

WHEN NOTRE DAME WON THE ROCKFORD CITY CHAMPIONSHIP

By Emil Klosinski

In the infant pre-NFL days of pro football, the fiercest rivalries were usually between two good teams in an immediate local area or even within a single city. One such rivalry in Rockford, Illinois, spawned an annual three-game series between the Grands and the A.A.C. teams.

In 1916, the first such series saw the Grands lose to the Rockford "Amateur" Athletic Club. Although the A.A.C. had indeed started as an amateur organization at the turn of the century, by 1916 the club's athletic teams sported many paid athletes.

The most unusual and significant series for the city championship occurred in 1919. The first game of the series was a hard-fought contest. It took a long pass from George Kitteringham to end T. Redin in the waning moments to produce a 6-0 victory for the Grands.

The second game was a "must" for the A.A.C., and rumors spread that they were going to "load up" for the contest. It was known that A.A.C. coach Tony Haines had contacted several stars of other pro teams. The names most mentioned were Don Oliver, star of the Chicago's Racine Cardinals; Walde, formerly of Purdue, playing for the Ft. Wayne Friars; and Stallins of Rock Island. Also in the rumor mill were a star from the Peoria Tractors and the Falcon brothers from the Hammond Bobcats.

Beside being quarterback for the Grands, George Kitteringham was also coach and club president. He wasn't about to be torpedoed by a bunch of pro football "ringers." George was related by marriage to Edward "Slip" Madigan, the starting center on the undefeated Notre Dame team. He called on Slip for help, promising \$200 each for every Notre Dame man who could be trusted not to "spill the beans."

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To digress for a moment, early in 1919 American troops began returning home from World War I just as factories – gearing down from war production – began laying people off. Many veterans found themselves unemployed. Some decided a fast buck by any method was the only way to survival. Thus gamblers and gambling thrived.

Gamblers even invaded major league baseball locker rooms and associated themselves with ball players. The Black Sox scandal of 1919, in which eight Chicago White Sox players were bribed to throw the World Series to the Cincinnati Reds, shocked the sports world and almost killed baseball.

Although it was more than a year later – October 29, 1920 – that a Cook County grand jury handed down thirteen indictments, things got "hot" for the Chicago gamblers, hustlers, and racketeers as soon as the 1919 Series ended in a Cincinnati win. With the police making things uncomfortable for the unsavory, most of them decided to get their action where the situation was "cool." Many chose the outlying areas, such as Rockford and South Bend, Indiana.

The A.A.C.-Grand game was a plum for the displaced Chicago gamblers.

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The South Bend contingent that played that day for the Grands as well as the rest of the team and its supporters were always convinced that the referee was bribed, and possibly the head linesman as well. The Grands were consistently and continually penalized after making a good gain or strong defensive play. The gamblers had done some heavy betting and probably tried to direct the game's outcome. It should be added that the \$200 apiece the South Benders were to receive for playing was bet for them by Kitteringham at the request of Madigan.

"South Benders" accurately describes Madigan's crew. He'd not only brought six of his Notre Dame teammates, but also two linemen from the South Bend Arrows, a pro team he coached three nights a

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week after his Notre Dame practices. One of the linemen was Tommy Grzegorek, better known as Tommy Gore. The other was John Klosinski, this writer's dad.

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In the early days of pro football, South Bend independents (as the pros were called) were blessed with a little-known luxury of that era – good coaching. Such Notre Dame players as Rockne, Gus Dorais, Stan Cofall, Hunk Anderson, Jimmy Phelan, and others earned extra money by coaching one or another of the local teams at night, after the Notre Dame practices finished.

Although Notre Dame permitted coaching the pros by its players, an appearance in a pro game would bring immediate suspension and probably expulsion. The unofficial criteria set up by the Fathers in charge as to which punishment was to be imposed was "admission and contrition". If a player made a denial of participation in a pro football game and the proof was otherwise, then he was asked to pack up and leave. This fate befell two of pro football's Hall of Famers, George Trafton and Curly Lambeau.

We can only guess what fate would have befallen five of the six Notre Dame athletes who played for the Grands of Rockford if word had reached Notre Dame that they'd been involved in a pro game. But for George Gipp, who'd been skating on scholastic thin ice, it would have been the end. As it was, the newly-elected Notre Dame football captain was expelled from school in the spring of 1920 for other transgressions. Only the intercession of Rockne and almost all of South Bend's townspeople and businessmen brought George a conditional reinstatement.

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Gus Dorais, Rockne's assistant, had been the Arrows' coach for most of 1919, assisted by Madigan. However, with three Arrow games remaining on the schedule, he turned the reins over to Slip so he could concentrate on the up-coming basketball season. Gus was head basketball coach for the Irish.

