

The Super Bulldogs

1916

By PFRA Research

Having committed to big time pro football in 1915, Jack Cusack could hardly take a step backward in 1916. Most Canton fans who saw them remembered the 1916 team as the best of the Bulldogs. It's unlikely the 1916 bunch was actually stronger than the team that later won back-to-back National Football League championships in 1922 and 1923, but those who favored the earlier team always had an unanswerable argument: the 1916 Bulldogs had Jim Thorpe!

They had much more than Thorpe, of course. A new "bidding war" for players was in full swing across the Midwest, and, of all the bidders, Jack Cusack was the most successful at corraling talent. Large linemen such as Howard "Cub" Buck of Wisconsin, Clarence "Doc" Spears of Dartmouth, Ed "Unk" Russell, of Penn, and Howard "Cap" Edwards of Notre Dame paved the way for Thorpe's long runs. Swift Harry Costello of Georgetown and line-blasting "Carp" Julian of Michigan State scored their share of touchdowns. But Thorpe was the centerpiece. The chance to play beside him helped bring some of the stars into the Canton fold. The chance to play against him was a selling point for opponents. Bulldog games were reported in most midwest newspapers.

Player-Coach Thorpe was playing professional baseball and unavailable for the Bulldogs' first two warm-up games. Young George Roudebush out of Denison University held down the fort and threw a couple of TD passes in easy wins. Roudebush moved on to the Cincinnati Celts when Big Jim arrived during the second week of October. In the 'Dogs' remaining eight games, the great Indian ran from scrimmage for ten touchdowns, returned kicks for two more, caught one touchdown pass, and kicked seven extra points for a total of 85 points. He might have doubled that total, but when the Bulldogs got well ahead, as they often did, he usually retired to the bench.

Cusack put together a perfect schedule. For the first two games at League Park, Canton hosted the Altoona Indians and Pitcairn Quakers, two Pennsylvania teams that could be counted on to lose but not embarrass themselves. Altoona fell 23-0, and Pitcairn actually put a scare into Bulldog fans before succumbing 7-0. Everybody agreed, of course, that the game never would have been so close had Jim Thorpe not been off playing baseball.

Cusack's next two victims were, in turn, the Buffalo All-Stars and the New York All-Stars. They sounded much better than they performed. A nice crowd of 3,000 showed up to welcome Thorpe back against Buffalo. The Great One rewarded his fans immediately by returning a punt 48 yards for a touchdown two

minutes into the game. Moments later he zipped a pass to Harry Costello for another touchdown. In the second quarter when the Bulldogs scored 42 points, Big Jim ran for two TDs, tossed a second touchdown pass to Costello, and then reversed the process by scoring a touchdown via a throw from Costello. The irony was that Canton could have won easily just on the work of Costello, Carp Julian, and George Roudebush. The final score was 77-0, but only 39-0 if Thorpe's scores were factored out. The New York All-Stars proved only slightly more competitive than their Buffalo counterparts, losing 68-0.

The real schedule began at the end of October when the Columbus Panhandles came to town. The 'Handles were slightly under-Nesslered; Fred was out with a broken hand, but the other five brothers were their usual bruising selves. Thorpe scored a first quarter touchdown on a 15-yard run after setting it up with an 18-yard dash. In the second quarter, the great Indian set up a touchdown by Julian when he completed a 29-yard pass. In the second half, the Bulldogs played it safe and concentrated on defending against the Panhandles' thrusts. The final 12-0 score disappointed a few fans who wanted to see the Bulldogs not only win but do it mercilessly.

The fans should have been more forgiving. The Panhandles remained one of the toughest aggregations in Ohio despite the fact that Lou Pickeral, who had given them a strong air arm in '15, was no longer on the scene. Their lineup still boasted six Nessers (usually), two Kuehners, and two Ruhs. Halfback Lee Snoots lacked siblings in uniform but scored eleven touchdowns on the season. Columbus profoundly influenced the championship race by defeating Cleveland and Youngstown and losing to Canton and Massillon.

