

A Legend Comes to Life

Jim Thorpe in the Days Before the NFL

By Bob Gill

Of all the magical phrases from football's past, none is more evocative than this one: Jim Thorpe and the Canton Bulldogs. The greatest player of the era, and the greatest team – or so they tell us. But there's not much tangible evidence to back up the claim, at least in the case of Thorpe.

By the time the NFL (actually, the APFA) began in 1920, the big Indian was 33 years old and already fading. Thanks to David Neft, we have a pretty good record of his career from then on, and it was hardly of superstar magnitude: a far-from-exceptional total of 57 points, and correspondingly unexciting stats in other incomplete departments. Thorpe played on only two good teams in his NFL years, Canton in 1920 and Rock Island in 1924. In each case he was more of a role player than a star.

So, skeptics might ask, what's he doing in the Hall of Fame?

Before we write the old geezer off, let's remember that it's the *Pro Football* Hall of Fame, not the NFL Hall of Fame. And the Thorpe legend was written in the years before the NFL was born. The question is, was it just a legend? Or was he really the greatest player in the world from 1915 to '19?

It just so happens that in those days the Canton *Repository* often printed play-by-play accounts of Bulldog games, mainly against their top opponents. Occasionally there was a play-by-play for a game with a subpar team, the kind the Bulldogs beat 77-0 or thereabouts, but for our purposes let's ignore them. After all, Thorpe didn't make his reputation by beating up on the Syracuse All-Stars or the Toledo Navy. He made it against the Massillon Tigers, the Youngstown Patricians, the Columbus Panhandles – the teams that would have been "major league" had there been such a league in those days.

For the four-year period I have 14 play-by-play accounts against big-time teams: eight with Massillon (two each year), two against Columbus (1916 and '17), two against Youngstown (both in 1917), one against Cleveland (1916) and one against Akron (1919). All these teams were contenders for the "Ohio League" championship, with the exception of Columbus in 1917; the Panhandles, though, were just having an off year, and were definitely considered "name" opponents.

Fourteen games, over four years, against top-level competition. If we reconstruct statistics for these games, as Neft did for the 1920s, we can get a pretty fair idea of just how good Jim Thorpe was – and also capture some of the flavor of pro football in the years immediately preceding the NFL.

* * * *

The story starts in 1915, the year big-time football returned to Ohio. It's possible that teams in Indiana and Michigan were stronger in the early teens, but the rebirth of the Massillon Tigers in 1915 prompted first Canton and then other Ohio teams to step up their search for nationally known players. That search culminated when Canton manager Jack Cusack signed Thorpe for the Bulldogs' final two games against Massillon, at the astounding salary of \$250 per game. Both teams had lost just once to that point, and their home-and-home series seemed likely to settle the championship of the Ohio League, if not the world.

Unfortunately for Cusack, in the first game at Massillon Thorpe was upstaged by the Tigers' Gus Dorais, formerly of Notre Dame and a fine player in his own right. Thorpe gained 70 yards rushing, including one 42-yarder, but his teammates fell far short of that level. Dorais' passes set up Massillon's lone touchdown, and he also booted three field goals in four attempts. Score one for the Tigers.

Nov. 14, 1915	Canton	0	0	0	0	-	0
	Massillon	3	7	3	3	-	16

Mas - Dorais FG

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Mas - Hanley run (Fleming)
Mas - Dorais FG
Mas - Dorais FG

	Can	Mas
Rushes-yards	41-101	34-81
Passing	4-15-3	7-19-2
Passing Yards	28	119
Punts-average	9-29.7	5-34.8

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

CANTON Rushing: Thorpe 10-70 yds; Wagner 8-19.
MASSILLON Rushing: Hanley 14-38 yds; Dorais 10-23. Passing: Dorais 7-19-2,
119 yds. Receiving: Kagy 3-63 yds.

