

Jim Ailinger: Buffalo Legend

By Jeffrey J. Miller



Jim Ailinger

It was with great sadness that the Buffalo community learned of the passing of Dr. James J. Ailinger on March 27 in a Rochester, New York, hospital. With Ailinger's death, the city of Buffalo lost not only an ardent supporter of community causes, a member of several area athletic Halls of Fame, and a legendary story-teller, but also its last link to its first professional football team, which played in the National Football League during the league's turbulent first decade.

His football career was a source of great pride for Ailinger, though his stay with the Bisons might be described as brief at best. His one season in the NFL is only one very small chapter in Ailinger's rich life,

which included a successful 50-plus year career as a dentist, over 40 seasons as an official of major college football games, a stint as general manager of the minor league Buffalo Bisons of the American Hockey League, and helping to found dental programs in Buffalo City Schools. But it will be for those eight NFL games he played during the Roaring '20s that the Buffalo native is most famous.

The year was 1924, and Jim Ailinger was a young dental student entering his senior year at the University of Buffalo. Captain and star center/defensive lineman of the UB football team, Ailinger's collegiate career ended in 1923. However, Jim had another year of schooling left before he would earn his degree in dentistry. It was during this final year that he was approached by the Buffalo pros with an offer of \$50 per game to play pro ball.

"They asked me if I'd like to play," Ailinger recalled of his tough negotiations with Bison management. "I didn't want to at first, but when they offered me fifty dollars a game--I couldn't turn that down. It paid my last year's tuition at dental school."

The Buffalo franchise was in a rebuilding mode in 1924. The Buffalo All-Americans, as the team had been known since its founding in 1920, had been very successful in their four year history, finishing within one game of the league championship in both 1920 and 1921. But successive 5-4 seasons and declining attendance had convinced owner Frank McNeil that it was time to get out of the football business. McNeil sold the franchise to a group led by local businessman Warren D. Patterson and Tommy Hughitt, the team's quarterback, for \$50,000. The new owners changed the name of the team to Bisons, and committed themselves to signing big name players in an effort to improve performance both on the field and at the box office. Among the big names signed by the Bisons were Cornell halfback Eddie Kaw (two-time Walter Camp All-American), fullback/end Pete Calac (a former member of the great Canton Bulldog teams of the late 1910s), and Benny Lee Boynton, the "Purple Streak" from Williams College.

According to Ailinger, his first practice was with a handful of local boys recruited by Bisons' end Luke Urban. "I practiced with five or six Canisius boys who were also joining the team. Luke Urban was coaching

the Canisius football team and he had me practice with these other players. They told me to come down for the practice and bring your shoes. That was the only stipulation--you had to have your own shoes."

Ailinger performed well enough to impress the decision makers. He was subsequently signed and wound up playing most of the team's eleven games that season as a reserve lineman. Among the Canisius auditioners to whom Ailinger referred were linemen Lou Feist and Harry Collins, and end Al "Chick" Guarnieri, who brought the total number of former Griffins on the Buffalo roster to five (including holdovers Mike Trainor and Elmer McCormick). Having so many hometown players on the squad was good public relations for the Bisons, who were looking to improve upon the disappointing attendance of the previous season, and also helped to offset the large salaries paid to stars like Boynton, Kaw, Calac, and Swede Youngstrom. Perhaps another consideration was that local players traveled less than those from other cities, which meant they were more likely to be on hand for each game. Whether this was a factor in including such players on the roster is not certain, but it nevertheless made good sense in an era when some teams barely had enough able-bodied men to fill all eleven slots in their starting lineups.

The Herd kicked off the 1924 season on October 5 by defeating the Columbus Tigers 13 to 0 in Buffalo's new Bison Stadium before 5,000 fans. But the Bisons dropped to 1-1 the following week by losing 7 to 0 to the visiting Dayton Triangles.

