

PEGGY PARRATT, MVP

By Milt Roberts

Professional football lost its MVP when George Watson "Peggy" Parratt died at his Lakewood home in Cleveland, Ohio, on January 3, 1959.

Parratt was never officially recognized as pro football's Most Valuable Player. But a study of the professional football scene in Ohio between 1905 and 1916 reveals that the myriad of valuable contributions Peggy made to professional football during those twelve struggling years eminently qualified him as the game's "Most Versatile Personality."

Parratt was one of that glittering collection of gridiron stars who came to the Canton-Massillon area in 1905 and 1906 to play for pay. He had performed professionally in 1905 for Shelby and Lorain before he came to Massillon in 1906.

The circumstances that found the three-time All-Ohio college star playing professional football while still playing college football at Case University in 1905 were most unusual. Parratt risked his amateur standing by playing professional ball on Sundays for the Shelby A.C., using the alias "Jimmy Murphy." Wearing a peculiar-looking helmet and nose guard, Peggy first drew notice from the Shelby press for his outstanding play against a team of college all-stars. The praise, however, was for Jimmy Murphy, not Peggy Parratt.

Two weeks later, against Toledo, Jimmy Murphy again starred on defense for Shelby, but this time the Cleveland papers revealed that Murphy was really Peggy Parratt, the well-known Case University player, in disguise.

The chairman of the Case University Athletic Board, Professor Arthur S. Wright, called Parratt in for questioning. Peggy openly admitted breaking the amateur code and was barred from further intercollegiate play of any kind at Case. Parratt thus became the first well-known college football star to be disciplined by his school for playing professional football on the side. Other name players had done the same thing but when questioned about it had winked and denied the charges. To Peggy's credit, he didn't lie. In truth, Parratt's candid confession amounted to a life-long pledge of loyalty to professional football. Peggy loved football. He once wrote, "Football gives a man proper confidence in himself, and this confidence makes him better- fitted to fight the battle of life when he leaves his Alma Mater."

Yet he also enjoyed playing other sports, and his loss of eligibility at Case in 1905 was a blow to the whole athletic program there since Parratt was also a star basketball and baseball player, talented enough to play both sports professionally at a later date. Oddly, after Peggy was ruled ineligible at Case, he did not return to play pro football for Shelby again that fall. Instead, he signed with the Lorain professionals for the remainder of the season. In an unusual turn of events, Case awarded him his varsity letter anyway, citing his invaluable leadership on and off the field during the major part of the '05 football season.

An even more remarkable development was Parratt's selection to the All-Ohio College Eleven in 1905; this in spite of his having been caught playing professionally for Shelby. It was a rare compliment to his college reputation. His baseball captaincy stripped from him at Case, he coached the baseball team in the Spring of 1906. That fall, after turning down the head football coaching job at Marietta, Peggy was signed by the Massillon Tigers, in part because of his acknowledged mastery of the newest offensive weapon in football, the forward pass. He immediately earned the starting role at quarterback.

In the second game of the now famous two-game championship series with Canton, the 168-pound Parratt brought new honors to himself by his outstanding defensive maneuvers against the forward pass, resulting in two or three interceptions. His performance in that game alone proved he could play with the best in pro football.

To the great disappointment of the Massillon and Canton fans, the 1906 series was beset with ugly rumors of a betting fix. Many of the famous name players drifted away when the scandal broke, leaving only the local players to pick up the pieces and try to patch together a respectable season for 1907.

It looked like the end of big-time professional football in Stark County, Ohio. But bad taste for the game had not traveled the twenty-odd miles to Akron, where crowds of two or three thousand continued to support the high class semi-professional outfits that fought it out for the city and Summit County championship.

If Akron was a hotbed of semi-pro football in 1907, Canton was a disenchanting and barren area. About the only enthusiasm shown was for the city's young elevens. There was little or no interest in the professional heavyweights' return to Canton.

Massillon, on the other hand, decided to field an older, experienced team of local stars, who had remained behind after the highly-paid imports deserted in 1906. Peggy Parratt had not been involved in the scandal, and was once again on the Massillon roster in 1907. He started the season in the regular lineup, but after the season was underway, he returned to Cleveland and cast his lot with the Franklin A.C. in that city. He played a few games for Franklin, starring as a forward passer, but spent most of his time refereeing professional football games in the Cleveland area in 1907.

