

Balancing Dollars and Sense

Providence Walks a Fiscal Tightrope in the 1940 Season

By Bob Gill

During pro football's adolescence, in the years before World War II, even the better teams often found themselves living on a shoelace – sometimes a very tattered shoelace. In those days the role of the team manager was essential to its survival. While the owner, or backer, provided the money, it was the manager's job to cut enough corners to keep the club competitive but still in the black – or at least not too far in the red.

One PFRA member who knows all about those hand-to-mouth days is Pearce Johnson, who served as manager for Providence teams in the NFL and several minor leagues for parts of five decades. His role with Providence's NFL team in the 1920s is fairly well known; his later roles with minor league incarnations of the Steam Roller are less familiar. But the work was just as demanding.

Case in point: Providence's 1940 season as a member of the American Association, the best minor league of the prewar era.

Why 1940? The Steam Roller, after all, compiled an unimpressive 2-8 record in league games that season, forfeiting their final two home games. Though they had a competitive team, they played only a small role in what was probably the AA's finest season. And a year later they dropped out of the league altogether after only two games.

One simple fact makes Providence's 1940 season very interesting for football historians: the existence of Pearce Johnson's profit-and-loss sheets for every game that year. A short perusal of them offers a detailed picture of the economics of minor league football in those bygone days.

For an outline of the team's organization, let's quote from a preseason article in one of the Providence papers: "The Steam Roller ... will be headed by Tom Cummings of East Providence as president; Joe McGee of Providence as coach and vice president; and Pearce B. Johnson of North Providence, secretary and treasurer." Thus Cummings and McGee provided the capital for the team, and it was Johnson's job to carefully dole it out.

Another note of interest in the same article concerns the Steam Roller's 1940 league schedule, which had just been announced:

"There was a long discussion of the fixing of the date for the Roller-Newark game in Providence, and it was finally posted as Nov. 17 by the league president. That date conflicts with the Providence College-St. Anselm game in Providence, and Coach McGee, loyal alumnus of Providence College, is averse to ever competing for dates against the alma mater. So that date will come under discussion again, and Coach McGee hopes that it can be changed."

Indeed it did "come under discussion again," as we'll see.

Another article from about the same time was headlined "Steam Roller May Be Made a Farm Team: Redskins, Dodgers Anxious to Have Arrangement with Local Club." Of the two proposals, the Redskins' is more interesting, since it demonstrates the use NFL teams made of minor league affiliates in those days.

Washington coach Ray Flaherty had phoned to say "that a prospective end, now under contract to Washington, would be made available to the Roller provided it could be arranged to use him as a guard. The player, Flaherty said, was an outstanding college wing of a year ago but, he believed, would best fit the Washington picture at guard. It

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would be impossible for the Redskins to use him there until he had had a year of pro seasoning with a minor league team.”

Such an arrangement would have put Providence on a more equal footing with the other league teams, most of whom had official or unofficial agreements with NFL clubs, which presumably meant a little extra money coming in to help meet expenses. But the deals with Washington and Brooklyn appear to have fallen through.

So, still on their own, the Steam Roller opened the season Sept. 15 with a non-league tune up against the Murphy Club of New Bedford, Mass. (also known as the Whalers). Providence registered an easy 38-0 win, but had less success when it was time to balance the books. Though the crowd was reported as 4,000, the actual paid attendance was only 3,018. That broke down to 2,189 40-cent tickets and 829 10-centers, bringing the total gate receipts to \$958.50. After a 15 percent deduction to pay for the field, Providence got half of the remainder, or \$407. Unfortunately, the team's payroll came to \$505, so the game resulted in a loss of \$98.

For this game, 21 of the 23 players got \$20 or \$25, the exceptions being fullback Pete Cignetti, who got \$17, and guard Chris Sarno, who got \$10. Three others were listed on the payroll: T. Ryan, the trainer, got \$5; G. Kehoe, who handled the sideline markers, got \$5; and Lester Asher, the equipment man, got \$3. These three showed up on every expense sheet of the season, though Asher was often listed as Lester.

Next week was the league opener, a road game against the Paterson Panthers. The attendance wasn't much better, with 3,946 paying their way in: 2,699 at 50 cents, 496 at 77 cents, 268 at \$1, and 483 at 27 cents. (Yes, those ticket prices are right.) Incidentally, those of you who own a PFRA publication called *A Minor Masterpiece* may have noticed that the crowds for the first two games differ from the figures given in that book. That's because the book's figures came from newspapers and apparently included complimentary tickets. Those discrepancies will continue.

