

BUILDING A CHAMPION: 1920 AKRON PROS

By Ken Crippen

It's time to dig deep into the archives to talk about the first National Football League (NFL) champion. In fact, the 1920 Akron Pros were champions before the NFL was called the NFL. In 1920, the American Professional Football Association was formed and started play. Currently, fourteen teams are included in the league standings, but it is unclear as to how many were official members of the Association. Different from today's game, the champion was not determined on the field, but during a vote at a league meeting. Championship games did not start until 1932. Also, there were no set schedules. Teams could extend their season in order to try and gain wins to influence voting the following spring. These late-season games were usually against lesser opponents in order to pad their win totals.

To discuss the Akron Pros, we must first travel back to the century's first decade. Starting in 1908 as the semi-pro Akron Indians, the team immediately took the city championship and stayed as consistently one of the best teams in the area. In 1912, "Peggy" Parratt was brought in to coach the team.

George Watson "Peggy" Parratt was a three-time All-Ohio football player for Case Western University. While in college, he played professionally for the 1905 Shelby Blues under the name "Jimmy Murphy," in order to preserve his amateur status. It only lasted a few weeks until local reporters discovered that it was Parratt on the field for the Blues. When brought before the university's Athletic Board, Parratt admitted his wrong-doing and was subsequently barred from all intercollegiate play. He was the first college star to be disciplined by his school for playing professional football. He finished the 1905 season with the Lorain Pros before he moved on to the Massillon Tigers in 1906. That year, October 25 specifically, Parratt threw a pass to Dan "Bullet" Riley. That is considered by some to be the first forward pass in a professional football game. Parratt continued his pro football career with the Franklin Athletic Club, before he returned to the Blues as player-coach-manager in 1908. In 1909, the Blues tied the Akron Indians for the state championship and won it outright in 1910. Shelby would again see themselves in the championship game in 1911, this time against the Canton Pros. A disputed offside ruling during the game angered Canton to the point of forfeiting.

Parratt joined the Akron Indians in 1912 and immediately changed their name to Parratt's Indians, but the little known Elyria Athletics took the championship. Parratt immediately set out to raid the champion Elyria roster and brought back the 1913 crown after a 9-1-2 season. They repeated as champions in 1914 with an 8-2-1 record. Of note during that season, in their November 15 matchup with the Canton Pros, Akron fullback Joe Collins tackled center Harry Turner, breaking his spine and severing his spinal cord. He died a short time later.

Akron's roster was decimated in the offseason. The Massillon Tigers and Canton Bulldogs stole the bulk of Parratt's players and the 1915 season was a disaster for Parratt. Going 1-4-2, including four games played as the Shelby Blues, was enough for Parratt and he left to head up the Cleveland Tigers.

The 1916 squad was reorganized by Howe Welch, footballer out of Case, and brothers “Suey” and “Chang.” The Akron squad also picked up a sponsor in the Burkhardt Brewing Company, namely Gus and Bill Burkhardt. The team was renamed the Akron Burkhardts and went 7-4-1 for the season. However, that sponsorship only lasted one season as Stephen “Suey” Welch and Vernon “Mac” McGinnis bought the team and renamed them the Akron Pros. Welch and McGinnis brought in Al Nesser, the youngest of the seven Nesser brothers that played for the Columbus Panhandles between 1904 and 1922. Alfred “Al” Louis Nesser did not play college football, but started immediately in the pros with the Columbus Panhandles in 1910. He stayed on and off with the team through 1919, with stops on the Canton Bulldogs, Massillon Tigers, as well as the Akron Pros. The 1917 incarnation of the Akron team went 6-2-0 before temporarily disbanding during World War I. They retook the field in 1919 as the Indians, with “Suey” Welch out and Ralph “Fat” Waldsmith, Art Ranney and Park “Tumble” Crisp joining McGinnis as owners. Waldsmith played for the Indians in 1914 and the Canton Bulldogs in 1916. Crisp played for Canton in 1916 and Akron in 1917. The new owners brought in halfback Fritz Pollard, who was one of the first African-Americans (along with Bobby Marshall) to play in the NFL in 1920. Frederick Douglass “Fritz” Pollard played his college football at Brown University. He graduated in 1919 and joined the Akron Indians to start his professional career.

