

Montana's Professional Football Team

By Gerald R. Gems

Long before the All-American Football Conference brought professional teams to California in the 1940s, a Montana team, the Butte Beasts, taught western teams the value of paid players in 1896. Football spread rapidly across the country from its eastern origins and by the 1890s western colleges, athletic clubs, and high schools fielded teams, albeit strictly amateur contingents. Even before the watchful eyes of the NCAA attempted to insure amateurism, other governing bodies, such as the Amateur Athletic Union, regulated the practice of sport, imposing extreme penalties, even lifetime bans on transgressors. Professionalism survived as a dirty and closely guarded secret.

Gambling and club rivalries induced the practice of professionalism as teams tried to gain an edge on opponents by attracting the best players. Pudge Heffelfinger, a Yale All-American, is generally conceded to be the first recognized pro for accepting \$500 from the Allegheny Athletic Association to help defeat its rival, the Pittsburgh Athletic Club on November 12, 1892. Other teams in the Pennsylvania-Ohio area began paying star players thereafter; but such under-the-table arrangements were not discovered or admitted until many years later.

Contrary to the subterfuge practiced in the East, the Butte team publicly acknowledged its professionalism.

Football provided a natural outlet for the rough mining town of Butte in the 1890s. Young men worked hard and played hard, and employers figured that football provided a more wholesome use of leisure time than the saloons and brothels that proliferated in the area. To the players and their fans, however; football provided more than the means to test one's courage and masculinity against peers. Incessant gambling on games allowed both players and backers to substantially augment their hard won salaries.

Employees soon discovered that sports teams provided an excellent means to promote their businesses and newspaper accounts of games offered free advertising. By the 1890s Butte and its nearby rival, Anaconda, offered lucrative full-time jobs to star players as inducements. Butte's aspirations extended beyond the local area, and the team issued challenges to teams throughout the country. Butte tried to entice Michigan to Montana and even offered the University of Chicago \$1,000 for a game; but its offers went unheeded.

After defeating the Omaha YMCA, and teams from Spokane, Salt Lake City, Portland, Iowa State College and the University of Nebraska, Butte declared itself "world champions" in 1895, despite a loss to the Denver Athletic Club.

The Iowa State game is noteworthy as its coach, Glenn "Pop" Warner, embarked on his inaugural season in a long career. Warner reputedly lost more than the game, betting a month's salary that his team could beat the unknown westerners.

The Butte team traveled to California for post-season confrontations with California teams over the Christmas holidays. The *Anaconda Standard*, a local Montana newspaper, reported that "In football circles the game was regarded as a contest between California and Montana, rather than a game between Reliance (Athletic Club) and Butte, and it was freely spoken of in that light." More than regional pride was at stake, however, as substantial sums were bet on the outcome. The newspaper stated that "A large amount of money changed hands on the game, as the Montana men brought with them plenty of coin and bet it freely." Reliance bolstered its team by recruiting a Stanford player and two others from its local rival, the Olympic Athletic Club of San Francisco.

A thousand fans stood in the mud to witness a 10-4 Reliance win; but the home team needed more than additional players. Butte protested the outcome, and even the referee, George B. Diggert, admitted that the referee, R.E. Ransome, who just happened to be a member of the Reliance Club, had made three egregious calls, resulting in three Butte turnovers, one of them within the 10 yard line. Diggert stated that two of Ransome's decisions were "unquestionably unfair and greatly against Butte."

The Southern Pacific Railroad offered free transport for both teams for a rematch at a neutral site in Santa Monica; but Reliance declined. Butte had to content itself with a 14-12 Christmas day win over the Olympic Athletic Club before 2,000 spectators in San Francisco. Olympic had added two Reliance players and another from Stanford for the match; but four different, and decidedly neutral officials, called an unbiased game.

Butte worked hard to improve for the 1896 season, practicing at night under the electric lights at the town's bicycle park. It embarked on a tour through the plains that included games in Colorado, Kansas, and Nebraska. It avenged its 1895 loss to Denver with a 20-0 rout; but Denver raised the issue of professionalism when it contended that Butte had used two college players as "ringers."

After a 20-6 win at Nebraska, Butte returned home for a game with Iowa State, which was engaged in a tour that covered the South and Northwest. Butte backers, perhaps aware of the team's added strength, bet that the Iowa team would not score a point. Eight hundred fans braved 2 inches of November snow and ice to watch their heroes. Much to their chagrin Iowa State managed a score on a fluke play; but Butte ran up 32 points in the first half and played its subs thereafter.

The *Butte Miner*, a local paper, remarked that "The visitors came on sedately huddled in blankets and quilts, resembling so many squaws ... good, husky sons of farmers, but not owning the matured muscles of Butte's full grown men."

The masculinity of Midwesterners sufficiently demeaned, Butte traveled westward to settle its score with California. It easily defeated the Olympics, 18-0; but, again, the opponents charged Butte with using paid professional players. A scheduled New Year's rematch occurred amidst "bad blood and viciousness on both sides." Before the game could get underway, W.F. Humphreys, president of the Pacific Amateur Association, halted the proceedings by threatening to declare all Olympic players professionals if they competed against Butte. Amateur guidelines of the day recognized any fraternization with pros as unseemly concurrence in the practice, and any competition as promoting the behavior. Labeling the Olympic team as such would not only jeopardize its ability to schedule other teams; but bring national ostracism to the club.

The argument continued for an hour before the impatient crowd hissed, jeered, and then demanded its money back. Butte finally admitted that it had at least one paid player in its fullback, Lasswell. Both sides agreed to rectify the impasse by declaring the game an "exhibition," and therefore not an official contest, a ploy that at least adhered to the letter if not the spirit of the amateur rule. Much gouging and slugging ensued throughout the game, as both teams employed "bull dog tactics" in a 14-4 win for the Olympics.

Butte lost much more than the game. Its open admission of professionalism prohibited its future ascendance as a football power. Prominent college teams and middle class athletic clubs could not chance the taint of professionalism. Butte had to content itself with games for local pride and remuneration against its nearby rival, Anaconda, which recruited players from California, Yale and Cornell by 1898.

The following year factions disrupted local unity and Butte fielded two teams. In the future its football laurels would be carried by its high school team, which played throughout the Northwest and in Utah from 1900-1915. On December 19, 1908, Butte High School hosted Englewood High School of Chicago in a game termed the "national championship;" but Englewood sealed Butte's fate in an 11-4 victory. More than a century after Montana's professional debut, the state still awaits another opportunity.