The A's Have It

The 3A's Triumph: 1894

By PFRA Research

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The American Association, baseball's second major league through the 1880s, went out of business after the 1891 season, depriving fans of the playoff series that had closed each season since 1884. The fans missed the excitement; clubowners missed the profits. Pittsburgh Pirate president William Chase Temple donated a magnificent trophy, and an end-of-season playoff was set up between the National League's first and second place teams for 1894. The Temple Cup Series never really made it as an attraction; neither fans nor players could take it seriously as a way to choose a champion.

Although the Temple Cup is nothing more than a footnote to baseball history today, it should be remembered that Mr. Temple showed himself to be a most generous and innovative sportsman. Eventually, he would also show the same qualities in Pittsburgh.

As the 1894 Pittsburgh football season began, three morning newspapers -- the Times, Dispatch, and Post -- combined forces in refusing to print any advance notice of either P.A.C. or A.A.A. games unless the athletic clubs agreed to buy advertising. The same policy had been applied with success to theaters for three years and to the baseball club since the spring. The papers made several dire predictions concerning reduced crowds should the football clubs refuse to knuckle under to their blackmail. Afternoon papers, such as the *Press*, continued to treat upcoming games as news.

O.D. Thompson, of the Three A's, and Douglas Buchanan, the new P.A.C. football manager (Barbour having been elevated to club president), reacted angrily. They agreed that charging theaters and the baseball club was perfectly fair. After all, the cash collected for those events went into the pockets of the owners. But an athletic club was completely different, as the managers received no financial benefit. On the contrary, they often spent valuable time and even more valuable money to make the various athletic events successful.

"We do not believe the daily papers wish to injure amateur athletics," said Buchanan, "but when the business manager reads in his paper that twelve or fifteen hundred dollars were taken in at the P.A.C.-A.A.A. football game, and he sees the report of the game takes up as much space as the baseball and theater news, he begins to think that the football clubs should pay a little for the favors they receive from the papers." No one would object to that if an athletic club were run as a business, as were the theaters and baseball team. "But," insisted Buchanan, "as the money made at a football game ... is devoted to promoting the physical, moral, and mental condition of our young men, we believe the actions of these dailies to be very unjust.

Naturally, Buchanan avoided mentioning that several of his club's young men had their wallets enriched every time they played a football game. Such mundane details were extraneous to his high moral indignation.

The afternoon *Press* jubilantly observed that crowds at the games were bigger than ever. This, they decided, proved that everyone read the *Press*. More likely it meant that word-of-mouth was superior to word-in-print.

In mid-November, the football managers relented and shelled out $1.25 to purchase ads in the dailies. As several club members had taken their business ads OUT of the papers in spite, the dailies lost a good deal more than they gained by their stand. And, after the next game, the *Press* concluded there had been no appreciable increase in attendance.

Just how many "club members" were being paid to play football in 1894 is impossible to know. We have no further pages from the trusty A.A.A. account book and no more torn P.A.C. contracts. A fair guess is that more than half of the Allegheny regulars received some sort of remuneration, but whether that came in the form of jobs, secret payments from individual club members, or outright wages from the club treasury no one can say.

Jim Van Cleve, Ollie Rafferty, and Sport Donnelly were back with the A's, as were Anson Harrold and A.S. Valentine. New men included fullback G.C. Hutchinson and tackle W. Greenwood from Lehigh's strong 1893 team, a tough guard named Hart, and a swift end named Randolph.

The P.A.C. had Clarence Lomax returning at one end, Rags Brown and Doc Proctor again in the backfield, and Charley Heppenstall in the line. Beef Ritchey and A.C. Read showed up for big games. Tom Roderick, a small but tricky halfback, was the best ever seen in Pittsburgh according to some. One "new" old face in the P.A.C. lineup belonged to Joe Trees, ex-A.A.A. star.

Of the two clubs, the Three A's looked to be the stronger. There was a good deal of worry in the P.A.C. camp about one side of their line, and Captain Charley Aull had announced his retirement from football, necessitating a shift of Proctor to quarterback.

A trio of meetings were scheduled between the two clubs in 1894 -- the first slated for late October.
The A.A.A. got in shape with three easy victories, knocking off Sewickley 18-0, Indiana Normal 16-0, and the Carnegie A.C. 33-0.

So many subs were used that it was impossible to get a good line on just how powerful the team might be.

After warming up with an intrasquad game, the P.A.C. buried Altoona 34-4, as young Roderick scored four touchdowns. Then, the Washington and Jefferson team, along with 400 of their fans, visited P.A.C. Park. Lining up at halfback for W. & J. was that well-known college student, Ross Fiscus. He put on quite a show. The *Press* account gave him most of the credit for the collegians' surprising 6-0 win.