After 1919 season, the team was sold to Art Ranney, an Akron businessman and former player for Akron University, and cigar-store owner Frank Neid. The Indians name was sold to “Suey” Welch, who fielded a team in 1921. Welch later became a successful boxing promoter and was inducted into the World Boxing Hall of Fame (get year). His brother Charles “Chang” Welch also became a boxing promoter.

Even though it had been attempted previously, 1920 saw yet another push to form a professional football league. Teams in the mythical “Ohio League” saw clubs from other parts of the country draw more fans to the games, which obviously translated to increased revenue for the teams participating. The fear was that more talented players would be drawn away from the smaller Ohio towns to other cities in search of larger salaries. Something needed to be done to keep the Ohio teams on a competitive level with organizations from outside of the Buckeye state.

The first step was taken on August 20, 1920, when four of the Ohio League teams met at Ralph Hay’s Hupmobile dealership in Canton, Ohio. Hay owned the Canton Bulldogs and was joined by his star player Jim Thorpe. Also at the meeting were Frank Nied and Art Ranney of Akron, Jimmy O’Donnell and Stanley Cofall of the Cleveland Tigers, and Carl Storck of the Dayton Triangles. Since no minutes were recorded for this meeting, the final outcome is a bit of a mystery, but a few things could be ascertained from media accounts of the event. First, the name of their new “league” was to be called the American Professional Football Conference and Hay was elected Secretary. Now, the focus could shift to the major issues facing those teams. Players were running from team to team to collect a paycheck. The members wanted this to stop and agreed to refrain from enticing players to leave their current club. Next, they needed to get player salaries under control, so they introduced a salary cap. Finally, they needed to address the increasing row between colleges and professional clubs with respect to undergraduate players. Colleges increasingly frowned on their players involving themselves in professional contests. The members of the league agreed to not allow these undergraduates to play on their squads.

With that all of the major issues addressed, they needed to get outside clubs to join and agree to the aforementioned stipulations.

All of the work that came out of the meeting would be for naught if only the four attending clubs were members of the league. They needed to bring in the organizations they most feared would induce their players to leave. Hay was responsible for contacting top-notch professional clubs in the surrounding states to have them attend the next meeting. Before that, however, the league received letters from three clubs, expressing interest in joining. The first was from Leo Lyons of the Rochester Jeffersons. Actually, it is not absolutely certain that the letter was from the Jeffersons, but since they were by far the strongest Rochester team, it can be assumed that it was from the Jeffersons. Couple that with the fact that Leo Lyons attended the follow-up meeting to the August 20th affair, it is safe to say that the letter was from the Jeffersons. Leo had always pushed for a league and when he heard that there was the possibility of one forming, it is assumed that he jumped at the chance to participate and sent the letter. The second letter was from Buffalo. Again, since no meeting minutes were recorded, there is no way to be absolutely certain who wrote the letter, but it is assumed that it was the Buffalo All-Americans, who were essentially the 1919 Buffalo Prospects under new management. The third letter was from Hammond, but it is unclear as to which Hammond team sent the letter. The Hammond Pros attended the second league meeting, but the Hammond Bobcats were also a strong contender in the area. The answers to these questions remain to this day.

The second league meeting was held September 17, 1920 in Canton. Hay and Thorpe were there, along with previous attendees Nied, Ranney, Storck, Cofall and O'Donnell. New to the meeting were Leo Lyons of the Rochester Jeffersons, Doc Young of the Hammond Pros, Walter Flanigan of the Rock Island Independents, Earl Ball of the Muncie Flyers, George Halas and Morgan O'Brien of the Decatur Staleys, and Chris O'Brien of the Chicago Cardinals. One of the first items to come out of this meeting was to change the name of the league to the American Professional Football Association (APFA). Next up was to choose the leadership. Jim Thorpe was elected as president, Stanley Cofall was elected vice-president and Art Ranney took the secretary-treasurer position. With the leadership in place, they could now get down to the details. Young, Flanigan, Storck and Cofall were responsible for drawing up a constitution and bylaws. It was also decided that each team would provide a list of all players used during the 1920 season and that this list was to be provided to Art Ranney (Association secretary) by January 1, 1921. This was in reference to teams enticing players to jump teams, the only of the three items that actually addressed the reasons why the league was formed. The league shaped up as follows: Akron Pros, Buffalo All-Americans, Canton Bulldogs, Chicago Cardinals, Chicago Tigers, Cleveland Tigers, Columbus Panhandles, Dayton Triangles, Decatur Staleys, Detroit Heralds, Hammond Pros, Muncie Flyers, Rochester Jeffersons and Rock Island Independents. All that was left was to play the games. Of note, the official meeting minutes of the first league gathering were kept on Akron Pros stationary.

