

THORPE'S FAREWELL SEASON

Legend got new life in Portsmouth, but threw it away

By Bob Gill

In the first decade following the formation of the NFL, very strong non-league teams flourished in several areas of the country. From 1925 to 1929, the best cluster of such teams was centered in the Ohio Valley. That region's most lasting contribution to football history was the Portsmouth Spartans, who survive today as the Detroit Lions.

However, during the formative years of the Ohio Vauey circuit Portsmouth was no better than an also-ran. From 1921 to 1926 the Ironton Tanks were clearly the dominant team in the region, losing only three games in six years. At first, the Huntington (W.Va.) Boosters were the Tanks' only real competition; later the Ashland Armcos, right across from Ironton on the Kentucky side of the Ohio River, became their arch rivals.

Other quality teams appeared in Cincinnati and Middletown. The Middletown Armco Blues were sponsored by the American Rolling Mill Company, which also sponsored Ashland's team. The Cincinnati Potters played the Tanks twice in 1924 and again in 1925, losing four hotly contested games. Then in 1926 they stunned everyone in the region by handing the Tanks a 28-0 defeat -- this against a team that otherwise went undefeated and unscored-on.

Meanwhile, Portsmouth, another river city and a natural geographical rival for the Tanks, fielded nondescript squads that managed a couple of scoreless ties against Ironton, but also suffered losses by scores like 44-0 and 40-0. In 1925, an early-season 34-0 thrashing by Huntington caused the Portsmouth Smoke House team to disband for the season without even playing the Tanks. In 1926, the reassembled and renamed Portsmouth Presidents won several games against second- and third-line Ohio teams, but dropped both engagements with the Tanks -- the second by a 33-0 score.

For 1927 a new team called the Shoe-Steels (sponsored by the Selby Shoe Company and Whitaker Glessner Steel Mills) replaced the Presidents and booked a more ambitious schedule than its predecessors. Still, the roster bore a striking resemblance to that of the Presidents and the earlier Smoke House team.

However, there was one big difference. New manager Jack Creasy had signed a new player-coach: the one and only Jim Thorpe.

Of course, Thorpe's glory days were well behind him. He had been no more than a solid pro since the inception of the APFA (later the NFL) in 1920. He had spent the 1926 season with a new incarnation of the Canton Bulldogs -- a team that finished 20th in the NFL, winning only once. Now 40 years old, Thorpe was injury-prone and unable to play more than 30 minutes per game. But his name was still magic, and his arrival showed local fans that this Portsmouth team meant business.

Still, there were few changes in personnel from the undistinguished 1926 team. Newcomers Paul Appel, a tackle, and NFL veteran Deacon Lynch, an end, bolstered the line, but their running mates were a nameless bunch - literally. They were identified only by last names: an end named Don, two centers named Brisker and Stamper, and a guard named Shope. Tackle Don Phillips was the only one who merited a first name in the local papers.

The backfield included holdovers Jake Pfau, Heckie DeVoss and Jake Shields. Thorpe was expected to complete the quartet, but an infected foot forced him to miss the Sept. 25 opener against the Rochester Clothiers, from Columbus. His team did all right without him, posting a 13-0 win.

Big Jim made his debut the following Sunday, starting at fullback against another Columbus team, the Bobb Chevrolets. The capital city had a semipro league of its own in those days, and the top couple of

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teams in a given year would supplement their local schedule with a few out-of-town games. En route to their second straight city championship, the Chevrolets had their best team ever, and played often and well enough against the top-line teams to qualify as a member of the unofficial Ohio Valley league for 1927 - a status Portsmouth was hoping to achieve.

The game with the Chevrolets demonstrated that the Shoe-Steels still hadn't made it, as Columbus posted a convincing 12-0 win. Thorpe's contribution to his team's effort was inconsequential, according to the scant accounts in the newspapers.

Losing to a team like the Bobb Chevrolets was nothing new in Portsmouth, but Creasy and Thorpe weren't satisfied, and went shopping for replacements - possibly at the instigation of Thorpe, who was used to this sort of thing from his heyday with the Bulldogs from 1915 to 1919, when it was a standard practice. They picked up two tackles: NFL veteran Joe Mulbarger and Ironton veteran Harry Pope. Mulbarger's team, the Columbus Tigers, had been dropped by the NFL in the great purge of 1927; Pope had started the season with the Tanks, and must have gotten a good financial deal to jump to Portsmouth.

Paul Appel shifted to guard to make room for the new acquisitions, who made their debut Oct. 9 against the Springfield Bulldogs. The resulting 6-0 win was nothing to crow about, considering the visitors' position (or lack of it) in Ohio football circles; still, it was better than a loss. Thorpe played more effectively this time around, but didn't contribute to the scoring. He came close, though, on two field goal attempts, including a long one that missed by inches.

Looking for more offensive punch, the Shoe-Steels signed Duke star Freddie Shipp, a good receiver and open-field runner, during the following week. He arrived just in time, because a banged-up knee forced Thorpe to miss the next game against the Logan (W.Va.) Wildcats. The coach watched from the sidelines as his team edged the West Virginia eleven 8-6, with a safety providing the winning margin.