With the first A.A.A. game coming up the next Saturday, the P.A.C. received another shock. Ross Fiscus dropped out of college and returned to the waiting arms of the Three A's. So much for education!

Nearly 2,000 tickets were sold in advance and the actual crowd at P.A.C. Park was estimated at 3,000. It was a fashionable bunch too. Much of local society was on hand, along with several well-dressed out-of-towners.

The *Press* outdid itself in praise of the contest, "... the greatest game of football ever played on local grounds," of the players, "... too much cannot be said," and even the officials, "... worth the price of admission." For once, a football account had no need to dwell on the prize fight aspects as the play was "hard" but "clean."

There was nothing to put a damper on the newspaper's enthusiasm, certainly not the final score. After the Three A's broke on top with a 4-0 lead in the first half -- courtesy of a Ross Fiscus plunge -- the P.A.C. came back in the second half to tie on a scamper by seldom-noticed halfback Don McNeil. Then, while everyone in the park held his breath, little Tom Roderick kicked the goal that put his team in front 6-4. Not even a few fisticuffs by the reliable Donnelly near the close of proceedings could rouse the A's to another score. When time was called, the P.A.C. had the first round of the championship series safely in its grasp.

Generally the P.A.C.'s old "Gyms" nickname had gone out of style. Those not alphabetically inclined were likely to call them the "East Enders" in honor of their location on Pittsburgh maps. The Allegheny Athletic Association was still known as the "Three A's" in print, but "Four A's" -- with the sarcastic A for "amateur" -- was popular with cynics. There were also those who chuckled over the "real" meaning of the first letter in P.A.C.

Both clubs still steadfastly asserted their simon-pure amateurism, but reference to "out-of-towners" at P.A.C. Park was more ominous than casual *Press* readers may have realized. The ever-watchful A.A.U. was beginning to worry about Pittsburgh football.

The second game in the P.A.C.-A.A.A. series was scheduled for Election Day, Tuesday, November 6. Neither team slated any other games between the meetings so they could concentrate on their preparations for the big game. The usual rumors of imported ringers circulated, but hard practice sessions were more the order of the day. Any football game was as much a test of endurance as of skill. However, the time on the field was reduced by the rulemakers in 1894 to a mere 70 minutes, divided into 35- minute halves.

The top scandal was the revelation that an unnamed East End player had tried to betray his team. A few days before the first meeting, Billy Kountz of the A's received a letter asking if he'd like to have the P.A.C. signals and offering to furnish them for $20. As signals were called out loud in those no-huddle days, knowledge of the East Enders' secret numbers was the same as knowing each play in advance. Kountz ran to O.D. Thompson with the letter. Neither of them minded hiring ringers to win games, but they drew the line at outright cheating. They decided to lay a trap for the traitor.

First, they notified some of the P.A.C. bigwigs about the offer they'd received. Then, they sent the double-dealer a letter asking him to bring the signals to a particular place at a specific time. Sure enough, the rascal arrived promptly.

He turned out to be one of the East End reserves, a player who might have made the starting eleven "had it not been for his propensity for rough playing." He'd used such rough tactics on his teammates in practice, and, after one too many incidents, lost any chance he'd had of playing. This had driven him to seek revenge by selling out his own team.

"Are you sure these are the signals the P.A.C. will use in the game on Saturday?" he was asked.

"Of course I am," the rascal replied indignantly. "Haven't I been practicing with the team right along?"

Thompson knew the traitor had actually missed a few practices of late. "When did you practice with them last?"

"Only a couple of evenings ago," he lied.

"Don't you know the P.A.C. has changed its signals the last two or three days?"

The traitor sputtered and then insisted he could provide the new signals just as easily. Another meeting was arranged. This time Thompson planned to have P.A.C. officials hiding around the corner. Perhaps the rascal smelled a rat when he learned the P.A.C. had not really changed signals, because he failed to appear at the second meeting.

East End officials, left with only accusations by Kountz and Thompson, gave the fellow every chance to defend himself, but he refused to appear before a club tribunal. The P.A.C. decided to change signals after all, but the reason for the switch was kept under wraps until the first game with the Three A's had been played.

Election Day came up snowing. The weather held down the voters, but a large crowd turned out at Three A's Park. A win for the East Enders would seal the local football championship, and their rooters invaded the Alleghenys' bailiwick in full force.

The first half was dead even, as the snow and deep mud hampered both sides. The P.A.C. penetrated once to the A.A.A.'s 30-yard-line, and the A's got as far as the East Enders' 20. Those two thrusts were the closest either team came to scoring.

