

Providence Starts Rolling

1924

By Bob Gill

Besides having one of the more colorful nicknames in NFL history, the Providence Steam Roller is best-known as the last now-defunct team to win the league championship. Some aficionados might remember that the team played its home games in the Cycledrome, a converted bicycle racing track that was certainly one of the most unusual homes a football team ever had. To us in the PFRA, Providence is also distinguished by the fact that our own Pearce Johnson served as the team's manager or co-manager for its entire existence.

Since the 1928 championship dominates the Roller's history so much, you might get the impression that the team wasn't much good except for that one year. Actually, Providence put a competitive team on the field in every one of its seven seasons in the NFL, posting a cumulative record of 41 wins, 32 losses and 11 ties. They weren't contenders every year, but they weren't tail-enders either.

In fact, Providence had a fine team even before it joined the NFL in 1925. Far from being an untested expansion team, the Steam Roller was an established club that had been beating strong opponents in the Northeast for several years; and the 1924 squad was its best yet, playing a tougher schedule that included six games with NFL teams.

There was one major difference in 1924: The team played at Kinsley Park, because the Cycledrome hadn't been built yet.

Steam Roller coach Joe Braney started the season with a roster dominated by players from northeastern colleges. Quarterback Curly Oden, a standout punt returner, was a Brown alumnus, halfback Chick Burke came from Dartmouth, and fullback Dutch Collins, who doubled as a punter and tripled as a kicker, had played at New Hampshire State. (David Neft, in *The Football Encyclopedia*, shows Dutch Connor from New Hampshire playing a few games with Providence in 1925. It seems certain that he and Collins are one and the same, and Neft is very thorough about these things, but since the newspapers always called him Collins in 1924, I'll do the same in this article.)

Al McKay started the season at the other halfback slot but was banished to the sidelines a few weeks into the season. Burke went down with an injury at about the same time, but Babe Tonry of Boston University and Colgate's Jim Laird, who had been playing professionally since 1920, stepped in and kept the Steam Roller rolling.

In the line, coach Braney and Firpo Avedisian started at guard, with Burt Shurtleff of Brown at center. The tackles were Dave Mullen of

Boston College and John Spellman of Brown; the ends were Pinky Lester, Bull Lowe and Archie Golembeski. Midway through the season Golembeski, a Holy Cross alumnus, replaced Avedisian as Braney's running mate at guard. (A year later he replaced Braney as coach for Providence's NFL debut.) One of the main reserves was Joe McGee, who played end and quarterback. Fifteen years later McGee returned to Providence as coach of a new Steam Roller team in the American Association from 1939 to '41.

The Season Opens

The Roller opened with a 66-0 tuneup Sept. 21 against the Newport Naval Training Station before a crowd of 2,500. They followed that with a 53-0 rout of a team from South Weymouth, Mass. The papers reported that the fans at the latter game completely filled the stands, but didn't say how many people those stands held. There was almost no information on home attendance for the rest of the season, either, but since the team was solid enough to join the NFL a year later, we can probably assume that the fans kept coming out.

With the "preseason" out of the way, the Steam Roller started playing for real on Oct. 5, when the New Haven Blues came to town. Collins got the home team off on the right foot with a first-quarter touchdown run, Mullen blocked a punt for a safety, and two late scores ran the final tally to 21-0, giving Braney's team its first real win of the year.

Next came a serious test: a trip to Boston's Fenway Park to play the Pere Marquette team, an annual contender for the title of northeastern champs. Twelve thousand fans came out to see one of the biggest independent pro games of the season. After a scoreless first half, Curly Oden took matters into his own hands in the third quarter, returning a punt 55 yards for the only score in a 7-0 victory. It didn't come cheap, though; this was the game in which halfback Chick Burke broke his ankle, ending his season.

Burke's misfortune was an opportunity for Jim Laird, who joined the starting backfield along with Babe Tonry a week later, back home against the Bridgeport American Chain (really, that was the name). Dave Mullen recovered a fumble for a first-period touchdown, Laird went over for another and a 13-0 halftime lead, and Braney's charges held on through a scoreless second half for another win.

(Speaking of the Roller coach, it's worth noting that the Providence papers managed to go through the season without ever referring to him as "the home club's Braney leader" or "the Brane behind the Steam Roller's success." Such admirable restraint should not go unnoticed.)

The Professional Football Researchers Association

The NFL Shows Up

The undefeated Providence team faced another tough opponent on Oct. 19, when the NFL Columbus Tigers came to town. During their eight years in the NFL, the Columbus club was generally at the bottom of the league; but in 1923 and '24 things were different, thanks to the presence of Sonny Winters, one of the best passers of the era, though possibly the least celebrated. The Roller managed to hold Winters in check, but at the same time their offense couldn't get going against the heavier Columbus line. The result was a scoreless tie -- not a bad showing for the locals against a competitive NFL team.

