

THE FIRST FOOTBALL WORLD SERIES

Experiment in the Garden

Tom O'Rourke had a big old barn of a building to fill. As manager of Madison Square Garden, he needed a constant flow of attractions to keep New Yorkers swarming into his place. Especially, he needed something both first-rate and unusual for the New Year's celebration. There were just too many other spots in New York where people could go to welcome in 1903.

Tom stared out over the wide, empty expanse of the Garden floor. With nothing cluttering it, the roomy arena seemed as big as a football field. A smile covered Tom's Irish face as quickly as his imagination covered the Garden floor with yard lines.

Why not a football game? Better yet, why not a whole tournament of football games? Why not the biggest and best football tourney ever? The Garden was big, and, to Tom's wishful eye, it was big enough. The more O'Rourke thought about it, the more his idea expanded. The Garden floor, unfortunately, remained the same size.

But that would be the players' problem.

What Tom O'Rourke envisioned was a series of games, showcasing the best in college and pro teams, eventually leading to one grand, climactic game, crowning the "champion of the world." What he got was considerably less, but it still made a pretty good show.

Filling the Slots

Although O'Rourke had hopes of putting a couple of "name" undergraduate elevens on his "gridiron" right up to the last minute, the colleges really weren't at all interested. That left the pros.

All things considered, the best professional clubs in the country during 1902 had been the Phillies and Athletics of Philadelphia, the Stars of Pittsburgh, and the Watertown, N.Y. Red and Blacks. The first three had formed what they called the "National Football League," beat everyone else into the ground, and tangled their "league" standings so monstrously that no one is certain to this day who won.

The fourth football power, Watertown, humbly claimed to be "champions of the world" already. How they managed to convince themselves of this after the Athletics came up to Watertown and defeated them in October was between them and God. Still, all claims aside, they did indeed have a strong club.

As a matter of fact, probably only a fumble or two separated the teams in ability. However, none of this had any bearing on O'Rourke's tournament because he didn't succeed in getting any of the four intact to his party.

Watertown decided it could best defend its "championship" by refusing to expose it to the whims of fate or strong Pennsylvania football teams. O'Rourke didn't bother to invite Pittsburgh on the logical assumption that very few New Yorkers would pay good money to watch a team from Pittsburgh.

The Phillies and Athletics didn't make it either, at least not in recognizable form. Instead, some players from each team got together and formed a new amalgam, which was neither wholly Athletic nor wholly Phillie, and was therefore logically called the "New York" team.

The squad, made up of eight Phillies and four Athletics, boasted Charley Gelbert, three times All-American end, and Blondy Wallace, twice named to the second AA team at tackle. The center, W.E. Bachman, had also received a few AA plaudits at Lafayette, and several other players had names recognizable in New York back then. These included fullback Curly Davidson and Benjamin Franklin Roller, a great player at several positions.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 2, Annual (1980)

It was an all-star aggregation, easily favored to win the tournament. In calling them the "New York" team, O'Rourke expected to give his patrons the pleasure of watching a "home team" win.

The competition didn't look overpowering. The teams O'Rourke used to fill up his card weren't in the same class. The New York Knickerbockers had enjoyed some success, but they were in over their heads. The Orange, New Jersey, Athletic Club was a little stronger but not enough to frighten the "New Yorks." The best the Warlow A.C. could present was a strong rooting section. O'Rourke rounded out the field with the Syracuse A.C., next to Watertown the best available upstate team.

Even though the lineup was made up of four New York state teams and one from New Jersey -- none of them the best in the country -- historians would inevitably refer to the affair as a "World Series." It was hardly a series in the sense of two strong teams playing each other over several games; no team played another more than once. The pairings were odd, too. The anticipated second-place team was "ceded" right into the championship game. Meanwhile, the expected first place finisher had to fight its way through the pack.

However, "World Series" has a nicer ring than "Indoor Football Tournament," so it will probably stick forever.

If the tournament wasn't a true "series," and could only by Tom O'Rourke's active imagination be regarded as a "world's championship," what remained to be decided was whether the activity that took place at the Garden was really football.