The rematch two weeks later in Canton brought victory for the Bulldogs and vindication for Jack Cusack's fiscal extravagance. Thorpe again ran very effectively, picking up 56 yards on 12 carries (his longest went for 28 yards), and this time he had help from Carp Julian, who paced the Bulldogs with 62 yards on the ground, including a 38-yarder. Canton stymied Massillon on the ground and held the Tigers scoreless despite Dorais' passing: 10 of 15 for 163 yards, a really outstanding effort for the period, as you'll see. His main receiver that day was a fellow named Knute Rockne, who caught 3 passes for 101 yards – and 100-yard games were few and very far between for receivers in those days.

The passing game hurt Canton both ways, as the Bulldogs failed to complete a single pass of their own. Thorpe did the tossing, and it was the one area he failed to excel in. But his kicking more than made up for that failing. Besides averaging 41.6 yards on 10 punts, he booted a pair of field goals (in four tries) to give the Bulldogs a 6-0 win, sending 6,000 spectators home happy and leaving the 1915 Ohio League championship forever in doubt.

Nov. 28, 1915	Massillon	0	0	0	0	-	0
	Canton	3	0	3	0	-	6

Can - Thorpe FG
Can - Thorpe FG

	Mas	Can
Rushes-yards	37-49	43-132
Passing	10-15-0	0-5-1
Passing Yards	163	0
Punts-average	9-34.0	10-41.6

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

MASSILLON Rushing: Hanley 14-18 yds; Dorais 6-14. Passing: Dorais 10-15-0,
163 yds. Receiving: Rockne 3-101 yds.
CANTON Rushing: Julian 13-62 yds; Thorpe 12-56. Punting: Thorpe 10-41.6 avg.

Our first play-by-play to consider for 1916 is from a late-October game with the Columbus Panhandles. The undefeated 'Handles were coming off consecutive wins over the tough Detroit Heralds and the Cleveland Indians, probably the best team in Ohio outside Canton and Massillon. The Bulldogs, on the other hand, were playing their first tough game of the season, with the possible exception of a 7-0 win (without Thorpe) over the Pitcairn Quakers, a strong minor team.

Pregame analysis might have rated the Canton-Columbus game almost a toss-up, but in fact it wasn't really close. The Bulldogs dominated the line of scrimmage, averaging 6 yards per carry in a workmanlike 12-0 win. Once again Julian and Thorpe were the big ground-gainers, with 81 and 74 yards respectively and a touchdown apiece. But Thorpe did more than just run with the ball: He averaged 47 yards on 8 punts (including one 85-yarder), ran back 6 punts for 90 yards, and completed 4 passes for 81 more. His only failing came on extra point attempts – he missed two.

Columbus didn't just roll over, either. Ted Nesser picked up 76 yards rushing for the Panhandles, while brother Frank completed half of his 8 passes for 57 yards. Five members of the famous Nesser family –

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Ted, Frank, Phil, John and Al – played for Columbus; another, Fred, missed the game. Altogether, T., F., P., and J. Nesser carried 30 times for 99 yards, almost 90 percent of their team's total.

Oct. 29, 1916	Columbus	0	0	0	0 - 0
	Canton	6	6	0	0 - 12

Can - Thorpe run (Thorpe XPM)
Can - Julian run (Thorpe XPM)

	Col	Can
Rushes-yards	43-111	30-181
Passing	4-8-1	4-12-3
Passing Yards	57	81
Punts-average	11-34.4	8-47.0

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

COLUMBUS Rushing: T.Nesser 14-76 yds; Snoots 12-10; F.Nesser 11-10. Passing: F.Nesser 4-8-1, 57 yds. Punting: F.Nesser 11-34.4 avg.

CANTON Rushing: Julian 13-81 yds; Thorpe 11-74. Passing: Thorpe 4-11-2, 81 yds. Punting: Thorpe 8-47.0 avg.

A week later 7,000 fans turned out to see the Bulldogs host the surprising Cleveland team organized by Peggy Parratt. After six games the loss to Columbus was the only blot on the Indians' record. A home-and-home series with Canton would determine their viability as contenders for the Ohio League championship – or, as it turned out, eliminate them from consideration.