Small crowd or not, this was a terrific game, with Providence taking a 19-6 lead into the final six minutes before a furious Paterson comeback led by backs Earl Warwick and Dale Burnett brought the Panthers a 20-19 win.

With gate receipts amounting to only \$2,129, the Steam Roller collected a \$1,000 guarantee rather than 30 percent after taxes and field rental. This was more than twice as much as the New Bedford game had brought them, but there was a catch – actually, two catches.

For one thing, the payroll was quite a bit higher this time around. Players' contracts called for two salaries: one for AA games, and a smaller amount for non-league contests. Salaries for this game ranged as high as \$55. Fella Gintoff, an all-league back in 1939, got the top figure; tackle Joe Delaney got \$50; center Ralph Freeman and back Emilio Daddario, a 1940 all-star, got \$40. Everybody else got \$25 or \$35. The total outlay amounted to \$680.

Then there was the question of getting to the game. The team took a boat to New York (\$166), then hopped on a bus to Paterson (\$25). And they had to eat, which necessitated another outlay of \$8 for sandwiches. Several other miscellaneous expenses brought the total to \$917.20. Still, that meant a profit of \$82.20, which isn't too bad when you consider that in those days \$8 could buy enough sandwiches for a hungry 22-man squad. (The number of players on hand varied slightly from game to game.)

A week later the Roller hit the road again for a date with the Wilmington Clippers. This time a paid crowd of 6,240 turned out to see Providence drop a 7-0 decision, paying ticket prices that ranged from 35 cents to \$2.25. The visitors' 30 percent of the net receipts came to \$1,212.84, the best take yet. And it got even better when someone in the Wilmington front office goofed and made out the check for \$1,248.88 instead.

The team apparently traveled to and from this game on some combination of boat, bus

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and train. Altogether that set them back \$282.10. Another \$47 went for meals, plus \$8 for sandwiches again. The payroll increased to \$785 with the addition of two players and an unexplained increase in a couple of salaries – Gintoff from \$55 to \$65, most notably. Along with other incidentals, these brought the total expenses to \$1,180.30, meaning the team made a profit of \$68.58 for the afternoon.

One player who wasn't included on the day's payroll was end Tom Nash. Pregame articles revealed that the former Brown star had signed with the Boston Bears of the new American Football League. There was nothing clandestine about his departure; he had asked to be released so he could accept Boston's more lucrative offer. But the newspaper story added ominously:

"Word has reached here that the Bears are having a difficult time assembling a full squad, and may try to sign other Providence players. The Roller possibly will make trouble for players who try any of this jumping business."

Providence opened its home season Sept. 29, hosting the Jersey City Giants. Though destined to win the 1940 championship, the New Jersey club had started poorly, dropping a 3-0 decision to the Long Island Indians. So it didn't look like too much of an upset when the Roller edged the Little Giants 7-6 at East Providence Stadium. A decent crowd of 5,090 (reported as 7,000) brought gross receipts of \$4,222.05. (Seats were priced at 55 cents, 85 cents and \$1.10.)

Out of that, Providence had to pay the following: \$42 for officials (the home team's responsibility); \$576.26 for the use of the field; \$391.87 in taxes; \$1,500 to the visitors (a high guarantee, probably reflecting Jersey City's status in the league); \$204.53 for newspaper ads, signs, etc.; \$200 to the Providence Shrine, which sponsored the game; plus players' salaries and incidentals.

The result was a profit of \$416.19 – the season's second-biggest payday, as it turned out.

Next the Roller visited Haverhill, Mass., for a Wednesday night non-league game against the Haverhill City Club. Only 955 fans paid their way in – at prices of 45 and 22 cents – to see Providence roll to a 26-6 win. But there were no travel costs, and the players got only \$15 or \$20 apiece this time, so the team made a \$47 profit despite picking up only a \$425 guarantee.

Also cutting the expenses for this game was the absence of back Vito Ananis, who had jumped the team (and his \$50-a-game contract) for a better deal with Boston of the AFL. Ananis and Tom Nash were in the Boston lineup that very night as the Bears kicked off their season with a loss to the Columbus Bullies.

On Sunday the Steam Roller took a \$49 bus trip to Springfield, Mass., for a date with the Churchill Pros of that city. The Churchills were just about on a par with AA clubs, and they proved it by giving the visitors all they could handle. The home team held a 6-0 lead until Fella Gintoff hit Ben Polak with a 46-yard touchdown pass just before halftime for a 7-6 lead. Then Gintoff's two second-half field goals sealed a 13-6 Providence win.

