

## **Teams Kept Area Buzzing**

By Larry Ebsch of the TwinCities EagleHerald

We don't see the sandlot or semipro football teams functioning in small towns nowadays like we did in the 1920s, '30s, '40s and '50s. The calendar of time has changed things so much with the introduction of television in the 1950s, and the explosion of all of professional sports, including the National Football League going from 12 teams to 30, and player rosters from 35 to 53. Throw in Arena football and more games on TV, and you get the idea of a saturated sport.

There are other reasons, of course, like spiraling operating costs, the need for larger rosters to replace the ironmen and their 60-minute performances of the past, and the risk of injuries and lawsuits. "Sandlot teams" got their name because they played on the vacant fields that were more plentiful before a building boom thinned out the open spaces in communities.

The "semipro teams" were those with a few star players getting paid. Collecting five, 10 or 20 bucks a game in tough economic times was a good way to grubstake the family budget. Players who toiled for nothing while some of their teammates got paid did so because they loved football.

Marinette and Menominee high schools have been playing football since 1894, which means they can start laying plans now to observe their 110th seasons in 2003. The high schools were the breeding grounds for the sandlot and semipro teams of yesteryear when college scholarships were sparse and few students could afford to attend college on their own.

Football was a big part of M&M culture in the pioneer era. It was cheap social entertainment at its best, and bragging rights were important to the souls on each side of the Menominee River.

Football players were household names, right up there with the mayor and sheriff. Basketball, with its 10- or 12-game season, was considered a winter pastime. Track was the only other major sport sponsored in high school.

Marinette and Menominee had several post-high school teams that logged outstanding records during their heyday. Menominee had the Buckskins, Wolverines, Jackrabbits, M&M Hornets, North End Athletics and the Professionals. Marinette had the East End Badgers out of Menekaunee, Northerners, Professionals and the Lauerman Twins.

It was not unusual for a Menominee club to have Marinette players or a Marinette squad to have Menominee athletes. The Twins and Hornets in particular had a sprinkling of players from both sides of the river.

One of the strongest and best-organized units was the Lauerman Twins that were founded in 1921 by Frank J. Lauerman and Raymond M. Lauerman. The Lauermans were big-hearted sponsors, and players enjoyed playing for them because of their steadfast support.

Richard A. Lemieux, a Menominee funeral director, helped with the business affairs. Sam Smith, the most famous trainer in Menominee football history, took care of the aches and pains of the Twins.

The Lauermans made sure the Twins were one of the best dressed, best-equipped teams on the circuit. The name of the team was stitched across the front of the dark blue jerseys. The numbers were on the back.

Ray Lauerman signed Paul Christensen, a highly touted end out of Menominee, as player/coach. Christensen was a gem from the harvest produced by Bob Zuppke, famed coach at the University of Illinois.

One of Christensen's teammates was George Halas, founder and legendary coach of the Chicago Bears. In fact, Christensen and Halas manned the end positions for the Illini.

The Twins never bumped shoulders with the Green Bay Packers like some other local teams because the Packers became a part of the original National Football League the same season the Marinette aggregation was formed.

The Twins were disappointed that they couldn't test their skills against the rising team from Green Bay in an exhibition game, and went so far as to accuse Coach Curly Lambeau of dodging them.

The Twins pointed to the fact that the Packers had the Minneapolis Marines, Rock Island, Ill., Independents, Evansville, Ind., Crimson Giants, Hammond, Ind., Professionals, and the Racine, Wis., American Legion on their schedule, so why not them?

With Christensen at the helm, the Twins punched out eight consecutive victories in their maiden season, all by lop-sided margins.

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The Twins became undisputed champions of Northeastern Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula with a 13-6 triumph over Stambaugh. Iron River, Ironwood, Marquette, Ishpeming, Iron Mountain and Escanaba all fielded semipro teams in the 1920s.

Some of the mainstays for the Twins were Walter Niemann, Jimmy McDonald, Richard "Eck" Erdlitz, Alfred Teichler, Arnold Peters, Ralph Sutliff, Eddie Holob, Jack Jaeger, Bill Brown, Clarence "Hike" Hlinka, Ned Peterson and Elmer Christensen, Paul's brother.

Niemann, a Menominee center who starred at Michigan, went on to play for the Packers in 1922, '23 and '24. Paul Christensen, who played for the Menominee Professionals before joining the Twins, officiated Packer games when they first joined the NFL.

The Twins played their home games at the Menominee Fairgrounds, now the general site of Emerson Electric Co., and State Street Field in Marinette.

The Twins had the longest tenure of local teams until the crack M&M Hornets were founded in 1950 by Howie Jozwiak.

The erstwhile teams of the bygone days may seem like relics now, but they are an incredible part of M&M football lore.