

Last Hurrah in Allegheny

The 3A's Exit in a Blaze of Glory: 1896

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Except for two unprecedented days in November, the top western Pennsylvania grid team of 1896 was not one of the athletic clubs. Washington and Jefferson College put together a powerhouse that numbered both the Duquesne Country and Athletic Club and the Pittsburgh A.C. among its eight victims. The Presidents' line featured an excellent guard in Bill Inglis and tough tackle Bill Theurer who was coming off three years as a regular with the Greensburg A.A. Star of the team was John A. "Teck" Matthews, an Indian from Texas. A tricky and powerful runner, Matthews would eventually play for just about every important pro team during the next ten years and play well enough that some oldtimers ranked him second only to the great Jim Thorpe in the category of Indian running backs. While at W. & J., he attended classes only during the fall, returning to Texas as soon as the football season ended. Regardless of what critics might whisper about his academic time, his moments on the gridiron were pure Dean's List, as the Presidents rolled to an 8-0-1 record.

West Virginia University also made a good impression on Pittsburgh football. The Mountaineers spent most of their season in Pennsylvania, splitting two close games with Latrobe, winning and tying against the P.A.C., and getting another tie out of two games with the D.C. & A.C. John Brallier began the season as the W.V.U. captain, having accepted the Mountaineers' offer as the best of the nine he received following the 1895 season. But, after W.V.U.'s fourth game, he returned to Latrobe because, he said, "the football management (at W.V.U.) got into financial difficulties and could not take care of their men as promised."

Even without him, West Virginia had a strong team. It included future coaching great Fielding "Hurry-Up" Yost at tackle and Thomas "Doggie" Trenchard at halfback. Trenchard, whose shaggy hair earned him his canine nickname, had already put in a full career at Princeton where he'd been named an All-America end in 1893. Officially, he was the Mountaineer coach, but no one raised any fuss about his eligibility to play.

As a matter of fact, had the A.A.U. taken a good look at either W. & J. or W.V.U. in 1896, it would have blanched. But "you get what you pay for," and both schools got good football teams.

Even Pitt, known then as Western University of Pennsylvania, showed some improvement, though it was exhibited more in keeping games close than in actually winning them. People wondered if the school would EVER come up with a good team.

Among the athletic clubs, the Pittsburgh A.C. faltered badly. They had a heavy turnover in personnel, with only four returnees from the 1895 team, but they added some veteran help. One end

position was manned by Jim Van Cleve, who'd previously performed for the Three A's and the Duquesnes. Halfback Fred Robison and fullback Charley Atherton, the former Penn Staters who'd starred for Greensburg in '95, appeared to solidify the backfield. On paper, the team looked strong.

Although they went into the season with out designating a coach, the P.A.C. started well with wins over W.U.P. and the weak Emerald A.C. and a scoreless tie at Washington and Jefferson -- the only game the Presidents failed to win all season. Then, the East Enders went into a tailspin and dropped five straight games as their offense deserted them. On October 31, Atherton had his nose broken in three places during the rematch with W. & J., a 21-0 defeat. Bill Stuart, star of the '95 team, returned to spell him at fullback for a few games, but the offense remained dormant. The team scored only one touchdown in its last seven games. George W. Hoskins, the W.U.P. coach, was put in as coach of the East Enders in mid-November. The team became less ragged but posted no wins.

The Pittsburgh *Press* editorialized: "The trouble seemed to be in the fact that many -- not all -- of the men had no personal interest in the organization. They played, not for the honor of the club, but for what they got for their services." It was not the first and certainly far from the last time the accusation would be made that pros did not play as hard for their money as did amateurs for dear old "Siwash U.," or, in this case, dear old P.A.C. More than half a century later, respected college coaches were still asserting that school spirit would take a good college team to victory over any professional team.

The *Press* went on with a more convincing explanation of the P.A.C.'s collapse: "It is an acknowledged fact that on the eve of at least two of the most important games of the season some members of the team drank and caroused until they were little fit for a contest of any kind. This kind of thing will not win out in football." The final 2-5-3 record was the East Enders' first losing mark since 1890 when they played only one game.

