

THE OHIO VALLEY IN 1924

By Bob Gill

In the first decade or so following the formation of the NFL, strong non-league teams flourished in several regions around the country -- in many cases teams that were on a par with NFL clubs. By the latter part of the decade, easily the strongest of these independent circuits existed in the Ohio Valley. Before the Depression shut down most of its teams, the region produced one fine NFL team, the Portsmouth Spartans (later the Detroit Lions), and another, the Ironton Tanks, that made its mark by beating the New York Giants and the Chicago Bears less than two weeks apart in 1930.

Altogether, teams on the Ohio Valley circuit compiled a 7-5-3 record against NFL teams from 1925 to 1930 (not including 1930 games involving Portsmouth, which was in the league by then).

The story of that era has already been told in *Down in the Valley*, a PFRA book that appeared last year. That book starts with the 1925 season, the first in which the region's top teams started to play each other regularly. This time around, let's go one season further back, to 1924, and see how the teams in the Ohio Valley fared in the last of their "formative" years.

First, a little background. From 1921 to 1923, the Ironton Tanks were clearly the dominant team in the region, but in November 1923 the Huntington (W.Va.) Boosters, the Tanks' upriver rivals, had threatened their supremacy by handing the champs a 12-6 loss, their first since 1920. The Tanks posted a convincing 26-0 win in the December rematch and retained bragging rights in the region with their 9-1 record, but the fans in Huntington had high hopes for 1924.

Portsmouth, a neighboring city on Ironton's side of the river, hadn't been able to establish much of a rivalry with the Tanks, mainly because it hadn't managed to field a decent team yet. The 1923 edition, which dropped a 40-0 decision to Ironton, was pretty typical.

Meanwhile, in Cincinnati, a much larger city, a full-fledged semipro league had taken shape. In 1923 its two best teams, by far, were the L.B. Harrisons, sponsored by a local hotel, and the Potter Tramps, sponsored by a shoe store. The undefeated Harrisons won the championship by virtue of a 9-0 win over the Potters, who won all their other games with the exception of a 6-6 tie in a rematch with the Harrisons. The other leading team in the Greater Cincinnati League, as it was known, was a neighborhood team from Christ Church. Unlike the Harrisons and the Potters, this team used mainly sandlot players with no college experience.

For 1924 the Cincinnati league became much stronger when it cut back from nine teams to four: the Potters, the Harrisons and Christ Church, plus the Covington Christian Athletic Club, from just across the Ohio River in Kentucky.

The Covington C.A.C. was an unlikely choice to survive the cut, since they hadn't won a single game in 1923. But the C.A.C. had scored a major coup by signing Virgil Perry, one of the top backs in Ohio during a three-year career with Miami University. By itself, the addition of Perry was enough to move the team into the Queen City's elite.

Not far to the north, Dayton had a thriving semipro scene of its own, albeit nothing as organized as Cincinnati's league (which benefited from the leadership of Frank Lane, a former player with the Cincinnati Celts and the most respected game official in the region).

A year earlier the newly organized Koors 29 team, run on more of a professional basis than its competitors, had established itself as Dayton's best, going undefeated in eight games, including a road win over the woeful Louisville Brecks of the NFL.

Two of the Koors' other wins came over the Middletown Miamis, a semipro team that had been playing for years without distinction in its strategic home midway between Dayton and Cincinnati. In 1924, though, the American Rolling Mill Co. (in popular parlance, Armco) took control of Middletown's football fortunes.

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With Armco's larger financial base to draw from, the new Armco Blues were full-fledged professionals. Just as Carl Koors had done in Dayton, the Middletown management brought in several college stars to supplement a nucleus of sandlotters from the earlier team.

For 1924, these eight teams -- Dayton, Middletown, Ironton, Huntington, and the four from Cincinnati -- were the pride of the Ohio Valley. And though Ironton was the obvious favorite, at least three of the others -- the Potters, the Harrisons and Huntington -- had a reasonable shot at dethroning the Tanks for the regional title.

Prospects

It wasn't going to be easy, though. Ironton coach Shorty Davies welcomed back five of his starting linemen from 1923: end George "Diner" Barron, tackles Bill Brooks and Harry Pope, and guards Theodore "Yabby" Abel and Bill Wardaman. To these he added center Fayne Grone and ends Roger Snowday and Red Wilson, who split time with Barron.