The Arrows' game with the Toledo Maroons, scheduled for the same day as the Grands-A.A.C. game, was cancelled because the Maroons were also involved in a fight for their city's championship. Madigan then invited Gore and Klosinski to play in Rockford because he wanted someone in the line who "knew our plays and signals." Any South bend team coached by a Notre Damer had the same system and any new innovation that Notre Dame had.

On the day before the second Grands-A.A.C. game, Notre Dame met Purdue in West Lafayette and defeated the Boilermakers 33-13. According to Art "Dutch" Bergman, all of the Notre Dame players returned to South Bend together, but the Madigan group split from the rest of the team upon arrival at the Grand Trunk depot on Division Street and hopped a cab to the South Shore Line on LaSalle Street, where the electric train ran to Chicago on an hourly basis. Klosinski and Gore of the South Bend Arrows had departed many hours earlier and spent the night in Chicago with relatives.

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As game time arrived, Rockford's Kishwaukee Park was jammed with partisans of both teams. Klosinski had a late breakfast at the depot's cafeteria and then went directly to the locker room at the park. He brought his own shoes, pants, and helmet. Piled on a bench were the Grands' black and orange jerseys, and he was told to take one that fit. Gore had arrived earlier and was already dressed to play.

Soon Kitteringham came in leading the Notre Dame entourage of Madigan, Gipp, and four others Klosinski did not recognize. He knew Madigan, his coach, and Gipp because he'd played poker with him one evening in Elkhart, Indiana.

Dutch Bergman was one of the other four, and he later identified the remaining three as fullback Fritz Slackford, end Bernie Kirk, quarterback Joe Brandy, Walter Miller, or back Grover Malone. Dutch had played sub rosa in one or two other such games and had difficulty reconciling names and certain events of the game.

For the lineup, Coach Kitteringham used the names of his displaced regular players in the line. In the backfield where all the scoring took place, the visibility was too high, so Kitteringham came up with

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aliases: quarterback Joe Brandy was "Boyd", Bergman was "Smith", Slackford was "Scone", and Gipp at left halfback became "Baker".

A pre-game consultation among Kitteringham, Madigan, and Brandy resulted in a decision to run wide and pass if they had to. Short yardage would call for Slackford up the middle through Madigan's center slot. The consensus was that Bergman's quick starting and speed, along with Gipp's unique running style would best be utilized by circling the flanks. In part, this strategy was based on Kitteringham's assessment of the A.A.C.'s ends' performance in the previous game. He didn't realize that new personnel would be manning the positions.

Although the Grands dressed at the park, Coach Haines had his A.A.C. contingent don their gear at their club room. They arrived at the park, dressed in their blue and white jerseys, ready to play.

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The Grands won the toss and elected to receive. The A.A.C. took the wind advantage.

The kick was short. Bernie Kirk had difficulty fielding it and managed to bring it forward only a few yards. On the first play from scrimmage, Gipp circled right end for 30 yards before being knocked out of bounds with a flying body block by A.A.C. safety Wagenknight. The play was called back and the Grands were assessed a 15-yard penalty. Gipp made that back with a 15-yard off-tackle burst on the next play, but when Bergman made eight yards around left end, the play was again called back and the Grands once more penalized.

Gipp and Bergman alternated carrying the ball until the drive reached the A.A.C. 28. There a Slackford plunge gained nothing, a short gain was nullified by another penalty, and a pass fell incomplete. On fourth down, Gipp tried a drop kick field goal but was rushed and drove the ball off to the left. A newspaper account described "Baker's" kick as "wild".

The Rockford *Gazette* summarized the first quarter: "The ball see-sawed back and forth for the remainder of the first quarter with the Grands receiving a penalty on nearly every other down." By the end of the period, Coach Kitteringham was not alone in getting after the referee. The Grands' supporters were shouting angry threats.

On the first play of the second quarter, A.A.C. end Thissel dropped off the line to intercept a Gipp pass and put the Blue and White deep in Grands' territory. Here, the South Bend Arrow tackles stood out, stopping three running plays for almost no gain.

It may have been the Arrows' presence that tipped off the A.A.C. that Notre Dame men were involved. Before the game, Klosinski – who'd played against Ericson, Hoagdahl, and Wagenknight of the A.A.C. – warned Madigan they might put two and two together and get Notre Dame. "Just keep your headgear on, Curly, and they won't know you from Adam," he was told.

Bergman offered another reason for the Notre Damers being found out. The displaced Grands players were in the locker room when the discussion of "Gipp and Bergman" running the ends took place. Dutch felt they let anger and pride supercede loyalty and tipped off the A.A.C.

The A.A.C. punted and then took time, giving the Grands a chance to discuss strategy. Gipp suggested passing, but three straight from deep in his own territory were broken up. Gipp punted to the A.A.C. 30-yard line. Rhodes took the ball, sidestepped the Grands' onrushing ends, and carried to the 50. There he was met with a crushing tackle by Gipp. He fumbled and the Grands recovered.

