

Glamourless Gridirons: 1907-9

By PFRA Research

Most of pro football's story is worth a second look; the years immediately following the disaster of 1906 deserve a first look. Those seasons are consistently ignored in most histories as though pro football fans in Ohio spent several autumns with their heads buried in sand and those local football players not enrolled in academic institutions took up knitting. Not so! Professional football was alive and well and living in Buckeyeland.

The great teams were gone, and the great stars were yet to come. No one compared local aggregations with the powerful collegiate elevens. Former All-Americans didn't descend on Ohio in droves to pick up fat weekend wages for a few hours of huffing and puffing. All-Americans were in short supply on Ohio gridirons; most of the players hadn't been to college.

The crowds were small; the pay was small; the headlines were small. Pageantry was non-existent. The fields were still one hundred and ten yards long, and sweating young men dressed in well-worn moleskins still got from one end to the other by using muscle, speed, and guile. Mostly muscle.

In the words of pro football historian Milt Roberts, these were the "Unglamorous Years."

In one way the games were better than they had been. They were less predictable. Talent was so dispersed that each year a half-dozen or more teams seriously contended for the state "independent" championship. In 1905 and 1906, the Tigers and Bulldogs had so dominated the scene that the only suspense was in how they would do against each other. For all their other games, their fans asked only "How big was the score?" Of course, while the two behemoths played can-you-top-this, many lesser teams played plenty of exciting football. And many of them played well. But the spectre of the superteams was so overpowering that the accomplishments of all the other elevens seemed Lilliputian, like putting up a picket fence next to the Great Wall of China.

The Tigers and Bulldogs had gone down in a death-struggle of dollars. They'd been expensive hybrids, high-priced monuments to the proposition that money can buy anything. They were a mad binge, letting out all the stops in anticipation that victory would be its own reward. But victory turned to ashes when the bills fell due.

In 1907, sanity returned to Ohio pro football. Sanity is unglamorous.

For a short time in September, it seemed likely the football league that had simmered for several years might come to a boil. Plans called for linking elevens from Canton, Massillon, Columbus, Toledo, and Lorain in a semi-pro circuit. By "semi-pro" was meant

an arrangement wherein the players shared the gate receipts in lieu of regular salaries. If a team drew well -- and the fans were generous -- the players would prosper; if no one showed up to watch a game, the team's backer might lose his cuffs and collar but not his whole shirt.

The semi-pro arrangement, it was assumed, would limit teams to local athletes. High-priced ringers wouldn't be much interested in playing-for-speculation, except possibly in the biggest games.

It seemed like a good idea, one likely to produce exciting -- if not great -- football. Then, in the first week of October, after many teams had begun play, it was announced that some cities had been unable to secure adequate financing or "sufficient playing material." The league idea was put on the back burner again, but "semi" would be the predominant pro football formula for the next several seasons.

In Canton, Blondy Wallace announced the collapse of the league idea. He also said he and others would probably organize a Canton team if they could drum up enough support. That Blondy was even considering re-entering the pro football wars can be taken as circumstantial evidence that he'd achieved some success with his libel suit.

It turned out that the best Canton could do in 1907 was a sandlot team called the "Indians." Although they claimed they won the (amateur) "championship of Stark County" by beating Alliance A.C. two out of three games, they lost to nearly everyone else they played. Nonetheless, several young players who would make names for themselves on Canton gridirons over the next few years got started with this club. Such players as "Wink" Zettler, Harry Turner, Erle Zerbe, Art Schlott, and "Monk" Oberlin would see better days.

In early November, the Canton A.C. put a semi-pro outfit in the field. The result was disappointing. The team went up to Akron, lost to the Rubber City Tigers, and disbanded.

The following year, the C.A.C. organized earlier and better under "Red" McDermott, a strong fullback. They had good success against lesser lights like Cuyahoga Falls, East Liverpool, and Cleveland's Franklin A.C. Respectable showings against the Shelby Blues and Canal Dover Giants, two clubs in the thick of the state's championship race, indicated the C.A.C. was only a step or two from the top. Most of the younger Canton players appeared for the Cohen Tigers, a team sponsored by a local haberdasher. Coached by George Clarke, the Tigers put together a better win-loss record than the C.A.C., albeit against unimpressive opposition.

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When the two Canton teams met in a late November showdown, the A.C. won the city title -- but only by a narrow 6-2 score.

Bullet Riley took over leadership of the C.A.C. team in 1909. A lineup that included Riley, McDermott, and Dutch Speck should have delivered a string of victories, yet, after a good start, the club dropped its final six games. Most of the defeats came by large, ugly scores, but the one that hurt most was a loss in which not a down was played.

