

THE PORTSMOUTH SPARTANS

By C. Robert Barnett

Had it not been for some Wisconsin "cheese" and a Colorado basketball game, the little town of Portsmouth, Ohio might be able to fly two National League championship pennants over Spartan Municipal Stadium. The Portsmouth Spartans were members of the N.F.L. from 1930 through 1933. During those seasons, they amassed a 23-10-4 record (in N.F.L. games) and annually were a contender for the league championship. They couldn't have come any closer without winning it in '31 and '32. Some events of those near-miss seasons still rankle Portsmouth oldtimers. So close!

The fact that the team secured an N.F.L. franchise and etched a place in the history of pro football certainly reflects an America of a different era. In the first place, N.F.L. franchises were not hard to get in 1930. A franchise could be acquired for as little as a \$500 fee and a \$2,500 deposit with the league office. Yet, the only city in the league in 1930 with a smaller population than Portsmouth was Green Bay, Wisc., with a population of 37,415 residents. All the other teams were located either within or very close to major metropolitan centers.

The citizens of Portsmouth viewed their hometown as a city on the move in the 1920's. During that decade, Portsmouth had grown to a population of more than 42,000, an increase of 9,000. The economy, based on the manufacture of steel, shoes and bricks, and rail and river transportation, was stable. During the late 1920's, a million-dollar bridge spanning the Ohio river was completed, the floodwall was extended, a new courthouse was begun, and a championship semi-pro football team had emerged. Growth and prosperity -- and winning football teams -- seemed automatic.

Semi-professional football began in Portsmouth as early as 1910. Various semi-pro teams, called the Shoe-Steels and Presidents, represented the town in the 1920's, and Jim Thorpe, the legendary Indian halfback, regularly played for Portsmouth near the end of his career.

Southern Ohio semi-pro football was dominated by the Ironton Tanks during the 1920's. Portsmouth, while occasionally beating or tying the Tanks, chafed under their dominance. In 1928, Portsmouth began seriously importing players who would form the heart of later Spartan teams. After a 5-2-2 record in 1928, the team came into its own in 1929.

The star of Coach Harold Griffen's 1929 team was Roy "Father" Lumpkin, a first-year back from Georgia Tech. Lumpkin was an immediate hit in Portsmouth. Glenn Presnell, a teammate of Lumpkin on later Spartan teams, described him as a "happy-go-lucky sort of guy who loved to have a good time, but he was a serious football player, an excellent blocker." Part of Lumpkin's appeal was his hard-nosed play on the field, an image he maintained by refusing to wear a helmet when he played.

Lumpkin led the Spartans to a 12-2-1 record. The two losses were to the 1929 N.F.L. champions, the Green Bay Packers, 14-0, and to the Ironton tanks, 3-0, but the Spartans later crushed the Tanks, 38-0. Despite the earlier loss, the Spartans' management claimed the Ohio Valley League Championship and began using stationary which proclaimed them the "Independent Pro Champions of the United States." The next step was obvious: The Big Leagues.

The First N.F.L. Season

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The citizens of Portsmouth must have ignored the October 24, 1929 "Black Thursday" stock market crash and subsequent market declines when they decided to push for an N.F.L. franchise. The Portsmouth National League Football Corporation was capitalized at \$25,000 on June 12, 1930. To raise money, the corporation attempted to sell 250 shares of stock for \$100 a share. Harry N. Snyder bought 91 shares and various other people bought 67 shares in lots of one or two shares each. The Spartans were officially granted a franchise at the July 1930 league meeting.

The Spartans made their N.F.L. debut at home by defeating the Newark Tornadoes on Sunday, September 14 before 4,000 enthusiastic fans. Halfback Chuck Bennett, from Indiana, plunged for the Spartans' first N.F.L. touchdown in the third quarter. Former Northwestern star Leland "Tiny" Lewis added the point. Ohio State's Byron Eby caught a pass in the final quarter for a spectacular 56-yard touchdown play to make the final score 13-6, Spartans. One of those in attendance was N.F.L. president Joe Carr.

Ten days later, the Spartans played their second contest, and it was really something special, a night game -- one of the earliest in N.F.L. history. Monday Night Football, with its slick announcers, millionaire quarterbacks and hundreds of multi-watt bulbs, may have dulled our appreciation of that night in Portsmouth. But on September 24, 1930, when the Brooklyn Dodgers came to the Ohio River town to play the Spartans, little could diminish the glittering effect that the spectators saw when the lights were turned on and men played football at night.

