

Ditto

1923

By PFRA Research

Somewhere along the line, the loving cup donated by the Brunswick-Balke company in 1920 for the champion of the league had disappeared. At the annual league meeting, held at Chicago's Sherman House on January 20, 1923, the Canton Bulldogs were awarded a pennant and eighteen gold footballs to signify their 1922 championship. The footballs were not to exceed \$10 each, and the pennant had a maximum price tag of \$37.50.

Although the owners enjoyed Chicago enough to vote that all future meetings should be held there, no earth-shaking decisions were made on this trip to the Windy City. Teams that had not posted their \$1,000 forfeit fee for the 1922 season had their franchises cancelled. Since that involved teams not carried in the league standings for over a year -- Muncie, Cincinnati, New Haven, Detroit, Cleveland, Tonawanda, Washington, and New York -- the status quo was not affected.

Equally unsurprising was the re-election of Joe Carr, John Dunn, and Carl Storck as league president, vice-president, and secretary-treasurer.

Three new applicants for membership -- Duluth, Davenport, and St. Louis -- found their pleas tabled until the June meeting. Davenport, in effect rejected for a second time, gave up the chase.

Two teams officially changed their franchise names. Minneapolis, Vice-President Dunn's team, became the "Marine Football and Athletic Club Incorporated," probably indicating some new financing. The Packers became the "Green Bay Football Incorporation" when local businessmen bailed out Curly Lambeau. Realizing the value of a pro team for civic pride and as an advertisement for their town, the merchants arranged a \$2,500 loan to pay off outstanding debts. Then, in a revolutionary move, the Packers were made a public non-profit corporation. For a mere \$5, Packer backers could buy a share of their team and get a season's pass to all home games thrown in. By the time the season opened, the team had \$5,000 in the bank, making them one of the league's most solvent teams.

Certainly the Packers were in better financial shape than Leo Lyons and his Jeffersons. At the January meeting, Rochester's \$800 claim against Washington was referred to the Executive Committee.

A great deal of time was spent haggling over an allowable number of free passes teams could give out. Passes to newspapermen brought a return in advertisement; passes to cronies and pals gave an owner some ego return on the money he was losing by supporting a local team. But passes earned the visiting team

nothing. The moguls settled on 100 passes for all games except in Chicago where 200 could be given out. They also voted to admit kids under 16-years-old for 50 cents.

Because teams sometimes showed up in virtually identical uniforms, a committee of "Babe" Reutz, "Dutch" Sternaman, and Veep Dunn was set up to clear up the confusion. The membership would vote on each team's colors.

Just before the meeting adjourned at ten that night, it was decided that a team must play at least seven games with seven different members to be carried in the standings. More than anything, this figured to aid the weaker teams -- the ones that seldom played more than a few games against league opponents. By forcing major teams like the Bears to play a variety of opponents, the small fry hoped to share in a good gate or two.

Hay Leaves

As summer arrived, the situation in Canton took an unexpected turn. Ralph Hay announced that he did not care to manage the Bulldogs anymore. His asking price for the team was \$1,500, which, after a great deal of hand-wringing, the Canton businessmen who were expected to ride to the rescue decided was about \$500 more than the 1922 champions were worth. Things were still up in the air when Hay and Guy Chamberlin left for Chicago to represent the Bulldogs at the league's summer meeting. For most of the two-day meeting that opened July 28, the moguls considered money -- getting and saving. After Duluth, St. Louis, and a new Cleveland team were admitted to membership, the franchise fee was boosted to \$500 which had to accompany any application. To help stock the new teams, the other managers were instructed to hand over a list of free agents from their clubs by the meeting's end.

In addition to the new franchise fee, annual dues went up to \$140 paid in quarterly installments. This would go toward covering the new salaries of President Carr and Secretary Storck, set at a princely \$1,000 apiece.