The answer turned out to be "sort of."

No matter what the teams did, the game they played could never really be football -- not with what they had to use for a field. The New York *Times* described the readying of Madison Square Garden like this:

"The wooden flooring of the big garden was taken up, and the gridiron was laid out on the earthen surface, which proved to be rather too sticky and holding for fast work. The goal lines were seventy yards apart, and the width of the playing space was scarcely more than thirty-five yards."

That size, reducing the normal 110-yard field used in 1902 by more than a third, coupled with the "sticky and holding" surface meant that speed and cleverness were neutralized and the advantage was, even more than usual, with the bigger and stronger eleven.

Kicking was drastically affected. In a normal game on a normal field, the team with the longest punts had a tremendous advantage. But even a weak punter was more than adequate when playing on this postage stamp. To make matters worse, the arena wall was right on the edge of the field, presenting a serious hazard on any sideline plays. One player knocked himself silly by running into the wall on the opening kickoff and never played another moment of the game.

O'Rourke scheduled his tournament with a certain logic, considering the expected strengths of the teams. On opening night, he scheduled the "New York" team against Syracuse. The "locals" from Philadelphia were expected to eliminate the upstaters and get rid of the team that figured to bring the fewest fans into the Garden.

On the second night, the Knickerbockers and Warlow were slated to play for the honor of getting creamed by the New York Philadelphians on New Year's Eve. Either the Knicks or the Warlows could draw well, and O'Rourke anticipated the third game as having the best attendance of the tourney. However, by holding out the Orange A.C. until the end, he had himself a "natural" for the final -- a New York versus New Jersey match.

If all went according to plan, New Jersey would lose a close game to a tired New York team before a packed Garden audience, wrapping up Tom O'Rourke's "World Series" in a blaze of profitable glory.

But football -- even O'Rourke's curious indoor brand -- seldom goes quite according to plan.

The Syracuse Surprise

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 2, Annual (1980)

The problem was Syracuse.

The upstaters took their invitation seriously. Deciding that the regular Syracuse A.C. team wasn't quite good enough to represent them, the civic leaders commissioned Frank "Buck" O'Neill to organize a team of world-beaters. O'Neill later coached successfully at Syracuse University, and he foreshadowed his future abilities with the job he did in late 1902.

To start, he had one excellent end in himself and another fine one named Carver for the opposite terminal. He set out to fill the space in between.

Jack Wright had enjoyed a good reputation as a center for Columbia University. O'Neill tagged him for the middle of his line. He scored a real coup by hiring two Indian brothers, Bemis and Hawley Pierce, to play on one side of Wright. Both were experienced pros who had learned their football at famed Carlisle. For the other side of his line, O'Neill signed up another pair of brothers, Glen and Bill Warner. Bill had just received All-American honors at Cornell. His older brother, better known as "Pop" than Glen, was his equal. Pop Warner went on to become one of the most successful and most innovative coaches in the history of football, developing such stars as Jim Thorpe and Ernie Nevers.

With the Warners and the Pierces in camp, Buck O'Neill had a line that could hold its own with anyone. Next he needed a backfield.

He already had a clever little quarterback named Moore. For runners he looked to Watertown. The strength of the Red and Blacks was in its backs, and none of them were employed at football at that moment, Watertown having decided to rest on its self-proclaimed laurels. O'Neill hired all three of the Red and Black runners, two tough pluggers in Bottger and Mason and one of the greatest halfbacks of the day, Phil Draper.

Indirectly, Watertown was back in the tournament.

More important, Syracuse had a team that looked like the equal of any in the country. The squad was christened the "All- Syracuse" team with as much logic as applied to the naming of the "New York" team.

It was obvious to anyone knowing the personnel that the winner of the tournament would be the team that survived the opening confrontation between New York and All-Syracuse.

Buck O'Neill gave his team a big edge by practicing daily at the Syracuse Armory. He had an all-star team, but he knew that to perform like one they would have to learn to work together. Meanwhile, the New York Philadelphians got in very little drilling time for three weeks or so before the tournament.