The game itself (Portsmouth won 12-0) was secondary to the condition of the lights. Most of the post-game reports spotlighted those grandstand bulbs rather than the play of the teams on the field. For the event, more than 6,000 fans turned out on an unseasonably warm evening to watch the two N.F.L. teams in brand new University Stadium (renamed Spartan Municipal Stadium during the high-school homecoming in 1970).

With two N.F.L. victories under their belts, the Spartans were riding high. But four days later, the team was barely able to defeat the semi-pro Ironton Tanks, 7-6. The Portsmouth *Times* expressed the belief that the underdog Tanks, particularly Keith Molesworth, who had been cut earlier in the season by the Spartans, had badly outplayed the Spartans. "Why wasn't Molesworth retained by the Spartans?" the *Times* asked rhetorically. Everyone in Portsmouth knew Molesworth had been cut because he had stolen (and later married) Coach Griffen's girl friend.

After amassing a mid-season record of 4-2-1, the Spartans fell apart under Griffen's uneven leadership. They lost the second game to the Tanks, 15-16, and won only one of their last seven league games. (They did beat the Tanks 12-0 in the third meeting.) Finishing their first N.F.L. season with a record of 5-6-3, the Spartans tied for seventh place in the eleven-team league. It was apparent that the team needed new leadership.

The 1931 Season

Before the beginning of the 1931 season, Griffen was demoted to business manager and George "Potsy" Clark was hired as the new coach at a salary of \$5,000. The head coach at Butler University, Clark had no experience in the professional game.

Yet he moved quickly to establish the kind of disciplined, talented team he wanted. Virtually all of the Spartan players were available from the previous year's team, but Clark kept only six veterans, including the 1930 star fullback Roy Lumpkin and tackle Jap Douds. Clark and the Spartans reaped a player bonanza when the Ironton Tanks folded following the 1930 season. The next fall five former Tank players, John Wager (C), Tim Hastings (T), Gene Alford (B), Tex Mitchell (E), and future All-Pro Glenn Presnell (B) moved thirty miles downriver to join the Spartans. To the former Spartan and Tank players Clark added center Clare Randolph, who had played the previous season with the Chicago Cardinals, and five outstanding rookies. The rookies included ends Harry

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Ebding and Bill McKalip, tackle George Christensen, guard Grover "Ox" Emerson, and All-American back Earl "Dutch" Clark.

Clark established his authority early. On the first day of practice he threw Father Lumpkin off the field for "too much horseplay." The spectators and the team were shocked by Clark's action, but it worked. The next day Lumpkin apologized to Clark, and Clark, with discipline established, named Lumpkin captain of the team.

Glenn Presnell remembers Clark as an excellent coach. "Potsy trained us like a college team: hard physical practice, attention to detail, and discipline," says Presnell.

"We were in excellent condition. A lot of players returned from the previous year's team, but Potsy cut most of them because they would not be disciplined."

The 1931 Spartans opened their season at home on Sunday, September 13, against the Brooklyn Dodgers. The temperature hovered around 100 degrees, and the well-conditioned Portsmouth team had little trouble defeating the Dodgers, 14-0. The Spartans proceeded to win their next seven straight games, allowing their opponents a total of only 16 points. Yet the Spartans were not able to assume the league lead because the Green Bay Packers were also undefeated.

The Spartans' winning streak was broken by the New York Giants on November 2 by the score of 14-0, and they lost the following week to the Chicago Bears, 9-6. They did win two of their next three games to stay in second place in the league standings.

The Packers, in first place with a 12-1 record, had two away games scheduled with the Bears and Spartans. The second-place Spartans had a 10-3 record with two home games remaining against the Bears and Packers. If Portsmouth won both games and the Bears beat the Packers, the Spartans and Packers would be tied, necessitating a play-off game for the championship. The Spartans had a chance, but it was a long-shot possibility.

The Spartans beat the Bears 3-0, thanks to a heavy rain and wet field, which kept the Bears' running attack led by Red Grange and Bronko Nagurski in check, on the strength of a 17-yard field goal by Glenn Presnell. Next, the Spartans, with an open date, awaited the outcome of the Bears-Packers game. The Spartans' prayers were answered. In Chicago, the Bears rebounded from their loss to the Spartans and beat the Packers in a 7-6 thriller. Portsmouth had a shot at a tie for the championship.

But the game was not to be. Spartan management met with L.H. Joanness, president of the Green Bay Packers, in Chicago following the Bears-Packers game. To the surprise of the Spartans, the Packers refused to play them. The Packers contended that the game had only been "tentatively" scheduled and that no contract had been signed. Therefore, the Packers argued, the game could be canceled by either party. The Spartans countered by saying that they did not have contracts for most of their games, but that the December 13 Spartans-Packers game was listed on the "official league schedule."