Clubs permitted 200 free passes were expanded to include Cleveland, St. Louis, Buffalo, and Milwaukee. The league's "small towns" were still restricted to 100. Visiting teams were to receive 40 percent of the gross receipts, minus 15 percent for park rental, making those extra free passes critical in places like Akron and Canton. No one actually said so, but many clubs felt they were getting a short count on visits to certain towns, with some paid-for tickets being counted as freebies.

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The maximum guarantee to be paid the visitors for games not played or poorly attended was set at \$1,200 plus \$100 for traveling and hotel expenses so long as a team's total salaries came to \$1,200. If the league records showed the payroll to be lower than that, a team only had to pay what was on record. Obviously, league salaries were no longer a spiraling problem. Those who'd attended the frantic meetings of 1920 must have taken some satisfaction in that. However, a suggestion that all players in the league be assessed two dollars for "registration" was withdrawn. Probably everyone realized that such a move would come off as just too chintzy to justify the approximately \$500 it would bring in.

The regular statement about the use of college players came in a somewhat different form. President Carr announced that not a single complaint about such a practice had been received during all of 1922.

No closing date for the end of the season was set, but before they left Chicago the moguls settled on a September 30 opening date.

When Ralph Hay returned to Canton, he unloaded the Bulldogs on a group of local businessmen who formed the Canton Athletic Company to run the team. In his four years as owner, he'd brought two national titles to Canton, gained a lot of publicity for his Hupmobiles, and lost a ton of money. And, though it's often forgotten, he was the single most important individual in getting the league off the ground. The Canton A.C. listed eighteen stockholders included H.H. Timkin of Timkin Bearing, Guy C. Hiner of the Canton Bridge Company, and restauranter Ed E. Bender. Guy Chamberlin stayed on as coach, assuring the team of success on the field. Success at the gate was not nearly so likely.

It seemed there were always entrepreneurs to be found who had faith in the future of pro football. Sometimes things worked out.

Sometimes they didn't.

Bulldogs Boom

Guy Chamberlin's Canton Bulldogs turned the 1923 championship race into their personal recital, occasionally being tested but never being found wanting. By rolling through their second undefeated season in a row, the 'Dogs proved beyond argument that they rated the designation "Dynasty." They had only got better since 1922.

The rather ordinary backfield of '22 became an efficient and versatile crew. Tailback Lou "Hammer" Smyth came into his own. A strong runner, Smyth's 205 pounds gave him the bulk to bowl over opposing linemen, and he was quite effective as a passer. Although he completed only about one out of four, he could hit the long one's, averaging better than 20-yards per completion. He led the league in both touchdowns rushing and touchdown passes thrown, matching the odd record Jimmy Conzelman had put together the year before. He may also have tied for the league lead in intercepting opponents' passes with six, but no official statistics were kept.

Fullback Wallace "Doc" Elliott was the best in the business when he was healthy. And, when injuries knocked Doc out of a couple games, rookie Ben Jones from Grove City took over with no loss of efficiency. Between them, the two fullbacks scored a full dozen touchdowns.

Elliott, Jones, and Smyth provided power running. Speed came from returnee "Tex" Grigg at wingback, and blocking backs Harry Robb and "Wooky" Roberts. The 'Dogs seldom found a foe they couldn't run through, but on those rare occasions when they needed it, they could run around their opponent.

Although the backfield was much improved, the strength of the team was still its brilliant line. The opportunistic Chamberlin held down one end. An inspirational leader, he could block and catch passes as well as any end in the league, but on defense he was head and shoulders above any other NFL flanker. "Bird" Carroll at the other wing wasn't quite in Chamberlin's class as a defender -- no one was --but he certainly ranked among the top half-dozen ends in football.

Future Hall of Famers Wilbur Henry and "Link" Lyman gave the Bulldogs an unmatched pair of tackles. Large and capable, they made running inside against Canton a waste of time. Both had plenty of speed for pursuit on defense, and were sometimes used as surprise pass receivers on offense. In an odd record, both tackles caught touchdown passes during the season.