On Monday night, December 28, 1902, the two teams squared off on Tom O'Rourke's pint-sized gridiron.

The Games

The contest has been called the first indoor pro football game. Actually, it was preceded by a warm-up, lightweight match between the Monitor A.C. and the Colonial Football Club, but it is unlikely that any of the players on either team were professionals. But whether it was a first or second on the indoor court, the game between Syracuse and New York turned out to be a real thriller.

The teams were exceptionally even in skill and equally rugged. Each team tried to intimidate the other and only the crowd of 3,000 delirious New Yorkers profited by any of the exchanges of mayhem. Glen Warner was cut badly on the side of his head, but he laughed it off at the time. Tom O'Rourke's junior-sized playpen was absurdly small to house this battery of giants. On the other hand, it brought the fans down front closer to the action than they could have been at any stadium. They could hear the grunts and groans and watch the sweat and the blood fly.

The teams played twenty-minute halves, and at the end of the first neither had scored. However, in the second session, all that practice in the Syracuse Armory began to tell. At last, Bottger was shoved over the goal line for a touchdown. New York was unable to duplicate the score, and All-Syracuse had beaten the expected champs.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 2, Annual (1980)

The score of this game is given as 6-0 in most histories, but that is a mistake. Touchdowns in '02 were counted at five points, and Glen Warner missed the extra point. As a matter of fact, he also failed on three field goal attempts, bothered perhaps by his head injury. To all competitive intents and purposes, O'Rourke's tournament was over. None of the other teams had a prayer. Still, the amenities had to be observed.

The Wrap-Up

On the next night, the Knickerbockers bested the Warlow A.C. from Whitestone, Long Island, 11-6, much to the disappointment of a huge Warlow cheering section. The second half had to be extended so that a decision could be reached, making this perhaps the first "overtime" football game.

Glen Warner's head injury turned out to be more serious than he had suspected, and he sat out the remainder of the tournament. His place was taken by Blondy Wallace from the New York team. There was apparently no loss of efficiency, although one could hardly tell because the rest of the Syracuse games were so one-sided.

The Knickerbockers would have liked to sit out the New Year's Eve game. They stalled as long as they could, demanding that they receive their \$250 guarantee before the game. When the money was in their hands, they went meekly out on the field and were destroyed by Syracuse, 36-0. The game was such a laugher that the second half was cut down to ten minutes. Syracuse had scored at a rate better than a point a minute -- 36 points in 30 minutes!

Although the main event was a rout, the fans got a good spectacle for their money in the preliminary match -- an exhibition of Gaelic football.

By stretching a point or three, the finale on New Year's night could be called "the first Super Bowl." It had one thing in common with many later Super Bowls -- it was a blow-out.

To no one's surprise, Buck O'Neill's team wrapped up the tourney with another 36-0 tromping, this one over the "ceded" Orange, New Jersey team. Actually, Orange did a better job than the Knickerbockers; it took Syracuse forty minutes instead of thirty to get their points.

Syracuse could safely claim the "world's indoor professional championship," and, quite possibly, they were the best on any kind of field.

Tom O'Rourke counted his money and began planning his 1903 tournament.

FRANKLIN'S HIRED GUNS: 1903

About 60 or 70 miles north of Pittsburgh, give or take a few thrown stones, lies Venango County, which was at the turn of the century the oil-producing center of the U.S. Nestled there is the town of Franklin, named after that wise and patriotic inventor of stoves and maxims, signer of Declarations, and flier of kites. Despite its honored namesake, Franklin is neither now nor was in 1902 the county seat. That honor is and was invested in the more prosaically named Oil City. Whether this in any way reflects upon the values of the citizenry of Venango County is a matter for speculation.

At any rate, as is usual in these situations, jealousy crackled between the two towns. Oil City was bigger, more up and coming, and had money the way Newcastle has coal. Franklin was smaller, less brash, and had even more money. Franklin liked twitting Oil City better than it liked new gushers. Oil City responded unkindly in kind. Naturally, the rivalry bubbled over onto the football field.

