

\$500? WHY NOT?

By Bob Carroll

In June of this year a news story by Paul Pierce appeared in the *Tribune-Review*. It seems that a Mr. Paul Novak of Latrobe, PA, announced he was going to petition the town council for money to sue the National Football League. Mr. Novak planned to take the NFL to court for recognizing "Pudge" Heffelfinger as the first authenticated pro football player in 1892 instead of John Brallier who had been considered the first pro up to about 40 years ago when the Heffelfinger evidence surfaced. From what I could gather, Mr. Novak's main "proof" that the Heffelfinger story was bogus was that no one in his right mind would have paid a football player \$500 for one game in 1892 as was detailed in the ledger of the Allegheny Athletic Association. Armed with such irrefutable evidence, Mr. Novak planned to bring the NFL to its knees and force them to reinstate Brallier as pro #1.

When I read this story, my first reaction was along the lines of "Gimme a break! We settled this years ago!"

But after thinking it over, it occurred to me that Joe Bagadonuts probably hasn't read a whole lot of pro football history and so might be swayed by Novak's theory. Lord knows, in this age of instant polls, it's more important to have an opinion than to know any facts.

Anyway, in my never-ending tilting at windbags – uh, wind mills, I penned this explanation. I didn't send it to Mr. Novak because I had no interest in entering into a debate, so I sent it to Reporter Paul Pierce.

June 15, 1999

Paul Pierce
c/o Tribune-Review
Cabin Hill Drive
Greensburg, PA 15601

Dear Mr. Pierce:

I enjoyed your story (June 14, [Football Fans Cry Personal Foul](#)) in the *Tribune-Review*, even though most of what Mr. Novak had to say was pure nonsense. I've studied the history of the game for more than 40 years, and such stories usually depress me. It's discouraging to see someone lecturing from ignorance after all these years. I'm not bothered when someone, even a staunch pro football fan, knows little about pro football's early years. After all, pre-NFL history is at best an acquired taste. Although I've written tens of thousands of words about those long gone days, I'm not surprised to learn that someone hasn't been interested enough to read them. What bothers me are the people who purport to know the real story and with their every word prove that they don't even know the outline.

It seems like every year a couple of these uninformed stories appear in one publication or another. They are the urban legends of football. One of the most common is how the NFL stole the 1925 championship from Pottsville; another one declares the NFL was actually formed in 1919 rather than 1920. A whole flock of legends surround such figures as Jim Thorpe and Ernie Nevers. Virtually every yarn proves false after subjected to investigation.

In most of these spurious cases, the advocate is armed with a few facts and a lot of fiction. He captures the ear of some reporter who quite understandably has little background in early pro history. Convinced, the reporter becomes an accomplice and misinformation spreads. What I liked most about your news story is that you didn't get caught up in advocacy. You simply reported what Mr. Novak said. Good for you!

Of course even the experts can be wrong. That I am an editor of *Total Football*, an author of several books on pro football history, an occasional columnist for *Pro Football Weekly*, and the executive director

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of the Pro Football Researchers Association does not insulate me from error. But, in this case, I feel I'm on solid ground.

Tony Novak's contention that the \$500 paid Pudge Heffelfinger by the Allegheny Athletic Association in 1892 is "preposterous" simply shows how little he understands the situation. He seems to base his assertion on the difference between John Brallier's \$10 and Heffelfinger's heftier fee.

In 1895, as Latrobe YMCA prepared to play its first-ever game, it learned that its regular quarterback would be unavailable because of a schedule conflict. Brallier had played a few games for Indiana University in '94 although he was not enrolled as a student there. He was preparing to leave for his freshman year at Washington & Jefferson. At first Latrobe offered only expenses to pinch-hit for the unavailable quarterback but then sweetened the pot with \$10, a useful sum for a young man just starting out in life. Although Brallier was known to be competent, he had not yet demonstrated that he was so talented as to insure a Latrobe victory. Furthermore, with a game crowd of only a few hundred anticipated, there was not a lot of money to waste. Wagerers often chipped in to raise money for ringers, but with this being the first game of a new team and having no established rivalry, betting should have been light. Ten dollars was a reasonable sum to spend for what amounted to a last-minute substitution.

