

Dave Berry and the Philadelphia Story

The Very First N.F.L.

By PFRA Research

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When the Steelers won Super Bowl IX, the chroniclers of pro football nearly wet themselves in celebrating Pittsburgh's first National Football League championship. What few of the praisers (and probably none of the praisees) realized was that the 16-6 victory over Minnesota actually gave Pittsburgh its SECOND N.F.L. title.

Of course, anyone can be forgiven such an historical gaffe. After all, that first championship came clear back in 1902. And almost no one noticed it then.

Or cared.

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Throughout the 1890's the best -- and sometimes the only -- professional football teams of consequence was played in southwest Pennsylvania: in Pittsburgh and nearby towns like Greensburg and Latrobe. By the turn of the century, Pittsburgh's Homestead team was fully pro and frightfully capable -- so much so that it could find few opponents able to give it any competition. Apathy set in among the fans. The team was too good. The Homesteaders always won, but so easily that they weren't a whole lot of fun to watch. After bad weather compounded the poor attendance in 1901, the great Homestead team folded.

The baseball team was great fun to watch. The Pirates were the best in baseball, just like Homestead had been tops in pro football. But the Pirates lost occasionally. There was some doubt when they took the field.

Pittsburgh, in 1902, was a baseball town.

After a decade of watching losers on the diamond, Smokeville fans had become captivated by the ball and bat game. The Pirates, with Honus Wagner performing a magic act at shortstop, were the biggest thing since Jumbo. They won the 1901 pennant easily and repeated in 1902 by a whopping 27 and one-half games! They hit, pitched, fielded, and ran better than anyone else around, with no fewer than three future members of baseball's Hall of Fame -- Wagner, manager and left fielder Fred Clarke, and pitcher Jack Chesbro -- doing regular duty.

Pittsburghers had two good reasons to flock out to Exposition Park, near present Three Rivers Stadium, to watch the Bucs. First, of course, they were so good watching them was like eating ice

cream in bed. Second, no one knew when they might be stolen away.

Baseball had a real war on its hands in 1902, a fight perhaps not as bloody as the recent Spanish-American conflict but no less bitter. The National League had been cock-of-the-baseball-walk for twenty-five years when Ban Johnson and a bunch of upstarts up and started the rival American League in 1901. After a few salvos of "fair play for all" and "big enough for both of us" platitudes, both leagues got to work and began stealing each other's players like Jimmy Valentine stole hearts. A rumor that a local hero like Bones Ely, the Pirates' shortstop before Wagner, had signed to play for the other league could almost crowd the assassination of President McKinley out of the headlines.

As a matter of fact, one of the prime reasons for Pittsburgh's 1901 success was that the Pirates had barely been touched by the pirates from the American League. But rumors were flying around Pittsburgh one year before the Wright brothers flew around Kittyhawk, and it was awfully hard to care about football when Wonderful Wagner might be spirited away at any moment.

Curiously, pro football's first league was born out of the bitterness of the baseball war. And, like the unnatural offspring of a cursed union in a Greek play, the first National Football League was doomed from the start. But that sort of thing never stopped the Greeks, and it couldn't stop Dave Berry.

It took him a while to get into it, though. Things began 300 miles east in the City of Brotherly Love.

In Philadelphia, the baseball war was particularly intense. The American League Athletics lured several of the N.L. Phillies from their contracts, only to lose them again through court action. When Phillie owner Col. John I. Rogers decided to bankroll a football team, a new battlefield opened up.

It was just the opportunity a soldier-of-somebody-else's-fortune named Charles E. "Blondy" Wallace needed. Besides being a 240-pound, former Walter Camp second-team All-America tackle, Blondy was also an operator of the snake-oil school. According to one football history, he ended up as "King of the Bootleggers" in Atlantic City. But his coronation was far in the future. In 1902, Blondy was just a former Penn U. lineman looking for a sinecure to ply his trade. Like a shot, he hiked himself over to Ben Shibe's

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office to find out what the A.L. Athletics' owner planned to do about this new Phillie football team.

Shibe allowed that anything the Phillies could do, the A's could do better. Blondy batted his blue eyes shyly and reminded the owner how he'd played some pretty good football at Penn. And was available.