Neither side was at all shy about backing its athletes when it came to wagering on the winner of the annual gridiron meeting. However, for a long time, both sides avoided the kind of wholesale bidding war for players that had bankrupted the famous Pittsburgh pro teams of the 1890s. Either city could have hired France to play halfback and had enough left over to pay the waterboy better than the President of the United States. But, the most each side did until 1902 was bring in an occasional lone outsider to give it a competitive edge. Everybody did that.

Thanksgiving Day, 1902, changed things.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 2, Annual (1980)

The betting was extra heavy. This was the third meeting of the teams in 1902 and the rubber game.

Franklin waited on its gridiron with its normal lineup of local athletes, plus a hired end named Hill to add a measure of stardom to its group. Nothing unusual there. No one could complain about Hill. Undoubtedly, Oil City would bring an import of its own.

Yes, that was him leading the team onto the field. But, who was that behind him? And behind HIM?

The Franklin players gaped as a truckload of towering strangers trooped onto the field. They were all wearing Oil City uniforms!

Oil City had gone out and hired the entire team from the East End Athletic Association in Pittsburgh, plus seven of the Philadelphia All-Stars, and also players from Steubenville, Grove City College, and just about anyplace that had a football player who could pull on a knee pad without herniating himself. In all, there were 28 football stars of various magnitudes assembled for the single purpose of thoroughly thrashing the Franklin team in that single Thanksgiving game. Some of the Franklin people paid off their bets before the opening kickoff, but the Franklin team had a go at it. Aided by a muddy field and the inevitable lack of teamwork peculiar to hastily gathered all-star elevens, the regular Franklin team-plus-one accomplished a minor miracle in losing by a mere 10-0.

Franklin folk grumbled about fair play as they paid off their bets. The Oil City slickers pointed at Hill, said something self-serving about beating the devil at his own game, and laughed all the way to the bank.

Well, they sure put one over on old Franklin!

One Franklin backer, a certain General Miller, decidedly did not like having one put over on him! General Miller had more dollars than General Electric has clocks. The sharpies from Oil City, had they not been busy gloating and counting their winnings, might have noted that the General fell into a quiet, earnest conversation with Bill Prince, the Franklin manager.

The Trap Is Set

P.T. Barnum said there was a sucker born every minute, and the Oil City people must have figured that every one of them had migrated to Franklin over the winter of 1903. Those poor fish just couldn't wait to risk their money on the next fall's football match. Oil City obliged joyfully. Eventually, an amount to the tune of \$20,000 was deposited in escrow in a local bank. It represented the largest, but by no means the only, bets.

We'll think of something, the Oil City folks told each other confidently.

But, when it came time to recruit their 1903 football team, they found that the cupboard was bare as a baboon's behind. Every time they approached a footballer of repute they got the same answer: "Sorry, but Mr. Bill Prince already signed me up for Franklin."

Franklin hadn't just stolen a march; they'd stolen the whole race. Heeding the wisdom found in the almanac published by its famous namesake, Franklin had decided that the early bid catches the football player. Indeed, Bill Prince had begun only two days after the '02 Thanksgiving game. On Saturday, when the Pittsburgh Stars and Philadelphia Athletics played in Pittsburgh to decide what amounted to the pro football championship of the world, Prince was a more than interested observer. As soon as the game ended, he hustled around and signed up every important player in sight.

Over the winter, Prince added to his store of football talent, and, by September, he had every "name" player in western Pennsylvania under lock and key.

General Miller had hired himself a football team like the cattle baron in the classic western scenario hires fast guns to fight his battle with the sheepherders. One can almost imagine an Oil City sheepherder moseying over to the Franklin ranch and coming back to report: "Them varmints is still thar!"

Of course, in the movie version, comes the final shootout and all the sheepherders turn out to be John Wayne. But, in the Franklin-Oil City script, the herders from O.C. turned out to be sheep.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 2, Annual (1980)

Who could blame them? They couldn't make bricks without straw or play football games without football players. About the only bodies left to them were the unseasoned, the untalented, the uninterested, the halt, the lame, and the blind.