This was the spark that was needed. Despite two more penalties, they drove down the field to the ten on end runs and short passes. On first down, Bergman took a slight delay, then sneaked out of the backfield and into the end zone to take a perfect pass from Gipp. The Gipper added the extra point on a drop kick to make it 7-0.

With time running down in the first half, the Grands tried an onside kick, and Klosinski recovered. But, a Gipp pass was promptly intercepted by Nelson of the A.A.C. who returned to the Grands' 45. A quick

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burst up the center moved the ball to the 38. There was time for only one more play, and the A.A.C. lined up for a field goal.

The distance was 45 yards, and the Grands suspected a fake. Gipp, Brandy, and Bergman stayed back at their regular defensive positions. On the snap, the holder had difficulty setting up the ball and Ericson cut his stride. He sliced a line drive to the left. Bergman caught the ball on the fly and raced 70 yards for a touchdown. Gipp again added the extra point and the Grands led 14-0 at halftime.

As the half ended, Kitteringham confronted Referee Holderness, Umpire Gardiner, and Head Linesman Graves and accused them of doing the gamblers' bidding. The Grands had been penalized over one hundred yards in the first half alone. The crowd jeered the officials as they retreated to the safety of their locker room.

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Play in the second half was close. The A.A.C. seemed to have gotten stronger, and the Notre Dame group began to tire. Bergman recalled they'd taken a physical pounding from the big Purdue line the day before and then had only a few winks of sleep while sitting on the train from Chicago to Rockford. Klosinski felt that the A.A.C. had simply figured out the Grands' strategy of running the ends and had made the proper adjustments.

Gipp and Bergman were being stopped effectively at the ends, and both teams punted frequently. Brandy fumbled one boot into the end zone and fell on it for a safety just as Thissel and Larson hit him. That made the score 14-2.

The A.A.C. had momentum as the fourth quarter began. Ericson's short, quick passes just over the heads of the Grands' hard-charging linemen moved the ball down to the Grands' nine. Brandy went for a fake into the line. Before he could recover, Ericson floated a pass to Thissel for a touchdown. The kick was good, making it a real ball game at 14-9. The A.A.C.'s fans were delirious!

In the huddle before the A.A.C. kickoff, Gipp told Brandy: "Cut out the end runs, Joe. We have to start moving the ball!" The kick was a dangerous bouncer, but Slackford fell on it to gain possession. Brandy called Gipp's number on the first play, and the Gipper responded in the fashion he usually could when the chips were down, zooming off tackle for 18 yards. Only a shoestring tackle by Ericson prevented a touchdown. On the next play, he took two steps to his right, stopped, and then launched a perfect feather to Brandy coming out of the backfield. With the ball suddenly in A.A.C. territory, their partisans' frenzied cheering became subdued.

The drive stalled, but any hope on the A.A.C. side was dashed when Gipp split the crossbars with a perfect dropkick for three points with only a minute or so remaining. The final score: Grands 17, A.A.C. 9.

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After the game, each of the South Benders collected his \$400 – having bet their game guarantee on themselves with the A.A.C. players. The gamblers were involved in bets with the townspeople of Rockford. To a man, the Grands insisted the game officials had been bribed by the Chicago gamblers.

One could read the complaints of the A.A.C. players, that they'd played against six college stars, in the Rockford newspaper. They neglected to mention their own recruits for the game.

The Rockford *Register Gazette* addressed the situation:

Following Sunday's game, the second of a series heralded for the city championship, local football fandom has been wandering through a maze of speculation concerning the identity of Grand football players who put over a victory on the A.A.C.

It was no ordinary bunch of gridiron talent that had been imported for the fray. That much was evident after the smooth working Grand backfield had been in operation for two plays. The backs played too well together not to have been in operation all season, and they maintained this pace through all quarters, showing some of the niftiest football that has been seen on the local field in many a day!

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Claims are made by the A.A.C. camp that the Grands, for the greater part, were made up of University regulars, who are disputing the University championship of the middle west with Illinois.

A.A.C. men insist that a regular varsity backfield with the regular varsity center and right end was used. This sextet, reinforced by five other clever players, not over three of whom were Rockford men, proved too fast for the blue and white. The only wonder is that the score against the A.A.C. was not of greater proportion, and more than one neutral fan along the sidelines marveled that coach Haines' aggregation was able to hold the Grands to as low a count as it did.

As far as settling city honors, the scrap certainly did nothing of the kind, for not over 50 per cent of the talent engaged were Rockford products. Why not have a series once in which strictly Rockford talent and none other is eligible?

Notre Dame indeed was selected western champions over once-beaten University of Illinois. Perhaps in the archives an asterisk should be added, with the notation: "Also Rockford city champions."