All season long, while the C.A.C. took its lumps, the Simpson Tigers, successors to the Cohens, ticked off victories over such indifferent foes as the feared "Pick-Ups." The Tigers challenged the C.A.C. to a game for the city championship, and the contracts were signed setting November 21 as game day.

The weather was awful, with rain falling steadily, yet a thousand fans came to the ballpark expecting a hotly contested game. In the stands, the soggy color scheme split evenly between the C.A.C.'s red and white and the Simpsons' orange and black.

When the teams warmed up, Manager Roth of the Simpsons noticed three players in C.A.C. uniforms who shouldn't have been there. They were not ringers but only locals who had not been listed on the C.A.C. roster when the game contracts were signed.

Roth protested to the referee. C.A.C. manager Thompson joined the huddle, and the argument dragged on while the field got muddier. The contract was produced. They argued over that. Finally, things seemed to be settled, and the teams lined up for the kickoff. There in the C.A.C. lineup were the three ineligible players again!

Out came Roth once more. And Thompson. More arguing. When Thompson absolutely refused to play without his three newcomers, the referee could only forfeit the game to the Tigers, 1-0.

The victory, no matter how technical, made the Simpsons city champs. More important, it established their young players as the nucleus Canton would use to get back into the race for the state football championship.

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Massillon -- without the Tigers -- could still put a pretty good team in the field for 1907. Some of the best local players from 1903-04 showed they still knew how to do it. Sherb Wightman fashioned a strong line featuring Fred Haag, Frank Botoner, and Fritz Miller, Mully's brother. Baldy Wittman, 36-years-old but still tough, played tackle in the most important games. Mully Miller, Bob Featheringham, and Frank Bast were backfield veterans.

After the "All-Massillons" opened with three consecutive easy wins over teams from Alliance, Akron, and Salem, local fans began comparing them with the Tigers of years past. The usual apathy set in. Only 200 fans showed up on October 20 to watch the Broadway A.C. of Cleveland -- a club the old Tigers would have ground into peanut butter.

The first half went according to the expected script, with Featheringham and Mully Miller cracking over for touchdowns to

build up an 11-0 lead. But, in the second half, things fell apart. Cliff, Broadway's right halfback, scored a touchdown when he outscrambled the Massillons for a fumble. The goal was missed, but Broadway was perched within tying distance.

Only two minutes remained when the Massillons dropped the ball again. A Broadway man grabbed it with a clear field, but a great effort by Rhodes, the Massillons' young right end, dropped him from behind before he could score. Hanging on by their fingernails, the All-Massillons preserved their victory.

Two Sundays of heavy rain kept the team idle. Then, on November 10, they went to Shelby to meet the undefeated Blues. Admittedly, after the layoff, the Massillons weren't at the top of their game, but the scoreless tie came as a shock to many Massillonians. There was the usual griping about officiating, but the truth was that the teams were of very similar quality.

Ames became the Massillons' hero of the moment when he blew in from his tackle slot to block a try for field goal by Shelby's brilliant kicker, Homer Davidson.

In a key game, the Massillons traveled to Columbus to face the reorganized Panhandles with all those Nesser brothers. Bullet Riley, who'd joined the club in Shelby, had a brilliant day. His running set up a Mully Miller touchdown plunge early in the first half. Frank Bast added goal.

Columbus gained nearly at will in the second half, but all they could muster was a field goal. The All-Massillons came home, breathing hard, with a narrow 6-4 win and a shot at a fifth straight championship.

Just how they'd arrived at this opportunity gives some insight into the way the state title was decided when there were several contenders. After an easy victory over the Akros, a local amateur team, the All-Massillons stood undefeated through seven games with only the tie at Shelby as a blemish. Shelby was also without a loss but had played a second tie, this with the Panhandles. At least, that's how they saw it in Massillon and Columbus. In Shelby, they claimed to have beaten the Panhandles, 8-6. However, an account of the game indicates the two-point margin came on a disputed safety, when Shelby players forced the Columbus ball carrier back over his own goal line. As that wasn't kosher in 1907 (or any other year, for that matter), Columbus claimed a tie, Massillon happily agreed, and most of the state seems to have bought the argument. As their final game, the Massillons invited the Panhandles for Thanksgiving. A victory would give the title to Massillon by the narrowest of margins; a loss would leave Shelby as champion, with a strong claim from Columbus.

Because of the game's importance, Massillon brought in two ringers, familiar faces Peggy Parratt and Bob Shiring. With Bullet Riley at halfback, the lineup was beginning to swing away from All-Massillon and toward a Tiger reunion. A crowd of 3,000, the best of the year, showed up at the asylum grounds. The betting before the game was at even money.

Shiring, Botoner and Haag gave the Massillons a weight advantage over the burly 'Handles. They proceeded to use the extra avoirdupois to push the visitors around the field in the first half.