Shibe agreed to finance a team -- with Blondy as coach -- to challenge the Phillies new gridmen. But Ben was nobody's fool, least of all Wallace's. As manager of his team-to-be, with on-the-spot say-so in all money matters, Shibe tapped his baseball team manager -- tall, spare, and incorruptible Connie Mack. What Connie knew about football might have been written with a blunt laundry marker on his high, starched collar, but no one ever accused him of playing fast or loose with either Ben Shibe's teams or Ben Shibe's money.

Blondy didn't have all that he'd hoped for, but he figured half a loaf was better than a kick in the fanny. He set to work, under Mack's watchful eye, signing the best football beef available. The Phillies had a headstart, but Blondy and Connie soon caught up. Both rosters began to look like a Philadelphia Who's Who in Football.

Meanwhile, both teams cast envious eyes west across the Alleghenies toward the apex of the 1902 pro football world. Shibe and Col. Rogers knew that the Philadelphia football championship would make for useful bragging rights in the baseball war, but, if they could beat Pittsburgh, they could claim the World's Championship.

That was even better. So, they called Dave Berry.

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Their timing was excellent.

In Latrobe, where Berry made his fulsome reputation as a willing pro football promoter, things were winding down. When arch-rival Greensburg quit the gridiron after 1900, Latrobe became a Yin without a Yang. Early in September of 1902, Dave took a train east to talk to the Colonel and Ben. He knew full well that those puddings in Philadelphia couldn't kick a football or a face like a hairy-chested Pittsburgh team, but he thought there just might be an honest buck to be made from an intercity rivalry.

In Philly, Berry agreed that when he returned to Pittsburgh he'd put together the remnants of the great Homestead team, the '00 and '01 champs. Then, his team and the two Philadelphia clubs would play a round-robin schedule for the title of World Champion. To make it all sound important, he and Shibe and Rogers called their agreement the National Football League. Of course, it was as national as the Pennsylvania state line, what with only two cities fielding teams, but, to give the founders their due, they tried to get New York and Chicago involved.

At least, they asked them if they wanted to play.

New York and Chicago said: "Don't call us; we'll call you."

Shibe and Rogers got along like a mongoose and a cobra, so they elected Dave Berry president of their glorious three-team league and went back to sticking pins into each other's dolls. President Dave went back to Pittsburgh. In mid-September, only a couple of weeks before the opening of the season, he revealed to a less-than-breathless press the advent of the National Football League.

Pittsburgh blinked and went back to putting padlocks on Honus Wagner.

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A few people wanted to know where the money was coming from. Certainly Berry didn't have the bucks to cover the salaries of top pros all by himself. Suspicion fell on William Chase Temple, the steelman who'd formerly backed Homestead and who was still an officer with the Pirates, and Barney Dreyfuss, the Pirate owner. Both denied any connection, and Berry insisted he was flying solo. No one believed that then or now. There had to be Pirate money behind the football team, but apparently Berry did make the decisions.

Right off, Berry made a serious tactical error. He alienated many potential fans in Pittsburgh when he decided to have his team train in Greensburg. It did no good to explain that in leasing the Greensburg Natatorium for October and November he was presenting his team with the finest set of training accommodations any gridiron group had ever sweat at. It was pointless to point out that a reading room was available so that minds as well as muscles could be improved or that each player would have his very own locker or even that the large swimming pool permitted a bracing dip before and after practice. Even the benefits of Greensburg's clear, country air failed to impress Pittsburghers who were, after all, used to breathing stuff you could tie a string around.

As far as the fans were concerned, Berry had deserted Pittsburgh and deprived them of the fun of watching practices for free. In those horse and buggy days, the forty miles to Greensburg cut most of them off from the team as effectively as if Berry's minions had trained on the moon.

Then, he compounded his error by announcing he'd actually play a couple of games in Greensburg. His team would come into Pittsburgh only for what he hoped would be big-money games. To some fans that marked them as no more than a bunch of carpetbaggers. The Pittsburgh *Press* insisted on calling them "the Greensburg team".

Fortunately, Dave Berry built his team better than he built his public relations. For his coach he hired Willis R. Richardson, a former Brown University All-American who had quarterbacked the great Homestead team of the previous year. Richardson, who earned his All-American status by running 103 yards for a touchdown against Princeton, cemented the QB position and also brought along the respect of other former Homestead players, many of whom signed up immediately.