In the backfield, the loss of Davy Jones, the team's second leading rusher, was offset by the signing of halfback Terry Snowday. A star at Centre College, Terry had been a disappointment in 1923 with Huntington. But reunited with his brother in Ironton, he was prepared to make everyone forget his rookie struggles. At fullback Clarence "Concrete" Poole was a holdover, sort of -- he had played only six games the year before. Another newcomer, Walter Kurtzhalz, teamed up with Snowday at halfback. And John "Andy" Andrews, a versatile rusher, receiver, kicker and punter, was reliable at any backfield position.

Davies' best player, however, was probably his quarterback -- a fellow named Shorty Davies. The man from Ohio State had led the Tanks in rushing for 1923 with 75 carries for 538 yards, a 7.2-yard average, and seven touchdowns. He also completed 35 of 102 passes for 652 yards and seven more scores. (Compiled from newspaper play-by-play accounts, these stats cover nine of the Tanks' ten games.) And there was no reason not to expect more of the same in 1924.

The region's other teams weren't as loaded, but they all had their strong points -- well, almost all. The Huntington Boosters featured three starters destined to play for years in the Ohio Valley: fullback Tom Dandelet and linemen Bunk McWilliams and L.L. "Gatling Gun" Gates. Dandelet had been a college star at Valparaiso; the other two had gone right from high school to the play-for-pay ranks. The Boosters' best player was center Jim "Red" Weaver, an All-American from Centre who replaced Dandelet as coach in November.

In Cincinnati, the Potters were led by fullback Joe Linneman, a punishing runner and one of the best punters in this or any other region. Most of the team's other regulars were Xavier alumni who had been signed as a group in 1923. The L.B. Harrisons had no one star, but generally relied on a trio of backs: coach Jimmy Roudebush of Denison and the Munns twins, George and Tom, both Miami alumni.

The Covington C.A.C. had Virgil Perry and not much else, though fullback Van Bowling did contribute with his punting. Meanwhile, the Christ Church team -- one of Cincinnati's best a year earlier -- found itself overmatched at the new level of competition and failed to win a game all season.

In Dayton, the Koors pinned their hopes on a quick backfield including Russ Shaner, Joe Schoepf, Phil Linsky and Dale Black, plus end Johnny Mahrt, a brother of Al Mahrt, the Triangles' great back of a few years earlier.

The new team in Middletown followed Ironton's lead in signing an Ohio State grad as quarterback and coach. Still, Pat Marts wasn't in Davies' class as a rusher or a passer, though he did do a pretty good job as a place-kicker. Most of the Armco Blues' offensive punch came from fullback Bill Ward, perhaps the region's best punter after Linneman, and halfback Jerry Mincher, who defected from the Dayton Koors in late October. Middletown also had a couple of fine linemen in tackle Pete Donisi of Dayton University and Al Graham, an 18-year-old sandlotter who was just beginning a ten-year pro football career in which he earned all-NFL mention four times.

The Season Begins

The season's first games of note took place on Oct. 19. The Potters invaded Ironton but came out on the short end of a 14-0 score before a crowd of 2,500. Terry Snowday starred for the Tanks, rushing for 60 yards and catching two TD passes from Davies. The absence of Joe Linneman, who didn't make the trip,

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left the visitors with no ground game, and when coach John "Yabby" Cushing took to the air the Tanks picked off three of his 17 passes.

Meanwhile, the Covington C.A.C. traveled to Middletown, where the Armco Blues took a quick 7-0 lead on Bill Ward's short plunge and Bill Class's conversion. In the fourth quarter Virgil Perry scooped up an Armco fumble and sprinted 80 yards to make it 7-6, but a pass for the extra point failed, and the home team escaped with its unbeaten record intact.

The Cincinnati league's top guns met each other a week later, and 3,300 fans watched the Potters top the Harrisons by a score of 12-6, with two plunges by Linneman accounting for all the winners' scoring. In Middletown, the Armcos scored a 10-7 win over Dayton's second-best team, the Lauber Clothiers, on a field goal by Pat Marts in the final minutes. Meanwhile, Ironton topped the Akron Goodyear Silents, a team of deaf players, 19-0, as Davies and Concrete Poole rushed for 96 and 95 yards, respectively.