On October 19, the team welcomed the archrival Rochester Jeffersons to the new stadium. Benny Boynton starred for the Bisons, scoring all but six points in leading the Bisons to a convincing 26-0 drubbing of the lowly Jeffs before some 3,500 loyalists. But more significantly, it was the first game in which Ailinger saw action. Ailinger was inserted at right guard, replacing stalwart Swede Youngstrom, who was moved to right tackle while the UB alum was receiving his baptism by fire. "I played next to Swede Youngstrom," Ailinger remembered. "He was an All-American. I was lucky to play on a line like that. We had Youngstrom, Luke Urban, and Frank Morrissey." Though he played only one or two series, Jim acquitted himself well enough to convince coach Tommy Hughitt to keep him around for the balance of the season.

The grind of today's football life was certainly a thing of the future to the players in Ailinger's day. There were no films to watch, no playbooks to study, and only one practice session per week. "We practiced every Sunday morning from about 10:00 to 11:30 at the Troop I Armory on West Delevan Avenue," Ailinger recalled. "Then we went over to the YMCA for lunch. Then we went out and played the game." The light

schedule fit nicely into Ailinger's weekday routine, which was busy enough with classes and homework. The Bisons hosted the Akron Pros the 26th, and once again Ailinger came in to play right guard while Youngstrom slipped over to left tackle, indicating that five feet, eleven inch, 185 pound Ailinger no longer needed the All-pro Youngstrom looking out for him. The Bisons outlasted the Pros in a dogfight, 17 to 13, and improved to 3-1. The Bisons were undefeated in games which Ailinger played.

But Ailinger's perfect record was shattered on Sunday, November 2 as the Bisons lost to the tough Frankford Yellow Jackets at Bisons stadium. Ailinger was inserted at left tackle late in the contest, replacing Lou Feist, and his play had no real bearing on the outcome.

The Herd rebounded the following Sunday, laying a 27-0 shellacking on the Kenosha Maroons. Ben Boynton showed once again why he was called the "Purple Streak" at Williams College, scoring two touchdowns, throwing two touchdown passes, and booting a field goal and three extra points. Once again, Ailinger was inserted at left tackle late in the game.

On November 16, playing in front of a sparse home crowd of 2,700, due mainly to the season's first severe snow storm, the Bisons avenged their early season loss to the Dayton Triangles with a convincing 14 to 6 victory. Ailinger found himself in a new position when he replaced Harry Collins at left guard early in the game.

Ailinger made his first road trip with the Herd for their November 22 game at Rochester. Once again, big Jim was inserted at left guard when starter Harry Collins needed a breather. Benny Boynton haunted his old mates by scoring nine points in the first four minutes of the contest. The 16 to 0 victory raised the Bisons' record to 6-2-0 for the season, and young Jim Ailinger found himself on a team with a clear shot at the league title.

The Bisons returned to the friendly confines of the Queen City the very next day to take on the 4-6 Milwaukee Badgers, but even the advantage of the home crowd could not kick-start the fatigued Buffalo offense. The Badgers dominated from first whistle to last in drubbing the hometowners 23-0, dropping the Bisons to 6-3, and dashing any titular aspirations the Bisons may have been entertaining. Ailinger saw limited action at the end of the game, replacing Babe Kraus at left guard.

Thursday, November 27, was the first day of a scheduled three-game weekend for the Buffalo Bisons. The Bisons' slide continued as the team suffered its second straight shutout loss, giving the Orange and Black very little to be thankful for this Thanksgiving Day. Looking to avenge an earlier season loss at

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Buffalo, the Pros signed several ringers to their squad for the rematch in Akron. Among them was African-American back Sol Butler, swift sprinter formerly with Canton and Rock Island. Playing without star back Benny Boynton, the Bisons failed to register a single first down. Because the Herd used no substitutions, Ailinger did not play in this contest.

Immediately following the debacle at Akron, the Bisons embarked for Philadelphia, where they were scheduled to play the Frankford Yellow Jackets just two days later. The City of Brotherly Love was well known to the veterans on the team, but its bright lights were a new experience to young Jim Ailinger, whose first visit to Philly left him with an indelible memory. Arriving there the night prior to the tilt with the Yellow Jackets, the players were hungry from the long ride on the cars. Ailinger recalls that some of the players decided to go out for some dinner. "We went out to eat in a restaurant," he remembers. "I sat right next to Pete Calac. The waiter asked Pete what he wanted and Pete said, 'A lot of meat and a lot of potatoes.' He knew what he wanted."