With understandable discretion, if not valor, Oil City decided that 1903 was a perfect year to forget football and take up badminton.

"Forfeit! Pay up!" cried Franklin.

"No team, no bets!" insisted Oil City.

September turned into October with no change in the dialog. Meanwhile, that \$20,000 sat in the vault doing no one but the bank any good at all because the signatures of both principals were required to withdraw it.

Well, one-upmanship was one thing, but \$20,000 was something else. Finally, Franklin decided to content themselves with having the last laugh rather than the dormant dough. They signed the necessary papers at the bank and everyone pocketed his own cash -- without interest.

Now What?

But, when the Franklin folk looked around, they found themselves inundated with idle football stars, all firmly expecting to play and be paid. If General Miller was going to get any return at all on his investment, Manager Prince had to get his football players cavorting on the gridiron p.d.q.

The following plaintive request found its way into the Pittsburgh Times: "Manager Prince thinks he has the best team in the business in Western Pennsylvania and would like to hear from all strong teams." Understandably, there was no stampede to communicate with Manager Prince. To any informed rival, pitting his team against the Franklin All-Stars looked like a sure way to turn his players into emergency room material.

Some of the Franklin players included Eddie Wood, who would become one of the first pros to catch forward passes when the rules were changed three years later, and Clark Schrontz, who won the "N.F.L." championship for Pittsburgh against Philadelphia in '02 with his handling of fumbles, at ends. Linemen Jack Lang, Herman Kerchoff, Pop Sweet, Blondy Wallace, and a half dozen others could turn a rival halfback into ground chuck. Backs like John Hayden, Twister Steinberg, Benjamin Franklin Roller, and Curly Davidson were quick and deadly.

Yet, by hook and by crook and by offering hefty guarantees, Bill Prince convinced ten squads to come to Franklin and be pounded into submission.

On October 21, Youngstown was edged 74 or 76 to 0. Understandably, they lost count.

The Primrose A.C. lost 28-0 as the All-Stars spent the second half punting every time they got the ball so they could practice defense.

The previously unscored upon Jamestown, N.Y. eleven was scored upon to the amount of 46-0 on October 28.

On October 31, Wheeling, W.Va. rolled over, 56-0.

A week later, Ellwood City went down, 33-0. Four days after that, on November 11, the Buffalo Niagaras fell, 74-0.

Sewickly, Pa. came north with the avowed purpose of "teaching Franklin how to play football." Apparently the All-Stars were quick learners; they won the November 14 match, 45-0.

On the 18th, Syracuse was beaten, 12-0.

Allegheny College came up three days later and went home a 47-0 loser.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 2, Annual (1980)

And finally, on Thanksgiving Day, Franklin got its shot at the East End A.A., the team that had formed the backbone of the Oil City imports the year before. Sweet revenge: 23-0.

In about five weeks, Franklin had ten wins and 400-some points. The opposition had zero, negative scores being impossible.

One More Step

The one victory that was not totally one-sided was the 12-0 besting of Syracuse in mid-November. Actually, it was the most significant victory on the Franklin list. Although they were not the same players who had won a so-called "World Series of Football" at Madison Square Garden the year before, Syracuse was still a first-rate team. They'd kept the Watertown, N.Y. Red and Blacks from crossing their goal line in two contests, and the Red and Blacks, for the third year in a row, claimed the pro football championship of the country. Franklin pointed to its victory over Syracuse as proof that Watertown's claims were as substantial as a chocolate malt diet. Watertown, however, was used to thinking of itself as the champion, perhaps on the theory that you say it three times and its yours.

Actually, the claim wasn't all hot air. Watertown had played a tougher schedule than Franklin, and, even though their fourteen-game slate showed a couple of ties, the only team to beat them was Bucknell. In a return match, the Red and Blacks had slaughtered the college boys.

Most important, the majority of the prestigious eastern football experts recognized Watertown as the champs and had done so for three years.

