

Move over Gipp, Thorpe... make room for Bowser!

by Emil Klosinski

In my *Coffin Corner* article entitled "Who Really Did It?" which appeared in the March issue, I questioned whether or not a drop-kicking stunt attributed to Jim Thorpe was truth or fiction living in legend. I stated that no date, no name of teams involved and no stadium site are mentioned in the anecdotal account and wondered if perhaps the feat of one football great was transferred onto another through the passage of time. Then I went on to describe George Gipp's spectacular pre-game drop-kicking performance on October 30, 1920 prior to the Notre Dame vs. Army kickoff. I cited my sources for the story and the reason for Gipp's kicking ostentation.

While Thorpe's punting prowess is well documented, there isn't much information about his drop-kicking efforts. Yet, there is no question about it. Thorpe with all his natural God-given ability was capable of drop-kicking for distance with accuracy. That he did not get too much opportunity to show his stuff can be speculatively attributed to the fact that Thorpe was too good of a runner. What team with Thorpe in the backfield and in scoring territory, would not have Thorpe run the ball on 4th down and a few yards to go? The percentages were better for Jim to run than to attempt a field goal with 11 men poised on the line of scrimmage ready to thunder in for the block attempt.

Thus, conceding that there is a dearth of information regarding Thorpe's drop-kicking efforts in games, is there specific information on any drop-kicking he might have done in exhibition? Yes, now there is and that is the reason for this follow-up article. And the story of that exhibition, although it varies slightly from the legendary version, is related herein by a man who was a participant -- Arda Bowser.

I had sent a xerox copy of that March *Coffin Corner* article to my friend and fellow-native South Bender, Eddie Chrobot. Ed Chrobot is the president of the Chicago chapter of the National College Football Foundation and Hall of Fame. Eddie and I keep in contact by exchanging such football items as that article as well as news about our former high school coaches, teammates, friends and acquaintances. On the gridiron, Eddie was a ferocious competitor who played his college football at the University of Oregon. As a lineman, Ed played on the 1948 Webfoot team which is considered by many Oregonians as the greatest team in that school's history. Others say it is the most memorable team for noteworthy reasons. That 1948 team won the Pacific Coast Conference title with a 7-0 conference record, but was by-passed by a controversial vote which saw the conference select the 2nd place California Bears for the Rose Bowl berth. That Oregon team was also memorable for the great talent on hand. At least six players go into pro football; among them were Brad Ecklund, Dan Garza, Dick Wilkins, George Bell, Woodley Lewis and the great Norm Van Brocklin. Halfback John McKay went into coaching and made history at Southern California and Eddie Chrobot entered the business field and became ensconced in the financial world of stocks and bonds.

When Ed Chrobot received and read that *Coffin Corner* article, he passed it on to Nevin Bowser, a colleague of his. After Nevin Bowser had read it, I subsequently got a call from Chicago with Nevin on that end of the line. When the salutation and introductions were finished, the conversation went something like this:

"I read your article and I can tell you when that kicking exhibition by Thorpe happened," Nevin said, "it was in 1923 just before the Oorang Indians and Cleveland Indians game."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Because my dad was there kicking with him. His name is Arda Bowser and he played for the Canton Bulldogs in 1922 and the Cleveland Indians in 1923."

"Can you give me some details on that kicking exhibition?"

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 14, No. 4 (1992)

"I sure can, but why don't you ask my dad?"

"Ask your dad?" I questioned in probably the most surprised tones anyone could ever hear over the phone. "Gee, if he's still alive he must be in his 90's."

"Yep," answered Nevin. "He celebrated his 93rd birthday in January."

Nevin then gave me his father's phone number. He also told me that his dad lived in Winter Park, Florida, which is only about 50 miles from where I live. I usually go into the Orlando/Winter Park area once or twice a week because I still have some business interests there and because all three of our children live in that area. So I made an appointment with Arda Bowser for a meeting hoping to learn more about that pioneer era of football and about Arda Bowser. I did.