Next to visit Portsmouth was a team from Martins Ferry, which had the misfortune of running into Thorpe's club on the day the offense finally started to click. Pfau and Shipp led the way in a 26-7 rout, with help from another new arrival, halfback Frank Bacon, a 33-year-old veteran who had been playing professionally since 1917. Coach Thorpe contributed one extra point to the offensive explosion -- the only point he scored all year. Even manager Creasy got into the act, making his only start of the season, at center.

The influx of new players continued during the following week, with the acquisition of veteran NFL tackle Russ Hathaway, a 31-year-old 240-pounder. Thorpe and Creasy apparently realized that the Shoe-Steels' recent successes, coming against lower-level teams, would mean little when they traveled to Cincinnati to get their first test against a top notch Ohio Valley club.

Potter's Shoes had withdrawn its sponsorship of the Cincinnati team after a disappointing 1926 season, and no other backers stepped forward until early October, when the local National Guard announced that it would take the plunge. The new regime quickly assembled a competitive squad, signing many of the Potters' stars. But the delay in organizing made it difficult for the team to line up a schedule -- in particular, no dates were available with Ironton and Ashland. That opened the door for Portsmouth, an opponent they might not have considered otherwise.

Of course, in Jim Thorpe the Shoe-Steels offered a major attraction for Cincinnati fans, and 5,000 of them -- the biggest crowd of the year -- turned out to see the legend in person. Thorpe's men put up a good fight, but Cincinnati fullback Joe Linneman spoiled the day, scoring all his team's points in a 19-12 win. Shipp scored twice for Portsmouth, and Thorpe gave the fans a treat when he came off the bench in the fourth quarter and started filling the air with passes. Newspaper accounts are sketchy, but he completed at least two: to Bacon for 12 yards, and to Shipp for about 30 and the game's final touchdown.

During the first week in November, Portsmouth picked up another NFL veteran, Walter Jean, a guard from the Pottsville Maroons. Jean, who was born and began his pro career as Walter LeJeune, also helped Thorpe out as line coach.

Thorpe and his men needed all the help they could get, because on Nov. 6 they hosted the big, bad, undefeated Ironton Tanks. For the second week in a row, the Shoe-Steels proved unable to cope with a big-time Ohio Vauey team. Actually, the Tanks didn't have much of an advantage in ground gaining, but

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a couple of long returns made the difference. Paul Hogan took a punt back for a touchdown in the second quarter, and player-coach Shorty Davies picked off a Thorpe pass in the final period and returned it for the last score in an 18-0 Ironton win.

Since the Ironton Tribune printed play-by-play accounts of the Tanks' games, we have a complete record of Thorpe's work for the first time in 1927. Playing a bit less than half the game, ol' Jim ran twice for three yards, completed two of 12 passes for 35 yards, with three intercepted, and misfired on a field goal attempt. Allowing for the fact that Ironton was the toughest team Portsmouth had faced, it was fairly typical of his season.

A week later Portsmouth bounced back, sort of, with a 12-7 win over another leading Columbus team, this one from a suburb called Hocking Valley. Still, to that point the Shoe Steels had been a bust. Despite the presence of the legendary Thorpe, they had yet to win a game against a first-rate team.

But that didn't mean they'd stopped trying.

Creasy and Thorpe were still stocking their roster with "ringers," now including NFL players who had finished the season with their main teams. Before traveling to Ironton Nov. 20 for a rematch with the Tanks, they acquired the services of center Hobby Kinderdine, end Red Joseph and back Winston Charles, all from the Dayton Triangles, plus end Emil Mayer, from Pottsville.

Of course, none of these players had practiced for more than a day or two with their new teammates, and no one in Ironton took Portsmouth very seriously -- until the game started. The made-over line took control from the start and held the Tanks to 19 yards rushing, and Shipp's short touchdown pass to Charles in the first quarter stood up for a 7-0 win - the first ever by a Portsmouth team over Ironton.

Coach Thorpe had been sick and unable to practice all week before the big game, but he turned in a pretty good performance when game day arrived. Though he didn't figure in the scoring drive, he picked up 20 yards rushing on eight carries, punted five times for an average of 33 yards, and completed one of four passes for eight yards, with one intercepted.

And on top of everything, he was hailed in Portsmouth as the coach who finally beat the Tanks.

Four days later, on Thanksgiving, the Tanks fell even further when the Middletown Armco Blues came to Ironton and posted an 8-0 victory. With two losses, plus three ties -- two with Ashland and one with Middletown -- Ironton was effectively eliminated from title contention for the first time in memory.

But who would replace the Tanks on the Ohio Valley throne? Ashland (5-1-3) and Middletown (6-1-3) had lost only to each other. Ashland had played three ties, two with Ironton and one with the Dayton Triangles; Middletown had tied the Tanks, the Kokomo American Legion and the Cincinnati New Eras, a second-line team at best. Ashland had compiled virtually the same record against a much stronger schedule, but Middletown had that big win over Ironton to its credit.

