

Behind the Walls

Semi-pro football in prison

By Steven M. Brainerd

Editor's note: Prison football first attracted attention in the early 1930s, mainly through the exploits of Ed (Alabama) Pitts, an inmate at Sing Sing. Upon his release, Pitts joined the Philadelphia Eagles for the 1935 season, but he had a disappointing season. He did somewhat better the following year with the New Rochelle Bulldogs in the American Association, but called it quits after that.

Another Sing Sing "graduate," William (Jumbo) Morano, played briefly at fullback for the Paterson Night Hawks in the 1932 Eastern Football League.

As the following article demonstrates, prison football didn't end with the departure of Alabama Pitts.

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Most of us have seen *The Longest Yard*, the movie in which Burt Reynolds runs wild on the gridiron while serving time in prison. There is more truth to this than is first evident.

Prison football goes back to the 1930s, when progressive penologists (no snickering, please) decided that the physical activity and teamwork would be good for the inmates. Unfortunately, many of the prisons have little or no information regarding their sports programs in general, and football in particular.

One of the first teams was at the Iowa State Prison at Fort Madison. The Bulldogs, as they were known, started play in 1933 and continued through 1969. Throughout the '50s they played strong schedules with many of the top teams in the Midwest, including the Dayton Triangles, the Roseland Mustangs and the Kansas City Rockets. The '60s saw the Bulldogs play many teams in Iowa and the Midwest Football League.

A team visiting Fort Madison was guaranteed \$300. In the '50s that was a good paycheck; in the '60s it wasn't a lot; after that it wasn't enough, and the 'Dogs went out of the football business. Interestingly enough, the Bulldogs team didn't cost the state of Iowa anything. It was paid for out of the prisoners' canteen fund and gate receipts. The Bulldogs had outsiders come in to see their games.

One of the Bulldogs' regular opponents was the Iowa State Reformatory Hornets, from Anamosa. In several years this was the 'Dogs' only road game. The Hornets played from the 1950s through 1969, playing games against mainly Iowa teams, often engaging in home-and-home series.

The Washington State Prison Steelers played their first outside game against the Seattle Ramblers in 1950 and continued to play against the Ramblers until 1964. The Steelers played many area teams through this period. Much more research is needed on this team.

The Steelers weren't the only prison team in Washington. The state reformatory in Monroe had a team, too. The Tigers played throughout the '50s, '60s and early '70s, the last several years as members of the Northwest International Football League.

Not much is known about the Somers (Conn.) Trojans, except that they played in the Atlantic Football League. The team was not a success.

League membership is nothing new for the Statesville Prison in Joliet. The Raiders have been a very unsuccessful team in both the Metro and Midwest leagues since 1984, and have been playing since at least 1977. One of their head coaches was Jesse Vail, a very successful coach "on the outside" with the Joliet Chargers and Explorers in the late 1960s and early '70s.

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The Loudon (Ohio State Prison) Falcons have played the last several seasons in the Hearts of Ohio Football League, and won the championship in 1989. The HOFL is a member of the American Football Association, but because the Falcons are a prison team they weren't eligible for the AFA national playoff.

The Connors Cobras, from the state prison in Hominy, Okla., played several years in the Mid-American Football League. Their football playing days came to an abrupt end. While preparations were going on for the 1983 season the general prison population rioted and destroyed the prison. Not surprisingly, the Cobras haven't played since.

The California State Prison system has had a very active football system, with at least three teams playing:

The men's prison at Chino played football in the '60s against teams in the Western and High Desert leagues and the Southern California Amateur Football Association. When contacted for more information, the authorities said most of that type of information had been destroyed in a prison riot.

The San Quentin Pirates played throughout the '50s against bay-area semi-pro teams and local small college squads. Vacaville, where Charles Manson is sequestered, also had a team for a while.

Much is still to be uncovered about football behind the walls, but this seems to be an interesting subject. By the way, most of the players on both the guards' team and the convicts' team in that movie were members of the Augusta Eagles of the Dixie League.