

Franklin's Hired Guns: 1903

Going to Extremes

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About 60 or 70 miles north of Pittsburgh, give or take a few thrown stones, lies Venango County, which was at the turn of the century the oil-producing center of the U.S. Nestled there is the town of Franklin, named after that wise and patriotic inventor of stoves and maxims, signer of Declarations, and flier of kites. Despite its honored namesake, Franklin is neither now nor was in 1902 the county seat. That honor is and was invested in the more prosaically named Oil City. Whether this in any way reflects upon the values of the citizenry of Venango County is a matter for speculation.

At any rate, as is usual in these situations, jealousy crackled between the two towns. Oil City was bigger, more up and coming, and had money the way Newcastle has coal. Franklin was smaller, less brash, and had even more money. Franklin liked twitting Oil City better than it liked new gushers. Oil City responded unkindly in kind. Naturally, the rivalry bubbled over onto the football field.

Neither side was at all shy about backing its athletes when it came to wagering on the winner of the annual gridiron meeting. However, for a long time, both sides avoided the kind of wholesale bidding war for players that had bankrupted the famous Pittsburgh pro teams of the 1890s. Either city could have hired France to play halfback and had enough left over to pay the waterboy better than the President of the United States. But, the most each side did until 1902 was bring in an occasional lone outsider to give it a competitive edge. Everybody did that.

Thanksgiving Day, 1902, changed things.

The betting was extra heavy. This was the third meeting of the teams in 1902 and the rubber game.

Franklin waited on its gridiron with its normal lineup of local athletes, plus a hired end named Hill to add a measure of stardom to its group. Nothing unusual there. No one could complain about Hill. Undoubtedly, Oil City would bring an import of its own.

Yes, that was him leading the team onto the field. But, who was that behind him? And behind HIM?

The Franklin players gaped as a truckload of towering strangers trooped onto the field. They were all wearing Oil City uniforms!

Oil City had gone out and hired the entire team from the East End Athletic Association in Pittsburgh, plus seven of the Philadelphia All-Stars, and also players from Steubenville, Grove City College, and just about anyplace that had a football player who could pull on a knee pad without herniating himself. In all, there were 28 football stars of various magnitudes assembled for the single purpose of

thoroughly thrashing the Franklin team in that single Thanksgiving game. Some of the Franklin people paid off their bets before the opening kickoff, but the Franklin team had a go at it. Aided by a muddy field and the inevitable lack of teamwork peculiar to hastily gathered all-star elevens, the regular Franklin team-plus-one accomplished a minor miracle in losing by a mere 10-0.

Franklin folk grumbled about fair play as they paid off their bets. The Oil City slickers pointed at Hill, said something self-serving about beating the devil at his own game, and laughed all the way to the bank.

Well, they sure put one over on old Franklin!

One Franklin backer, a certain General Miller, decidedly did not like having one put over on him! General Miller had more dollars than General Electric has clocks. The sharpies from Oil City, had they not been busy gloating and counting their winnings, might have noted that the General fell into a quiet, earnest conversation with Bill Prince, the Franklin manager.

The Trap Is Set

P.T. Barnum said there was a sucker born every minute, and the Oil City people must have figured that every one of them had migrated to Franklin over the winter of 1903. Those poor fish just couldn't wait to risk their money on the next fall's football match. Oil City obliged joyfully. Eventually, an amount to the tune of \$20,000 was deposited in escrow in a local bank. It represented the largest, but by no means the only, bets.

We'll think of something, the Oil City folks told each other confidently.

But, when it came time to recruit their 1903 football team, they found that the cupboard was bare as a baboon's behind. Every time they approached a footballer of repute they got the same answer: "Sorry, but Mr. Bill Prince already signed me up for Franklin."

Franklin hadn't just stolen a march; they'd stolen the whole race. Heeding the wisdom found in the almanac published by its famous namesake, Franklin had decided that the early bid catches the football player. Indeed, Bill Prince had begun only two days after the '02 Thanksgiving game. On Saturday, when the Pittsburgh Stars and Philadelphia Athletics played in Pittsburgh to decide what amounted to the pro football championship of the world, Prince was a more than interested observer. As soon as the game ended, he hustled around and signed up every important player in sight.

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Over the winter, Prince added to his store of football talent, and, by September, he had every "name" player in western Pennsylvania under lock and key.

