

The NFL's forgotten franchise

Syracuse Pros may have been league members back in 1921

By Tod Maher (with Bob Gill)

No wonder they changed the name.

The American Professional Football Association lasted only two years before changing its name to the National Football League. But in those two years it left behind what could only be described as a confusing and frustrating record.

There has always been a great amount of discussion about who was and who wasn't a member of the APFA. Thanks to the research of Joe Horrigan, John Hogrogian and Bob Carroll, we have a much clearer picture of league membership in those early days of the NFL. (See the 1982 PFRA Annual for Joe's compilation of yearly franchise transactions.)

One interesting piece that John Hogrogian found in his searches through newspapers of the early years was this article in the Syracuse *Post-Standard* of Oct. 2, 1921:

"Professional football activities in Syracuse for the season of 1921 will be launched a week from today, when the newly organized Syracuse eleven of the National Professional Football association will clash with the All-Tonawanda warriors here ...

"The Syracusans will meet the leading professional football teams of the country in the 1921 campaign. On October 16 the locals will go to Buffalo to engage the Buffalo All-Americans, and on October 23 Friedman's eleven will journey to New York City, meeting the New York Giants, a team headed by Charlie Brickley ...

"The management of the Syracuse professional eleven announces that the locals will abide by all eligibility rules of the National association, among which is a stringent one prohibiting any college player who might be eligible for further play on a college eleven from participating in the local eleven under any circumstances."

Even though Syracuse wound up not playing Buffalo and New York, two APFA teams, the Pros played three of their six games against league members: Tonawanda, Rochester and Washington. This fact, plus articles from the other Syracuse papers – the *Herald* and the *Journal* – leads us to believe that the Pros were indeed members of the APFA.

With that in mind, here's a look at their 1921 season.

The Pros opened with a scoreless tie on a muddy field against Tonawanda, another recently discovered league member. A touchdown pass from coach Mike Purdy to Lew Andreas in the last minute of play was called back on a holding penalty, costing Syracuse a win. The game was nearly called off because of the "disagreeable weather," and maybe it should have been – only 800 fans braved the elements and made the trip to Star Park.

As we've seen, the next two games were to be on the road against Buffalo and New York, two more in-state APFA teams. But both were canceled. The reason for the first cancellation is anybody's guess; as for the second, Charlie Brickley's team didn't play its first home game until November, and may have been unable to line up a field before then.

To fill the first open date, manager Andy Friedman lined up a game with the Oakdales, a local semi-pro team. The result was an easy 19-0 victory before a slightly improved crowd of 1,000.

On Oct. 22, according to the Akron *Beacon-Journal*, the Akron Pros, 1920 APFA champs, were trying to schedule a home game for Oct. 30 against "Mike Purdy's Syracuse professional team." Two days later Akron management announced that they, like Buffalo before them, were bringing in the Rochester Jeffersons instead.

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Those negotiations may not have been a total loss for Syracuse, however. On Oct. 23 the Pros hosted another team from the Rubber City: Suey Welch's Akron Indians, a road team reputedly made up entirely of Indians who had played for Carlisle or other Indian schools. We can't be sure, because none of the papers printed lineups for the game. What we do know is that Syracuse scalped the invaders 47-0 before the season's largest home crowd – only 1,500.

with no trip to Akron in the offing the following Sunday, the Pros took a week off in anticipation of the toughest part of their schedule: a home game against Rochester Nov. 6, an Armistice Day game at Buffalo five days later, and a game in Washington two days after that. But once again Friedman's team was victimized by a pair of cancellations – one by Rochester, the other by Buffalo (yes, again!).

Friedman proved up to the challenge, lining up a game in Binghamton, N.Y., against the Endicott-Johnson A.A. The Pros won easily, 20-0, and the game drew a crowd of 3,500, easily the season's largest.

A week later the Pros finally played their second game against an APFA team, and suffered their first loss. The Washington Pros (popular name!) trounced them 20-7. That was followed by another week off, before the season finale in Rochester, where the Jeffersons posted a 12-0 victory, leaving Syracuse with an APFA record of 0-2-1 – assuming, of course, that the team was really in the league.

But were they? At this point we think so, and here's why.

First, and most important, the Pros *said* they were members of the APFA. It has been suggested that other teams made this claim. Yet we don't have any specific instances of that happening.

Some might say a team like Syracuse would claim membership in the APFA to give itself added stature; but almost everyone agrees that being a member of the professional league carried no weight with the public at that time.

The strongest objection to "admitting" Syracuse to the league's rolls is the fact that there's no record of a franchise being awarded or withdrawn in the league minutes. There's no record of Washington or New York (Brickley's team) being awarded a franchise, either – but there *is* mention of the latter two franchises being revoked by the league in 1922.

Still, that doesn't have to disqualify Syracuse. These things weren't written in stone. A New Haven franchise was canceled by the league in 1923, but New Haven is not considered a member for 1922 as a result. The point is that membership in the league in its first couple of seasons was not clear-cut, and maybe we shouldn't dismiss Syracuse too quickly.

Because the fact remains that they said they were in the league, even though there was no particular advantage in doing so. Newspapers were still referring to "the Syracuse football association team" in the last week of October, after which the Pros hit the road and disappeared from the local columns for the most part.

And besides the three games they played against APFA teams, the Pros also had four other scheduled games canceled.

Joe Horrigan has argued convincingly that in 1921 all teams that played fewer than six games against APFA members were dropped from the official standings. If all those canceled games had been played, Syracuse would have had seven league games – enough to qualify for the final standings if indeed they were APFA members. Then we'd know beyond a shadow of a doubt whether the Pros were in the league or not.

Unfortunately, they didn't qualify. And they may not have been members of the league anyway.

But for now, at least, we think they were.

1921 SYRACUSE PROS

Oct. 9	H	0	Oshkosh All-Stars	0	T	800
Oct. 16	H	19	Syracuse Oakdales	0	W	1,000

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Oct. 23	H	47	Akron Indians	0 W	1,500
Nov. 6	A	20	Endicott-Johnson A.A.	0 W	3,500
Nov. 13	A	7	Washington Pros	20 L	
Nov. 20	A	0	Rochester Jeffersons	12 L	1,500

Player	Pos	Hgt	Wgt	Age	College
Joe Alexander	C-FB	5-11	195	23	Syracuse
Lew Andreas	E				Syracuse
Bruce	E				
Ed Delaney	HB				Villanova
Dempsey	T				
John Dooley	T	6-1	205	24	Syracuse
Roddy Dunn	T-G	5-10	195	26	Syracuse
Andy Friedman	FB				
Clarence Holleran	HB-FB				Fordham; Boston College
Kippley	C				
Knowland	FB				
Chris Lehrer	HB-FB		185	27	none
Bob Martin	G				Colgate
Frank Matteo (Patsy)	T-G	5-11	195	25	Syracuse
Luke McDermott	E				
Nelson	G				
Doc O'Connor	E				
Mike Purdy	QB	5-10	178	26	Brown
Billy Rafter	QB-HB	5-6	155	26	Syracuse
Tubby Rosecrans	FB				Union
Jack Smithson	C-G-E				Syracuse
Bryan Thompson	G	5-10	233	22	Syracuse
Travis	E				Syracuse
Ward	FB				