Although names like Datz Lawler, Indian Artie Miller, Doc McChesney, Bob Shiring, P.J. McNulty, Herman Kerchoff, John Lang, and Clark Shrontz mean nothing to the modern fan, they

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were the cream of the young men playing football for pay in 1902. With good reason, Berry's team was quickly christened the "Stars." The handsome young man Berry hired to play fullback had a reputation considerably more national than the Pittsburgh-Philadelphia National Football League. New York Giant pitching ace Christy Mathewson was well started on a career that would see him notch 373 victories. Along with Pittsburgh's Wagner, he would be one of the first five inductees in baseball's Hall of Fame. But he was also a former Bucknell fullback, renowned as one of the best punters ever to apply foot to spheroid.

The whole "league" was a curious mixture of baseball and football. Baseball clubs sponsored two of the teams for certain, and both of those were led by the baseball managers, Mack being in charge of the Athletics and Bill Shettline bossing the Phillies. On the Pittsburgh team which probably was also baseball-sponsored, Mathewson had a baseball mate in the backfield in Fred Crolius, who'd played several games in the Pirates' outfield that summer.

The most unlikely football-playing baseballer was the Athletics' star left-hander, Rube Waddell. When in the mood, he could throw a baseball better than anyone in the world, including Mathewson, but he wasn't always in the mood. Newspapers of the time charitably referred to Waddell as "eccentric." Actually, he ranked somewhere between "screwball" and "nutsy." He was a flake's flake.

Waddell showed up late for games because he was too busy playing with kids in the street. He missed trains because he went to the circus. He came in after curfew because he'd followed a shiny, red fire engine to a blaze. Sometimes he helped fight the fire. Training was a joke to Rube, but manager after manager found his antics so unfunny that he shuffled from team to team until he finally landed in Philadelphia with Connie Mack.

Using a Solomon's mixture of firmness and patience, Mack turned the Rube into a great pitcher, but fun and frolic were never far from what passed for Waddell's mind. When this football thing opened up, Connie saw a chance to keep his star in line for a few months more and maybe get him back in one piece by the next spring. He signed the lefty on as an extra lineman.

Waddell allowed as how he'd rather be a halfback.

"You are a guard," said Connie firmly.

Blondy Wallace was delighted. As long as Mack watched Waddell, he'd stay out of Wallace's blond locks. Research has failed to find Waddell's name in any lineups or game accounts but Wallace may have let the lefty into a few games when the score was safe. Regardless, it was no secret to anyone but Waddell that the Rube was there to watch and, more important, be watched.

With all the baseball involvement, training didn't get underway for the football teams until September 29; the season was scheduled to open October 4! However, most of the players were already in shape. Besides the baseball players, many of the others had jobs that kept them in good condition. For example, Pittsburgh halfback Indian Artie Miller came in after a summer's lumberjacking in the Wisconsin woods.

Then, too, they didn't need any time to learn new plays. There weren't any.

Football was a much simpler game in 1902. A half dozen plays were about all any team ever used, and they were all standard, brute force being considered superior to trickery.

The forward pass would not be made legal for four more years. In its place, teams sometimes resorted to a play called the "quarterback kick." The team lined up in a T-formation with the quarterback a yard or so behind the center, rather than snug up behind him as in today's T. At the snap, the quarterback took the ball and immediately punted it downfield. Everyone who had lined up behind the quarterback was eligible to recover the ball, so the backs ran downfield like commuters after the last train, trying to beat the opposition to the pigskin. By placing it carefully, a nifty quarterback like Willis Richardson could "complete" his kick more often than not.

Other than this Neandertal pass, most of the plays looked like cavalry charges. Everyone ran and smashed and pushed and pulled the runner. No rule said that seven men had to be on the line of scrimmage so guards and tackles often dropped into the backfield to use their weight as ball carriers.

Only five yards were needed for a first down in 1902, but a team had only three downs to make the yardage. Two evenly matched teams could run at each other for a whole half and never make the necessary five yards.

All this made the punter -- always the fullback except on the "quarterback kick," -- the most valuable man on the team. The best way to score was to kick the ball deep and hope for a fumble. A booter like Mathewson could shine brighter than Teddy Roosevelt's teeth.