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Despite lots of yardage, the Massillons couldn't cross the Columbus goal line, though they did manage a safety. Frank Nesser booted a 20-yard field goal near the end of the period to give the 'Handles a 4-2 lead at the half.

Just before the period ended, Ted Nesser's arm was broken near the wrist. Then early in the second half, Columbus quarterback "Heinie" Spiers also went out with an injury. Riley and Bast scored touchdowns against the weakened visitors to make the final 13-4.

At the same time, Shelby ran off an easy victory over Sandusky, but it made no difference. Massillon celebrated its fifth consecutive state championship.

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That was the last hoorah for Stark County's second city, at least for quite a few years. For 1908, Sherb Wightman took Bast, Rhodes, Mully Miller, and a few others down to Canal Dover. The Dover Giants had never been a factor in Ohio football, but the transfusion from Massillon instantly made them a power. They claimed the 1908 state championship at the end of the season, but their assertion got little support outside the Dover city limits because they played an undemanding schedule.

The next year, they started strong, running up a 158-0 score against poor Lorain A.C. in early October. But when they finally got their big chance against state champion Akron on the last day of the month, they were shot down, 10-0. The next week, the Columbus Nationals, ranked as inferior to the Panhandles, edged the Giants. Two losses put them out of the race.

That was as close as they would ever come.

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The Columbus Panhandles came back to the football wars in 1907 and stayed for twenty colorful years. Ted Nesser and his brothers formed the team's backbone throughout almost all of their history, but they weren't the only good players to appear in the maroon and gold 'Handle uniforms. Through most of the '07 season, until the All-Massillons kayoed them twice, they contended for state honors, the first pro (or semi-pro) team from southern Ohio to get into the race.

1908 was an up and down season, alternating wins and losses. The final loss took them years to live down, as the lower-ranked Nationals took the city championship away from them on a field goal by veteran sandlotter Bob Kern.

For most teams, a city championship was THE game of any season. Such contests always drew big crowds and betting was high, but more than bragging and betting was involved. Winning the city championship usually meant a team could base its home games at its city's best football field the following year. New fans and a stronger schedule could justify the investment. Losing could condemn a team to games on a cow pasture that might not even be enclosed. Moreover, the best local players gravitated to a town's top team. In many cases, a first city championship became the springboard to a long reign as a city's main football attraction.

In 1909, Bob Kern reversed the trend by leaving the city-champ Nationals and joining the Panhandles. Together with the Nessers, he gave them one of the best teams in their history. This time, when they played the Nationals for the Columbus city title, it was no contest -- 33-0.

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The Panhandles and Nationals, along with the Dayton Oakwoods, comprised the top southern Ohio teams. In the northwest, Toledo had a fair team in the Athletic Association, or T.A.A. as they were usually called. From 1902 through 1907, the club compiled a 36-7-2 record, playing mainly teams from its own area. Louis "Mother" Kruse, a slashing halfback who would have been welcome on any Ohio team, was their main weapon. Another good player was teenager Fred Merkle, who later gained infamy in baseball annals when his failure to touch second base led to the New York Giants losing the 1908 pennant. Quarterback Walter Wright became one of the nation's best known football officials, primarily working in the Western Conference from 1909 through 1928.

The T.A.A. may have been the only football team ever to be put out of business by habitual mud. They played their home games at Armory Park, an unsodded field that inspired the name for Toledo's minor league baseball team -- the Mud Hens. Armory Park was bad enough in the summer; in the less-than-ideal weather of the autumn it took an ox team to make a successful end run. The ground was in such bad condition by 1908 that the T.A.A. refused to play there and disbanded.

A team called the "Colts" played in 1909 and 1910. Their main distinction was cleaner uniforms, as they performed at Ames Donner Field.

There were numerous "kid" teams, middleweight teams, and sandlot teams playing in Toledo during these years. The eleven that was eventually to become both Toledo's most famous and most successful -- the "Maroons" -- began as a kids team in 1906. By 1909, when young Art Gratop, formerly the team's center, took over as manager, they realized enough profit from their games to "let every man keep his jersey at the end of the season."

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After the flurry of rule changes made before the 1906 season, the rulemakers sat back and waited to see the results. They waited for the most part until 1909 was history. The only important change in the interim came after 1908 when the value of a field goal was reduced to three points. With touchdowns still at five points each, two good kicks could still beat one long drive.

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The Akron Tigers were not a championship club in 1907, but they had their moments -- particularly against Canton teams. They knocked off the Canton Indians in mid-October and two weeks later ended the C.A.C.'s attempt to get a semi-pro team going by whipping them 5-0 in their only start. The C.A.C. may have felt better about that loss the next week when the Tigers destroyed the Newburg Steel Works team, 105-0. The Tigers had some good sandlotters going for them, but they were out of their element

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against the best teams. Both the All-Massillons and Shelby beat them by five touchdowns.

