago Shamrocks	6	2,500
Nov. 12	A	3	Charlotte Bantams	13	4,000
Nov. 14	A	--	Chattanooga Lookouts	--	(can.)
Nov. 19	H	3	St. Louis Gunners	14	2,500
Nov. 26	A	7	Oklahoma City Chiefs	20	1,000

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Dec. 2	H	48	Atlanta Bears	0	
Dec. 3	A	6	West Tennessee All-Stars	3	1,000
Dec. 10	H	35	West Tennessee All-Stars	0	

During the offseason S.A. Goodman stepped down as head of the Tigers to take the presidency of the new AFL. His place was taken by Tom Watkins. In a way, Goodman's move was symbolic, reflecting a shift in the focus of southern football from Memphis alone to the league as a whole. The Tigers were no longer the dominant presence, but pro football in the region was stronger than ever.

Of course, the Tigers weren't ready to roll over and play dead, and there were plenty of offseason changes. Returnees Frosty Peters (still player-coach), Red Cavette, Cliff Norvell, Danny McMullen and Ted Saussele were joined by linemen Bill Cooper, Art Koeninger, Nap Nisonger and Burle Robison, plus backs Bobby "Runt" Herrington and Lee "Cowboy" Woodruff, a veteran from the 1930 team. Possibly the best of the newcomers was halfback Mike Massad, a pickup from the Oklahoma City Chiefs.

Unfortunately, Massad's former team didn't make it into the new league. They were dropped from consideration on Aug. 28 because of "difficulties in getting a suitable stadium." This questionable decision cost the league one of its best teams. Another, the St. Louis Gunners, declined to join, preferring to focus their efforts on getting a franchise in the NFL. But Bud Yates, the veteran St. Louis promoter, put together a rival team called the Blues to represent his city and improve the new circuit's credibility.

In fact, he did such a good job that the quickly assembled team led the AFL from wire to wire and finished as undefeated champs. Their only loss came off the field, when the Gunners entered the NFL to replace the sorry Cincinnati Reds. Unable to compete with a big-league team, the Blues moved to Kansas City.

Though they never really threatened the Blues' hold on first place, the Tigers were much improved in 1934. They finished 5-3-2 and managed a 7-7 tie in their first game with the champs, the only blot on the Blues' 7-0-1 record. The Tigers also dropped a 6-3 decision to the Louisville Bourbons, a new team that posted the league's only other winning record.

The Tigers' one failure was an inability to beat the Tulsa oilers, the AFL's worst team. In back-to-back games Nov. 11 and 16, they managed only a 6-6 tie and a 6-3 loss that was the Oilers' only win of the season. The loss was doubly painful, because Massad broke his arm in that game and was lost for the rest of season.

Despite missing the last three league games, Massad still led the AFL in touchdown passes, with a modest total of two, and field goals, with three. That figure tied him with his teammate Peters; and Herrington, with two of his own, was the only other player in the league with more than one, far and away the AFL's best kicking corps.

Robison and halfback Red Tobin, a late-season pickup from the Dallas Rams, were named to the league all-star team chosen by the Associated Press. Robison, McMullen, Saussele and tackle Champ Seibold, acquired in midseason from the Green Bay Packers, made a similar team selected by the league's coaches. Norvell, Koeninger, Nisonger and Peters made the coaches' second team.

The success of the AFL and the improved play of the Tigers combined to bring out the best crowds in Memphis since 1930. A new home field, Russwood Park, may have contributed to the increase, too.

AFL Standings	W-L-T	Pct	Pts	Opp
St. Louis/Kansas City Blues	7-0-1	1.000	161	40
Memphis Tigers	5-3-2	.625	94	76
Louisville Bourbons	5-3-0	.625	76	70
Dallas Rams	3-6-0	.333	65	105
Charlotte Bantams	3-7-0	.300	81	122

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Tulsa Oilers

1-5-1 .167 28 92

To wrap up their best season since 1931, the Tigers booked games with the Brooklyn Dodgers and the Chicago Bears after completing their AFL schedule. A crowd of 4,000 turned out for the first game, a 20-7 Brooklyn victory. Shipwreck Kelly passed to Wayland Becker for a first-quarter touchdown, then returned an interception 55 yards in the fourth period for a 14-0 lead. Norvell took a lateral from Peters and chugged in for a Memphis score to make it 14-7, but Becker picked off a pass and returned it for another Dodger touchdown to ice the game.