There had been a ruffle of criticism in 1902 when the Red and Blacks refused to risk their status in the Madison Square Garden football "World Series." But, when three Watertown backs joined the all-star team that Syracuse sent down and then helped them win handily, Watertown's honor was restored.

Instead of ignoring the 1903 "Series," Watertown jumped into it with both feet. They volunteered as sponsors of the tournament and even put up \$2,000 in prize money -- \$1,250 for the winner and the remainder for second place -- confidently expecting to carry the lion's share back home.

The Garden planned a bigger tournament than the year before. A second series of games was added, with local teams playing for the championship of New York City. There would also be Gaelic football and a high school all-star game. In all, fifteen games were scheduled over six days.

The main matches, those for the U.S. independent (non-college) championship, involved Watertown, the Orange, (N.J.) A.C., the Oreos A.C. of Asbury Park, N.J., and Franklin. Syracuse was invited again but begged off.

For General Miller, the tournament was a chance to recoup some of the dollars he'd invested in football players. The prize money was small potatoes and would go to the players, but the General knew that New York would be knee-deep in Watertown backers looking to bet on their favorites. He packed a suitcase with greenbacks and headed for Gotham. Others who had seen the Franklin All-Stars in action did the same.

A Wonderful Town

The '03 tournament was set for mid-December.

Preparing the Garden for football was a huge job. The six-day bicycle races closed on Saturday night. Before the crowd was out of the arena, workmen began ripping up the track and floor. On Sunday, 500 loads of dirt were dumped and spread across the surface. The 1902 field, which had been laid out on the earth under the floor, had been criticized as "sticky and holding." Then, on Monday morning, a huge steamroller came in and packed everything down. During the afternoon, the yard lines were laid out and the goal posts were set in place.

By Monday night, December 14, the field -- one-third smaller than a regular gridiron -- was open for business.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 2, Annual (1980)

Although a nice crowd of 2,000 showed up for the first night, the tournament was not a success. Greater audiences than the year before had been expected, but the novelty had worn off. Significantly, the largest audience was on Saturday afternoon for the high school all-stars.

Those fans who came saw some interesting football through the week.

The Olympic A.C. defeated two foes to win the New York City title. Ft. Hamilton and Ft. Totten battled twice to scoreless ties, playing for the "championship of New York Harbor." The Gaelic football fans saw two fine games and enjoyed explaining what was going on to the uninitiated.

However, the main issue to be settled was between Watertown and Franklin.

On opening night, Watertown had more trouble than expected with the Oreos before winning, 5-0. Franklin was able to top Orange by only 12-0 the next evening. No one could prove that either team held back so as to "sucker" rival bettors, but both sides were encouraged by the other's showing. All day Wednesday and right up to game time on Thursday night, Watertown and Franklin supporters were scurrying around Gotham to get down every last cent on their favorites.

The officials for the big game -- former Ivy League All-Americans Walter Booth, "Big Bill" Edwards, and Frank Hinkey -- added a bizarre note by showing up in full evening dress: patent leather shoes, spotless white gloves, and high top hats. More than one wag suggested that they looked ready to officiate a funeral.

They did.

Watertown's championship claims were laid to rest as Franklin ran over the Red and Blacks the way the steamroller ran over the Garden floor on Monday. The All-Stars gained almost at will. Without seeming to extend themselves, they socked away two touchdowns and could have had more, but, with the game safely in hand, they turned playful. As time ran out, they huddled and then aimed the last play of the game at Frank Hinkey, dumping the former Yale great and his tuxedo on the fresh earth of the Garden floor.

Bill Prince magnanimously paid the cleaning bill.

He could afford to. Everyone from Franklin was up to his money belt in winnings. The Wall Street News sobbed: "On account of so much money being taken out of the city by the Franklin contingent, a financial stringency is expected. We may have to look to Franklin for help."

Several Watertown men had to wire for money to get home. And, even though the Red and Blacks won the runner-up game on Saturday night, they did no more talking about championships.

General Miller and Bill Prince went back to Franklin and announced that, despite their success, they would not field an all-star squad in '04. There was no one left to bushwack, so the General unloaded his hired guns.