Peggy Parratt came back into the football wars in 1916, fielding a Cleveland team of all-stars built around Paul "Shorty" Des Jardien, the 6'4" former All-America center from Chicago. Playing their home games at League Park (later called Dunn Field), home of the baseball Indians, Parratt's football Indians began well, but fan interest sagged when the Panhandles slipped past them 9-6. The keys to Cleveland's season were home-and-home games with Canton in early November.

Despite Cleveland's star-studded lineup, Parratt's club was no match for the Bulldogs' in a November 5 meeting at Canton. Thorpe ran for two touchdowns and returned a punt for a third as Canton won 27-0 in front of a crowd reported at 7,000. The next week, the Bulldogs went to Cleveland for the return match. Parratt

The Professional Football Researchers Association

started himself at quarterback and enhanced his lineup with a few new stars, most playing under names they had never been christened with. In a much closer game, Canton won 14-7, with Thorpe running for both Bulldog touchdowns. The gate in Cleveland was reported at 10,000 but, after Canton handed Parratt's men their third defeat of the season, fan interest waned.

Parratt brought in Loren Solon, a terrific fullback from the University of Minnesota, for the game against Massillon the following Sunday. Next to Thorpe, Solon may have been the best back on an Ohio gridiron in 1916. He helped the Indians to a scoreless tie with the Tigers and then took them to three straight season-ending wins against the Panhandles, Detroit Heralds, and Toledo Maroons. Although best known for rugged line-smashing, the Minnesotan was a triple threat.

The Indians' finale at Toledo was an exceptionally even match that seemed certain to end in a scoreless tie until the closing minutes when Solon completed a long pass to Hube Wagner who took the ball to the Maroons' 15-yard-line. Then, as time ran down, he dropped back to the 22 and booted a game-winning field goal through the uprights. Cleveland fans could only wonder if Solon might have made a difference had he been on hand for the earlier losses to Canton.

The Cleveland-Toledo game proved to be the finale not only of the season but for all time for Parratt's Indians. Apparently his financial backers were unwilling to make another try for the championship in 1917. Parratt continued to field teams for several years, but they were second-line aggregations, sporting a few stars and playing on the road for guarantees, much like Pitcairn and Altoona.

* * * * *

The Youngstown Patricians had gotten off to a roaring start by winning their first five games. However, their victims included no one stronger than the Pitcairn Quakers. On November 5, the Pats' first quality opponent, the Massillon Tigers, padded into Youngstown with their own undefeated team. Skeet Lambert's field goal gave Massillon a narrow 3-0 win, but the Patricians still had to be considered contenders for the championship. They polished off the McKeesport Olympics and then played host for the game that would make or break their season -- Canton.

Over 5,000 fans, reportedly the largest crowd to witness a pro game in Youngstown up to then, turned out to see Thorpe and Company. Both Thorpe and his company were at less than full strength. Big tackle Cub Buck and top end Ernie Soucy were unavailable to the Bulldogs because their Saturday coaching duties with the University of Wisconsin took them too far away to make the trip to Youngstown. Thorpe, nursing an ankle injured the week before in Cleveland, began the game on the bench. For Youngstown fans, Thorpe's absence was a mixed blessing: they wanted to see the big Indian in action but the Pats' chances for victory were definitely improved with him on the sideline. Midway through the opening period, Big Jim was forced into the game when Costello was knocked out with a wrenched knee. The crowd cheered but Thorpe was below par. In the third quarter, a hip injury on top of his bad ankle ended his performance for the day.

To add to the Bulldogs' problems, they were breaking in a new quarterback. Milt Ghee, the Dartmouth All-America, was a fine passer who deserved his acclaim, but he needed some time to acclimate himself to his new teammates. The combination of Canton's own problems and a determined effort by the Patricians kept the game scoreless into the fourth quarter. Canton drove from its own 35 down to Youngstown's eleven only to be stopped on downs. Had Thorpe been in the game on two healthy legs, he would no doubt have tried a field goal.