The first game was no contest. Canton held Cleveland to 9 yards total offense en route to an easy 27-0 win. Julian ran well for the Bulldogs, and quarterback Harry Costello played a fine game, throwing for a touchdown and returning 4 punts for 66 yards. But the main man, as usual, was Thorpe. The big Indian ran for 60 yards and two scores, ran back 6 punts for 130 yards, including a 71-yard touchdown, and averaged 44 yards on 6 punts of his own. Cleveland had a whole team of "Indians," but Canton had the one that counted.

Nov. 5, 1916	Cleveland	0	0	0	0 - 0
	Canton	0	6	7	14 - 27

Can - Thorpe run (Thorpe XPM)
Can - Stewart pass from Costello (Costello)
Can - Thorpe punt return (Costello)
Can - Thorpe run (Wilkinson)

	Cle	Can
Rushes-yards	15-4	41-129
Passing	1-3-0	7-15-1
Passing Yards	5	99
Punts-average	11-38.7	6-43.8

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

CLEVELAND Punting: Davidson 8-39.4 avg.

CANTON Rushing: Thorpe 14-60 yds; Julian 16-51. Passing: Costello 6-10-1, 76 yds. Punting: Thorpe 6-43.8 avg.

A week later Thorpe again did in Cleveland, running for both Canton touchdowns in a 14-7 win. After a 6-0 decision over Youngstown, the season came down to its grand finale: the home-and-home series between Canton and Massillon. The Bulldogs were undefeated and untied; the Tigers had only a scoreless tie with Cleveland to mar their record.

The first matchup of titans, in Massillon, drew 15,000 fans, and they got what they wanted – sort of. The Tigers held the visitors in check throughout and outgained them 70 yards to 15 on the ground, but had to settle for a scoreless tie as Gus Dorais, last year's hero, missed three field goal attempts and completed only 2 passes for 11 yards. Howard Talman led Massillon with 37 yards rushing; Thorpe paced Canton with 27, but all the other Bulldogs backs finished the day with negative yardage.

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An odd note: For some reason the Bulldogs had Red Wilkinson do most of their punting. Since he and the other Canton booters averaged only 31 yards (Thorpe's only kick went for 42), it seems likely that this decision cost the Bulldogs at least 10 yards on every punt.

Nov. 26, 1916	Canton	0	0	0	0 - 0
	Massillon	0	0	0	0 - 0
			Can		Mas
	Rushes-yards	22-15		43-70	
	Passing	1-5-0		2-11-1	
	Passing Yards	2		11	
	Punts-average	13-31.8		10-31.0	

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

CANTON Rushing: Thorpe 8-27 yds. Punting: Wilkinson 8-31.3 avg.
MASSILLON Rushing: Talman 9-37 yds. Passing: Dorais 2-9-1, 11 yds. Punting:
Talman 9-30.0 avg.

A week later the two teams squared off again in front of 10,000 witnesses in Canton, and this time it was no contest, as the Bulldogs exploded for a surprising 24-0 triumph that sewed up the championship of the Ohio League. This time they did it even without a dominating performance from Thorpe. Oh, ol' Jim did his part, leading all rushers with 81 yards, but he averaged only 35 yards punting (somehow, one of his kicks went "straight up" for 0 yards) and missed a field goal and two more extra points. But on this day he had help: Pete Calac ran for 66 yards, including a 31-yarder; Milt Ghee tossed a touchdown pass to Ernie Soucy; and Fat Waldsmith returned a fumble for another score.

No one had much success on the Massillon side, but the biggest disappointment was the play of quarterback Bud Goodwin. Signed after Dorais' poor performance in the first Canton game, Goodwin had completed 15 of 28 passes for 204 yards and a touchdown in a 27-0 slaughter of Youngstown on Thanksgiving Day – probably the best display of passing yet in a pro football game. But against the Bulldogs he threw more interceptions (6) than completions (5), and Massillon never had a chance.