The crowd wasn't bad – 3,847 at 50 cents, 464 at 10 cents, for a total gate of \$1,969.90 – and the Roller's 40 percent share after taxes came to \$787. With the players getting \$20, \$25 or \$30 apiece, expenses came to \$650.65, for a tidy profit of \$136.35.

Another non-league game was on tap for Thursday, Oct. 10, when the Roller visited the Hartford Blues. Hartford was on about the same level as the Churchill team, but not that night, as Providence cruised to a 33-6 win. Though one Hartford paper called the game "decidedly a success," the Blues' management may have seen things differently, as only 1,752 fans paid their way in. Providence's 40 percent share of the gate receipts came to only \$394.90, so the visitors pocketed a \$600 guarantee instead.

Unfortunately, the Roller's expenses – salaries, \$50 bus fare, and \$24 for meals – came

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to \$604, so the whole evening's work brought a loss of \$4. Each player picked up \$20 or \$25, except center Ralph Freeman, who got \$40; Gintoff, who got \$35; and tackle George Larkowich, who got \$22.

Next the team returned to East Providence Stadium for its second home game, this one with the Paterson Panthers. The prospect of another game like the 20-19 thriller they'd played a month earlier should have brought out a good crowd, but only 2,494 paid to see the rematch. And as it turned out, those who stayed away didn't miss much: Paterson took a fairly uneventful 13-0 decision.

On top of that, it was the Roller's worst financial beating of the season, too. Paterson got a \$1,000 guarantee, the payroll went up \$200 because it was a league game, and newspaper ads and other details that fell to the home team brought the game's expenses to \$2,170. The bottom line showed a loss of \$154.19.

However, Providence did win one battle that weekend. Though Vito Ananis had already played two games with Boston of the AFL, the Roller management hadn't forgotten its earlier vow to "make trouble for players who try any of this jumping business." They obtained an injunction barring Ananis from playing for any other team, which caused him to miss the Bears' game against the New York Yankees that Sunday.

A couple of days later Providence officially sold Ananis to Boston to settle the case. The amount the Bears paid wasn't divulged, but presumably it made up for the loss on the Paterson game, anyway.

Next Sunday it was off to Jersey City for a return game with the Giants. As they had on the trip to Paterson, the Roller entourage took a boat to New York City and a bus the rest of the way. But the team they found waiting for them was not the same club that had dropped a 7-6 decision three weeks earlier in Providence. Jersey City had added Ed Danowski to its backfield corps, and he completed 12 of 15 passes for 123 yards and three touchdowns in the Giants' 31-0 victory.

The financial news was much better. The attendance was 5,917, far below Jersey City's home average of better than 10,000, but Providence took home a \$1,500 guarantee to make up for the afternoon's embarrassment. Expenses for the trip came to \$1,052.40, which left a profit of \$447.60, the season's best. (The second-best payday, remember, came from the first game with Jersey City.)

On the return trip to Providence, the team was minus one of its players: Emilio Daddario, who had skipped out after the first quarter of the game, with the Roller trailing 14-0. But it was an excused absence. Daddario had scheduled his wedding for 4 o'clock that afternoon in Brooklyn. Over the objections of coach McGee, he played the first period before heading for the altar.

Daddario was back in the fold a week later when the Roller boarded another boat to New York en route to a game with the Newark Bears. But he might have regretted it. Failing to score for the second straight game, Providence dropped a 23-0 decision. On top of that, a mere 2,482 paying customers showed up, and the Roller's \$1,000 guarantee couldn't quite cover the \$1,022.45 expenses for the day.

Apparently some salary adjustments had been made during the week. Fella Gintoff, the highest-paid player at \$65 a game, got \$55 this time, and continued at that rate for the rest of the season. Bobby Cragan, a back who got \$30 for the Jersey City game, his first, was cut to \$10! He played one more game at that salary before being dropped altogether.

Those cutbacks were more than offset, though, by the addition of halfback Whit Baker, a Cornell star who was picked up from Jersey City. Baker had an unusual deal, calling for \$60 a game, even against non-league opponents.

Next on the schedule was a home game with the Wilmington Clippers; but Providence

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management, remembering the financial bath they'd taken in the second Paterson game, got this one moved to Wilmington. The home fans – those who would've come out – missed a good game, as the Roller kept their slim playoff hopes alive with an 8-7 squeaker over a superior Clipper team that eventually lost to Jersey City in the championship game. All the Providence points came in the second quarter: Guard Jim Turner blocked a punt by Clipper coach Walt Masters for a safety, and Daddario broke loose for a 35-yard touchdown run after an interception by Baker.