Henry did most of team's kicking. Although he was no "Paddy" Driscoll as a field goal kicker, his total of nine was only one short of "Paddy"'s league-leading mark. Henry also added 25 extra points, not surprisingly the NFL's top total considering the Bulldogs' high-powered offense. As a punter, Wilbur was consistent but also capable of an occasional mammoth blast.

Guard "Duke" Osborn was only a stutter step behind Henry and Lyman as a quality lineman. Rookie Rudy Comstock of Georgetown moved into the regular lineup at the other guard slot and established himself for a long NFL run. Another NFL rookie -- albeit 29 years old -- Larry Conover took over at center to give the Bulldogs the best pivot in their long history. Ancient "Dutch" Speck and rookie Joe Williams were capable, if seldom used, subs.

This crew could block with anyone and on defense proved more impenetrable than a shelf of Russian novels. Only nineteen points were scored against the 'Dogs all year, and twelve of those came on field goals.

The Bulldogs opened the season with three straight shutouts at home, popping Hammond, Louisville, and Dayton by an aggregate 84-0. Neither the Hammond Pros nor the Louisville Brecks had ever frightened any team of consequence, and the once-proud Dayton Triangles completely collapsed in 1923, so the trio of easy wins served mainly to warm up the Bulldogs for more important games.

Their first big challenge came on October 21 when they went to Chicago to take on Halas' Bears. The Bruins had a powerful line -- nearly the equal of Canton's -- that included tackles Hugh Blacklock, Ralph Scott, and Hall of Famer Ed Healey, guards Hunk Anderson and Hec Garvey, and center George Trafton, returning from a year of coaching. Halas, at 28, was still a strong end, and versatile "Duke" Hanny, a rookie from the University of Indiana, gave good service at the other flank.

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The Bears' backfield had slipped a little from the year before. Rookie Johnny Bryan had his moments and "Dutch" Sternaman could still be depended upon, but "Dutch"'s brother Joey had taken his all-pro act to Duluth and "Pete" Stinchcomb had gone home to Columbus. As a consequence, Chicago was unable to score a touchdown in its first three games. The defense held things together and provided a pair of 3-0 victories with the points thanks to "Dutch" Sternaman field goals. They had, however, dropped their opener to Rock Island by the same 3-0 count.

The Bulldogs all but knocked the Bears out of the race by handing them another loss, but it was far from easy. Defense kept both sides scoreless until the final quarter. Finally, Hammer Smyth connected on a few passes to get Canton within field goal range. Wilbur Henry obliged with a pair of three-pointers to make the final 6-0.

The Bears also lost tackle Blacklock for the rest of the season with a broken leg. After four games, the Bears had one of the strangest records ever: no touchdowns scored, no touchdowns allowed, but no ties.

Canton came home perhaps a bit overconfident. Their opponent for the next week -- the Akron Pros -- bore no resemblance to the champions of 1920 and should have been a soft touch. Only 2,500 Canton fans showed up for the expected "laughter." Any chuckles were all by the Akronites for most of the day. With only five minutes remaining, the Pros led 3-0 on triple-threat Al Michaels' 25-yard dropkick field goal. At that point, Wilbur Henry -- who'd earlier missed three field goal tries for the 'Dogs -- showed that his punting was still on the beam as he blasted one 85-yards and out-of-bounds at the Akron one!

Akron's return punt went only to the 40, but with the clock running out, it was desperation-pass time for the Bulldogs. Smyth's first try was blocked. On second down, he was rushed and nearly downed, appeared to decide to run for it, then suddenly threw far downfield to "Link" Lyman who'd lined up as an eligible receiver. Lyman caught the ball at the three and was immediately downed, but on the next play Jones drove over for the touchdown. Henry's extra point made the final score 7-3.