Dec. 3, 1916	Massillon	0	0	0	0 - 0
	Canton	6	6	0	12 - 24

Can - Waldsmith fumble return (Thorpe XPM)
Can - Calac run (Calac XPM)
Can - Soucy pass from Ghee (Thorpe XPM)
Can - Thorpe run (Spears XPM)

	Mas	Can
Rushes-yards	25-48	40-176
Passing	5-17-6	3-12-1
Passing Yards	38	61
Punts-average	5-32.6	6-31.5

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

MASSILLON Rushing: Goodwin 5-21 yds; Talman 11-20. Passing: Goodwin 5-17-6, 38 yds. Punting: Talman 5-32.6 avg.
CANTON Rushing: Thorpe 14-81 yds; Calac 11-66; Dunn 12-23.

Canton started the 1917 season with another close win (this one 12-7) over the scrappy Pitcairn Quakers, followed by an 80-0 demolition of the Altoona Indians. The Bulldogs' first "name" opponent, Columbus, came to town Oct. 21. The Panhandles had just lost to the very strong Akron Indians by just 3-0, but against Canton they were simply out of their league. Milt Ghee completed 12 of 19 pases for 201 yards and 5 touchdowns as the Bulldogs rolled to a 54-0 win before a crowd of 2,000.

A new addition to the Canton team, Greasy Neale (playing under the alias "Foster," proved himself a very able receiver, snagging four of Ghee's tosses, two of them for scores. Thorpe played little – for once, the team didn't need him.

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Oct. 21, 1917	Columbus	0	0	0	0 - 0
	Canton	21	14	6	13 - 54

Can - Neale kickoff recovery (Ghee)
 Can - Thorpe run (Ghee)
 Can - Dunn run (Ghee)
 Can - Neale pass from Ghee (Ghee)
 Can - Dunn pass from Ghee (Ghee)
 Can - Dunn pass from Ghee (Ghee)
 Can - Stewart pass from Ghee (Ghee XPM)
 Can - Neale pass from Ghee (Ghee)

	Col	Can
Rushes-yards	17-18	49-176
Passing	0-1-1	12-19-1
Passing Yards	0	201
Punts-average	5-29.0	5-38.6

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

CANTON Rushing: Schwab 11-67 yds; Dunn 14-51; Thorpe 7-34. Passing: Ghee 12-19-1, 201 yds. Receiving: Neale 4.82 yds; Sefton 2-57.

Two weeks later the Bulldogs traveled to Youngstown for their first game with a legitimate championship contender. A crowd of 5,500 saw the Patricians live up to their press notices, holding Canton scoreless after a first-quarter field goal by Neil Matthews. The Bulldogs limited Youngstown to minus 17 yards rushing, but the Patricians ruled the air, completing 7 of 10 passes and picking off four Canton tosses.

Moreover, Youngstown's Stan Cofall actually outpunted Thorpe, averaging 40 yards on 11 kicks. Ol' Jim averaged just 34.5 yards (one boot was good for only 7); but he more than made up for it by rushing for 100 yards on 19 carries. The Bulldogs' only other offense came from Milt Ghee, who returned 9 punts for 90 yards. Ghee had a little less success with his passing, completing just 2 of 15 for 25 yards.

Nov. 4, 1917	Canton	0	0	0	0 - 3
	Youngstown	0	0	0	0 - 0

Can - Matthews FG

	Can	You
Rushes-yards	40-164	30-(-17)
Passing	4-26-4	7-10-0
Passing Yards	56	112
Punts-average	10-34.5	12-38.6

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

CANTON Rushing: Thorpe 19-100 yds. Punting: Thorpe 10-34.5 avg.
 YOUNGSTOWN Passing: Hughitt 4-6-0, 59 yds; Cofall 2-3-0, 35. Punting: Cofall 11-40.3 avg.

Next week the Bulldogs went to Akron to play the Indians. The home team's nickname notwithstanding, once again Canton's big Indian had the last laugh, scoring both touchdowns in a 14-0 win. Then the Bulldogs came home for a rematch with Youngstown.

Thorpe was still hurting from the Akron game, and he stayed on the sidelines as Gus Welch and Greasy Neale handled all the ball-carrying. Though the Patricians did much better on the ground this time, the Bulldogs had a slight edge in the passing game, and Neale outpunted Cofall. Welch made the play of the game, going 89 yards from scrimmage for the second Canton touchdown in a hard-earned 13-0 win.