The second half started on the same slow note, but soon frustration brought out the usual slugging. Someone gave Gallagher, one of the P.A.C. guards, a shot sufficient to break his jaw and cause his removal from the competition. Then Van Cleve and Trees mixed it up, and, when Valentine came to Jim's rescue, the umpire tossed the quarterback out of the game. After several appeals, Valentine left the field "crying like a baby," and Hutchinson moved to quarterback.

The loss of a guard seemed to hurt the East Enders more than the ousting of their signal-caller disturbed the A's. The latter began a strong drive, sparked by Ross Fiscus' 32-yard burst around right end.

With the ball resting on their doorstep, the East Enders summoned all their energies and stopped the A's on downs. Now it was the P.A.C.'s turn, but they could only paw ineffectively at the line a couple of times. Brown went back to punt. Just as his foot met the ball, a Three A's lineman came flying in to block the kick with his chest. The ball bounded over the goal line with both teams in hot pursuit. Randolph of the A's had the lead. He fell to the ground, but the ball shot from under him. With a mighty effort, he dragged himself on his stomach in the mud and reached for the ball just as the two teams piled on him "like ten loads of bricks."

When the officials got everyone unpiled, Randolph still had the ball and the A's had a touchdown. The big crowd -- at least the A.A.A. part of it -- swarmed out of the stands and surrounded the muddy players, cheering them and clapping them on their backs.

The police cleared the field to let Hutchinson kick the goal. After one more P.A.C. possession, the A's held the ball for the rest of the game.

The championship series was tied.

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Between his early season play with Washington and Jefferson and his later appearances with the A's, Ross Fiscus was building quite a reputation. Out in Washington County, young Newell Fiscus was holding down a regular tackle spot for the W. & J. team.

Big brother Lawson Fiscus was doing all right for himself too.

The Fiscus family, which came from western Pennsylvania's Indiana County, had sixteen children in all, but big, mustachioed Lawson was the roughest. He may have played some informal football at Indiana Normal School in the late 1880s. By 1891, he and Ross were good enough to receive liberal expense money to go to Pittsburgh and play for the Three A's.

The next year, Lawson was recruited to try big-time football at Princeton University. He won a guard position and a nickname -- "The Samson of Princeton." But, after that one season, he dropped out and returned home.

In 1893, he divided his play between the A's and the Greensburg A.A., thirty miles apart. At 5'11" and 185 pounds, he was a big man for his time and quite versatile. The Three A's used him in the line, but Greensburg usually lined him up in the backfield.

By 1894, he was 28-years-old and teaching at South Fork, near Johnstown. When the Greensburg people offered him $20 a game to stick with them, he gladly took it. He might have got more in Pittsburgh had he tested the waters there. Interestingly enough, he was unaware that some of his 1893 Three A 's teammates had been salaried.

The weekly double-sawbuck to Lawson made Greensburg the third football team in as many years to go pro. Soon there would be too many to keep track of.

Fiscus earned his money as the Greenies enjoyed their best season to date. The only loss -- at Altoona -- was avenged with a 6-4 victory at home on Thanksgiving Day. Other wins came over the Kiskiminetas, Indiana Normal, West Virginia University, the Carnegies of Braddock, and Holy Ghost College.

The most celebrated game of the season came in late November at Jeannette, Pa. The first half was rolling along in scoreless fashion when Fiscus did something very nasty to a Jeannette player. Most accounts have him kicking the poor fellow in the face, but the Pittsburgh *Press* reported that he tripped the guy and "purposely tramped on his neck." Whatever Lawson did, it was sufficient to render his opponent hors de combat. The Jeannette side immediately and loudly petitioned the umpire to expel Fiscus from the game. Greensburg shouted just as loudly that Lawson had simply performed in the line of duty. The worthy official tended to side with the Greenies.

The arguments continued through the intermission, which was expanded to allow for more shouting. Finally, one side or the other -- accounts vary -- stormed off the field and the game was declared a scoreless draw.

Fiscus continued in a Greensburg A.A. uniform for several more years. Later he went through a couple of businesses. Still later, he became a local police chief, aided in the performance of his duties no doubt, by the rough and tumble reputation he'd earned in his youth. In the 1940s, when sports historians were convinced that pro football had begun with a $10 payment in 1895, the police chief of Youngwood, Pa., announced he'd got twice as much a year earlier. He had only his word, but for those who knew his lifelong reputation for straightforward honesty, that was enough. Until his death in 1949, Lawson Fiscus honestly believed himself to have been the first pro football player.