The Pats took over at their own eleven, and, in keeping with the accepted strategy of the time, immediately punted. It was a mistake because it left Canton with enough time to mount another drive. Ghee, Julian, and "Red" Wilkinson, a strong runner out of Syracuse, brought the ball in short jaunts down to the Youngstown 18. Then, with three minutes and seventeen seconds remaining, Ghee flipped a pass to Wilkinson for the touchdown. The try for the extra point was unsuccessful, but Youngstown's desperation passes as the clock ran out resulted in interceptions.

That ended Youngstown's run on the 1916 Ohio League championship; later, one-sided losses to Massillon and the Columbus Panhandles simply underlined the situation. The Pats lacked the firepower of their near neighbors from Stark County. On the other hand, in defiance of geography, the Patricians could claim the "Eastern Championship" because the Washington, D.C., Vigilants made their second visit and again were beaten, this time by a narrow 10-9 score.

* * * * *

Having escaped Youngstown with a skin-of-their-teeth, 6-0 win, the Bulldogs moved on to still-undefeated Massillon for a game scheduled the Sunday before Thanksgiving. While Canton was having its close scrape with the Patricians, the Tigers were in an even closer tilt against Peggy Parratt's team at Cleveland. The 0-0 tie helped restore some of Cleveland's luster but was ominous for the Tigers in view of Canton's pair of victories over the same club. Canton and Massillon undefeated before the big game was the northeastern Ohio promoter's dream. No one could argue that this one was for the United States pro football championship. One report had 15,000 fans turning out at Massillon's Driving Park, but that was surely an exaggeration. The Canton *Daily News* estimated 10,000, a more likely figure but still an immense crowd for the time and place.

Both teams beefed up. Massillon added All-America end Bert Baston from Minnesota and former Washington and Jefferson center Al Wesbecher. Canton's additions were Illinois' famous halfback Bart Macomber and 255-pound guard Clarence "Doc" Spears from Dartmouth. More important for Canton were their absentees: Costello was gone for the season with his bad knee, and so was Carp Julian with blood poisoning. Most significant of all, Thorpe was still limping.

The game might have been scripted in Hollywood. The two giants slugged it out through four quarters with neither able to score. In fact, neither even threatened to score a touchdown. Gus Dorias tried for three field goals and Thorpe attempted one but a muddy field and wicked crosswind ruined the kicks. Both contenders were still undefeated with one more meeting scheduled.

The Professional Football Researchers Association

Potentially, Thanksgiving Day was a big payday for a team. Massillon brought in the Youngstown Patrician squad that had given the Tigers fits less than a month earlier. The problem for a pro team playing on Thanksgiving was that many of its regulars would be absent coaching college or high school teams. Massillon lost a couple of players by that route, including Rockne and Dorias, but they were able to fill the empty slots with quality players; Youngstown was harder hit and unable to make up the difference. The Tigers had little trouble in a 27-0 win, but their fans were focused on the coming Canton game and only 2,000 showed up.

Jack Cusack avoided the temptation to schedule a Thanksgiving Day game. One good reason was that so many of his players coached that he would have had to hire a large new contingent, and because Thanksgiving Day players were in demand, they often bargained for higher than usual pay. But more than that, this was a case when fiscal responsibility went hand in hand with smart football; his squad needed time to heal. When the Massillon Tigers came out on Canton's League Park field the following Sunday, they no doubt noticed immediately that Jim Thorpe wasn't limping anymore.

Massillon brought in some good players, including Rockne, Bob "Nasty" Nash, a rugged tackle, Freeman Fitzgerald, ex-Notre Dame guard, and "Bud" Goodman, a good passer from W. & J., but overall, the Tigers' lineup wasn't in Canton's class.

Thorpe was joined in the backfield by a second Indian. Pete Calac, Big Jim's best friend and an old Carlisle teammate, lined up at fullback. The rest of the backfield found Ghee at quarterback and Frank Dunn, the coach at Dickinson, at half. Veterans Fred Sefton and Ernie Soucy started at the end slots. The huge line read Cub Buck and Cap Edwards at tackles, Doc Spears and Unk Russell at guards, and Fat Waldsmith at center. There wasn't a weak spot in sight. This was the lineup that fans remembered years later when they argued that the 1916 Bulldogs were the greatest team ever to wear Canton's red and white.