Nov. 18, 1917	Youngstown	0	0	0	0 - 0
	Canton	6	7	0	0 - 13

Can - Neale pass from Ghee (Ghee XPM)
 Can - Welch run (Russell)

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	You	Can
Rushes-yards	33-71	32-109
Passing	11-24-3	5-11-3
Passing Yards	94	100
Punts-average	9-30.6	10-35.1

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

YOUNGSTOWN Rushing: Cofall 12-33 yds; Hughitt 6.20. Passing: Cofall 10-21-2, 80 yds. Receiving: Barrett 4-36 yds.

CANTON Rushing: Welch 19-99 yds. Passing: Ghee 5-11-3, 100 yds.

With Youngstown vanquished, the Bulldogs turned their attention to the annual two-game set with Massillon. This time, though, the matchup had lost some of its luster. For one thing, the visitors had lost two games in a row, to Youngstown and Akron; for another, the Tigers had signed most of Youngstown's team in hopes of improving their luck against Canton. In that regard they succeeded; the Tiger team that played the Bulldogs was much stronger than it had been all year. But besides ending the Patricians' season prematurely and causing a lot of bad feeling, the move may have diminished interest in the big Canton-Massillon games by making them seem like a continuation of the Canton-Youngstown contests. And everybody already knew how those games had turned out.

Whatever the reason, a slightly disappointing crowd of 6,000 showed up for the Nov. 25 game. They saw Canton roll to a surprisingly easy 14-3 win – surprising because Massillon held Thorpe to only 16 yards rushing. Unfortunately, that was 16 yards more than the whole Tiger team managed on the ground. F.A. Dunn picked up the slack for Canton, gaining 101 yards, Pete Calac (playing under the alias "Anderson") gained 45, and Thorpe chipped in with a short touchdown run and a pass reception for 37 yards. The lone bright spot for Massillon was Charlie Brickley, the famous dropkicker from Harvard, who connected on one of three field goal attempts for the Tigers' only points.

Nov. 25, 1917	Massillon	0	3	0	0	-	3
	Canton	7	0	0	7	-	14

Can - Thorpe run (Russell)

Mas - Brickley FG

Can - Dunn run (Welch)

	Mas	Can
Rushes-yards	19-01	61-182
Passing	2-6-1	5-20-2
Passing Yards	24	96
Punts-average	9-33.1	5-33.8

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

MASSILLON Punting: Morris 9-33.1 avg.

CANTON Rushing: Dunn 28-101 yds; Calac 14-45; Thorpe 7-16.

On Thanksgiving Day the Bulldogs traveled to Detroit to meet the once-defeated Heralds, and emerged with a 7-0 victory on a Ghee-to-Neale touchdown pass. Three days later they were back in Canton for the second game with Massillon. Thorpe was back in form, too, rushing for 70 yards (including one 36-yard burst) and averaging 55 yards on the only two punts recorded in the play-by-play report. But instead of another easy win, Canton wound up on the short end of a 6-0 score when the final gun sounded.

What happened? As today's TV analysts would say, turnovers killed the Bulldogs. Milt Ghee threw five interceptions, and Thorpe had a punt and a field goal attempt blocked.

Still, Canton might have escaped with a scoreless tie if not for the efforts of Massillon's Stan Cofall, one of the many players signed away from Youngstown. After playing very little in his first game with the Tigers, Cofall came to life this time around, booting a pair of field goals (without a miss) for both scores, punting effectively, picking off two of Ghee's tosses and completing a couple of his own for good yardage.

Dec. 2, 1917	Massillon	3	3	0	0	-	6
	Canton	0	0	0	0	-	0

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Mas - Cofall FG
Mas - Cofall FG

	Mas	Can
Rushes-yards	26-13	42-116
Passing	2-4-1	4-19-5
Passing Yards	38	78
Punts-average	9-36.9	2-55.0

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

MASSILLON Rushing: Miller 11-13 yds. Passing: Cofall 2-4-1, 38 yds. Punting: Cofall 9-36.9 avg.

