

KENOSHA MAROONS: NEVER A WINNING GAME

Originally published in the *Kenosha News*
January 6, 1979
by Don Jensen, Staff Writer

QUESTION: What do these cities have in common? Dallas, Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, Houston and Kenosha.

ANSWER: All have been home to a National Football League team. But while the first four fielded winners, Kenosha's NFL pro team have the worst record in the history of the league.

It also is one of the shortest records, less than a season, shorter even than the NFL record book shows because of a phantom game, never played but inexplicably recorded as a 10-6 Kenosha loss in the pro football statistics.

It all happened back in 1924, the year the Kenosha Maroons played - and never won a game - in the National Football League.

The NFL got started in 1920 as the American Professional Football Association. The name was changed to the National Football League in 1922 when there were 18 teams in the circuit. One of those was the Toledo (Ohio) Maroons which finished 1923 with a mediocre 2-3-2 record. When the season ended, the team folded.

On September 16, 1924 a Kenosha Evening News story reported the big news: a pro franchise had been purchased for Kenosha!

"With the entry of this team in pro grid circles, Wisconsin will be well represented this season in the great professional wheel by four strong teams, Racine, Green Bay, Milwaukee and Kenosha. Kenosha has purchased the Toledo franchise and the team ought to be a success under the direction of [George] Johnson. Professional football is enjoying increasing popularity all over the country."

Johnson, an umpire in the Midwest baseball league, began scouting for talent to stock the new club. Financial support was offered by the Nash and Simmons companies, long-time sponsors of local athletic teams.

So the Maroons began hiring players away from other clubs, including three from the Chicago Bears, plus some free-lance players. And as the season progressed, the local squad also lost some of its gypsy players to other teams. Lou Usher, and All-American at Syracuse in 1919, started the season for the Maroons, but also played for Milwaukee and Hammond in 1924.

Signed to contracts by Johnson were Marvin Wood, a 195-pound fullback from the University of California, and Walt Cassidy, end and wingback, a 1923 graduate of the University of Detroit. Others on the official roster were quarterback Jim Simpson, also out of the University of Detroit; running back George "Dutch" Seasholtz (whose name was regularly spelled in about three different ways) from Lafayette College; and Cletus Patterson, a guard from Ohio University. There were ends Richard Stahlman of DePaul; running back Dick Vick and tackle Raymond Oberbroekling from Loras College.

One of the most popular players was Earl "Potty" Potteiger, a running back. He was well known in Kenosha as a baseball player for the Simmons and Nash teams in previous years. Potteiger would go on to coach the championship New York (football) Giants three years later.

Newspaper accounts list several Kenoshans as signed to playing contracts: "Swede" Rhenstrom, who played at Beloit College; "Red" Cronan, Kenosha High School star center in 1922; and others identified only as Gerhardt, Erickson and Flynn. However, none of them appears on the roster that survives.

Coach of the Maroons was "Bo" Hanley, called the "Marquette Marvel," who was assisted by Potteiger. Late in September, two-a-day drills began at Nash Field in preparation for the Maroons' first game.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 12, No. 4 (1990)

On October 3, 1924, the team boarded a train at the Kenosha depot. The next day they arrived in Philadelphia for a game with the Frankford (Pa.) Yellow Jackets that Saturday afternoon. The Yellow Jackets, predecessor of the Eagles, were established players, though the club was new to the 22-team league in 1924. The suburban Philadelphia team iced the game with two early touchdowns.

The following Monday, the Evening News reported: "Playing their first game of the season against a pro football machine that has been welded together for over five years, the Kenosha Maroons went down to defeat, 31-6, at the hands of the famous Philadelphia Yellow Jackets in the East Saturday afternoon."

Despite the loss, hopes were high for the second game, to be played in Milwaukee, October 12, against the Badgers. But Milwaukee quarterback "Red" Dunn launched a "dazzling aerial attack" to defeat the Maroons, 21-0. Kenosha's Vick moved the team with short passes and runs but couldn't score.