Afterward, Brallier made no attempt to hide that he'd been paid, Why should he? Washington & Jefferson and West Virginia University (which he later attended) were both known to employ footballers on their varsities who had earlier won their professional spurs. As a matter of fact, near the end of the decade, Walter Camp advised the "pure" Eastern schools to forego scheduling W. & J. as it was a professional team.

Three years before Brallier's windfall, the Allegheny Athletic Association versus Pittsburgh Athletic Club tilt was the most important football game played in western Pennsylvania in 1892, or for that matter during the entire decade. Small wonder that the money involved was far greater than that involved in Latrobe in 1895.

Athletic clubs were an important social institution at the time. They constituted the entry into society for young, upward bound executives. They fielded teams in a number of sports such as track, baseball, gymnastics, and rowing. Everyone wanted to be associated with a winner so the clubs that had the strongest teams, particularly in the most popular sports, tended to have the largest and most influential memberships. And the wealthiest members.

As the '90s began, the P.A.C. had a definite advantage in that it possessed a modern gym. The newer A.A.A. was still raising money to build a clubhouse. To grab public attention, the Three A's put a football team on the field, a first in western Pennsylvania. Under the leadership of lawyer O.D. Thompson, who had played in the same backfield as Camp at Yale, the Three A's took on athletic clubs from Cleveland, Detroit, and other cities and held their own. Late in the 1890 season, the P.A.C. tried its hand at football but quit after one game. The A.A.A.'s football success increased their membership.

In 1891, the Three A's had less success. Meanwhile, the P.A.C. went undefeated but with a far softer schedule. Naturally, the P.A.C. lobbied for a game with the A.A.A. O.D. Thompson, realizing he had nothing to gain and much to lose by such a meeting, avoided a game but was roundly criticized in the press. The public was primed for an 1892 meeting.

However, nothing was resolved by the first game between the two which ended in a tie. The public's interest in the second game, set for November 12, went up several more notches.

Things began to happen. In the first game, the P.A.C. had pled an injury to their regular center and received permission to use a non-clubmember named "Stayer" in his stead. The newcomer was identified as a "friend" of the P.A.C. quarterback. After the game, "Stayer" was revealed to be A.C. Read, the captain and regular center for Penn State. Although the A.A.A. could not prove that Read had received any inducement to perform for the P.A.C. other than a chance to breath Pittsburgh's smoke, they had their suspicions. Furthermore, it was pointed out that the P.A.C.'s athletic director, a tower of strength in the P.A.C. line, received a higher wage during football season although his teaching load did not increase. Most A.A.A. members were convinced that their rivals had already crossed over into professionalism. Then it was learned that P.A.C. bigwigs were trying to convince Pudge Heffelfinger to take a trip to Pittsburgh.

Heffelfinger was anything but an unknown quantity. He was, in fact, regarded as the best football player in the world. Three times an All-America at Yale – such teams were not picked until his sophomore year – the 200-plus-pound Heffelfinger was bigger than most players at the time, as well as faster and stronger. Nominally a guard, he more or less invented running interference, was impassable on defense, and occasionally terrified opponents by slipping into the backfield and running with the ball. After graduation from Yale, he took a job with the railroad in Omaha but was soon recruited to play football for the Chicago Athletic Association. For his efforts, he received “expenses.” No one has ever seen his expense account but it must have been a gem.

Heff turned down the P.A.C.’s entreaties. Rumors swirled, but nothing was definite until he came out on the field in an A.A.A. uniform on November 12, 1892. How much was it worth to the Three A’s to put him in that uniform? At stake was far more than bragging rights. A victory for the Three A’s would make them the top athletic club in the area. The resulting membership increase would not only raise the club’s status, it would also swell the club treasury. Any money to be gained by game attendance would be dwarfed by the revenue produced in new memberships. The new clubhouse was in sight.

There was a further reason that winning was important. Wagers. A victory by the Three A’s would bring a bonanza to many members’ wallets. Or at least it seemed that way up to game time. The P.A.C. refused to take the field against Heffelfinger unless all bets were cancelled. That, of course, was not expected when the Three A’s braintrust was deciding how much to pay Heffelfinger.

How “preposterous” was the \$500? Not a bit.

And, even with the huge payment to Heffelfinger, the attendance at the game brought the Three A’s a nice profit of \$621.