October 4 came and went, but the season didn't open in Pittsburgh after all. Rain fell on the north side Coliseum where Berry had chosen to play the Stars' games, and the contest was cancelled. In those pre-television days, it was common to cancel or postpone games when the weather turned bad, but a false start in the very first game didn't endear the Stars to Pittsburgh fans.

Be that as it may, the team got an extra week's practice in perfecting plays like the flying-guards-back-and- everybody-run-like-hell-at-the-tackle-to-see -what-breaks.

The Stars finally got into action on the next Saturday, there being no Sunday sports events in blue-lawed Pennsylvania. The Coliseum was still a mud trough, but the team waltzed through the Pennsylvania Railroad Y.M.C.A. to the tune of 30-0. It was a fine showing for the Stars, but the crowd was miniscule. Only 750 showed up and fewer than half of them paid.

Wagner and the Pirates could have drawn a bigger attendance to watch them lick postage stamps. Dave Berry was disappointed, but he diplomatically spent a post-game interview lauding the glories of his team and ignoring the inglorious crowd.

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An oddity was that, for this game and for all games played by the Stars in Pittsburgh, the field was the wrong size. In 1902, a normal football field was 110 yards long with the midpoint falling at the 55-yard line. It's a length still used in Canadian football. But the Coliseum had been decked out for bicycle racing with a wooden track completely encircling the field and cutting off the ends. As a result, the Stars played on an "undersized" 100-yard gridiron.

According to some, the choice of the Coliseum proved that Berry's Stars were backed financially by William C. Temple. Temple was the proprietor of the Coliseum but he continued to deny he had any part in the football team. Those who figured Dreyfuss as the backer were surprised that the team hadn't scheduled its games for Exposition Park, the Pirates' home.

As the season progressed, Pittsburghers began to take some interest. The Stars were just too good to be ignored. In their first six games, no opponent crossed their goal line. Meanwhile, Berry's boys never scored fewer than three touchdowns in any game. Sometimes they played local semi-pros like the Cottage A.C. and the East End A.C. Sometimes they played colleges. Christy Mathewson had the mixed pleasure of helping to beat Bucknell, his old school, 24-0, in the season's third outing.

It wasn't uncommon for pro teams and college teams to play each other in those days. No one thought much about it until a few years later when the colleges decided that their pristine amateurism could somehow be contaminated if their players associated with athletes who took money over the table.

Besides, the pros usually beat the college kids badly.

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Dave Berry's hopes for the box office wonders of an intercity rivalry seemed justified when the Phillies came to town in early November. Nearly 4,000 fans -- an excellent crowd -- showed up at the Coliseum to watch the Stars dump the Philadelphians, 18-0.

At this time, Christy Mathewson disappeared from the Pittsburgh team. One theory is that the New York Giants got wind that their star pitcher was risking life and right forelimb for the Stars and ordered him to stop. There is, however, an alternate theory that holds that, flushed with success, Coach Richardson made a fatal error. The team had done so well on offense that Christy Mathewson's punting skill was seldom needed. Richardson decided to replace him in the line-up with a pile-driving fullback named Shirley. The new fullback, Shirley Ellis, was a local boy built like a stack of steel ingots. When he ran with the ball, he was harder to knock down than a 7-10 split, but he couldn't punt like Mathewson. That fact cost Pittsburgh a ball game.

On November 8, the Stars went to Philadelphia to play Connie Mack's Athletics. In the first half Pittsburgh scored two touchdowns but failed to cash either extra point. The Athletics also got a TD and added the point. Until 1912 a touchdown counted only five points, so the score at the half stood 10-6. However, the A's were not content to be the first team to score against the Stars; they added a second-half field goal -- also five points, the same as a touchdown.

Under modern scoring, the game would have been a 12-10 Pittsburgh victory. In 1902 scoring it was 11-10, Philadelphia.

Had Pittsburgh scored either extra point, it could have avoided defeat. But no one blamed Quarterback Richardson for missing the kicks. The fault was in Coach Richardson's choice of fullback.

In those days, the PAT was often a real production number. It had to be kicked from a point straight out from where the ball crossed the goal line on the TD. If the angle was bad -- the goal posts were on the goal line -- the scoring team's fullback punted the ball out into the field from behind the goal line. The extra point man had first to field the punt-out, and then, kick from where he'd caught the ball. If the fullback couldn't give the kicker good field position, he didn't stand a chance on his try. Ellis was no Mathewson, and both tries failed.