The big game and the home opener -- as it turned out, it was the only game the professional Maroons would ever play in Kenosha -- was scheduled for Sunday afternoon, October 19. "History will be written into the sport annals of Kenosha," a local sportswriter noted, "when the pros inaugurate the season, and it will mark the first time in the history of the great sport that Kenosha has been represented with a professional football team."

The opposition was the powerful Hammond (Ind.) Pros, sparked by quarterback "Rat" Watson and two black stars, halfback "Sol" Butler and speedy end, Jay "Inky" Williams, referred to euphemistically by the Evening News as "two dusky boys."

The weather was perfect, Indian summer temperatures, when the first game of a doubleheader, between local amateur squads, Staton and Kappus, began. And it remained warm during the first half of the Maroons-Pros contest, a dull, scoreless period.

But then the wind shifted and a sharp breeze cooled off the thousand or so spectators at Nash Field. On the gridiron things heated up. Capping a third quarter drive, fullback Seasholtz hurtled over the goal for a Maroon touchdown. He missed the conversion kick.

Hammond came back on "Rat" Watson passes and a final dash by halfback Butler with a minute left in the game. Maroons' tackle Fred Heinisch, a Racine native, blocked the extra point try to preserve the final tie - considered almost a moral victory for the underdog home team.

The estimated 1,000 [actually about 600] attendance, however, was considerably less than a victory since other NFL teams, like the Green Bay Packers, could draw 5,000 hometown fans to a game.

Injuries in the Hamond game were costly. Usher broke his nose, Simpson injured his neck, and local favorite "Potty" Potteiger suffered a broken arm that finished him for the season.

From that point, it was all downhill for the Maroons. On October 26, they traveled to Duluth to play a strong Kelley team. With a powerful running attack, mixed with passes, the Kelleys wiped out the Kenoshans, 32-0. The Maroons failed to make a first down all afternoon.

A game with the Waukegan Elks of the lesser Midwest League was scheduled for November 2. At the last minute, however, the Illinois team cancelled out. Some claimed that Midwest officials pressured Waukegan not to play outside its league. When manager Johnson was unable to schedule a replacement game, November 2 became an open date.

Citing the missed game and the poor local attendance at the Hammond contest, a Racine sportswriter claimed pro football in Kenosha was "a flop" and predicted the Maroons would not finish the season. A Maroons spokesman denied this as "the bunk," and to prove it announced the team would travel to Buffalo, N.Y., the following weekend to play the NFL Bisons. But there was uncertainty in the air as Johnson announced that there would be a big announcement after the Buffalo game.

At Buffalo, the Maroons were hopelessly outclassed and lost 27-0 to a Bison team with "a wonderful passing attack that swept the locals off their feet."

Ten Days later the roof fell in. The "high-priced" Maroons players were released from their contracts and the original team disbanded. In a startling development, the local financial backers announced they were keeping the franchise and had bought the winning, but financially troubled, Duluth Kelleys. The Minnesota players were to simply switch jerseys and become the new Kenosha Maroons. The Kelleys were tied for fourth place in the league with the Packers and Chicago Cardinals. The Evening News predicted Kenoshans would flock to see a "proven winner" and would give the team "loyal backing."

A Thanksgiving Day game with the Racine Horlick-Legion was announced, as was another, just three days later, on November 30, with the NFL Kansas City Cowboys.

Neither game was played. The Kelleys went back to Duluth to play several more years. For Kenosha the season ended dismally with a 0-4-1 record. The Maroons tied with the similarly winless Minneapolis Marines and the Rochester (N.Y.) Jeffersons for dead last in the NFL.

The final chapter of the Maroons history is missing from the sports pages of the local paper. There were no announcements of the cancelling of the final two games. And it went unreported when the franchise was lost.

There was a postscript, however, in the form of a brief item in the November 28 issue of the Evening News:

"Kenosha fans today were wondering whether the Kenosha Maroons had come to life again. Reasons for so believing resulted from a report sent out of Rock Island that the Island pro team defeated Kenosha, 10 to 6. However, a look at the lineup reveals the fact that none of the former Maroons players were in the lineup called Kenosha. There's a mistake somewhere!"