Unfortunately, the attendance at Wilmington came to only 4,297, which meant the Roller again took the guarantee rather than a percentage of the gate. Thus they got \$1,000, plus \$37 for some kind of special event before the game, but their expenses came to \$1,058.10, which meant another day on the wrong side of the ledger.

The following week, after a boat/bus trip to Long Island, the Roller saw their chances for the playoffs go up in smoke in a 20-7 loss to the Indians. Adding insult to injury, the home team got its last score on the final play of the game, when Baker, trying a desperation pass, fumbled into his own end zone and Shipley Farroh fell on it for Long Island.

Once again, the attendance was such that Providence opted for the guarantee, this time \$800. But expenses for the game totaled \$932 – yet another week in the red.

Next on the schedule was a Nov. 17 home game against the Newark Bears. This, remember, was a game that Providence hadn't really wanted from the beginning; now, with no chance of making the playoffs, any home game looked like a very poor risk, let alone one that had to compete with a popular college game. Roller management took its case to the league office, and on Nov. 12 president Joe Rosentover approved the cancellation of that game, plus a Nov. 24 home game against Long Island, while still allowing Providence to remain in the league for the 1941 season.

Incidentally, that decision probably cost Daddario the American Association rushing title. He finished third with 350 yards in eight games, only 54 yards behind the leader, Rudy Choborda of Newark, who played a full season. But things like that took second place in those days – and a poor second at that – to more important issues like financial survival.

With that problem cleared up, Providence booked a Nov. 17 game in Worcester, Mass., against a good team called the Lake View Golden Bears, whose star player, tailback Ronnie Cahill of Holy Cross, had reportedly signed with the Roller before the season but reneged on the deal. The Lake View team vindicated Cahill's judgment by edging the Roller 7-6. Also vindicated was the judgment of the Roller management in canceling the Newark game. The crowd of 4,972 brought a payoff of \$948 for Providence, and with non-league salaries in effect and no travel costs, expenses came to only \$561. The resulting \$387 profit was the biggest of the year other than the two Jersey City games.

By the way, the profitability of these non-league games probably goes a long way toward explaining why the Steam Roller dropped out of the AA after only two games in 1941. This one did so well that the Roller immediately booked a rematch, again in Worcester, for Dec. 1. But first they had a return engagement in Springfield with the Churchill Pros. Both games looked like sure money-makers, but the weather didn't cooperate.

First, rain caused, or at least contributed to, the last-minute cancellation of the Springfield game, despite the fact that 3,000 fans were on hand and waiting for the kickoff. A Springfield paper reported that "Providence and Churchill players were willing to play without promise of any exact remuneration" – that is, taking a percentage of the gate rather than a predetermined salary. But for some reason the game was called off instead. Pearce Johnson said the Churchills made the decision; the Springfield paper said it was Providence backer Tom Cummings.

Either way, the Roller management got only a rain guarantee of \$50, which didn't cover their travel expenses of \$77. And the players got nothing.

The wet weather continued through the following week, and the return trip to Worcester

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was also canceled. This time the Roller entourage just stayed home, so there was no actual loss – but the expected big payday went down the drain.

Johnson's final ledger sheet for the season, adding the profits or losses from all games, showed a net gain of \$1,230.16. But that didn't include quite a few expenses that weren't included in individual game accounts: league dues, laundry bills, medical bills, publicity photos, equipment, insurance and so on. These totaled \$1,168.69. And then there were the bills – more of the same kind – that still hadn't been paid when the season ended. They came to \$289.49.

Altogether, the paid and unpaid bills added up to \$1,458.18. And so the team ended up \$228.02 in the red – not a bad showing, really. That deficit was covered by Cummings and Joe McGee, who split it 50-50.

There's no mention of any salary paid to Johnson, but that still left him \$114 ahead of the other two officers.

And let's remember, Providence was one of the few teams in the AA that didn't have a working agreement with an NFL team. (At least three of the other five did, and all of them may have.) Such agreements presumably included some financial backing from the parent clubs, and even a little bit would have put the Roller comfortably in the black. Also, Providence drew the smallest crowds in the league, with the possible exception of Long Island. Add it all up, and it looks as though the teams that drew bigger crowds and got support from NFL clubs almost certainly made money – in Jersey City's case, probably quite a bit.

And what about the players? Though \$35 or \$50 a game may not sound like much today, during the Depression it wasn't bad at all. A minor league player could earn more in a three-month season than many people were making for an entire year. So it wasn't bad work if you could get it – and if you actually got paid. In the American Association, they did. In fact, maybe the best we can say about the Steam Roller in 1940 is that even when times were tough, the team always paid its bills.

Sometimes, just surviving is winning.