Still undefeated, but breathing hard, the Bulldogs went back to Chicago to take on the surprising Cardinals. "Paddy" Driscoll and Company hadn't beaten anyone important in October, but they'd finished the month with five victories and nary a loss, allowing only a single field goal along the way. "Paddy" had handed the coaching reins over to Harvard's Arnold Horween this year, and freed of that responsibility, he was enjoying one of his best seasons. He would go on to lead the league in scoring with 78 points and in field goals with ten.

In the first quarter, as 6,000 cold and wet fans huddled through a rainstorm, "Paddy" garnered one of his fielders on a 47-yard dropkick. Canton couldn't get untracked for the first three quarters - - a replay of the previous week -- and once again they used Smyth's passing arm to win in the final period. A couple of completions moved the 'Dogs in close, and then the Hammer took it over himself for the TD. As usual, Henry booted the extra point, and again Canton had escaped 7-3.

Both Chicago teams were out of the race; the Bears were saddled with a pair of losses and the Cardinals could only split their remaining six games. The Bulldogs hadn't lost since 1921. On November 11, they had their closest call.

This time the scene was Buffalo, but the script was dreadfully familiar. The All-Americans took the usual 3-0 lead in the first quarter, and the Bulldogs huffed and puffed to no avail for three periods. Came the fourth quarter and it was time for the 'Dogs to wake up and score. But Buffalo was playing for keeps and time kept running.

With only two minutes to go, the All-Americans held both a 3-0 edge and the football at their own 22-yard line. A single first down would make the Bulldogs' undefeated streak history. Three times the Buffalo backs slammed into the line, but all they could get was four yards. Quarterback "Tommy" Hughitt went back to punt as the clock dipped inside a minute.

The ball was snapped; Hughitt stepped and swung his leg. Suddenly Guy Chamberlin flew in front of him. Boom! Blocked punt! Wilbur Henry covered the ball at the eleven. 32 seconds remained.

A modern team can throw four passes in 32 seconds, but under 1923 rules an incomplete in the end zone was a turnover. The Bulldogs couldn't chance that. Smyth tried the line but could get only two yards. The clock kept ticking. Henry dropped back to the 25 in kick formation. He took the snap and calmly dropkicked a field goal to tie the score. The game ended on the ensuing kickoff.

The Bulldogs had struggled on offense for a month, coming closer and closer to losing each week. But, with the tie at Buffalo, it seemed as though they said, "Enough of this fooling around. Let's wrap this up." The remainder of the season was a cakewalk.

Jim Thorpe had an embarrassing homecoming before 5,000 Canton fans, as his old team -- the Bulldogs -- destroyed his new team -- the Oorang Indians -- by a 41-0 score that could have been worse. The Canton *Daily News* allowed that Guyon and Thorpe played well, and that Jim could still punt, pass, and hit the line, but that "his speed is gone." Thorpe played the full schedule for his team this season until he was sidelined for the last two games by an ankle injury. Guyon, on the other hand, only joined the club for its final four games.

On November 25, the Bulldogs took the short trip to Cleveland to face what was technically an undefeated team. The new Cleveland Indians had struggled to three wins and three ties against very ordinary competition. Coach Howard "Horse" Edwards, a former Bulldog, had put together a respectable defense but almost no offense at all. They'd posted five shutouts to open the season but had to settle for three scoreless ties and only two wins. Their most recent win, a 9-3 edging of Columbus, was not calculated to strike fear in the hearts of the Bulldogs. Nevertheless, a reasonably close game was anticipated in view of the demonstrated Cleveland defense, and about three times as many fans showed up at Cleveland's League Park as would have been in Canton's ball yard under the same circumstances.

They saw the Bulldogs at their best.

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Elliott bulled over for three touchdowns, Smyth got a pair, and Grigg and Robb each scored once. It all added up to a 46-10 romp. Cleveland's lone consolation was John Kyle's touchdown run, the only six-pointer the Bulldogs gave up all season.