The late-in-organizing Huntington team scored its first significant win that same afternoon. Red Weaver's field goal gave the Boosters a 3-0 decision over the Cleveland Panthers, a touring team that played in the region (and elsewhere) for at least a decade.

Huntington's big test came the next week, when the Ironton Tanks came to town for the season's most important game to date. There was no score until the fourth period, when Davies passed to Terry Snowday for a touchdown that gave Ironton a 6-0 victory and frustrated most of the 3,000 fans in attendance.

In Cincinnati, the Covington C.A.C. scored a major upset, routing the L.B. Harrisons 20-2. Virgil Perry scored on two long interception returns and one run from scrimmage to hand the Harrisons their second loss. That game, coupled with the Potters' 13-6 win over Christ Church, left the 1923 runners-up in a commanding position for the city championship.

November Crunch

On Nov. 9, though, the Potters managed only a 6-6 tie with the Covington C.A.C., as Perry and Linneman traded TDs. This game, following an earlier scoreless tie with the Potters, pushed the C.A.C. ahead of the Harrisons as the No. 2 team in Cincinnati. The fact that a crowd of 3,300 turned out for the game was another indication of the C.A.C.'s new status. Elsewhere it was an uneventful week, as Ironton routed the Portsmouth Smoke House team 44-0, Middletown administered a 40-6 drubbing to the second-line Dayton Mascottes, and Huntington played a 6-6 tie with the Charleston Senators.

A week later, two of Cincinnati's finest had important games with out-of-town opponents. The Potters, with Linneman in the lineup this time, had lined up a rematch with the Ironton at Redland Field, and 3,200 fans saw them give the Tanks all they could handle. The home team took the lead on Linneman's first-quarter field goal, but the game's key play came just before the half, when the Tanks stopped Linneman on fourth-and-goal from the one-yard line. Going into the locker room trailing by three points rather than ten, the Tanks came out inspired in the third quarter, and Davies hit Walter Kurtzhalz for the winning score in a hard-earned 7-3 victory.

Meanwhile, the L.B. Harrisons traveled to Middletown, where they had little luck with the Armco Blues' ground game. Jerry Mincher rushed for 143 yards, Bill Ward for 103, as Middletown satisfied a crowd of 2,800 with a 6-0 win that wasn't nearly as close as the score indicates.

On the Sunday before Thanksgiving, Ironton hosted another team from the Greater Cincinnati League, the Covington C.A.C. Shorty Davies returned a fumble 60 yards for one touchdown and threw to Terry Snowday for the other in a 12-0 win. The Tanks and the C.A.C. combined to toss 37 passes, completing 16, in a surprisingly pass-happy game for the era.

The Dayton Koors traveled to Middletown that afternoon for another big game, but though the Armco Blues had the edge in yardage gained, it wasn't enough to avert a scoreless tie. And in Cincinnati the L.B. Harrisons showed they weren't dead yet by holding the Potters to a tie by an identical 0-0 score.

The Game of the Year

Only one game was scheduled for Thanksgiving Day, but it was the season's biggest, at least by reputation: Huntington at Ironton. Having beaten the Tanks once in 1923 and lost a classic battle to them in 1922 on a dramatic fourth-quarter field goal by John "Andy" Andrews, the Boosters were generally

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considered the region's second best team, despite the fact that they had managed only a win and a tie in three straight games with the unremarkable Charleston Senators.

The Tanks seemed to be taking Huntington seriously; during the week they signed halfback Sonny Winters and end Andy Nemececk from the Columbus Tigers, who had just finished their season in the NFL. Winters, in particular, certainly earned his money against the Boosters, completing 7 of 9 passes for 111 yards and rushing for 64 yards in 18 tries.

But he and everyone else had to take a back seat to Terry Snowday, who turned in the outstanding performance of the year against his former teammates. He rushed 18 times for 126 yards and caught 7 passes for 89 more, plus three touchdowns -- two from Winters and one from Davies. Winters' three conversions completed the scoring in a 21-0 Ironton win that sent the crowd of 2,600 home in a good mood to enjoy a holiday feast.

That game effectively ended the Ohio Valley season, but there were still a few loose ends to be tied up.