General Miller had hired himself a football team like the cattle baron in the classic western scenario hires fast guns to fight his battle with the sheepherders. One can almost imagine an Oil City sheepherder moseying over to the Franklin ranch and coming back to report: "Them varmints is still thar!"

Of course, in the movie version, comes the final shootout and all the sheepherders turn out to be John Wayne. But, in the Franklin-Oil City script, the herders from O.C. turned out to be sheep.

Who could blame them? They couldn't make bricks without straw or play football games without football players. About the only bodies left to them were the unseasoned, the untalented, the uninterested, the halt, the lame, and the blind.

With understandable discretion, if not valor, Oil City decided that 1903 was a perfect year to forget football and take up badminton. "Forfeit! Pay up!" cried Franklin.

"No team, no bets!" insisted Oil City.

September turned into October with no change in the dialog. Meanwhile, that \$20,000 sat in the vault doing no one but the bank any good at all because the signatures of both principals were required to withdraw it.

Well, one-upmanship was one thing, but \$20,000 was something else. Finally, Franklin decided to content themselves with having the last laugh rather than the dormant dough. They signed the necessary papers at the bank and everyone pocketed his own cash -- without interest.

Now What?

But, when the Franklin folk looked around, they found themselves inundated with idle football stars, all firmly expecting to play and be paid. If General Miller was going to get any return at all on his investment, Manager Prince had to get his football players cavorting on the gridiron p.d.q.

The following plaintive request found its way into the Pittsburgh Times: "Manager Prince thinks he has the best team in the business in Western Pennsylvania and would like to hear from all strong teams." Understandably, there was no stampede to communicate with Manager Prince. To any informed rival, pitting his team against the Franklin All-Stars looked like a sure way to turn his players into emergency room material.

Some of the Franklin players included Eddie Wood, who would become one of the first pros to catch forward passes when the rules were changed three years later, and Clark Schrontz, who won the "N.F.L." championship for Pittsburgh against Philadelphia in '02 with his handling of fumbles, at ends. Linemen Jack Lang, Herman Kerchoff, Pop Sweet, Blondy Wallace, and a half dozen others could turn a rival halfback into ground chuck. Backs like John Hayden, Twister Steinberg, Benjamin Franklin Roller, and Curly Davidson were quick and deadly.

Yet, by hook and by crook and by offering hefty guarantees, Bill Prince convinced ten squads to come to Franklin and be pounded into submission.

On October 21, Youngstown was edged 74 or 76 to 0. Understandably, they lost count.

The Primrose A.C. lost 28-0 as the All-Stars spent the second half punting every time they got the ball so they could practice defense. The previously unscored upon Jamestown, N.Y. eleven was scored upon to the amount of 46-0 on October 28.

On October 31, Wheeling, W.Va. rolled over, 56-0.

A week later, Ellwood City went down, 33-0. Four days after that, on November 11, the Buffalo Niagaras fell, 74-0.

Sewickly, Pa. came north with the avowed purpose of "teaching Franklin how to play football." Apparently the All-Stars were quick learners; they won the November 14 match, 45-0.

On the 18th, Syracuse was beaten, 12-0.

Allegheny College came up three days later and went home a 47-0 loser.

And finally, on Thanksgiving Day, Franklin got its shot at the East End A.A., the team that had formed the backbone of the Oil City imports the year before. Sweet revenge: 23-0.

In about five weeks, Franklin had ten wins and 400-some points. The opposition had zero, negative scores being impossible.

One More Step

The one victory that was not totally one-sided was the 12-0 besting of Syracuse in mid-November. Actually, it was the most significant victory on the Franklin list. Although they were not the same players who had won a so-called "World Series of Football" at Madison Square Garden the year before, Syracuse was still a first-rate team. They'd kept the Watertown, N.Y. Red and Blacks from crossing their goal line in two contests, and the Red and Blacks, for the third year in a row, claimed the pro football championship of the country. Franklin pointed to its victory over Syracuse as proof that Watertown's claims were as substantial as a chocolate malt diet. Watertown, however, was used to thinking of itself as the champion, perhaps on the theory that you say it three times and its yours.

Actually, the claim wasn't all hot air. Watertown had played a tougher schedule than Franklin, and, even though their fourteen-game slate showed a couple of ties, the only team to beat them was Bucknell. In a return match, the Red and Blacks had slaughtered the college boys.