After that, it was only a matter of playing out the string. The Toledo Maroons, 1922's surprise contenders, were hosted and roasted for Thanksgiving, 28-0. Buffalo, possessor of the only tie against Canton, saw the real Bulldogs when they came to town on the next Sunday, leaving 14-0 losers. The league season ended in Columbus, as the 'Dogs coasted to a 10-0 win, but Canton took a victory lap through the east on the next weekend. On Saturday, December 15, they went to Philadelphia to take on the Frankford Yellow Jackets. The Jackets had inherited some of the old Philadelphia Quakers' players and were easily the strongest non-NFL team of 1923. Canton's 3-0 win on a Henry field goal didn't count in the league standings, but it was a more impressive victory than some of the games that did. The next day, the Bulldogs ran up to Atlantic City to finish the season with a 27-0 topping of the Melrose A.C.

Esthetically, the Bulldogs were purebreds; financially, they were mutts. Ralph Hay had gotten out just in time. The Bulldogs attendance at home wasn't much more than that shown in other comparable cities with poor teams, and it was nowhere near what could be found every Sunday in Cubs Park. Canton fans had shown in 1920 and 1921 that they wouldn't support an ordinary team; in 1923 it looked very much like they wouldn't support the best team in the world. The 'Dogs were a fine draw on the road, and always welcome in a rival park, but few important teams were interested in coming to Canton for a game where the best they could hope for was the minimum guarantee.

The Best in Wisconsin

It's interesting to note that the idea of forming a pro football league had been led by Canton, in part, to protect the Bulldogs' place at the top of the pro football heap. After four years of league play, the Bulldogs were securely on top in the standings, but financially they were lagging behind many of the newcomers.

The other members of the "Ohio League" weren't doing all that well either. The Massillon Tigers, of course, were only a dim memory. The Akron Pros and Dayton Triangles were scraping the bottom of the league standings with attendance figures that would soon make them road teams only. Columbus had reorganized as the "Tigers" in 1923, replacing most of the Nessler's with younger players. The result had been a winning season against weak competition but not much improvement at the gate. Toledo, after two years, had pretty well proved it couldn't support a pro team. Only in Cleveland had there been a glimmer of major league attendance figures, but the team was boring and not very strong. Historically, that was death in Cleveland.

While the Ohio clubs were struggling, some other areas were doing well. Both Chicago teams finished successful, if not championship, seasons. Wisconsin also had a pair of strong teams.

Under Coach Jimmy Conzelman, the Milwaukee Badgers managed a winning record that included a pair of ties against the Bears and a victory over the Cardinals, all in Chicago and all in December. Conzelman was his own best player, but he had some

help from Hal Erickson, a first rate wingback, and plunging fullback Erling "Dinger" Doane.

Two Milwaukee losses were to "Curly" Lambeau's Green Bay Packers. Lambeau had put together a strong club that included veteran linemen "Cub" Buck and "Jug" Earpe in the line. He handled most of the offense himself, featuring more passes than other league teams. The Green Bay *Press-Gazette* published play-by-plays of all Packer games this season, giving modern fans some insight into what the league's most successful passing attack looked like in 1923. Over a ten-game schedule, Lambeau threw 118 passes for 43 completions, a mere 36.4 percentage. He gained a respectable 752 yards, with his favorite receiver being blocking back Charlie Mathys who caught an amazing-for-the-time 33 tosses.

The real sour note in Lambeau's passes was his 17 interceptions against a mere three touchdowns, marks that would put any modern quarterback in the unemployment line. However, two factors must be remembered in evaluating those apparently sad statistics. First, the rule that made a misfire in the end zone a turnover discouraged passes in close. A team was even more likely to throw to a receiver at the ten than risk hoisting the ball across a goal line. Obviously, such a rule cut deeply into TD pass totals. Secondly, the high interception total (a 14.4 percent!) was not viewed in 1923 as the same disaster it would be sixty years later. Many of them were long, third-down "Hail Mary's" that served the same purpose as punts. Lambeau didn't have the modern worry of turning out impressive statistics so he would be armed to negotiate his next contract.