Akron always had several teams vying for honors. In 1908, the Akron Indians came to the fore with black star Charles Baker as a regular. Although the best they could do was a scoreless tie against the crosstown Tigers, the Indians won eight other games without a loss and were generally recognized as state champs -- except, of course, in Dover and Shelby.

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Interestingly enough, Shelby wasn't included in the proposed semi-pro league of 1907, probably because the Blues were "too pro," still paying salaries. Although wages were undoubtedly paid, Shelby never paid close to the amounts shelled out by Canton and Massillon in 1905-06. One tip-off is that as late as '06, Shelby was still charging only 25 cents for general admission tickets. Even a crowd 3,000 could bring Shelby a host share of around \$500. Massillon, on the other hand, charged 50 cents, and Manager J.J. Wise raised that to a dollar for the 1905 Canton game.

For the Shelby Blues, 1907 and 1908 were frustrating times. They'd challenged for the state title for years. Even when Canton and Massillon were slaughtering everyone in sight, the Blues never thought of themselves as less than third in Ohio. They fully expected to take over the crown when the Bulldogs and Tigers folded.

It was certainly galling to their fine team and loyal fans to see the All-Massillons get the nod from most critics for the state crown only because one more tie -- which they counted as a win -- marred the Blue's slate.

For 1908, Peggy Parratt was brought in as star. Shelby's great kicker and quarterback, Homer Davidson, chose to sit out the year because he was under contract to Cleveland's baseball Indians and did not want to risk injury. Once Davidson returned to football for Shelby in '09, Parratt -- by then the coach -- usually played halfback or end. No matter where he put himself, he was a fine player, but his greatest skill was in recruiting a strong collection of players. Under Parratt in '08, the Blues went through an undefeated season. They tried frantically to book a game with the Akron Indians, most critics' choice as the top team. When no arrangement could be made, Shelby fans were quick to accuse Akron of avoiding a showdown out of fear.

In his later dealings, Parratt was to show himself a master at seeming to be all for a particular game until he got behind closed doors with a rival manager and then bargaining for blood. Possibly the Akron Indians were less worried about taking a whipping from Parratt than they were about losing their wampum. Either way, Peggy knew how to use the non-game for publicity.

1909 began as 1908 had ended, with Parratt agitating for a big game with the Indians. Meanwhile, both teams continued unbeaten. Finally, in mid-November, the champs deigned to meet the Blues at Akron's Nolan Field.

It was the most important pro game in Ohio since 1906, and Akron was ready. They caught Shelby off guard and, using straight power football, moved the ball steadily down the field to a touchdown early in the first half. After that, the Blues stiffened and held the Indians at bay. Near the end of the half, Parratt snagged an Akron fumble and raced 45 yards to a touchdown that tied the score.

In the second half, Homer Davidson dropkicked a field goal from the 35-yard-line to put Shelby in the lead. "The play of the game" some accounts called it. It wasn't quite enough.

As time ran down, Akron turned to desperation passes and several of them worked, finally producing the winning touchdown. Ironically, Parratt, who'd thrown (as far as we know) the first completed pro forward pass only three years earlier, saw his team beaten for the Ohio championship by Akron's use of the aerial game.

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Glamourless though the years 1907 through '09 may have been on Ohio gridirons, there was still enough exciting football to satisfy anyone not completely jaded by memories of the Bulldogs and Tigers. By 1910, Parratt had a new dynasty ready in Shelby.

Until then, the strongest area team was not an Ohio eleven. In an echo of former glory, Pittsburgh produced its last pro football power for nearly seventy years -- the Lyceum team. Doc McChesney, Bob Shiring, and a few other pros returned from Ohio to join with the Dillon brothers who'd starred at Princeton. The result was a team that stayed undefeated for nearly three seasons. Their victims included many of the strongest teams in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio. Hence, a new title -- the "Tri-State Champions." with all the area, state, county, city, and even neighborhood crowns floating around in those years, it seemed everyone was champion of something, but the Lyceum's claim was legitimate.

They were finally upset by the Dayton Oakwoods in their final game of 1909. After that, the Lyceums broke up and pro football in western Pennsylvania drifted into the "also-ran" category. Partly this was because of the growing popularity of collegiate teams at Pitt and at Washington and Jefferson. Partly it was because Pennsylvania's Blue Laws outlawed Sunday football, forcing the pro teams to compete on Saturdays, in direct competition with the colleges for the fans' attention.

But, as Pennsylvania pro football slipped into mediocrity, its star was again on the rise in Ohio. Its greatest days were yet to come.