The Spartans appealed to league president Joe Carr. He backed Green Bay, saying, "the Green Bay-Portsmouth arrangement was made after the regular schedule had been drawn up." Carr added that he could not forfeit the game to Portsmouth. Consequently, the Green Bay Packers were declared the N.F.L. champions and Portsmouth second.

Columbus *State Journal* sportswriter Bob Hooey summed up the feelings of the Portsmouth Spartan fans when he wrote: "Green Bay withheld its decision until after the Chicago Bears game Sunday. The Bears won and the Packers' crown was toppling. Had Green Bay won, it is practically certain that it would have agreed to visit Portsmouth next Sunday, glad for the chance to strut on the Ohio gridiron, keenly partaking of the

championship limelight, but with its crown not endangered. Such is the way of cheese champions."

The 1932 Season

Before the season began, the N.F.L. shrunk from ten to eight teams, and the remaining teams were in deep financial trouble. Portsmouth was no exception. The auditor's 1931 report indicated that the Spartans had lost more than \$16,000 on the season and were \$27,000 in debt. In an attempt to remain solvent, the Spartans cut their player roster, scheduled a number of exhibition games and traveled by bus rather than by train.

Almost fifty years later, Spartan lineman John "Popeye" Wager recalled, "It was tough. We had a small roster because we just could not pay more players. Other teams traveled by train, but we went by bus to save money. We would pack enough clothing for three or four weeks and take off. Potsy would stop the bus alongside the road and we would practice in a farmer's pasture. In New York we practiced in Central Park, but we did not have to practice much because we played a game every three or four days."

Despite the financial difficulties, the 1932 season proved to be a good one for the Spartans. They returned from a nine-game, 21-day road trip with a 4-1-3 record (some games were exhibitions and were not counted in the record) and were again in the championship race. Unfortunately, the team could not pay the players following the next home game, a 10-0 win over the Boston Braves. The players threatened to strike, and rumors of a franchise shift and the rescheduling of home games for larger cities filtered through Portsmouth.

"We talked about not playing," Presnell said, "but in the end we always played in the hopes of drawing a big enough crowd to get paid."

Going into the last game of the season, the Packers were in first place with a 10-1-1 record (.909 percentage; tie games were not counted), and the Spartans (5-1-4 record) and the Bears (5-1-6 record) were tied for second place with identical .833 percentages.

As fate would have it, the Packers' final two games were away... the first against the Spartans and the second against the Bears. If either team beat Green Bay, it would be league champion.

The Portsmouth fans had been waiting a year for the Packers. Two hours before the kick-off the downtown was one massive traffic jam. More than 14,000 fans jammed into tiny Universal Stadium, and countless more scrambled up the flood wall behind the field. "The mood of that crowd was ugly," Clark Hinkle, Packer fullback, recently recalled. "When we got off the team bus they threw oranges and eggs at us."

The Spartans' locker room was tense. "The Packers had beaten us 15-10 earlier in the season at Green Bay and after that game Potsy said publicly they wouldn't beat us in Portsmouth. When we lined up to go out on the field Potsy said, "I am going to start eleven men and the only way you're going to come off that field is if we have to carry you off," recalled Glenn Presnell, a Spartan back. True to his word, Clark did not substitute. Today, in Portsmouth, the game is fondly remembered as the "iron man game."

Playing conditions were good except for a swirling, gale-force wind, rare for the narrow Ohio Valley, which played havoc with punts and passes. The wind was so strong at times that the defensive middle guard had to hold the ball in place while the offense was in the huddle to keep it from blowing off the field.

The Spartans scored in the middle of the first quarter following a blocked punt and added touchdowns in the third and fourth periods. The following day the Portsmouth *Times* headline read "Spartans Trounce Green Bay 19-0: Purple Gets Sweet Revenge."

Hinkle recalled, "I hated to lose that game because it meant the championship, and a number of my relatives and friends from Toronto, Ohio went down to the game. We were coming off a tough five game road trip and were kind of beaten up."

The hostility of the crowd was another factor in favor of the Spartans. An unidentified Packer official was quoted in the Portsmouth *Times* as having said, "In all my connection with professional football, I never have seen a crowd so unsportsmanlike and insulting as the crowd in Portsmouth. From the moment the Packers arrived at the field until the time they left, they were subjected to a barrage of epithets and collection of abuse which would have taken the heart out of any team. The unfortunate attitude was not confined to the male fans, but was general among the women as well."