Lambeau, the passer, needs no defense for his throwing. He was one of the better throwers in the league, competing with a still-primitive weapon within a context of unfriendly rules. The most important thing to remember about the strategy devised by Lambeau, the coach, is that it succeeded. The Packers' fine won-lost mark in 1923 was only the beginning of a streak of winning records that would take Lambeau-coached Packer teams to six NFL championships.

All-NFL - Green Bay Press-Gazette

In addition to play-by-plays of Green Bay games, the *Press-Gazette* began in 1923 a poll of sports writers around the league to choose an all-NFL team. The poll would become annual, and eventually, the selectors would include league officials and coaches. In 1931, the league would legitimize the poll by making it the "Official" All-League team.

The 1923 selections were a little surprising and seem to represent a desire on the part of the sports writers to spread the honors around. Most all-pro teams tend to fill up with players from the top teams, but this one seems to bend over backwards in the opposite direction:

First Team

Ends: "Inky" Williams, Hammond; Gus Tebell, Columbus.
Tackles: Ed Healey, Bears; Wilbur Henry, Canton.
Guards: "Swede" Youngstrom, Buffalo; "Bub" Weller, St. Louis.
Center: Harry Mehre, Minneapolis.
Quarterback: "Paddy" Driscoll, Cardinals.
Halfbacks: Jim Thorpe, Orang Indians; Al Michaels, Akron.

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Fullback: "Doc" Elliott, Canton.

Second Team

Ends: Guy Chamberlin, Canton; "Duke" Hanny, Chicago Bears

Tackles: "Duke" Slater, Rock Island; Russ Hathaway, Dayton

Guards: Frank Morrissey, Buffalo; "Hec" Garvey, Chicago Bears

Center: Larry Conover, Canton

Quarterback: Jim Conzelman, Milwaukee

Halfbacks: Harry Robb, Canton; "Curly" Lambeau, Green Bay

Fullback: "Dinger" Doane, Milwaukee

While these were all good players, Williams, Weller, Mehre, Thorpe, and Michaels all played on losing teams with a combined record of 6-30-5. Meanwhile, the Bears gained only one position and neither Green Bay nor Milwaukee were represented at all. Canton, the best team, could gather only two slots.

All-NFL - Collyer's Eye

The first installment of another long-running All-NFL team was published in *Collyer's Eye*, a Chicago tabloid devoted to sports coverage. The *Eye* would continue end-of-season picks through the 1930's, often with a "guest expert," such as "Red" Grange. The 1923 selections were made by editor E.G. Brands:

First Team

Ends: Guy Chamberlin, Canton; Luke Urban, Buffalo

Tackles: Wilbur Henry, Canton; "Duke" Slater, Rock Island

Guards: "Swede" Youngstrom; "Hec" Garvey, Chicago Bears

Center: Walt Kreinheder, St. Louis

Quarterback: "Paddy" Driscoll, Chicago Cardinals

Halfbacks: Hal Erickson, Milwaukee; "Tex" Grigg, Canton

Fullback: Hank Gillo, Racine

Second Team

Ends: "Duke" Hanny, Chicago Bears; Dick Reichle, Milwaukee

Tackles: "Link" Lyman, Canton; Elmer McCormick, Buffalo

Guards: Herb Sies, Rock Island; Stan Keck, Cleveland

Center: George Trafton, Chicago Bears

Quarterback: Joey Sternaman, Duluth

Halfbacks: Harry Robb, Canton; "Pete" Stinchcomb, Columbus

Fullback: Jack Crangle, Chicago Cardinals

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Vince Dolan, the sports editor of the Canton *Daily News* and Guy Chamberlin, the Canton coach, also picked all-league teams. Between them, they managed to name eleven Bulldogs to their first teams, even though Chamberlin omitted himself altogether and Dolan placed the Canton leader only on his second squad.