The Akron Pros opened their 1920 season by playing the non-league Wheeling Stogies. End Al Nesser scored the first three touchdowns – two fumble recoveries and a blocked kick recovery – and back Fritz Pollard added two on end runs. Back Harry Harris finished the scoring with a fourth quarter touchdown to seal the 43-0 victory.

In the sweltering heat, Akron continued their winning ways by beating the Columbus Panhandles 37-0. Akron seemed to gain yardage at will, while the visitors struggled to drive the ball. Fullback Frank McCormick started the scoring with a three-yard dive through the Columbus line and again scored to give Akron a 14-0 lead. Harry Harris, Bob Nash and Fred Sweetland scored touchdowns, and end Scotty Bierce tackled Frank Nesser for a safety to finish the scoring.

Akron continued their home stand by taking on the visiting non-league Cincinnati Celts. The game was not as close as the 13-0 final score indicated. Akron seemed to drive the ball with ease, while Cincinnati did not register a first down. Tailback Rip King scored approximately five minutes into the game to give Akron a 7-0 lead, while Fritz Pollard clinched the victory with a touchdown run in the final period. Scoring would have been higher, but Akron missed on three field goal attempts.

Next up for Akron was the visiting Cleveland Tigers. The Pros racked up twelve first downs in the game, but it took a freak play to put points on the board for the home team. In the first quarter, tailback Stanley Cofall dropped back to punt for the Tigers. As the ball was snapped, Bob Nash streaked through the line, caught the ball as it was punted and raced the final eight yards for a touchdown. Even though Akron was able to move the ball, the Cleveland defense held firm as Akron approached the goal line. The final score was 7-0 to preserve Akron's undefeated streak.

Ten thousand fans saw Akron dismantle the perennial powerhouse Canton Bulldogs on October 31. Coming off their first loss since 1917, the Bulldogs were expected to rebound on their home field, but the Akron squad was too much. In the first quarter, Charlie Copley put Akron on the board with a 38-yard field goal. The legendary Jim Thorpe entered the game in the third quarter and Canton showed some signs of life. However, a strong defensive effort by Akron prevented Canton from crossing the Pros' ten-yard line. Canton tailback Joe Guyon returned Rip King's punt to midfield. Johnny Gilroy dropped back to pass, but Bob Nash and Pike Johnson split the line and blocked Gilroy's pass. Johnson caught the deflection and ran 50 yards for the touchdown. Canton's only chance to score came in the third quarter when Thorpe failed to kick a field goal from the Akron 18-yard line.

Akron traveled to Cleveland for their second road game of the season. Two weeks prior, the Pros beat Cleveland 7-0, but the Tigers wanted revenge. To this point in the season, Akron was undefeated, untied and gave up no points to their opposition. The Pros wanted to keep that streak alive. It started with two beautiful twenty-yard runs by tailback Fritz Pollard to give Akron a 7-0 lead in the second quarter. In the third quarter, Cleveland struck. Back Mark Devlin hoisted a 25-yard pass to tailback Tuffy Conn, who raced 25 yards for a touchdown to tie the game. These were the first points scored against Akron all season. The game ended in a 7-7 tie, breaking Akron's undefeated – untied record.

The following week saw Akron take on the 4-0-2 Dayton Triangles. Dayton's defense held for the first three quarters, but Akron broke free in the final period. Rip King passed to Frank McCormick for a touchdown to break the scoreless deadlock. Soon after, Fritz Pollard ran around end for a 17-yard scoring scamper to give Akron a 13-0 victory.

At this point of the season, the Akron Pros were 6-0-1 and ready to face a rematch with the 6-1-1 Canton Bulldogs. With only a few days rest after the win over Dayton and an undefeated season still in play, the Pros could not afford a letdown against the championship-contender Bulldog team. Even though Akron beat Canton earlier in the season, there was an unwritten rule that with tie-breakers, second games count more than the first when it came to the final standings.