But that mistake is perpetuated in the NFL records today. That phantom game, claimed as a victory by Rock Island but never played by the Maroons, appears, incorrectly, in NFL records as the Kenosha team's fifth loss of its first - and last - season.

* * * * *

HE RECALLS KENOSHA MAROONS

by Don Jensen (1978)

Fred Heinisch may well be the last of the Maroons, the only survivor of the team that in 1924, for one brief and disastrous season, represented Kenosha in the fledgling National Football League.

Heinisch, a spritely 78, still lives in Racine, as he did nearly 55 years ago when he played - for \$50 a game - with the Kenosha pro football team. [Note: Heinisch died in 1983.]

"I'm the last one around, as far as I know," says Heinisch.

Heinisch played the 1923 season in Racine but the following fall it looked as if his pro career had ended. "In 1924 I was working days at the Racine post office. The Racine team practiced in the afternoon. But my boss told me I had to work days or quit the post office."

But the Racine coach, Babe Ruetz tipped Heinisch off about the new team forming in Kenosha. "They practiced evenings," Heinisch recalls, "so that worked for me."

The 1924 Maroons lost four games, tied one in the only contest played at Kenosh, failed to finish the season and wound up in the NFL cellar.

When the Kenosha team folded in late November 1924, Heinisch was able to return to the Racine Legion squad. He played with the Legion, and later the Duluth Eskimos, for several more seasons.

Heinisch says he probably was the last Maroons player to be paid.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 12, No. 4 (1990)

"Our last game that season was in Buffalo, New York. Usually we'd be paid at our Tuesday practice after the weekend's game. But I had a friend in Pittsburgh I wanted to visit. So I went to the manager and asked for my money. I got my \$50 and took off for Pittsburgh.

"I heard later," Heinisch recounts, "that the manager just took off and disappeared and nobody else got their money."

Who were the stars of the Kenosha Maroons?

"Well there was Lou Usher, All American from Syracuse," says Heinisch, "Ernie Vick from Michigan, a fellow named (Walter) Pearce, and (Earl) Potteiger was pretty well known."

"Jimmy Baxter from Racine was around here for quite a while. And (Earl) Bud Gorman, I think his name was really Lovejoy and he called Kenosha home. Gorman was a boxer too and sparred with Tommy Gibbons. But I'm the last one around as far as I know."

Heinisch's playing weight was 173 pounds and he played several positions, end and back.

The gear was pretty primitive, Heinisch says. "We had leather helmets with felt padding. You could get a pretty good jarring! There were no face guards and you wore shoulder and hip pads if you could afford them."

But Heinisch recalls only a couple of major injuries during the brief Kenosha Maroons' season. Heinisch did suffer a fractured jaw at the end of the 1922 season when the Racine Legion team played the Green Bay Packers.

We weren't specialists then, Heinisch explains, and we didn't have the coaching they have today. But, he feels, many of the pro players of 1924 could play professional football today.

"Desire," Heinisch says, "desire wins football games, then and now."

* * * * *

INJUSTICE IN WISCONSIN

By Bob Carroll

They knew better in Kenosha. When the wire service carried the news of Rock Island's late-season win over the Kenosha Maroons in 1924, the Kenosha newspaper immediately howled, "Not OUR Maroons!"

That the team playing at Rock Island on November 27, 1924, was NOT the Kenosha Maroons is made clear in the lead of the Rock Island Argus game story:

A small crowd of fans shivered through a cold football afternoon here yesterday to see the Rock Island Independents hang up a 10 to 6 victory over the Kenosha All-Stars, a team made up of outstanding performers of the Kenosha and Hammond National Professional league gridiron aggregations.

All-Stars, see?

That would be all well and good, but a glance at the line-up of the All-Stars shows no Kenosha Maroons players -- nada -- and leaves the Kenosha connection unanswered.