CANTON Rushing: Thorpe 14-70 yds; Dunn 15-24. Receiving: Neale 3-51 yds.

The Bulldogs retained the Ohio League championship despite the loss, since Massillon's 5-3 record was no match for their 9-1, and Canton had beaten every contender. Still, losing the final game left a bad taste in everyone's mouth, and a lot of folks around Canton were probably just itching for the start of the 1918 season. But World War I finished that season even before it started. Only a handful of cities in Ohio and Indiana fielded teams at all, and Canton wasn't among them.

With the end of the war, though, the troops came marching home, and by the fall of 1919 big-time football returned as well. In addition to very good teams in Massillon and Akron, two new challengers for pro football supremacy appeared: one a new Cleveland team, this one called the Tigers, the other an impressive Hammond team organized by George Halas. Jim Thorpe was now 32, very old for those days of rugged two-way football. Well-informed fans could have been excused for wondering whether Canton was ripe for the plucking.

The Bulldogs opened the season with their accustomed squeaker over tough little Pitcairn, followed by a rout of a patsy team called the Toledo Navy. Then came convincing wins over Columbus and Detroit, with Thorpe playing little in either game.

So far, so good. But after that the Bulldogs' schedule showed two games apiece with Akron, Hammond and Massillon.

First up were the Akron Indians, who came into Canton Nov. 2 and went home on the short end of a 19-7 score. Ten thousand fans saw Thorpe display his pre-war form, throwing for a touchdown, rushing for 87 yards, including one 52-yard jaunt, punting brilliantly, and adding a 60-yard kickoff return for good measure. But he wasn't the only star. Tex Grigg scored twice, on a 55-yard punt return and a 29-yard run, and Joe Guyon added a 57-yard kickoff return for the Bulldogs. The outcome was never in doubt.

Nov. 2, 1919	Akron	0	0	0	7	-	7
	Canton	13	6	0	0	-	19

Can - O'Connor pass from Thorpe (Pierce)

Can - Grigg run (kick-out failed)

Can - Grigg punt return (Pierce XPM)

Akr - Bryant run (Crisp)

	Akr	Can
Rushes-yards	39-102	40-177
Passing	2-6-1	3-10-2
Passing Yards	45	78
Punts-average	10-35.7	11-39.8

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

AKRON Rushing: Brown 9-34 yds; Purdy 12-29; Bryant 5-16. Passing: Bryant 2-3-0, 45 yds. Punting: Crawford 10-35.7 avg.

CANTON Rushing: Thorpe 15-87 yds; Guyon 15-47. Passing: Thorpe 3-9-2, 78 yds. Punting: Thorpe 9-43.6 avg.

A week later the Bulldogs traveled to Chicago to play the vaunted Hammond team. So far Halas' squad hadn't lived up to expectations, with just a toss and a tie to show for two meetings with Cleveland, but this

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time they came to play. Johnny Barrett's field goal gave them an early lead that held up until Thorpe matched it in the third quarter, and the game ended in a 3-3 tie.

Then it was back to Canton for a clash with Massillon. The Tigers had started with five straight wins, including two over Akron and one over Cleveland before falling to Cleveland 3-0 in an Armistice Day rematch. They hoped to get back on track in Canton, but the Bulldogs had other ideas. They also had Jim Thorpe, who rushed for 85 yards and one touchdown, threw to Guyon for another, kicked a field goal and averaged more than 43 yards on 11 punts as Canton rolled to an easy 23-0 win before a crowd of 10,000. Tex Grigg ran back *another* punt for a touchdown (his third of the season) and Pete Calac gained 68 yards on the extraordinary total of 33 carries.

Gus Dorais and Knute Rockne were in the Massillon lineup, but the Notre Dame stars connected on just one pass for 19 yards. The Tigers' biggest threat was Tuffy Conn, who ran back 7 punts for 134 yards.