Canton made a costly mistake in the first quarter. Canton quarterback Tex Grigg fumbled an Akron punt and end Scotty Bierce fell on it to give the ball to the Pros at the Canton 32-yard line. A pass from Rip King to Bierce put the ball on the Canton twelve-yard line and a pass from King to Bob Nash gave Akron a 7-0 lead. After that, Akron's defense took charge and Canton was unable to score. In two games, Akron held Canton scoreless and preserved their undefeated streak.

Next, Akron faced a rematch with the 5-1-2 Dayton Triangles. The only loss for the Triangles was against the Pros. It was a hard-fought match, but Akron took charge in the second half. With Dayton quarterback Al Mahrt going down to a broken collarbone, the Triangles' offense sputtered. In the third quarter, Rip King received a Dayton punt, but fumbled the ball around midfield. Fritz Pollard recovered the loose ball and weaved his way to the goal line for the first score of the game. In the fourth quarter, Akron's offense drove to the Dayton 20-yard line. A fumble and two penalties pushed the Pros back to the Triangle 32-yard line. On the next play, King dropped back to pass, but was hit by tackle Max Broadhurst. King fell to one knee, but the play was not over. King got up and tossed a pass to Pollard for a score and a 14-0 victory. That essentially eliminated Dayton from championship consideration, while the 8-0-1 Akron Pros were on their way to a title.

Around December 5, 1920, the Akron Pros sold end/tackle Bob "Nasty" Nash to the Buffalo All-Americans for \$300 and five percent of the gate receipts for their game with the All-Americans. That was considered the first player transaction in league history. However, Nash did not suit up for either team in their December 5 matchup.

Only 3,000 fans showed up in the Buffalo winter weather. Intermittent rain and snow, combined with a blustery wind made things difficult for both teams. However, late in the second quarter, Akron's offense provided a spark. Five straight first downs put the ball on the Buffalo two-yard line, but the defense of the All-Americans held on downs. Akron again drove to the shadow of the Buffalo goal in the fourth quarter, when Rip King tossed a pass to end Al Nesser, who rumbled his way to the one-yard line. Buffalo back Tommy Hughitt stopped Nesser short of the goal. Near the end of the game, Hughitt dropped back to punt from his goal line. His punt went about five yards, but with an Akron man touching it and failing to recover the loose ball, Buffalo's Bodie Weldon fell on it to regain possession for the All-Americans. A poor pass by Lud Wray almost caused Buffalo guard Swede Youngstrom to fall back into his own goal for a safety. That was the last scoring opportunity for either team. The game ended in a scoreless tie.

With only one game remaining, 8-0-2 Akron needed to beat the 10-1-1 Decatur Staleys to leave no doubt as to the first champion of the APFA. Decatur did not leave anything to chance and hired Chicago Cardinal tailback Paddy Driscoll. However, even with all of the stars on the Staley team, neither team was able to put points on the board. Akron's offense had a slight advantage in

yards, but the Staleys drove deeper into Akron territory. Obviously, without points to show for their efforts, it really did not matter.

The champion would be determined by a vote of the membership, with Akron and Decatur both claiming the title. The two teams had to wait until April 30, 1921 to see who would take home the crown.

That marked the end of the first year of the APFA. Even with their best efforts, the league was not able to stop the three things that forced them to create the Association in the first place: skyrocketing salaries, team jumping and the use of college undergraduates. In fact, it was as if the Association did not even exist. The end of the 1920 season still called for the formation of a pro football league, even by members of the Association!! Regardless, the APFA decided to continue and had a meeting on April 30, 1921. Thorpe and Cofall did not attend, so Art Ranney took charge. Other attendees included Joe Carr, Leo Conway (Union Athletic Association), George Halas, Ralph Hay, Lester Higgins (brother-in-law of Hay), Charles Lambert, Leo Lyons, Frank McNeil, Frank Nied, Chris O'Brien, Morgan O'Brien, Carl Storck and Doc Young.