With 7,000 in the stands, according to the Canton *Daily News*, League Park was not quite filled to capacity. Those anticipating another close game were disappointed but no one from Canton complained. The Bulldogs hardly needed a break, but they got one anyway. Less than three minutes into the game, Goodman fumbled a Thorpe punt; Waldsmith picked up the loose football and trotted into the end zone. After that, the Bulldogs controlled the game with an irresistible ground attack.

The *Daily News*, in its exuberance, praised each Bulldog player but its most stylish prose went to Thorpe: "Thorpe bumped tacklers, and then advanced; Thorpe sidestepped adversaries and left disaster in his wake; Thorpe, by sheer strength, shook off rivals like the wind blows leaves to the ground. When yards were needed, yards were obtained."

The final score was 24-0, but the game was not nearly that close. Cusack's Bulldogs were undefeated and accepted by most commentators across the midwest as the "Professional Champions of the U.S." For Massillon, despite a strong season, it was a case of "wait till next year."

Had the Ohio League printed standings based on consensus opinion for 1916, they might have looked something like this:

1. Canton Bulldogs	9-0-1
2. Massillon Tigers	7-1-2
3. Cleveland Indians	8-3-1
4. Dayton Triangles	9-1-0
5. Toledo Maroons	7-3-1
6. Columbus Panhandles	7-5-0
7. Youngstown Patricians	7-4-0
8. Cincinnati Celts	5-4-1

The Triangles of Dayton were the former Dayton Gym-Cadets. The name change signified new financial backing from three Dayton factories that formed an industrial triangle of plants in the downtown section of Dayton: DELCO (Dayton Engineering Laboratories Company), Dayton Metal Products Company (D.M.P. Co.), and Domestic Engineering Company (DECO, later called Delco-Light). Later, Dayton Wright Airplane Company came in as a fourth sponsor.

With a crew of homegrown stars like passer Al Mahrt and runner Lou Partlow, the Tris put a good team on the field, but they couldn't bring in the major northeastern clubs like Canton and Massillon because their fan support was too weak to allow them to offer more than a token guarantee. Despite this handicap, the Triangles became part of the league that was formed in 1920 and survived, albeit as a road team, through 1929 -- three years longer than the Canton Bulldogs!

Dayton's biggest wins of the season were 14-7 over the Heralds at Detroit and 12-0 over the Maroons at Toledo. There was even some talk of the state championship making the rounds until the Cincinnati Celts clipped them 10-7 at Redland Field in late November.

The up-and-down Celts pulled off the season's biggest upset out in Indiana when they snapped Pine Village's remarkable winning streak on October 29. George Roudebush, who had started the season with Canton, kicked an early field goal, but the Celts trailed 7-3 late in the game when they were forced to punt. Instead of taking a blocking position, Roudebush lined up behind his punter. Under the rule (long since changed), he was eligible to recover the punt, just as in the old "quarterback kick." Apparently the Villagers forgot this because when the punt rolled over the goal line they let it lie. Down swooped Roudebush to recover for the game-winning touchdown.

The Ft. Wayne Friars and the Hammond Clabby's (sponsored by a gym run by boxer Jimmy Clabby) were other strong Indiana teams, but the Wabash A.A. appeared to be in decline. Also slipping a notch were longtime local powers like the Detroit Heralds and the Evanston North Ends, who broke up after the season. The sandlotters who had been the backbone of those teams for years couldn't quite compete with the influx of college-trained players moving into pro ball.

Unfortunately, "good" and "profitable" didn't go hand in hand. Despite the record crowds for the two Bulldogs-Tigers games,

The Professional Football Researchers Association

Massillon lost money on the season and Canton barely made a profit.

Most other major teams across the Midwest were running in the red. The problem was obvious. Every player knew Thorpe was being paid \$250 a game and most agreed he was worth every cent of it. But players of considerably less skill were holding out for \$100

or \$125. Team managers had to produce stars to draw crowds, but the crowds could never be big enough to pay for the stars. Teams desperately needed something like the old "Ohio League" sub-rosa agreement where the managers foreswore raiding other teams. Only something along that line could hold salaries at a responsible level.