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With the third and rubber game of the championship series slated for the Saturday before Thanksgiving, the P.A.C. and A.A.A. had two weekends to fill. The East Enders led off with a ho-hum 16-0 win over the Y.M.C.A. of Beaver Falls, Pa. Meanwhile, the A's traveled to Altoona for an easy 20-4 victory.

On November 17, each team was at home with -- next to playing each other -- the most attractive games on their schedules.

The Carlisle Indian School was not yet the famous Carlisle of Jim Thorpe -- that would come nearly twenty years later -- but they were still a highly regarded group of redskins. Their lineup included

four at-the-time famous Indian stars whose renown was later dimmed by the adulation over Thorpe: Captain Ben Caswell and Jonas Metoxen in the backfield, Martin Wheelock and the great Bemus Pierce in the line. Some said the East Enders would be doing well to score against the talented braves.

To just about everyone's astonishment, the P.A.C. registered a pair of touchdowns in the first half and held the visitors scoreless throughout. Superior teamwork and a good showing for little Don McNeil, the P.A.C.'s "other" halfback, were given most of the credit for the victory.

While the East Enders were doing themselves proud, the Alleghenys were getting slaughtered over at Three A's Park. The Chicago A.A. was again cruising through town after bouts in the east against Harvard and Yale. The Windy City boys had some familiar faces like big Steve Stevenson, the great center, but they'd also added several new huskies to make themselves tougher than ever. The A's managed to hold them to a single touchdown in the first half, but after the intermission, the Chicagoans scored pretty much at will. The final count was 24-0 and the A's got off lucky with that.

The P.A.C. was coming off a big win, had shown excellent teamwork, but suffered from so-so kicking. The A's had just been manhandled, tended to play a little ragged around the edges, but had a bargeload of talent. Each team held one victory in the championship series. How the third game might go was anybody's guess.

The A.A.A. decided to take out a little insurance. When the teams lined up at Three A's Park, the home club had a new man at center -- none other than big Stevenson, late of the Chicago A.A.!

The usual protests were registered. As usual, they fell on deaf ears. The East Enders must have experienced deja vu -- it was 1892 again -- and the heart seemed to go out of them.

Stevenson completely controlled the center of the line. Sport Donnelly was at his pugnacious best, slugging anything that moved. Naturally, Joe Trees got sent to the sideline when he responded with a swing at Sport. It just wasn't the P.A.C.'s day.

Trees, who eventually made a fortune in the oil business, became a legendary supporter of athletic programs at the University of Pittsburgh. There was a completeness in this as he was one of the first college players to receive an "athletic scholarship," although it wasn't called that at the time. What happened was that the 210-pound lineman so impressed the W.U.P. captain arranged for Joe to receive room, board, and tuition to change schools.

A friendly man, Trees nevertheless conceived a lifetime loathing for Sport Donnelly. It seems that Joe had bright red hair which he wore in long, flowing locks. In games where the two opposed each other, Sport gravitated to Joe's red hair like a bull to red flannel and enjoyed pulling it with fierce abandon. Joe would usually defend his crowning glory with a strenuous poke at Donnelly, and as often as not wind up on the sideline as in this game.

The score was 18-0 at halftime. So one-sided was the game that a few A.A.A. members voiced disappointment that their team had chosen to use such a rank ringer as Stevenson. "We could have won anyway," they insisted.

Allegheny shame was somewhat expunged when Captain Lomax of the East Enders put in HIS ringer, former Cornell fullback Ed Young, at the start of the second half. Several P.A.C. members begged Lomax to leave Young on the bench so that the guilt of "ringerdom" would fall exclusively on the Three A's. Lomax hoped Young might lead a comeback, so into the fray went the Ithican. Ten minutes later, he was back out, a victim of an upset stomach.
Pretty soon everyone on the P.A.C. side was sick, as the A's picked up in the second half where they'd left off in the first. The score reached 30-4 before the game was mercifully ended. Ross Fiscus had scored three touchdowns.

The winning A's gained a large trophy cup contributed by the Pittsburgh Chronicle-Telegraph as emblematic of local football supremacy. Both clubs admitted to making a couple of thousand dollars on the game. The crowd was said to have numbered nearly 10,000!

Only the Three A's management knew what it cost to keep big Stevenson in town for an extra week.

On Thanksgiving Day, the P.A.C. finished the season with their annual loss to Penn State. They'd ended second in a two- team race with the Three A's, and their final won-lost mark was only .500 for eight games. It was almost embarrassing to admit that the team registered a record $4.500 profit.

The Three A's hadn't done quite so well financially, but they were comfortably in the black. Best of all, they had a championship cup to defend in 1895 ... if the A.A.U. would let them.