The following Sunday the Bears beat the Packers 9-0 to create a first-place tie (Spartans 6-1-4, pct. .857; Bears 6-1-6, pct. .857). The Bears and Spartans agreed to play off on December 18 for the championship in Chicago. The loser would drop to third place!

But, in arranging their tie-breaker, the Bears' George Halas and Spartans' Harry Snyder overlooked one detail -- Chicago weather. "When we arrived in Chicago, it was bitter cold and there was snow waist-deep. We couldn't really practice," Glenn Presnell recalled.

Halas suggested holding the game indoors in Chicago Stadium. Snyder hesitated. The Stadium was primarily a hockey rink and could accommodate a field only 60 yards long (with half-moon end zones) and 45 yards wide.

It was hardly ideal for football. Still, the Bears and Cardinals had played an exhibition for charity there in 1930. A circus was scheduled to play in the Stadium the next week, so a dirt floor had been laid. Playing there would be possible.

On Friday it was still snowing. Snyder agreed. The indoor game was on -- on, that is, as soon as the owners had modified a few rules. Because of the small field, kickoffs were made from the 10-yard line. The ball was moved in ten yards from the sidelines following an out of bounds (normally, it was brought in only one yard), but with loss of down. Touchbacks were returned to the 10-yard line. No field goals were permitted.

With fullback Bronko Nagurski, the Bears were favored to win on the small field. In addition, the Spartans had brought only 16 players to Chicago. They had played the season with a roster of 17; the N.F.L. allowed 20. "They had enough trouble paying the 17 of us," explained Presnell.

The Spartans' missing player was its All-Pro quarterback, Earl "Dutch" Clark, the N.F.L.'s leading scorer for 1932. Clark, who was also the head basketball coach at Colorado College, had returned to Colorado to resume his coaching duties. His team had a big game scheduled with Wyoming on Saturday and Colorado's president refused to excuse Clark, despite a personal request from the Spartans' management.

Undaunted, Roy Lumpkin proclaimed, "We can beat the Bears, anytime, anywhere -- even without Dutch Clark."

For the first half it looked as if Lumpkin was right. Playing before a capacity crowd of more than 12,000 was a new experience for the small-town Spartans, and they were exhilarated. "It was real exciting," said guard John Wager. "The place was jammed and the fans were almost sitting on top of the field."

Although the keyed-up Spartans dominated the first half, neither team was at its best. "We were handicapped by the small field because you could pull your defense in," said

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Presnell. "There were no long runs, and it was difficult to pass because the field was so confining. Any kind of zone defense stopped everything except short passes."

The score was 0-0 when, late in the second quarter, the Spartans were on the Bears' six. Presnell remembers it well.

"Our favorite play was a fake end run where I would plant my foot and cut off tackle. We ran that on fourth down. Just as the hole opened up, I tried to plant my foot, slipped and fell. If we had scored then it might have been a different game."

Turning point or not, the complexion of the game changed. Just as the first half was all Spartans, the second half was all Bears. "We may have gotten tired," admitted Presnell. "It was hot and close, and in the second half the dust clouds got kind of thick. As I recall the Bears used a lot of subs."

The Spartans hung on tenaciously, but five minutes into the fourth quarter Bears' defensive halfback Dick Nesbitt intercepted a pass from Ace Gutowsky and was run out of bounds on the Spartans' 7-yard line. Bears' ball: second and goal. (Remember the rule change -- a down was lost when the ball was brought in bounds.) Nagurski gained six yards and lost one on two carries, making it fourth down and goal to go on the two. Nagurski then started what looked like a run over the middle but stopped and lobbed a pass to Grange, waiting in the end zone.

Touchdown!

Potsy Clark stormed onto the field protesting that Nagurski had broken the N.F.L. rule that a pass had to be released at least five yards behind the line of scrimmage. "Potsy was right," insisted "Popeye" Wager. "I know because I had hold of Nagurski's legs when he threw the ball." The Spartans' protest was ignored and the touchdown stood. The Bears kicked the extra point and later in the quarter scored a safety for a 9-0 victory and the N.F.L. championship.

"It wasn't like the Super Bowl is today," said Presnell. "It counted in the standings and we got our regular per game salary. I got \$175 and was happy to get it during the Depression."

As Presnell noted, the game was included in computing the regular season's standings. The Spartans, who had come so close to the championship, dropped to third place behind the Packers.

"A sham battle on a Tom Thumb gridiron," reported the *Portsmouth Times*. But even though the *Times* had nothing good to say about the game, it did capture the public's attention. Unlike the regular season, the championship game generated excitement and was a financial success.