A week later the Bears and the Tigers put on an entertaining offensive show for 3,523 fans, with the Bears coming out on top, 30-13. Bernie Masterson threw two touchdown passes for the invaders and Jack Manders scored 11 points, including a 47-yard field goal; but the real center of attention was Beattie Feathers, who ran for 98 yards on 11 carries – just about what he averaged in the NFL that year en route to his record total of 1,004 yards. Feathers also scored a touchdown just before the half, and afterward the fans were treated to a successful conversion by none other than Bronko Nagurski.

The Tigers scored on two pass plays: Tobin to Saussele for 37 yards in the second quarter, and Dale Burnett to Robison in the final period. Burnett, along with his teammate Mel Hein, joined the Tigers especially for this game against the Bears, only two weeks after playing against them with the New York Giants in the famous “sneakers game.”

The success of the new league, and the improvement of the Tigers’ fortunes, made for the most hopeful offseason since the winter of 1931-32. But by the following December the Tigers *and* the league they helped to create no longer existed.

Oct. 7	A	14	Dallas Rams	13	1,500
Oct. 14	H	3	Louisville Bourbons	6	4,005
Oct. 21	A	9	Charlotte Bantams	7	3,500
Oct. 28	A	7	St. Louis Blues	7	10,564
Nov. 4	H	8	Dallas Rams	7	4,000
Nov. 11	H	6	Tulsa Oilers	6	2,500
Nov. 16	H	3	Tulsa Oilers	6	1,500
Nov. 25	A	17	Louisville Bourbons	3	2,453
Dec. 2	H	13	Charlotte Bantams	0	2,500
Dec. 9	H	14	Kansas City Blues	21	3,000
Dec. 16	H	7	Brooklyn Dodgers	20	4,000
Dec. 23	H	13	Chicago Bears	30	3,523

Preparations for the league’s sophomore season went smoothly through the spring and summer. Two teams, Louisville and St. Louis (back home after the offseason demise of the Gunners), had played several exhibitions in preparation for the regular season when in late September it suddenly dawned on all concerned that no other member cities had thought to assemble their teams – Memphis included. Considering the Tigers’ illustrious history and the fact that S.A. Goodman had kept the league headquarters in his home city, this was inexplicable; and it proved to be fatal.

Goodman was forced to announce on Sept. 26 that this “lateness in organizing” had caused the cancellation of the 1935 AFL season, though he added that the league would be back in 1936. Luckily, he refrained from prefacing that promise with any easily remembered phrases like “Read my lips.”

St. Louis and Louisville played each other four times in October before steadily diminishing crowds, then gave up the ghost. Late in that month Red Cavette and Cliff Norvell, the two senior members of the Tigers, organized the club on a cooperative basis, serving as co-coaches and securing the services of Wilson Murrah as business manager. A few other former Tigers joined the team, but most of the players were newcomers of little distinction.

With Louisville and St. Louis out of the picture, along with all the other AFL teams of 1934 (not to mention Oklahoma City and the St. Louis Gunners), there weren’t many potential

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opponents for the “new-look” Tigers. They won three lopsided games, scoring 100 points and drawing slightly more fans, before calling it quits – forever.

Like that other Memphis phenomenon mentioned at the top of this article, the Tigers died an inglorious death after their years in the limelight. But the similarity stops there: No one has ever called the *National Enquirer* to report sighting, say, Frosty Peters calling signals in the frozen foods aisle at the local Safeway.

Unlike Elvis, the Tigers have *stayed* dead.