Although Mr. Novak contends that the Three A’s ledger is a fake, one has to question whether he has examined the pages himself. The ink has turned brown. The signature at the end is that of O.D. Thompson. Yes, these things can be faked, but one doesn’t usually make such a declaration simply because the evidence is inconvenient.

What cannot be faked is some of the stories that appeared in Pittsburgh newspapers in the week after the game. Several team members were reported as quitting because their side had employed a professional. One A.A.A. club member stated that Heffelfinger had been paid. P.A.C. members insisted this was true. The figure of \$500 was proclaimed. Admittedly, they too had brought in a ringer, but he was only promised a job.

This wasn’t Heffelfinger’s only bit of professionalism. By 1896, the Three A’s practice of hiring players had finally doomed them. Under investigation by the A.A.U., there was little doubt what the result would be. The club would be declared *persona non grata* and find itself unable to schedule any other A.A.U. member in any sport. All but the “football people” quit the club. The footballers decided to go out in a blaze of glory. They took the club treasury, hired an outside cadre of stars including Heffelfinger and brought them to Pittsburgh for two games, back-to-back, against the leading local athletic clubs. It is believed the eleven stars received \$100 for each game.

On Tuesday, November 10, the A.A.A. stars defeated the Duquesne Country and Athletic Club 12-0. The next day, they smashed the P.A.C. 18-0. Then, with the Three A’s treasury empty, the players went home. For those two games, the Three A’s team fielded the first all-professional lineup. The next year, Latrobe had an all-paid team for the entire season (although some question whether all of the subs were actually paid).

Heffelfinger kept his professionalism a secret. He had come out of the Ivy League where as late as the 1930s former players were still being actively discouraged from turning pro. Also, a revelation of professionalism would have lessened his chances of finding a coaching job with a reputable college. As it turned out, Heff wasn’t a very successful coach anyway, but by the time he ceased to hanker after such a position, he was locked into his non-professional stance. Where Brallier and Lawson Fiscus who were not nationally known received attention and honor in the 1930s-40s by admitting their early professionalism, Heffelfinger would have faced uncomfortable questions from the press about what amounted to false claims of amateurism.

So was Heffelfinger the first pro? Highly unlikely. In the years before 1892, athletic clubs in New York and New Jersey used many questionable tactics to remain "amateurs." A favorite was to award a player a game trophy in the form of a watch. The player could then take the watch to a designated pawn shop where he could pawn it for \$20. Later, he would sell the pawn ticket to one of the club's officers for another \$20. The next week he'd receive the same watch as his new game trophy. It seems only logical that somewhere along the line a club skipped the supertuge and just handed over the cash. Obviously, there never was any record of such a transaction.

There may have been a hundred or more pros before Heffelfinger, but he is the first one for whom we have a written record – the first *verified* pro. It is likely that the A.A.A. ledger is legitimate, but even if it should somehow prove a forgery, many historians believed that Heff had been paid *before* the ledger was discovered. The contemporary newspaper stories are, after all, as strong proof of Heffelfinger's professionalism as is Brallier's unverified account proof of his. Of course there is no reason to doubt Brallier, but when someone such as Mr. Novak begins tossing around unsubstantiated charges, who knows how many reputations may be be tarnished?

Perhaps the most astounding assertion made by Mr. Novak comes near the end of your article. "It's like Christopher Columbus. Even though we know better, he still carries the designation of the man who first discovered America." Someone should point out that Columbus only carries that designation among those who *don't* "know better." What is this? A plea for ignorance?

Nearly as laughable is his suggestion that the entire 1897 Latrobe team be inducted into the hall of fame in Canton. Before he begins deciding on inductees, Mr. Novak might look into why actual enshrines have been honored. He also might note that the NFL does not name people to the hall which has an independent selection committee made up of media types and no – *no* – league delegates. Incidentally, neither John Brallier nor Pudge Heffelfinger have been enshrined.

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, but in this case, the littler the knowledge, the more dangerous the thing becomes.

Sincerely,

Bob Carroll

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Apparently the Latrobe city council didn't see a whole lot of merit in Mr. Novak's proposed suit. At least, I haven't seen any mention of it in the local press. Gosh, it might have been this week's Trial of the Cenury!