The owners knew a good thing when they saw it. It influenced them to divide the league into Eastern and Western Divisions with an annual championship game starting in 1933. To encourage more scoring and wide-open play, the goal posts were moved to the goal line. Balls were brought in 10 yards after an out-of-bounds play. Most important of all, passing was allowed from anywhere behind the line of scrimmage. As Potsy Clark said, "Nagurski will pass from anywhere, so why not make it legal!"

The 1932 season was unique. It was a year of statistical oddities. It was nearly a year of financial disaster. But it was also a year that changed the nature of pro football. The Spartan-Bear indoor game demonstrated the tremendous appeal of pro football when it was more than an imitation of the college game. The rule changes brought about by the events of the 1932 season pushed the N.F.L. into a new era of pro football and helped create its overwhelming success.

And, had Dutch Clark been in Chicago instead of at a basketball game in Colorado, the final league standings might have had a different leader.

The Final Season

The Spartans received a major setback before the beginning of the 1933 season when All-Pro Dutch Clark decided to retire from professional football to accept the athletic director's position at the Colorado School of Mines. The Spartans signed University of Kansas All-American Elmer Schaake, but he was a less-than-adequate replacement for Clark.

Even without Clark the Spartans won six of their first eight games and trailed the Western Division-leading Bears (6-1-1) by one-half game going into the ninth game of the season against the hapless Cincinnati Reds. The Reds in their first N.F.L. season sported a 1-5-1 record and an anemic offense that had scored only 15 points in their first seven games. The game looked like a "lock" for the Spartans, who had beaten the Reds 21-0 in the first game of the season.

If the 1932 Green Bay "iron man" game was the high point of the Spartans' existence, the 1933 Cincinnati game was the low point. The Reds, playing before a home crowd of 7,000 (one of the biggest of the season) rose to the occasion, forcing three Spartan fumbles and intercepting two passes. Cincinnati turned one second-quarter Spartan fumble into a two-yard touchdown run by Lester "Red" Corzine and another into a twenty-nine yard field goal by Hillary Lee. Those ten second-quarter points held and the Spartans lost 7-10 to the lowly Reds. "We were pretty confident going into that game," recalled the Spartans' Glenn Presnell. "I guess we were overconfident because we had beaten them earlier in the season and Cincinnati didn't really have much of a team."

The Spartans proceeded to lose their final two games of the season, both to the Bears (14-17 and 7-17), dropping their final record to 6-5. It was a disappointing season but good enough for second place in the Western Division.

Glenn Presnell emerged from the shadow of Dutch Clark and had an outstanding season. He led the league in scoring and field goals, finished near the top in rushing and passing, and was named to the All-Pro team.

The Spartans' financial situation was becoming worse. In the book *Detroit Lions*, Dutch Clark was quoted as saying, "Hell, we'd get 4,000 or 5,000 people out to watch practice and at game time we'd be lucky if we had 2,000." Wager added, "We were popular and everyone who could afford it came to the games, but as the depression got worse not many people could afford the ticket price."

The players were forced to take shares of stock in the team instead of their full salary (fifty years later both Wager and Presnell still had their stock certificates), as the team was deeply in debt.

Early in the spring of 1934, the directors of the Spartans began negotiations with George A. Richards for the sale of the team and the reestablishment of the franchise in Detroit. The sale price was reported to have been between \$15,000 and \$16,500, but there are some indications that Richards may have paid an extra \$5,000 to cover the Spartans' debts. The Detroit Lions were officially accepted into the N.F.L. in the summer of 1934.

Richards gave Coach Clark enough money to induce Dutch Clark out of retirement, and he was joined by at least 12 former Spartans, including Ace Gutowsky, Glenn Presnell, Ernie Caddell, George Christensen, Ox Emerson, and Father Lumpkin.

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The transplanted Spartans' first season in Detroit was a tremendous success. They were unscored on in their first seven games and won their first ten straight. (One game was won by a 54-yard field goal by Presnell.) They then lost their last three games and finished second in the Western Division (10-3 record) behind the undefeated Chicago Bears (13-0).

In 1935, the Lions won it all. They won the well-balanced Western Division with a 7-3-2 record and faced the New York Giants in the championship game. Former Spartan Ace Gutowsky scored first for the Lions on a two-yard run and Presnell kicked the extra point. Later in the first quarter, Dutch Clark romped 40 yards for the game's second touchdown. Ernie Caddell scored the Lions' third touchdown, and Clark drop-kicked the extra point after the fourth. In all, former Spartans scored 20 of the Lions' points in this 26-7 win over the Giants.

For many football fans in southern Ohio it was a bittersweet experience because their beloved Spartans had finally won the championship, but they were dressed in the blue uniforms of the Detroit Lions.