The next day's game, however, was not so memorable. Forced once again to start without Benny Boynton, Buffalo suffered its worst loss of the season at the hands of the tough losing 45-7. The impotent Bisons managed only three first downs for the entire game. Ailinger found his way into the fray late, relieving starting left guard Harry Collins. But once again, Jim's performance would have no impact on the outcome of the game. (A game scheduled for the next day at Cleveland was cancelled due to inclement weather.)

It was an inauspicious end to an up-and-down season as the Bisons fell to 6-5. It was also the last game of Jim Ailinger's short NFL career. He had played in a total of eight games, and the Bisons' record in games in which Ailinger appeared was 5-3. Despite an invitation to come back for another season, Jim decided a career as a pro football player was not the ticket to success in life.

Ailinger quit pro ball after just one season to begin his dental practice. He never regretted his decision to leave the gridiron. "I was spending so much time with my practice that I didn't miss it," Ailinger recalled. "I was on my way in the dental practice. I had a big practice to start with." He eventually built up one of the most successful offices in the city, but what he was most proud of is his efforts toward establishing school programs. "We set up nine programs in Buffalo. This was during the WPA. We got some money and started the programs, and I thought it would be nice and it would last two or three years. But when I came back to Buffalo for the Hall of Fame (he was inducted into the Greater Buffalo Sports Hall of Fame in 1998) dinner, I see the school is still running."

In addition to his dental practice, Ailinger moonlighted on weekends officiating major college football. "I worked 425 college football games," he told Rick Maloney of *Business First of Buffalo* in 1998. "They wanted me to go into the pros, but I said no. I would just as soon work Army-Navy games." He was a past president of the Eastern Intercollegiate Football Officials Association

Ailinger was inducted into the University of Buffalo Athletic Hall of Fame in 1965, and was named to John Madden's All-Madden All-Millennium Team in 1999.

Prior to his death this past March, he was the only surviving member of the Buffalo teams from the 1920s, and the oldest surviving former National Football League player at the age of 99. He was living in Pittsford, New York, and to the end remained a staunch fan of the Buffalo Bills.

Jim Ailinger's Stats:

Full Name: James Joseph Ailinger
Birthdate: July 10, 1901
High School: Hutchinson Central, Buffalo, NY
College: University of Buffalo
Height: 5'11"
Weight: 185
Seasons: 1924

Games Played:

10/19 Rochester Jeffersons (W) (Sub-Guard)
10/26 Akron Pros (W) (Sub-Guard)
11/2 Frankford Yellow Jackets (L) (Sub-Tackle)
11/9 Kenosha Maroons (W) (Sub-Tackle)
11/16 Dayton Triangles (W) (Sub-Guard)
11/22 Rochester Jeffersons (W) (Sub-Guard)
11/23 Milwaukee Badgers (L) (Sub Guard)
11/29 Frankford Yellow Jackets (L) (Sub-Guard)

BUFFALO BISONS 1924

6-5-0 .537 - 9th NFL Coach: Tommy Hughitt
Home: Bison Stadium
Owners: Warren Patterson & Ernest "Tommy" Hughitt

DAYDATE	AT	OPPONENT	SCOR	R	ATT
Sun O- 5	H	Columbus Tigers	13- 0	W	3,500
Sun O-12	H	Dayton Triangles	0- 7	L	6,000
Sun O-19	H	Rochester Jeffersons	26- 0	W	3,500
Sun O-26	H	Akron Pros	17-13	W	8,000
Sun N- 2	H	Frankford YellowJackets	0-24	L	6,000
Sun N- 9	H	Kenosha Maroons	27- 0	W	3,500
Sun N-16	H	Dayton Triangles	14- 6	W	2,700
Sat N-22	A	Rochester Jeffersons	16- 0	W	n/a
Sun N-23	H	Milwaukee Badgers	0-23	L	n/a
Thu N-27	A	Akron Pros	0-22	L	1,000

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Sun	N-30	A	Cleveland Bulldogs	Canceled	---
Sat	N-29	A	Frankford YellowJackets	7-45 L	7,000