First on the agenda was to vote for the "champion" of the association. Carr nominated the Akron Pros and it was approved. Akron was able to rack up an impressive unbeaten 8-0-3 record, playing tough opponents. That is what carried them to the "championship," even though Decatur tied Akron (and thought that would be enough to get them the championship) and Buffalo tied Akron and beat Canton. Regardless, Akron won the championship based on the vote of the membership. The Pros were awarded a loving cup from the Brunswick-Balke Collender Company. Unfortunately, the cup has been lost to history, as its current location is a mystery. It has never been mentioned or seen since.

The next item on the meeting agenda was the appointment of a new leader. After a short discussion, Joe Carr was elected the new Association president, replacing Jim Thorpe. Morgan O'Brien was elected vice-president and Carl Storck secretary-treasurer.

Making good on the promise from the previous meeting, members of the Association had until May 15th to submit a list of all players that played on their squad the previous season. These players were not allowed to be enticed into leaving until the club management released them from their contract. This was to address the team-jumping issue that plagued clubs of that era. Finally, the Association was taking a hard stand to clean up the sport.

Another point that needed to be addressed was players playing for more than one team in the same week. This hit home with Conway and McNeil, as both teams were guilty of this practice. McNeil's Buffalo All-American players suited up for Conway's Union team on Saturdays and then returned to Buffalo to play for the All-Americans on Sunday. This was pretty much overlooked up to this point, but the situation would boil toward the end of the 1921 season.

Another Association meeting occurred on June 18, 1921 at the Hollenden Hotel in Cleveland. The main purpose of this meeting was to start establishing schedules and to approve a new constitution (it looked like one was never written, as promised in the 1920 meetings). Rochester's Leo Lyons never attended this meeting, but representatives from Akron, Buffalo, Canton, Chicago, Columbus and Dayton all made the trip. There is no official record of Buffalo

ever being admitted to the Association in 1920, but it was brought up at this meeting. Also attaining membership at this meeting was Cleveland, Detroit, Rock Island and Toledo. Even though Rock Island was a member in 1920, there seemed to be an issue with whether they were still members at the end of the 1920 season. It is unclear as to the exact reason, but the Independents played a team from Washington and Jefferson at the end of the season, a frowned-upon offense.

As if the first two meetings were not enough, a third meeting was held August 27, 1921 at the LaSalle Hotel in Chicago. Leo was able to make it to this meeting, which also included members of the Akron, Buffalo, Canton, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dayton, Decatur, Detroit, Evansville, Fort Wayne, Green Bay, Louisville, Minneapolis, Rock Island and Toledo squads. Coming out of this meeting was an agreement that any organization receiving a request to have a college player suit up for their team, must notify university officials. There are no records showing that any club followed through with this agreement. Also, Buffalo was officially admitted to the Association, along with Minneapolis, Evansville, Tonawanda and Green Bay. The Washington Senators and Brickley's New York Giants were not admitted at this meeting, but were admitted before the beginning of the season.

For the 1921 season, Fritz Pollard became co-head coach with 1920 head coach Elgie Tobin, becoming the first African-American head coach in NFL history. With an 8-3-1 record, they again made a run for the league championship, but fell just short of the 9-1-2 Chicago Staleys (formerly the Decatur Staleys and would be named the Chicago Bears the following season) and the 9-1-1 Buffalo All-Americans.

In 1922, the American Professional Football Association changed their name to the National Football League. The Akron Pros started to fall apart in 1922, only going 3-5-2 that year, 1-6-0 in 1923 and 2-6-0 in 1924. They saw slight improvement in 1925, finishing fourth in the league with a 4-2-2 record, but fell apart in 1926, only winning one of eight games as the newly renamed Akron Indians.

The National Football League was going through some difficulty by 1927. The feud with the rival American Football League (AFL) had a financial impact on NFL franchises. As they tirelessly worked to prevent the AFL from getting any foothold and quickly expanded to compete in every AFL city, they subsequently weakened their own league. Something needed to be done. The weaker franchises were dragging down the stronger clubs, preventing them from making a profit.