Parratt never stopped trying to give the necessary quality and guidance to the profession he loved. Officiating was just another way he found to help pro football along.

Meanwhile, Massillon and the Shelby Blues proved the strongest teams in Ohio in 1907, each claiming the state title. Both handily went undefeated and played each other to a scoreless tie. Shelby's claim was perhaps the lesser; they were tied by the Columbus Panhandles, a team Massillon defeated twice.

Before the 1908 season began, Parratt decided to return to Shelby, the scene of his professional debut in 1905. He helped to organize and financially back the team, and offered his playing, coaching, and recruiting talents to the Blues. His forceful personality gave new confidence to Shelby's old veterans. They defeated all rivals and finished in a tie with the Akron Indians for state honors.

The Akron Indians had come on strong, having played together for years as youngsters in south Akron. They crushed all opponents in 1908 except the Akron Tigers, with whom they played a scoreless tie. The Indians were very popular in Akron and drew large crowds whenever they played at Nolan's Park.

The potential for an even bigger gate in Akron caught Parratt's eye in Shelby. He viewed Akron as fertile ground for his next promotional move. In 1909, Peggy must have wished the Akron Indians hadn't been so strong. They won the state crown outright, defeating his Shelby Blues 12-9. They also took the measure of Parratt's former team, the Franklin A.C. of Cleveland. While he was taking his lumps in 1909 as Shelby's coach, Peggy found time to act as assistant coach at his Alma Mater, Case University.

But Parratt was far from through at Shelby. He decided to put his super recruiting talent to work for the 1910 season. Shelby signed on several well-known Ohio college graduates who were coaching in the state and combined them with the best of the local veterans. That mixture of football brains and brawn paid off, as Shelby twice upset the still-powerful Indians, 16-6 and 8-5, and copped the Ohio title for 1910.

In 1911, Peggy continued to swell Shelby's roster with name players, many of whom drifted in from schools outside Ohio. Again the Blues were stronger than the Akron Indians, shutting them out twice, 6-0 and 3-0. Massillon attempted a revival in 1911 and challenged Canton, also resurging and awakening hopes that the area might again become a prominent pro football battleground.

Canton handled Massillon's challenge rather easily, but lost their new-found hopes for the state crown when they forfeited the all-important title game to Shelby, 1-0, after a heated dispute over an offside ruling.

Actually, Shelby's Parratt was willing to compromise with Canton over the official's call, but Canton Captain Harry Turner angrily called his team off the field and refused to continue the contest.

In a post-game statement, Captain Turner told the Canton Repository, "Right or wrong, no more football for me after this; these old football duds, mud and dirt, go up to the attic to rot ... I'm done!" Harry Turner made his vow to quit pro football on November 26, 1911. It would have been better for him if he had kept his word. As it turned out, he wanted so badly to beat Peggy Parratt that he returned to play for Canton for the next three years. It proved a fatal error in 1914.

Before the 1912 season, Parratt left Shelby for Akron. His eye had been on the Akron possibilities for several years. When he arrived in Akron, his first move was to make sure everyone knew that the "Akron" Indians had become "Parratt's" Indians. With Peggy as player, coach, and owner-manager, they were strong enough to split with Shelby and twice defeat Canton, 14-7 and 19-7. But it wasn't good enough to win the state title.

Elyria, a previously unheard-from team, went undefeated, disposed of Parratt's Indians, Shelby, and Canton, and took off with every state honor. Their sudden success was not unexplainable. Many of Shelby's stars from the Parratt-directed championship elevens of 1910 and 1911 transferred their allegiance to Elyria in 1912 after Peggy left for Akron.

Parratt encouraged this movement of talent in order to build up a professional following in Elyria and create another first-class competitor for Shelby, Canton, and Akron. It meant one more big gate --after all, money was the name of the game if pro football was going to survive.

The 1913 season saw Peggy bring most of Elyria's 1912 championship team to Akron, adding them to his local Indians. He then pulled in one or two name players from big Eastern colleges and, without much difficulty, hauled the state title back to Akron. His Indians beat Shelby and Elyria and tied Jack Cusack's rapidly improving Canton Pros. Truthfully, Peggy had outmaneuvered Cusack in recruiting but still needed all the talent he had corraled to stay even with him on the field.

It was the season when another group of Indians appeared on the Akron scene -- the McCoy Indians. Their roster included several old East Akron players, some former Canton stars, and a couple of Cleveland standouts. They surprised the Canton Pros and defeated them rather easily, pushing back Jack Cusack's dream of the old Canton glory for at least another year.