I'm not sure what I expected, but when Ard (he prefers to be called Ard) opened the door of his condo suite, I was impressed to see an erect and imposing elderly gentleman whose appearance and strong resonant voice belies his age. "Oh, I have a little arthritis in my back and my bum knees give me some trouble," he said, "but otherwise I feel fine. I will admit to a memory lapse now and then, but even youngsters have that."

Arda Bowser transferred from tiny Bethany College to Bucknell in 1920. In his playing days, Ard weighed 196 pounds which were proportionately distributed over a 6'2" frame. He was bigger than the average player of his era and was a very productive fullback for Bucknell. In fact, Ard led the East in scoring in 1920 with a 102 points, most of which came from 13 TD's he scored. He was an excellent left-footed placekicker and punter. In Dr. Baker's Football: Facts and Figures, he is given credit for a 50-yard field goal as his longest, but a newspaper story during that 1920 Bucknell season credits Bowser with a 53-yarder against Ursinus.

While Ard's punting and kicking were superb, his strongest point was his hard driving plunges into the line. He was blessed with good speed, but it was Ard's powerful darts into the line that caused Ross Kauffman, a noted football authority, to call Bowser "the greatest line 'cracker' in the country." Yet another newspaper statement said this: "If Bowser can't find a hole in the line, that dare-devil dives over it, and when he lands, it's usually on his head with no harmful effects."

Arda Bowser made Ross Kauffman's All-State (Pennsylvania) College team and Kauffman's prestigious All-Eastern team as first team fullback. He received Honorable Mention on Walter Camp's All-America team. He might have been rated higher had Camp seen Bowser in action as Kauffman had, still he received due honors from other experts. He made first team All-America on Frank Menke's team and the New York Telegram's team. In 1921, Bowser was Bucknell's captain and again led the East in scoring with 112 points. He was named first team All-America on Grantland Rice's mythical team.

In 1922, he was told that he had used up his eligibility. He became an assistant at his Alma Mater during the week and played pro ball on weekends in Philadelphia and Canton. This arrangement was not compatible with the ideals of Bucknell's officials. There was a war against the young sport of pro football waged by collegiate officialdom. Led by Amos Alonzo Stagg, the coach at the University of Chicago, who denounced the sport at every public forum available to him, most college officials tried to steer their personnel away from the pro game. This made Ard shy away from a coaching career in favor of pro football and other lines of endeavor. Ard's pro football career was short but sweet -- from 1922 to 1924 -- and this is how he describes it:

"By 1922, Jim Thorpe had left the Canton Bulldogs to form his own team which was made up of former Carlisle players and was named the Oorang Indians. People thought that Oorang was a tribal name or an Indian language slogan, but actually that was the name of a Marion, Ohio, dog kennel that sponsored the team.

"When Jim left the Canton Bulldogs, I was hired to take his place. My contract called for \$150 per game plus \$50 expense money. And we had a good, well-balanced team with which we won the NFL championship in 1922 with no loses for the season. Our record was 10-0-2. One thing I remember about that season was that I got a chance to do the kicking-off when "Fats" Henry hurt his foot. It bothered him quite a bit, so he asked the manager to replace him for kickoffs. The manager told me that I would replace Henry temporarily, but when my first kickoff attempt sailed into the end zone, I had the job for the rest of the year.

"1922 was the first year that the NFL required everyone to sign a contract...no more oral agreements sealed by handshakes. One of the clauses in that contract was that a player could play for only one team in the `association' (league). That clause was aimed at eliminating team `hopping' but I played with other teams that year besides Canton. The key words in that clause were `association team' and I felt that teams not in the NFL didn't count. In fact I believe I hold a record of playing 4 games in 4 days. I haven't heard of anyone else who had done that.

"It started on Thanksgiving Thursday when I played for the Frankford Yellow Jackets in Philadelphia. At that time, the Yellow Jackets were not an NFL team. After the game I hopped a train for Mount Carmel to play in a Friday game with a non-NFL team. Then after that one was over, I again grabbed a train to get back to Philadelphia for a Saturday game there. The next train ride was to Canton, Ohio, for the Sunday game and after that game, I was back on the train for the long, aching ride to Philadelphia. And I mean aching ride! You know, I played 60 minutes in each game and I can say I don't remember much about those games, but I sure remember clearly how I hurt all over and that I could barely get off that train.