On Nov. 30 the Potters clinched the Cincinnati league title by beating the Covington C.A.C., minus the injured Virgil Perry, 13-3. Middletown completed an undefeated season, beating Cincinnati's Christ Church team 14-0 on a frozen field before an intimate gathering of 150 fans. Meanwhile, after only two days to savor their great win over Huntington, the Tanks traveled to Portsmouth and played a scoreless tie with the Smoke House team they'd beaten by 44 points three weeks earlier. A Sunday snowstorm added to the anticlimactic nature of the game and held the attendance to 650.

The season wound down with two games against NFL teams. On Dec. 7 the Koors played the Triangles for the championship of Dayton, and the Triangles predictably posted a 20-0 victory. And on Dec. 14 Huntington hosted the Cleveland Bulldogs, three-time NFL champs. Despite the addition of Winters, Bill Brooks, Clarence Poole and Harry Pope from the Tanks, the Boosters came out on the short end of a 28-0 score.

Honors to the Tanks

Looking back, the biggest story of the 1924 season in the Ohio Valley may have been Terry Snowday. After a disappointing debut in the professional ranks in 1923, he bounced back to lead the region in scoring with 68 points in his second and final season in pro football. Snowday's resurgence certainly irked many fans in Huntington. One of them wrote to the Ironton Register late in the season, asking how a player who looked so ordinary with the Boosters could be such a world beater with the Tanks only a year later. An Ironton sportswriter replied that in 1923 Snowday had been just another addition to Huntington's collection of college stars, but in 1924 he had been a member of a well-drilled Ironton team. While no doubt tinged with a bit of hometown boosterism, that answer was probably correct. The better-organized Tanks knew how to take full advantage of Snowday's skills.

Just how well they did so is shown in stats compiled from the Register, which printed play-by-plays for eight of the Tanks' games, omitting three road dates (Nov. 2 at Huntington, Nov. 16 at Cincinnati and Nov. 30 at Portsmouth). In those eight games, Snowday rushed 100 times for 495 yards and caught an amazing 22 passes for 266 more. For the whole season, he hauled in nine touchdown passes, a total no one in the Ohio Valley ever matched.

Even so, he may not have been Ironton's -- and thus the region's -- most valuable player. That honor might have belonged to his coach, Shorty Davies. Davies' eight-game totals show 49 carries for 341 yards, an average of seven yards a pop, plus 41 of 92 passes completed for 588 yards and 11 touchdowns. For the whole season, he threw for 13 scores. (No one else in the region ever reached double figures.) He also found time to intercept a team-high four passes and return 12 punts for 189 yards.

The Tanks' other main backs weren't too shabby either. Poole gained 387 yards in 91 carries, and Kurtzhalz amassed 306 yards in 69 tries. Andrews, who broke his leg Oct. 26 and missed the rest of the season, contributed 128 yards on the ground and averaged an excellent 40.6 yards on 18 punts.

Of course, the Tanks didn't have all the best players. Though it's harder to document, several other teams in the region had outstanding performers of their own. For instance, the Potters' Joe Linneman scored 42 points with his line-plunging and kicking, and Virgil Perry of the Covington C.A.C. scored 36 points, tallying every one of his team's six touchdowns.

The Middletown Journal was so impressed by the new team in town that it printed play-by-plays for six of the Armco Blues' nine games, including all their major contests except the finale against Christ Church. In those six games, Bill Ward rushed 96 times for 406 yards, and Jerry Mincher picked up 394 yards on 82 carries. Ward also averaged a commendable 39.1 yards on 32 punts.

What Was Needed

The biggest disappointment of the season was that the two unbeaten teams, Middletown and Ironton, hadn't played each other. But that was symptomatic of the region's one problem -- the best teams didn't get together often enough. Aside from the four clubs in the Greater Cincinnati League, who had to play one another, here's the breakdown:

The Dayton Koors played the L.B. Harrisons and Middletown.

Huntington played Ironton twice.

Ironton played the Potters twice, Huntington twice, and the Covington C.A.C.

Middletown played the L.B. Harrisons, the Covington C.A.C., Christ Church and Dayton.

It wasn't that the Ohio Valley lacked strong teams; it had seven of them (omitting Christ Church), in five cities. They just needed to establish an organized circuit that would let them play each other on some sort of regular basis.

Starting in 1925, they did just that.