One unusual note during the 1913 season was a visit to Akron in early November by Parratt's former Shelby team. They came looking for his scalp. They were loaded with a collection of famous players from big Eastern schools and were supporting a payroll of \$700 for that one game. A snowstorm forced a cancellation, and when Shelby returned the following week minus a few of their more expensive imports, Parratt's Indians were waiting with superior talent and walloped them 20-0 for the state crown.

Peggy really went all out in his 1914 recruiting efforts. Besides the usual big names from the East and Midwest, he employed several former Notre Dame stars. In fact, in some of the late season games, the entire left side of his Akron Indian line was from Notre Dame, including the legendary Knute Rockne. Parratt had "Rock" playing both end and halfback and teamed with him on several successful forward pass plays during their title drive. But in spite of their impressive lineup, the Indians lost a shocker to Canton, 6-0, in a mid-November contest. The date should be clearly marked; it was November 15, 1914, and tragedy stalked the gridiron.

Canton's popular center, Harry Turner, died shortly after the game, his spine broken while tackling Akron's fullback Collins, another ex-Notre Dame player. It was the first fatal accident involving a major professional football team in Ohio, and it recalled Turner's unfulfilled vow to quit football forever made after the forfeit to Parratt's Shelby team in 1911.

It was Canton's first victory ever over Peggy's Akron Indians. According to Jack Cusack, Turner on his deathbed whispered, "I know I must go, but I'm satisfied, for we beat Peggy Parratt!" It was a sincere tribute, though a very sad one, to Peggy's prestige.

A short time later, on Thanksgiving Day, the Indians reversed the loss and beat Canton 21-0, ending Cusack's hopes for the 1914 title. Once again it belonged to Peggy Parratt's Indians. It was the last time. In 1915, Akron's city honors went to the Burkhart Brewers and the runner-up spot to Hahn's Drugs. Some of Parratt's Indians had signed with those two new teams for higher pay.

However, the Massillon Tigers -- returning to the football wars to compete with Canton -- really stripped the Indians, taking nearly all of his best players for big money boosts. Canton also joined in the raid, and Parratt played out a bleak season fielding mostly earnest semi-pros. In November, Cusack scooped the pro football world by signing Carlisle's incomparable Jim Thorpe to a Canton contract. This unexpected move proved to be the catalyst that raised pro football to a far higher plane.

The sudden burst of glamour effectively cast a blanket of obscurity over Peggy Parratt's twelve long, unglamorous years of battling to keep pro football alive. He had helped put it on its feet financially, stocked it with quality players, and established it as a respectable sport in Ohio. It was ready and waiting when the big explosion came.

It was time to move on ... again. Parratt returned to Cleveland, where in 1916 he welded some of his former Akron players and a few new ex-collegians into a respectable eleven which he named the Cleveland Indians. Despite a winning record, the Indians were disappointing, losing twice to the Thorpe-led Canton Bulldogs and splitting a pair of games with the Columbus Panhandles.

On October 22, 1916, as his Indians lost to Columbus 9-6, Parratt appeared at quarterback. It was the last time he would ever direct one of his teams from a playing position.

During the next four years, although his name was often associated with the annual rumors of a formation of a professional league, Peggy chose to keep a low profile. From time to time, he'd get together a temporary group of stars to play one or another of the secondary pro teams.

The inevitable happened. In 1920 a structured pro league was born. Although Peggy was not part of it, he must have smiled at the fulfillment of one of his fondest dreams. Five years later on August 1, 1925, in Chicago at the league's annual meeting, Peggy Parratt quietly reappeared. He was introduced as the authorized representative of the Cleveland franchise, representing owner Samuel Deutsch. Parratt was back in the game he loved.

Finally, at the February 6, 1926, league meeting, his long-time organizational and diplomatic expertise was officially recognized by the NFL's membership. Peggy was named to two of the league's most important committees: a seven-member committee to redraft the NFL constitution and by-laws, and a three-man committee to meet with the Intercollegiate Committee of Athletics (ICA) in New York City. He shared the responsibility of these important duties with two other prestigious professionals -- George Halas and Dr. Harry March.

So the man who for years labored unceremoniously for the recognition of professional football had himself been recognized by the leaders of the game -- George Watson Parratt, pro football's Most Versatile Personality.