Nov. 16, 1919	Massillon	0	0	0	0 - 0
	Canton	7	6	3	7 - 23

Can - Thorpe run (Thorpe)
Can - Guyon pass from Thorpe (Thorpe XPM)
Can - Thorpe FG
Can - Grigg punt return (Thorpe)

	Mas	Can
Rushes-yards	29-34	62-185
Passing	4-13-2	4-13-1
Passing Yards	28	87
Punts-average	10-33.5	12-44.0

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

MASSILLON Passing: Dorais 4-12-2, 28 yds. Punting: Cofall 6-38.5 avg.
CANTON Rushing: Thorpe 16-85 yds; Calac 33-68; Guyon 11-33. Passing: Thorpe 2-9-1, 62 yds; Guyon 2-3-0, 25. Punting: Thorpe 11-43.5 avg.

Thorpe played little the following week as Canton ground out a 14-0 win in Akron, but on Thanksgiving Day he ran for the game's only touchdown as the Bulldogs topped Hammond 7-0 on their second visit to Chicago. At that point Canton had beaten all legitimate challengers for the pro football title except Cleveland, but a scoreless tie with Detroit and a second loss to Massillon on Thanksgiving had effectively ended that team's championship hopes.

Thus there really wasn't much at stake when the Bulldogs took the field Nov. 30 for the season finale against Massillon. Maybe that's why only 7,000 fans turned out for the game. Still, a win would have given the Tigers a chance to proclaim themselves co-champions – and for a while it looked like they might get that chance.

The two teams played evenly through the first half. The Tigers didn't have much offense, but they managed to shut down Thorpe, holding him to just 8 yards rushing. (In his defense, ol' Jim was playing with a bad back.) The big Indian had the last laugh, though, booting a field goal in the third quarter and turning the tide of the game shortly thereafter with a tremendous 85-yard punt, a blow from which Massillon never recovered. The game ended with Canton on top 3-0.

To be fair about it, the Bulldogs' star on this day was probably Joe Guyon, who rushed for 73 yards and picked off two Massillon passes. But the game marked the end of the Jim Thorpe Era, and it was no occasion for nitpicking.

Nov. 30, 1919	Massillon	0	0	0	0 - 0
	Canton	0	0	3	0 - 3

Can - Thorpe FG

	Mas	Can
Rushes-yards	44-56	43-126
Passing	3-8-2	1-5-0

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Passing Yards	18	14
Punts-average	11-32.7	9-35.2

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

MASSILLON Rushing: McLaren 19-31 yds; Cofall 13-17. Punting: Cofall 11-32.7 avg.

CANTON Rushing: Guyon 15-73 yds; Calac 11-29; Thorpe 11-8. Punting: Thorpe 9-35.2 avg.

OK, it's time to sum up. Jim Thorpe played in 13 of the games we've looked at, and in those games he:

- Rushed 158 times for 768 yards (a 4.9 average) and 7 TDs.
- Caught 3 passes for 54 yards.
- Completed 13 of 53 passes (24.3 percent) for 289 yards (a 5.5 average) and 2 TDs, with 7 intercepted.
- Returned 17 punts for 251 yards (a 14.8 average) and a TD.
- Returned 9 kickoffs for 177 yards (a 19.7 average).
- Punted 80 times for an average of 40.7 yards.

Those last three items need some qualification, because the reporting of punts and kickoffs occasionally left something to be desired. The best and most common method goes like this: "Thorpe punted to Cofal, who returned 9 yards to the Youngstown 42." But sometimes we get this instead: "Thorpe punted to Conn, who was downed at the Massillon 29." That doesn't tell us how far the punt went or how far Conn ran it back. (For the record, though, I just recorded this type as a punt to the 29.) And once in a while we get "Thorpe punted to Dorais," which doesn't tell us anything.

The upshot of all this is that Thorpe had six punt returns and one kickoff return for which we have no yardage. However, it's likely that they weren't long ones (or they would have been noted), so his return averages would probably go down a bit if we had them.