In an effort to bolster its championship claims, Ashland scheduled a game with Kokomo for Nov. 27 and beat the Indiana team 14-0 -- a convincing win over a team that had tied Middletown. And when the Armco Blues dropped a 6-0 decision to the Cincinnati National Guards on the same day, the folks in Ashland were ready to celebrate their first regional title.

But Ashland still wasn't home free. While the Armcos were beating Kokomo, the overhauled Portsmouth team -- with another NFL import, halfback Walt Achui from the Dayton Triangles -- was hosting the Columbus Bobb Chevrolets, who had beaten them in the season's second game. This time it was no contest, as Thorpe's men rolled to a 32-0 win. Big Jim didn't play much -- he didn't have to -- but he contributed a 58-yard punt to the cause.

Combined with the previous week's victory over Ironton, the rout of Columbus made the Shoe-Steels look like championship contenders to many observers, despite the fact that they'd already lost three games. The reasoning went like this: The second Columbus game canceled the earlier loss, as did the second game with Ironton. On top of that, Portsmouth had beaten the defending champs -- something Ashland hadn't managed to do.

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This may not seem very convincing today, but in 1927 it was enough to give Thorpe's team a reasonable claim to the title. All they had to do was beat Ashland.

The Armcos could hardly refuse the challenge, so a game was scheduled for Dec. 4 that would decide the regional championship.

True to form, Creasy and Thorpe looked around for more reinforcements. Guard Al Graham reported from Middletown, which was through for the year. Then the Shoe-Steels persuaded backs Rex Enright and Pid Purdy of the Green Bay Packers to join them on the trip to Ashland.

Unfortunately, the new recruits didn't even make it as far as Portsmouth. An auto accident on the way put them out of action. (It may have ended their careers, as well. Neither played in the NFL again, though Purdy did play major league baseball through 1929.)

So Creasy tried again, signing Red Dunn and Eddie Kotal, two more backs from the second-place Packers - and they managed to arrive safely. But in the meantime the team had lost its coach.

Having originally signed a ten-game contract, Thorpe had completed his end of it with the win over Columbus. At first he said he'd stay with the team, for a reasonable sum; but apparently he and Creasy had different ideas about what was reasonable. The Portsmouth Times reported that Thorpe had gone home Nov. 30 to check on the dog kennel he operated in Marion, Ohio, and was expected back the next day. But that was the last time his name appeared in the local press. From that point on, the Times referred to Walter Jean, formerly Thorpe's assistant, as "Coach Jean," and anyone who hadn't been paying attention would have thought he'd held the job all along.

Of course, it was rather fitting for Portsmouth to have a new coach for the big game, since eight of the Shoe-Steels' starters against Ashland -- including Jean himself -- were recent arrivals who had started the season in the NFL.

On the other hand, the Armcos had to play without their quarterback, Sonny Winters. But they had a real team.

For three quarters, though, it looked like the Portsmouth mercenaries might carry the day. Dunn passed to Kotal for a first-quarter touchdown, and after three quarters it was still 6-0 Portsmouth. But with seven minutes to go, Johnny Stuart of Ashland took a punt back 54 yards to the within a yard of pay dirt. Coach Virgil Perry went over for the touchdown, and Louie Ware's conversion clinched Ashland's first title.

It had been a pivotal season in the Ohio Valley. The emergence of several teams that could challenge the Tanks -- even beat them -- moved the regional circuit into a new era. And nowhere was the change more noticeable than in Portsmouth.

After years as a doormat among Ohio Valley teams, Portsmouth had taken its first step toward respectability in 1927. A year later, assembling a nucleus of good young players into a real team rather than a collection of hired guns, a reorganized club called the Spartans climbed another rung on the ladder of success. And in 1929 they cleared the final hurdle by dethroning the Tanks. From there it was on to the NFL.

As for Jim Thorpe, he never returned after his ill-timed walkout before the big Ashland game.

Given his stature as a living football legend, plus the improved fortunes of his team, Thorpe might have continued indefinitely as the Spartans' coach. Instead, when he walked out of Portsmouth he was putting an end to his pro football career, except for a single embarrassing appearance with the Chicago Cardinals in 1928. He had helped to plant the seeds of pro football success in Portsmouth, but he wasn't around to see them bear fruit.

1927 PORTSMOUTH SHOE-STEELS

Sept. 25	H	13	Columbus Rochester Clothiers	0	...
Oct. 2	H	0	Columbus Bobb Chevrolets	12	1,500
Oct. 9	H	6	Springfield Bulldogs	0	1,500

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Oct.	16	H	8	Logan (W.Va.) Wildcats	6	1,000
Oct.	23	H	26	Martins Ferry	7	...
Oct.	30	A	12	Cincinnati National Guards	19	5,000
Nov.	6	H	0	Ironton Tanks	18	3,500
Nov.	13	H	12	Hocking Valley (Columbus)	7	800
Nov.	20	A	7	Ironton Tanks	0	2,000
Nov.	27	H	32	Columbus Bobb Chevrolets	0	...
Dec.	4	A	6	Ashland Armcos	7	3,195