

Mini-bios from the Ohio Valley league

By Bob Gill

In case you haven't read the story on page 3 of this issue yet, I should explain that the Ohio Valley league of the latter 1920s wasn't an official league at all, but a group of independent teams. The best of them played NFL-caliber football, and the players profiled here were among the main reasons why.

VIRGIL PERRY

5-foot-11, 165 lbs.

HB

Miami (Ohio)

Virgil Perry became a big star in Ohio football circles at Miami of Ohio, where he was captain of the team as a senior in 1923. Upon his graduation he joined the Covington (Ky.) Christian Athletic Club, a member of the Greater Cincinnati League. (Covington is just across the Ohio river from the Queen City.) The C.A.C. team wasn't particularly successful, finishing third in a four team league, but Perry turned in a fine year as player-coach, scoring all six of his team's touchdowns. In one game he scored three times on runs of 40, 56 and 72 yards.

The league dissolved in 1925, but Perry joined the Cincinnati Potters, who had won the championship in '24. He helped the Potters to a 7-2 season, their only losses coming at the hands of the Ironton Tanks.

One of Perry's better efforts that year was a 99-yard rushing game against the Ashland Armcos, a new team that struggled through its inaugural season. His performance so impressed Armco officials that they hired him to be their player-coach for 1926. He also took a job at the American Rolling Mill Company plant, which sponsored the team.

The move paid immediate dividends, as the Armcos became the second-best team on the Ohio Valley circuit, behind only the Tanks, who edged them twice by scores of 2-0 and 7-0.

A year later Perry had his best season, leading the Armcos to the regional championship and rushing for at least 605 yards, the best total in the valley. (I have play-by-play accounts for about half of the Ashland games, but only partial stats for the rest.) If there had been an MVP award for the unofficial league, he probably would have won it.

The Armcos looked even better in 1928, and seemed destined to repeat as Ohio Valley champs. They even managed to beat Ironton for the first time. But they fell apart at the finish line, losing their last three games to drop out of contention. Still, Perry had another fine year – his last.

Discouraged by the team's poor finish, Armco management brought in a new coach for the following season, and Perry became a part-time player. But he still played effectively at times as the Armcos finished second in the region, behind the Portsmouth Spartans.

The Depression hit hard in one-industry towns like Ashland, and the Armcos bit the dust during the offseason, ending Perry's gridiron career. He died prematurely in 1944, but he was always remembered fondly by fans from the days when little Ashland fielded a big-time football team.

(For the statistics that follow, I've combined complete-game stats and partial stats into one lump sum for each year's rushing total. For instance, in 1925 Perry ran 39 times for 168 yards in the three complete games I have, and other game accounts give him at least 109 – though obviously he had a lot more than that. So his total is 277.)

As for the abbreviations, G/C means games/complete games. And TDR means rushing touchdowns, TDC means touchdown receptions, TDX means touchdowns on returns and so forth, and TDP means touchdown passes thrown. Those apply to Linneman's stats, too.)

| | G/C | Yds | TDR | TDC | TDX | Pts |
|-----------------|------------|-------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| 1924 Covington | 8/2 | 91 | 2 | - | 4 | 36 |
| 1925 Cincinnati | 9/3 | 277 | 2 | - | - | 12 |
| 1926 Ashland | 11/6 | 384 | 4 | - | - | 24 |
| 1927 Ashland | 11/7 | 605 | 7 | 1 | - | 48 |
| 1928 Ashland | 9/5 | 290 | 3 | - | - | 18 |
| 1929 Ashland | 7/2 | 68 | 1 | - | - | 6 |
| Totals | | 1715 | 19 | 1 | 4 | 144 |

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JOE LINNEMAN

200 lbs.

FB

Cincinnati U.

Joe Linneman wasn't a household name even in his playing days, but he did something that few bigger stars have ever managed: He had a fine career in college and pro football without ever leaving his hometown.

At the University of Cincinnati from 1920-22 Linneman excelled as a line plunger and a punter. In 1923 he joined the Potters in the Greater Cincinnati League. The team finished second, and Linneman made the all-league first team despite missing three games with an injury. A year later the Potters went undefeated in league play to win the championship, and Linneman was their big gun. He took over the kicking chores and scored 42 of his team's 60 points for the season.

For 1925 the Potters left the local league and became a regional team. They beat everyone except Ironton, and Linneman had his finest year, scoring an amazing 79 points in nine games. On top of that, in a 9-0 loss to Ironton in late November he put on the best punting performance in the history of Ohio Valley football, averaging 43.4 yards on 13 kicks. Under the conditions of the time, it was a tremendous performance.

Linneman took over as the Potters' coach in 1926, and the move was not a success. The team dropped its first four games before he could get things straightened out. The season did have its bright spot, though: a 28-0 rout of the otherwise undefeated Ironton Tanks in which the coach threw for one touchdown, ran for another and booted four extra points.

The local National Guard took over the Cincinnati team the next year and relieved Linneman of his coaching duties. The result was only a slight improvement over 1926, but Linneman had another good season, matching the previous year's total of 27 points.

By then he was beginning to slow down, and it's too bad, because Cincinnati was putting together its best team since 1925. The National Guards challenged for the regional title in 1928 and '29 before falling a bit short each time. A collection of new backs took the ball-carrying spotlight away from Linneman, but he still excelled as a blocker and a punter. And he developed a new talent as a passer, throwing for five touchdowns in his final two years.

The National Guards' dissolution in 1930 spelled an end to Linneman's career, but he left behind a couple of impressive records. For one, his 203 lifetime points are the most by anyone from the Ohio Valley circuit of the 1920s.

And then there's his punting. Though Cincinnati papers didn't print statistics in those days, I have punting stats for ten of Linneman's games against Ironton and Ashland from 1924 to '29. In those games, he punted 57 times for a 40.1-yard average. That doesn't sound too impressive today, but in the 1920s only Verne Lewellen and a handful of others could match it. And newspaper accounts of other games make it plain that these weren't just a few good days – Linneman's punting was always mentioned as outstanding.

Don't discount Linneman's career – or Perry's, either – just because he never played in the NFL. In those days there wasn't much prestige attached to the league, and if a guy had the chance to play high caliber football without leaving his hometown, he probably counted himself lucky.

Linneman was more than lucky, though. He was also good.

| | TDR | TDC | TDX | XP-A | FG | Pts | TDP |
|---------------|------------|------------|------------|--------------|-----------|------------|------------|
| 1923 Potters | 1 | 1 | - | - | - | 12 | - |
| 1924 Potters | 5 | - | 1 | 3-4 | 1 | 42 | - |
| 1925 Potters | 10 | 1 | - | 13-19 | - | 79 | - |
| 1926 Potters | 3 | - | - | 6-6 | 1 | 27 | 1 |
| 1927 Guards | 3 | 1 | - | 3-7 | - | 27 | 1 |
| 1928 Guards | - | 1 | - | 4-6 | - | 10 | 2 |
| 1929 Guards | 1 | - | - | 0-2 | - | 6 | 3 |
| Totals | 23 | 4 | 1 | 29-44 | 2 | 203 | 7 |