On the other hand, his punting average would go up. For six punts we don't even have a clue – that is, they were reported by the third method above. (Four of them came in the 1917 finale against Massillon.) And 26 others – almost a third of his total – were described by method #2, which means they were probably a bit longer than the figures I recorded. For a conservative estimate, let's say those 26 punts were returned an average of 4 yards. That adds 104 yards to Thorpe's punting yardage, and his average increases to 42 yards a kick, which I'd bet is very close to the real figure.

To return to Thorpe's overall statistical profile: The numbers certainly indicate that he was an outstanding running back, punter and punt returner. To get an idea of just how outstanding, let's see what the rest of the players were doing. Team stats for the 14 games we covered look like this:

Rushing: Canton 586-1969 yds (3.4 avg)
Opponents 434-640 yds (1.5 avg)

Passing: Canton 57-187 (30.5 pct), 981 yds (5.2 avg), 27 int
Opponents 60-145 (41.4 pct), 752 yds (5.2 avg), 21 int

Punting: Canton 116-37.7 avg
Opponents 126-34.3 avg

Thorpe's passing doesn't look quite as bad now, does it? And his 4.9-yard average per carry and 40.7-yard punting average are a lot more impressive.

Just for the record, I figured Canton's rushing and punting stats *without* Thorpe, and got the following results:

- Rushing: 428 carries for 1201 yards, a 2.8-yard average.
- Punting: 36 punts for a 31.2-yard average.

Before leaving the subject of the Bulldogs, I added up the totals for several other notable players who played in more than a couple of the 14 games under consideration. First, the other top Canton rushers:

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	Att	Yds	Avg	TD
Carp Julian (4 games, 1915-16)	48	205	4.3	1
F.A. Dunn (4 games, 1916-17)	74	240	3.2	2
Pete Calac (8 games, 1916-19)	97	293	3.0	1
Joe Guyon (3 games, 1919)	41	153	3.7	0

These, remember, were four of the best backs in the game, running behind the same outstanding line Thorpe had blocking for him. And considering the conditions of the time, they all compiled very good records. But none was close to ol' Jim.

A couple of other Bulldogs amassed interesting totals in other categories:

- Milt Ghee (7 games, 1916-17) completed 30 of 94 passes (31.9 percent) for 532 yards (a 5.6 average) and 7 TDs, with 13 intercepted. Really, Ghee didn't do much at all except for that one great game against an abnormally weak Columbus team in 1917.
- On the other hand, Greasy Neale (5 games, 1917) was a legitimately outstanding receiver, probably the best of the era. In those five games he pulled down 13 passes for 262 yards and 3 TDs. That would be a pretty good record today, and in 1917 it was almost unthinkable. Neale wasn't much of a punter, though, averaging 34.6 yards on 14 kicks.

What about Canton's opponents? We have to remember that the Bulldogs were the best team in the world not only because of Jim Thorpe, but also because their defense allowed a total of 43 points in 30 games from 1916 to 1919. In other words, nobody was gaining much ground against them, as the 1.5-yard rushing average for their opponents suggests. But it's clear that Massillon and Youngstown, for instance, did a lot better against lesser opponents – and remember, "lesser" means everybody else.

With this disclaimer, there are a couple of stars from the Thorpe era who played enough against Canton to compile interesting stats in several categories. Both were former Notre Dame stars: Gus Dorais (two games in 1915, one each in '17 and '19) and Stan Cofall (four games in 1917, two in 1919). Here's what they did:

Passing	Att	Com	Pct	Yds	Avg	TD	Int
Cofall	36	17	47.2	171	4.7	0	5
Dorais	55	23	41.8	321	5.8	0	5

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	TD	Punt	Avg
Cofall	45	51	1.1	0	45	36.0
Dorais	27	49	1.8	0	18	32.4

One other Notre Dame star deserves a mention here: the immortal Knute Rockne, an excellent end who caught 6 passes for 132 yards in three games against Canton – one each in 1915, '16 and '19. Until now, Rockne's best-known contribution to pro football was that he "let ol' Jim run." But as we've seen, there was really nothing noteworthy about that.

Everybody else did, too.