February 5, 1927 was the date of the first league meeting to discuss what to do to strengthen the NFL. The AFL was pretty much history, so the focus of the owners shifted internally to the league. Clubs like Rochester, Akron and Canton were not strong enough to draw the crowds necessary for the bigger clubs to succeed. The league meeting would start with Dr. Harry March requesting that a committee be formed to design a reorganization plan. NFL Commissioner Joe Carr appointed representatives of the Chicago Bears, New York Giants, Frankford Yellowjackets, Kansas City Cowboys, Akron Indians, Columbus Tigers, Providence Steamroller, Pottsville Maroons and Green Bay Packers to this committee, with Charles Coppen of the Providence Steamroller being named chairman. Chairman Coppen reported back that the league should be divided up into two distinct sections: an "A" section and a "B" section. The "A" teams

were the strongest teams in the league, while the “B” members were the weakest. This plan immediately drew the ire of the teams labeled under “B” and the meeting was adjourned to discuss other alternatives.

When the meetings the following day got back around to reorganization, chairman Copen was still unable to put forth a plan that was agreeable by the membership. The “A” and “B” concept would eventually be accepted, but the method of determining who belonged into what classification was still to be completed. Copen was again appointed to find a solution to this problem and he enlisted the help of Shep Royle of the Frankford Yellowjackets, Johnny Bryan of the Milwaukee Badgers, Jim Conzelman of the Detroit Panthers and Jerry Corcoran of the Columbus Tigers. The committee came back with the following designations:

A: Providence Steamroller, Frankford Yellowjackets, Milwaukee Badgers, Detroit Panthers, New York Giants, Chicago Bears, Chicago Cardinals, Cleveland Bulldogs, Green Bay Packers, Buffalo Bisons and the Brooklyn Lions with the Duluth Eskimos, Kansas City Cowboys and Pottsville Maroons relegated to traveling teams.

B: Akron Indians, Canton Bulldogs, Columbus Tigers, Dayton Triangles, Hammond Pros, Hartford Blues, Louisville Colonels, Minneapolis, Racine Tornadoes and Rochester Jeffersons.

The next item up for discussion was how to dismantle the “B” franchises. Each team was resigned to their fate, but proper compensation needed to be established. Corcoran insisted that the “B” teams sell their franchises back to the league at the current rate of \$2500 each. The “A” teams immediately rejected that suggestion. It was now up to Carr to come up with a compromise and the league gave him until April 15 to make that decision.

Carr did not make his plan known until the April 23rd meeting at the Hotel Statler in Cleveland. Most of the “B” franchises did not show. The only representatives for those franchises were men who also held league positions; namely Jack Dunn (Minneapolis) who was NFL vice-president, Carl Storck (Dayton) who was secretary-treasurer, Aaron Hertzman (Louisville) and Jerry Corcoran (Columbus). They devised a six-point plan:

- 1) Any franchise that wished to suspend operations for the year may do so without having to pay the requisite dues. Any franchise that wished to sell their franchise back to the league may do so and will receive a pro-rated share of the monies in the league treasury at the time. This would be approximately a couple of hundred dollars.

- 2) If a club decided to suspend operations for the year, the teams could sell player contracts up to September 15, 1927. If the franchise decided to withdraw from the league, but still wanted to operate independently, the league will respect the rights of the players on that franchise.

- 3) If several franchises decide to operate independently and form their own league, the NFL would respect the rights of the players and the NFL would offer assistance in the operation

and organization of the new league, including playing exhibition games with league members. Since Carr wanted a minor league with a close working relationship with the NFL, this was a pretty good option for him. He would have eliminated the weaker teams from his league, while still having a minor league from which to groom players for the NFL.

4) Any franchise that wished to suspend operations could sell their franchise for the current application fee. The downside was that the new owners needed to be approved by the league. Since the league did not want to expand, this was pretty much a moot point.

5) Any franchise that decided to resign from the league could not associate or participate in any other league without permission from the National Football League. This was to guarantee that the AFL would not come back.

6) Franchises had one year to make a decision before the league took more drastic action.

On July 16th and 17th, the league held another set of meetings to discuss scheduling. Obviously, the first item on the agenda was to determine who would remain in the league and who would resign. Brooklyn sold their franchise to Tim Mara, owner of the New York Giants. Milwaukee operated as an independent franchise. Detroit and Kansas City unloaded their rosters and Minneapolis suspended operations for a year. The Rochester Jeffersons suspended operations on July 16, 1927, but failed to re-activate or sell the team by the July 7, 1928 deadline indicated in the plan. Therefore, the franchise was cancelled. Akron also suspended operations on July 16, 1927 and forfeited their franchise back to the league in 1928.