"A player in those days had to recuperate on his own. If you got hurt, you usually played hurt because there were no doctors, no trainers, no pain killers and I didn't even hear of aspirin at that time. One way of playing while hurt was to try to stay away from pileups and avoid getting a direct shoulder hit. Some older players used that strategy to avoid getting hurt.

"It reminds me of the time we played Jim Thorpe's Oorang Indians. Jim was a player/coach then, who usually started the ball game but took himself out before the first quarter was over. Late in the second half, Jim would re-enter the ball game. Thorpe was in his thirties at that time and very much out of shape; yet there were times when he displayed flashes of his old form.

"On one play that I remember well, Jim got the ball and started to go wide and turned to hustle downfield for yardage. I was a linebacker on a 7-2-2 defense and managed to follow the play to the outside. Remembering what I heard around the league about Thorpe that his shoulder pads were made of iron or had iron sewn into them, I planned to hit him so low that he couldn't get down far enough with his shoulder to ram me out of his way. To my surprise, just as I was about to hit him, he stepped out-of-bounds. Nowadays, that's smart football, but in those days, that sort of thing just didn't happen. I knew then that Jim was not in shape and did not want to risk getting hurt."

"Speaking of Jim Thorpe," I interrupted, "what can you remember about that kicking exhibition which involved you and Jim Thorpe in 1923?"

"First of all, let me tell you how it came about," he began. "In 1923, I got a job with the White Motor Company in Cleveland. I had to have a steady year 'round job and yet I wanted to be able to play football. Because of that, I found it convenient to play for Cleveland Indians because I could also dash over to Philadelphia to play with the Yellow Jackets. One team played on Saturday and the other on Sunday, so there was no hitch that would prevent me from doing this.

"We had a good team in Cleveland that year and were winning our ball games, but for some reason we couldn't draw a big crowd. With the Oorang Indians coming into town and being a team with a losing record two years in a row, our manager thought that a kicking exhibition by Thorpe and myself might help the gate a little. The publicity in the papers during the week mentioned a 'pre-game kicking exhibition by Jim Thorpe and Ard Bowser which will feature punting and field goal kicking.'

"During that exhibition, Jim's punting was sensational, his kicks sailed high for 60 and 65 yards consistently. My punts were high as well, but they would travel only 45 and 50 yards. Any coach will tell you that this isn't bad average for high punts. But they were anemic compared to Thorpe's. Now on our field goal kicking, well, that was a little different. Jim would drop-kick while I used the place-kicking style. The goal posts were positioned on the goal line in those days and we kicked from the 50 yard line, With a roundish ball or a streamlined ball, those kicks aren't easy to make even for today's kicking specialists. We also had a cold, shifting crosswind blowing, so we kicked toward both goal posts. As it turned out, Jim and I did hit on a couple of 'em. Actually, I made one or two more field goals than Jim did, but I had an advantage over him -- I used a kicking shoe and a tee."

Without researching the subject, I am willing to concede that Bowser may have been the first football player to use such gadgetry for kicking. He states that there was no rule at that time that covered the

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 14, No. 4 (1992)

subject and that there were no complaints from the opposition. Both the "tee" and the kicking shoe were crude improvisations, but according to Ard, they helped his kicking. This is what Bowser had to say about his "tee" and his kicking shoe:

"A lot of kickers didn't want someone to hold the ball on kickoffs because by the time the kicker got to kick it, the holder moved his finger and the angle was not the same as when the kicker set it. We used to dig a hole with our heel and toe and position the ball in that hole. My Bucknell coach, Pete Reynolds, studied my kicking and came up with the conclusion that I could get more height and distance if I got the ball out of that hole and raised it on some support.