Six days later the Steam Roller traveled to Philadelphia, where Sunday football was taboo, for a Saturday game with the Frankford Yellowjackets. This was the Yellowjackets' first year in the NFL, and they were more than competitive; Frankford made a strong bid for the championship before settling for third place with an 11-2-1 record. They flexed their muscles early against Providence, scoring three touchdowns in a remarkable first quarter that thrilled a crowd of 12,000. It happened this way:

The Jackets drove 62 yards for their first score, with Jack Storer going over on a short run and Russ Stein adding the extra point. As often happened in those days, the Steam Roller elected to kick off after the score, but Frankford took the kick and marched 80 yards for another six-pointer, this one coming on an 18-yard pass from Tex Hamer to Les Haws. After another conversion by Stein, Providence kicked off again, and again the Jackets drove the length of the field, scoring on a 35-yard pass from Charlie Way to Eddie O'Doyle. Stein's conversion made it 21-0, and the game was essentially over.

Remember, long touchdown drives were rare in the 1920s; most scores followed fumbles, interceptions or blocked punts. But in that first quarter the Yellowjackets put together three straight drives totaling 222 yards without their opponents ever taking possession. And Providence was no pushover, either.

In fact, the Steam Roller proved their mettle by holding Frankford scoreless for the rest of the afternoon and battling back with 10 points of their own, on a field goal by Collins and a fumble return by Bull Lowe. But that still left them on the short end of a 21-10 score -- their first loss of the season.

They got back on track the next day back at Kinsley Park against the Newark Field Club, a team that hung around for most of the 1920s without ever achieving much success. The visitors hung tough for the first half, holding the Roller to a single TD by Jim Laird, but Providence pulled away after intermission. Curly Oden passed to Pinky Lester for one score, Collins and Howard Clarke went over for two more, and the result was a 25-0 Steam Roller win.

It was more of the same a week later when Providence hosted a team from the New London Sub Base. Collins' field goal provided the only scoring in the first half, but Oden got loose for a 65-yard punt return in the third quarter to make it 10-0, and Collins tossed to Bull Lowe in the final period for a final score of 17-0.

Next to visit were the Rochester Jeffersons -- an NFL team, albeit one in the midst of an 0-7 season. In fact, they hadn't won a league

game since 1921. Still, they represented the big time, and a chance for the Steam Roller to show they belonged.

As it turned out, the Jeffersons put up a real fight, playing one of their best games of the year. For three quarters the two teams slugged it out on even terms, with neither able to mount a sustained offense. But with four minutes left the Roller got close enough for Collins to try a field goal from the 30-yard line, and he nailed it for a hard-earned 3-0 victory.

An Avalanche

The Steam Roller got another shot at an NFL opponent on Nov. 16, when the Minneapolis Marines came to town. Like Rochester, the Marines were winless; on top of that, they were probably tired, having dropped a 39-7 decision to Frankford a day earlier in what turned out to be their final game in the NFL. Still, no one could have expected the offensive avalanche that awaited them in Providence.

It started innocently enough. Collins booted a field goal to open the scoring in the first quarter, and Oden passed to Lowe before the half to make it 9-0. Then the floodgates opened.

In a seven-minute span of the third quarter, the Steam Roller rolled to 34 points. Lester started it, returning a fumble for a score; then halfback Bunny Corcoran scored on a plunge. Laird hauled in two TD passes in quick succession, one apiece from Oden and Collins; and Oden ended the flurry with a 55-yard punt return, his third such touchdown of the season. Lester scored again in the fourth period, and when the gun sounded the Roller had tallied an amazing 49-0 win.

Even against a winless NFL team, that was an impressive show. In fact, it's possible that this game brought Providence to the attention of NFL president Joe Carr and led the Steam Roller to join the league a year later.

That was still in the future, though, and for the moment Braney's charges had to worry about a rematch with the Frankford Yellowjackets, who took the field in Providence 24 hours after beating the Milwaukee Badgers in a Saturday game in Philadelphia. Collins gave the capacity crowd hope when he kicked a field goal in the second quarter for the customary 3-0 lead. Frankford got on the board soon afterward when Butch Spagna blocked a punt for a safety, but the Steam Roller held a 3-2 lead at intermission.

Unfortunately, the second half was all Frankford. Tex Hamer scored on a short plunge in the third quarter, then broke loose for a 35-yard touchdown run in the final period to clinch a 16-3 win. It was no disgrace, but it showed Providence fans that their team wasn't equipped to compete at pro football's highest level just yet.

New Men

At this time of the season, though, there was an obvious avenue open for teams looking to improve themselves: College stars whose teams had finished playing were often willing to help out local pro teams, for a price. The Steam Roller signed several players who fit that description -- most notably halfback Freddy Sweet and lineman Spike Staff, both from Brown, and tackle Joe Kozlowsky, from Boston College.

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Sweet and Staff joined the team in time for the annual Thanksgiving Day game with the Cleveland Panthers, a touring team that existed throughout the 1920s and into the '30s. The Steam Roller had beaten them and tied them in two previous Turkey Day encounters. In their later years the Panthers usually weren't much good, but in 1924 they had one of their best teams, as Providence fans soon found out.