Most important, the majority of the prestigious eastern football experts recognized Watertown as the champs and had done so for three years.

There had been a ruffle of criticism in 1902 when the Red and Blacks refused to risk their status in the Madison Square Garden football "World Series." But, when three Watertown backs joined

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the all-star team that Syracuse sent down and then helped them win handily, Watertown's honor was restored.

Instead of ignoring the 1903 "Series," Watertown jumped into it with both feet. They volunteered as sponsors of the tournament and even put up \$2,000 in prize money -- \$1,250 for the winner and the remainder for second place -- confidently expecting to carry the lion's share back home.

The Garden planned a bigger tournament than the year before. A second series of games was added, with local teams playing for the championship of New York City. There would also be Gaelic football and a high school all-star game. In all, fifteen games were scheduled over six days.

The main matches, those for the U.S. independent (non-college) championship, involved Watertown, the Orange, (N.J.) A.C., the Oreos A.C. of Asbury Park, N.J., and Franklin. Syracuse was invited again but begged off.

For General Miller, the tournament was a chance to recoup some of the dollars he'd invested in football players. The prize money was small potatoes and would go to the players, but the General knew that New York would be knee-deep in Watertown backers looking to bet on their favorites. He packed a suitcase with greenbacks and headed for Gotham. Others who had seen the Franklin All-Stars in action did the same.

A Wonderful Town

The '03 tournament was set for mid-December.

Preparing the Garden for football was a huge job. The six-day bicycle races closed on Saturday night. Before the crowd was out of the arena, workmen began ripping up the track and floor. On Sunday, 500 loads of dirt were dumped and spread across the surface. The 1902 field, which had been laid out on the earth under the floor, had been criticized as "sticky and holding." Then, on Monday morning, a huge steamroller came in and packed everything down. During the afternoon, the yard lines were laid out and the goal posts were set in place.

By Monday night, December 14, the field -- one-third smaller than a regular gridiron -- was open for business.

Although a nice crowd of 2,000 showed up for the first night, the tournament was not a success. Greater audiences than the year before had been expected, but the novelty had worn off. Significantly, the largest audience was on Saturday afternoon for the high school all-stars.

Those fans who came saw some interesting football through the week.

The Olympic A.C. defeated two foes to win the New York City title. Ft. Hamilton and Ft. Totten battled twice to scoreless ties, playing for the "championship of New York Harbor." The Gaelic football fans saw two fine games and enjoyed explaining what was going on to the uninitiated.

However, the main issue to be settled was between Watertown and Franklin.

On opening night, Watertown had more trouble than expected with the Oreos before winning, 5-0. Franklin was able to top Orange by only 12-0 the next evening. No one could prove that either team held back so as to "sucker" rival bettors, but both sides were encouraged by the other's showing. All day Wednesday and right up to game time on Thursday night, Watertown and Franklin supporters were scurrying around Gotham to get down every last cent on their favorites.

The officials for the big game -- former Ivy League All-Americans Walter Booth, "Big Bill" Edwards, and Frank Hinkey -- added a bizarre note by showing up in full evening dress: patent leather shoes, spotless white gloves, and high top hats. More than one wag suggested that they looked ready to officiate a funeral.

They did.

Watertown's championship claims were laid to rest as Franklin ran over the Red and Blacks the way the steamroller ran over the Garden floor on Monday. The All-Stars gained almost at will. Without seeming to extend themselves, they socked away two touchdowns and could have had more, but, with the game safely in hand, they turned playful. As time ran out, they huddled and then aimed the last play of the game at Frank Hinkey, dumping the former Yale great and his tuxedo on the fresh earth of the Garden floor.

Bill Prince magnanimously paid the cleaning bill.

He could afford to. Everyone from Franklin was up to his money belt in winnings. The Wall Street News sobbed: "On account of so much money being taken out of the city by the Franklin contingent, a financial stringency is expected. We may have to look to Franklin for help."

Several Watertown men had to wire for money to get home. And, even though the Red and Blacks won the runner-up game on Saturday night, they did no more talking about championships.

General Miller and Bill Prince went back to Franklin and announced that, despite their success, they would not field an all-star squad in '04. There was no one left to bushwack, so the General unloaded his hired guns.