"He got some freshmen to get a small tub and then he took some dirt and water and mixed it into mud. With some practice, we managed to mix it just right so that we could have it loose enough to shape a "tee" and stiff enough to hold a football. I used it on kickoffs with great success, hitting the ball into the end zone almost every time. Even on field goal attempts, I'd run to the sideline without stepping off the field and reach out and grab a handful of mud from the tub set close to the out-of-bounds line, and then rush back to construct a "tee" for the holder to set the ball on. These days, the rules give you just so many seconds to put the ball in play after your previous down, but in my football days, it was up to the referee's discretion whether or not the game was being unnecessarily delayed. So I used the mud as a "tee" in both college ball and with the pros.

"My kicking shoe came about after I had acquired a sore toe. To protect it from the kicking impact, I cut off a piece from the rim of my shoe sole in front to make it even with my toe. Then I had a small, square piece of thick sole leather nailed onto the bottom of the shoe where the sole had been cut in front of the toe. It not only protected my toe but also added extra yardage to my kicking. And you know, that piece never did fall off my shoe."

Ard did bring out a few clippings which served as a key to unlock his treasure chest of memories. He also showed me a snapshot of him kicking off during a game, and a ball is clearly visible sailing aloft, while on the turf, Ard's "tee" is almost intact even after the kick had been made. With a magnifying glass enlarging the "tee," one can see the details of its form. To me, it looked like the top half of a whiskey bottle, with the bottom of the "tee" formed as a broad base that contoured upward into a bottle-neck shape with a flat top. It did not resemble the modern, plastic tees in any way.

In 1924, Bowser was transferred to Pittsburgh by the White Motor Company, a manufacturer of heavy trucks. Ard was an area salesman selected for supervisor training and Pittsburgh was his new home base.

With the public attention that playing football can attract, Ard's weekend moonlighting became known to some of his superiors in the company. Pittsburgh had a pro team which was not affiliated with the NFL and Bowser entertained the idea of playing for that team. He had a discussion with his company manager regarding playing but did not find a sympathetic ear. The area manager told Ard to make a choice -- either a career with the White Motor Company or pro football, but not both.

Ard's love for the game was so strong that he actually thought of playing for Pittsburgh's pro club under an assumed name. After mulling it over, he decided not to risk his future that way. He now had a wife and new obligations to be concerned with...and yet, that "itch" was there and it had to be scratched. Ard Bowser made a decision to barnstorm on weekends, free-lancing under an assumed name and playing for teams in small towns such as Mount Carmel. During that 1924 season, there was always an uneasiness and apprehension about the course he had chosen. There was the chance that he might be recognized or that he might get hurt seriously enough to prevent him from going to work. When the 1924 season was over, Bowser hung up his moleskins and cleats for good.

Ard ventured some opinions about football -- then and now. In the old days, the rules favored the defense and in the modern times, the rules favor the offense and wide-open football. With today's rules permitting blockers to use their hands and with the big blockers of today, Bowser feels that Jim Thorpe would even be greater in the modern era.

The ball's shape also would make a big difference to Ard's own punting and field goal kicking. He said that the old ball had more of an area for the wind to hit thus blowing it off course and also giving resistance. Placing the ball on the hash-marks toward the center of the field gives the modern day

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 14, No. 4 (1992)

placekicker a good angle for his attempt. In the old days, if the ball ended a yard away or anywhere else from the side line on the previous play, well that's the spot from which the attempt had to be made.

He also feels that yesteryears' runners would have better statistics had they played under today's rules and philosophy. Modern day backs carry the ball about 20 to 30 times or more per game. Pete Reynolds, his coach at Bucknell would order punts with third down and one yard to go and the ball resting at mid-field. Ard does concede that the modern game is more interesting and oriented in rules and style to please the fans.

Even with the old rules and old ball, Ard Bowser was one of the best all-around players of his era. He bested Jim Thorpe in that field goal kicking duel in 1923. He said that it was merely an exhibition and both he and Thorpe considered it as such, but the fans in the stands saw it as a one on one competition and Bowser was the winner!

Before I left, I couldn't resist asking Bowser if there was anything special to which he could attribute his longevity? He answered with a smile and a twinkle in his eye, "Maybe it's the genes or maybe I'm living on somebody else's time."