Things started out well for the Roller, as Collins' second quarter field goal opened the scoring, as usual, and a bad snap by the Cleveland center resulted in a safety. Though they didn't mount much of an offense, Braney's charges entered the fourth quarter holding a 5-0 advantage. Then the visitors surprised everyone by connecting on a long scoring pass to take a 6-5 lead with little time to go. The Steam Roller turned up the heat at that point, and with less than two minutes to go they had a first down just inside the Cleveland 30-yard line. Unwilling to risk any mistakes, they elected to have Dutch Collins try a game-winning field goal on first down. That decision showed great confidence in Collins, but -- as it turned out -- not much sense. Collins' kick went wide, and the game ended with Providence on the short end of a 6-5 score.

That was the low point of the Steam Roller's season, but they bounced back three days later against the Dayton Triangles of the NFL. With 4,000 fans cheering them on, the Roller got off to a slow start, and most of the first quarter was played in their territory. But they escaped unscathed because Dayton's Russ Hathaway missed a pair of field goal attempts, from 28 and 13 yards. Then, in the second quarter, Providence finally got close enough to have Collins try a kick, and he connected for -- you guessed it -- a 3-0 lead.

Shortly thereafter Dayton was knocking on the door again. With the ball inside the Providence 20, Gus Redmond went back to pass; but Pinky Lester broke through, stripped him of the ball, and sprinted 77 yards for a touchdown on the game's key play. Collins' conversion made it 10-0.

Dayton kept the pressure on, scoring a late touchdown of their own on a pass from Ken Huffine to Frank Bacon to make it 10-7, but that was as close as they got. When the gun sounded, Providence had its third win in six games against NFL teams (with one tie).

Winning the Championship

A week later, on Dec. 7, the "largest crowd of the season" packed Kinsley Park to see the Steam Roller play a rematch with the Pere Marquette team. For the first time since late October, Collins didn't break the ice with a field goal. This time Bunny Corcoran did the honors, scoring on a short run in the first quarter for a 7-0 lead. The visitors scored before the half on a fumble return but missed the extra point, and it was still 7-6 going into the fourth quarter. At that point the Steam Roller offense came to life, and Curly Oden capped a scoring drive with a plunge into the end zone to make it 14-6. A few minutes later Archie Golembeski picked off a pass and rumbled 55 yards to clinch a 20-6 victory.

At this point the Steam Roller had beaten every major contender for the independent championship of the Northeast except one: the Waterbury Blues. And on Dec. 14 the Blues came to town to challenge Providence for the regional title.

Cold weather restricted both teams offensively, and the game quickly turned into a defensive struggle, with each side waiting for a break. The big one came in the second quarter. With the Blues backed up deep in their own territory, Kozlowsky blocked a punt. Staff, the other new addition on the Roller line, recovered on the 8-yard line. Waterbury held and tried to punt again; but once again Kozlowsky broke it up. This time he got there before the ball was kicked and forced a fumble, which Lester recovered in the end zone for a 6-0 lead.

That was all the Roller needed, but Collins added a field goal in the fourth quarter to make the final score 9-0 and give Providence the undisputed championship of the Northeast.

The 1924 Steam Roller didn't leave much of a statistical record, but Dutch Collins was the leading scorer, with 46 points in 14 games (not including those first two against patsy teams). Behind him came Pinky Lester, with 30 points; Jim Laird, with 25; and Curly Oden, with 24. Oden tossed three touchdown passes, and Collins threw two.

The team's success was enough to make Steam Roller management and fans start thinking about a bigger championship - the championship of the NFL, for instance. And sure enough, Providence joined the big league for the 1925 season. Winning the title took a bit longer, but that too came to pass.

By that time only three players from the 1924 team were still around. In fact, only about a dozen of them wore Steam Roller colors for the team's debut in the NFL. Still, that 1924 squad did its part: It was the one that really put Providence on the pro football map.

1924 PROVIDENCE STEAM ROLLER, 12-3-1

Sept. 21	H	*Newport Naval Training Sta.	66-0	W
Sept. 28	H	*South Weymouth (Mass.)	53-0	W
Oct. 5	H	New Haven Blues	21-0	W
Oct. 11	A	Pere Marquette	7-0	W
Oct. 12	H	Bridgeport American Chain	13-0	W
Oct. 19	H	Columbus Panhandles	0-0	T
Oct. 25	A	Frankford Yellow Jackets	10-21	L
Oct. 26	H	Newark Field Club	25-0	W
Nov. 2	H	New London Submarine Base	17-0	W
Nov. 9	H	Rochester Jeffersons	3-0	W
Nov. 16	H	Minneapolis Marines	49-0	W
Nov. 23	H	Frankford Yellow Jackets	3-16	L
Nov. 27	H	Cleveland Panthers	5-6	L
Nov. 30	H	Dayton Triangles	10-7	W
Dec. 7	H	Pere Marquette	20-6	W
Dec. 14	H	Waterbury Blues	9-0	W