LE Williams (Inky) - from Hammond Pros
LT Neal (Ray) - from Hammond Pros
LG Sies (Dale) - from Hamond Pros
C Oltz (Russ) - from Hammond Pros
RG Fortune (Burnell) - from Hammond
RT Garden
RE Mease[Meese](Ward)-from Hammond Pros
QB Hess (Wally) - from Hammond Pros
LH Robinson (Ed) - from Hammond Pros
RH Besta (Teddy) - from Hammond Pros

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 12, No. 4 (1990)

FB Annan (Dunc) - from Hammond Pros
Subs:
QB Watson (Rat) - from Hammond Pros
RH Carrigan

Except for Garden and Carrigan -- whoever THEY were -- that looks like the Hammond Pros. So, question number one: why isn't it?

Well, for starters, the Pros had been in Rock Island back on October 12 and got their butts kicked 26-0. So how many Rock Islanders could be expected to turn out to a cold Douglas Park to watch the Independents romp all over Hammond again? Answer: about the same number that'd show up if they announced a bird-watching contest. But the Independents' braintrust knew how to fix that: play down (in fact, HIDE!) the Hammond connection.

They could do it with a clear conscience too. The REAL Hammond Pros -- the ones with a league franchise -- had disbanded after their November 2 game. Although most of the "All-Stars" were Hammonders, the team WASN'T the Pros, at least not officially. Apparently it WAS what you might call a "pick-up" team. Had the players used the franchise nickname, there might have been National Football League repercussions. Suspensions for the players. A fine for Rock Island. Stuff like that.

Okay, maybe not. The league was pretty loose in those days. But the folks involved probably thought, "Why take a chance?" Ergo, All-Stars.

But that still doesn't answer where the Kenosha part came from.

Were Gardner and Carrigan from Kenosha? They didn't play for the Maroons during the season, but they MIGHT have been local sandlotters.

Could the team have been brought together by George Johnson, the Kenosha manager? That's a long shot, but George was at the time an unemployed football-promoter.

Or maybe the hardy band of barnstormers who showed up at Rock Island borrowed the idle Kenosha jerseys for the afternoon.

Whatever the Kenosha connection, the Maroons are still paying the price. In the last few years, the league standings from the 1920s, as published in National Football League Record and Fact Book, have been corrected and purged of most errors by the admirable Elias Sports Bureau and concerned league people. But -- alas! -- Rock Island still has an extra win in 1924 (6-2-2 instead of 5-2-2) and the Maroon's season record remains unrectified -- 0-5-1.

It's time to repair this terrible injustice.

Correcting the record would not change the ORDER of finish in 1924 for either Rock Island (fifth) or Kenosha (16th). And Rock Island probably wouldn't miss that extra win. (Not that you hear them complaining about it, like the Kenosha folks gripe about that extra loss.)

But, even if they have a snit fit down in Illinois, truth must be served (or, at least on the menu). That game belongs in the official standings the way Eric Dickerson belongs in a Confidence Course. And think what publishing the true and glorious 0-4-1 mark instead of that hideous 0-5-1 would do for Kenosha pride!

Best of all, the improvement still would not mar either of Kenosha's authentic claims to NFL fame.

What? You didn't know Kenosha had a claim to NFL fame.?

Hah!

The first is that of all the cities that have held NFL franchises, no other ever had so many losses to go with so few wins. If you arranged the cumulative records of all the league cities since 1920 from the top on down, you'd find Muncie (0-3-0 over two seasons) next to last. But at the very bottom would be Kenosha -- corrected at 0-4-1.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 12, No. 4 (1990)

Kenosha's second claim to pro football immortality is unaffected by such mundane affairs as win-loss records. According to Phil Lowry's Green Gridirons, the 600 cheering souls who packed Nash Employee's Athletic Field to overflowing on Sunday, October 19 to watch the Maroons' only home game -- a 6-6 tie with Hammond, no less -- represent the smallest announced crowd in NFL history. Shucks, more folks would turn out to watch a fat man fall off his front porch.

Think of it! Kenoshans (Kenoshites?) should be proud. In the two areas that mean anything to the NFL -- putting victories into the standings and money in the till (not necessarily in that order) -- Kenosha ranks undeniably, unequivocally, unalterably, and historically LAST.

You'd think the league would want to do right by such an historic team as the Maroons and deep six that undeserved loss. After all, on the track record, an expansion team is unlikely.