Local fans were shocked at the Stars' loss. It was unheard of that a champion Pittsburgh pro team should ever lose. The Pittsburgh *Leader* ran a story showing that once, years before, it had happened, but no one was satisfied.

It got worse. Two weeks later, the Stars went back to Philadelphia and lost to the Phillies, 11-0.

A few loyalists wanted to drape the city in black, but the coal dust had beaten them to it. Most of the populace forgot they'd been momentarily stirred when the Stars were winning. Well, they sniffed, THEY weren't going to support any two-time losing carpetbaggers from Greensburg!

Maybe Berry's bunch had never really had a chance for Pittsburgh's approval. But, if they had, like so many Pennsylvania maidens, they lost it in Philadelphia.

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The one big football draw in Pittsburgh was Washington & Jefferson's Thanksgiving Day game. Berry tried to talk W. & J. into playing his Stars on Turkey Day, but the college wouldn't buy it. For one thing, they were miffed that Dave had scheduled Penn State for an earlier game on the same date that the Presidents had scheduled them. Penn State solved the problem by cancelling both games. That just made W. & J. more angry with Berry.

But Dave figured he still had a strong attraction when he booked Connie Mack's Athletics for the Thanksgiving date. He still had faith in the intercity rivalry gimmick.

On top of that, he could bill the game as being for the championship of the National Football League. The Athletics had split on the season with the Phillies, as had Pittsburgh. Although a Philadelphia victory on Thanksgiving would give the A's the championship hands down, a win by the Stars could tie the league race tighter than a toper on Saturday night.

Mack readied his A's for the big game by playing an exhibition tour through northern Pennsylvania and southern New York. In Elmira, the Athletics joined in the first night game in pro football history. Lights were set up along the sidelines and giant searchlights glared

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from behind the goal posts. Connie's team was nearly blinded, but they won easily.

Mack worried more about losing Rube Waddell than any football game. Elmira was the home of one of the biggest manufacturers of fire engines, and the Rube was sorely tempted to remain among the glittering machines when the team was ready to leave. It took all of Connie's persuasive powers to talk Rube onto the train. When they finally pulled into Pittsburgh, Connie breathed a sigh of relief. The end seemed to be in sight.

The night before the big game in Pittsburgh, Connie spotted Rube sneaking into the hotel long after curfew. Holding his temper, he gave Waddell a firm but kindly talking to that left Rube tearfully contrite and promising to behave forever. Then, as the big pitcher turned to go quietly to do penance in his hotel room, a loaded pistol dropped out of his pocket and went off. The bullet missed Connie's head by inches.

The next day at the Coliseum, Connie may have had a moment when he wished the bullet had been better aimed. When he arrived at the field, one look told him most Pittsburgh fans had gone to the W. & J. game. Dave Berry had guaranteed Mack \$2,000 to get him to come to Pittsburgh. With the stands almost empty, Connie had visions of being stranded and broke in Pittsburgh.

With Rube Waddell. Mack ordered his team to stay on the busses. Unless he was paid first, Connie announced, he wasn't going to play.

But the money wasn't there. William Temple was a noted local sportsman second but a noted local businessman first, and he'd already attached every cent of cash for stadium rental. So, for about an hour, the A's sat on their busses, the Stars stood around on the field, and the fans -- what few there were -- wished they'd gone to the W. & J. game.

At last, a distinguished looking visitor walked up to Mack.

"Why the delay?"

"I am waiting until I see if I am going to get my guarantee."

"What is your guarantee?"

"Two thousand dollars."

"If that is all, I'll give you a check."

As the well-dressed man began scribbling in his checkbook, Connie figured he'd just met Rube Waddell's crazier uncle. Then a newspaperman called Mack aside and explained that the "nut" was Willim Corey, head of Carnegie Steel, and the Mr. Corey's check was as good as the Bank of England's. Probably better.

Connie limply ordered his team onto the field, swearing he never expected to see a fan who would pay \$2,000 to see a game.

Corey got his money's worth if he liked evenly matched games. Both teams played at their best and sweated to a scoreless tie. It

was a fair verdict, but Dave Berry's "championship game" hadn't decided anything.

Quickly, he got together with Mack and they hastily arranged another "championship game" for two days later on Saturday. Then he sat down with his players and explained that he couldn't pay them because Temple had all the money. But, he promised, they would all share equally in Saturday's game, which was sure to be a sell-out. After some grumbling, everything was set.

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The crowd was a little better on Saturday, but not much. About 2,000 fans showed up, and the Pittsburgh players knew before the game began that they were going to come up short at pay time. Still, they gave their all. Only, for a long time it looked like their "all" wasn't going to be enough.

The teams fought and scratched and bit and bumped and crunched and crashed back and forth across the 50-yard line. With less than three minutes left, neither team had yet been able to score a point. Everyone was about resigned to another tie.

Then lightning struck. A Philadelphian fumbled a punt at his own eight-yard line. Pittsburgh's Clark Schrontz was on it like a cat. It took four plunges for the Stars to move from the eight to the two-yard line, but they gained a first down in the process. Then Richardson handed off to Ellis, and his faith in the local boy proved justified. Shirley disappeared into a pyramid of players between tackle and end. For a second the A's line held; then, with a crash, Ellis was through and across the goal.

It wasn't quite the Immaculate Reception, but Frank Merriwell would have been proud.

The last minute proved anticlimactic. After Richardson kicked the extra point, the Stars got the ball back again. Once more they punted, and once more the A's butterfingered the ball. This time, instead of falling on the ball, Schrontz kicked it into the end zone. Indian Artie Miller was there to recover it for another touchdown.

When the whistle blew a minute later, the Stars had won Dave Berry's championship game, 11-0.

After that everything faded away like the ancient newspaper clippings that carry the story.

The Pittsburgh players were too busy suing W.C. Temple for their Thanksgiving Day money to do much gloating over their victory. At that time, athletes in the courtroom weren't considered big sports news as they are now, and the story disappeared from the newspapers before the suit was settled. Most of the players tried it again with Franklin or Canton or Massillon in the next few years. They played for some strong teams, but none of those outfits were champions of any sort of league.

The Pennsylvania edition of the National Football League went the way of the passenger pigeon. It was an idea whose time hadn't come.

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The Philadelphia Athletics went home and beat the Phillies to wrap up second place. It was a nice win and gave them the city championship, but that's all it was; the season had ended in Pittsburgh the week before. It didn't even mean as much to the baseball team in bragging rights as Ben Shibe had hoped for; by the next spring, the baseball war was over.

After a while the A's players decided that maybe the Saturday game with the Stars could be explained away as an exhibition. Maybe it didn't count and they were really the champs. Eventually, they managed to convince themselves and enough other people that their yarn even found its way into a few record books.

But the facts didn't back them up.

They had agreed to that season-ending championship game the Saturday after Thanksgiving, and they had lost it. As for the extra game against the Phillies, they could have played a hundred because the league standings were reckoned as of that last tangle in Pittsburgh. These showed all three teams with two wins and two losses in games against each other. However, Pittsburgh had by far the better point ratio, scoring 39 points to their opponents' 22. Both the Athletics and the Phillies gave up more points than they scored in their league games.

That was enough for Dave Berry.

He declared positively and without reservation that his Stars were the National Football League champions for 1902.

And, after all, he was the league president.

From the *Pittsburgh Leader*, November 28, 1902:

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| | Pittsburgh 11 | Athletics 0 |
| LE | Schrontz | Baeder |
| LT | McNulty | Pierce |
| LG | Kerchoff | McFarland |
| C | Shiring | Sweet |
| RG | Lawler | Kingdon |
| RT | Lang | Wallace |
| RE | Poe | Merriam |
| QB | Richardson | Hewitt |
| LHB | McChesney | Cure |
| RHB | Crolius | Reiter |
| FB | Ellis | Davidson |

Substitutions: Steinberg for Reiter, Schafer for Pierce, Miller for McChesney, Weir for Hewitt, Deems for Davidson

Touchdowns: Ellis, Miller
Goal from Touchdown: Richardson
Missed Goal from TD: Richardson
Missed goal from field: Cure
Time of Halves: Twenty-Five
Minutes each

Referee: Dr. William Farrar (U.of P.)
Umpire: R.N. Hockenberry (Syracuse)
Timers: Maxon for Pittsburgh
Lang for Athletics
Linesmen: Martin for Pittsburgh
Schafer for Athletics
Time of Halves: Twenty-Five Minutes each