Out in Westmoreland County, the Latrobe A.C. had an improved team in 1896, especially after Brallier joined them. They counted Altoona among the victims in their 6-3-0 record, but two losses to archrival Greensburg marred the season.

The Greensburg A.A. had shown steady improvement for three years. This season continued the trend. Adam Wyant returned to bulwark the line. Fullback Alfred Sigman, who'd starred in both track and football at Lafayette, was installed as coach. Ross and Lawson Fiscus manned the halfback slots, and brother Newell took

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over a tackle position. The Greenies stood 5-0-0 at the end of October, with key wins over Latrobe 10-4 and the P.A.C. 14-0.

On November 14, they invaded Exposition Park to challenge the Duquesne Country and Athletic Club, the defending champions. A special train took the team and its fans to Pittsburgh. Unhappily, they saw a very ragged performance by their heroes, as the D.C. & A.C. triumphed 18-4. Greensburg newspapers focused on lack of teamwork as the cause of defeat, following what was already a time-honored partisan line that your team is never beaten by an opponent, only by your own your own errors and unfair officiating.

The next week, the Greenies returned to Pittsburgh for a rematch with the P.A.C. Heavy rain turned the field into a swamp. Despite a couple of good Lawson Fiscus runs, Greensburg couldn't slog a touchdown across, and the game ended 0-0.

The season wrapped up with the second win over Latrobe, before a crowd of 2,500 at Greensburg's Athletic Field. The game was held up an hour for a discussion of the eligibility of a former Harvard star added to Latrobe's team at the last minute. Once that was settled, the Greenies took a workmanlike 10-0 decision, highlighted by Lawson Fiscus' 35-yard touchdown dash around left end.

The final 6-1-1 mark was the best for Greensburg since they began playing football in 1890.

The Duquesne Country and Athletic Club had a turnover from its 1895 lineup similar to that of the P.A.C. Only five players returned from the champion squad of the previous year. Most of the early season was spent in finding a solid combination, as the lineup changed from game to game.

Fullback Ed Young and quarterback Floyd "Posey" Rose played well all year, but the team did not really gel until it defeated the P.A.C. 12-6 on November 3. The victory over ragged Greensburg on November 14 gave the Duquesnes the top spot among the "big four" athletic clubs, but hopes for any higher honors evaporated as Washington and Jefferson edged them 4-0 on Thanksgiving Day. The Red and Black had to content themselves with a quite respectable 6-3-1 mark, and second place among "local" grid teams.

The Three A's Last Stand

Among the athletic clubs, the 1896 grid season had the usual quota of close games, long runs, and bitter arguments, but in retrospect, everything played second banana to the magnificent last stand of the Allegheny Athletic Association.

The previous winter the Three A's received its death sentence: the A.A.U. found them guilty of employing professionals on their football team and permanently barred them from any kind of competition with other A.A.U. members. Athletic clubs fielded more than football teams, of course. The P.A.C. prided itself on its gymnasts and the D.C. & A.C. developed strong baseball teams. In their year-round sports program, the Three A's had excellent cyclists and track men. They were now barred from entering any regional or national competitions.

The club began to split apart amid angry criticism of the "football men" by the "track and cycling men." By the time the '96 grid season rolled around, about the only A.A.A. members who'd not resigned were the footballers.

At a meeting on October 27, they decided to go out in a blaze of glory. They would field a football team in defiance of the A.A.U. And it would be the best football team ever!

They chipped in their own money to make a pool with which to hire players, the club treasury being nearly empty because of resignations. But good intentions were not the same as good results. Most of the good local players had been signed by, or were loyal to, one or another of the "big four" A.C.'s. The season was half over, and some club members wondered if finding eleven good men might not be impossible for love or money -- lots of money -- at this late date.

They turned to Old Reliable -- "Sport" Donnelly.

The combative Donnelly had returned to the Chicago A.A. as coach after they apologized-and-then-some for the Crescent game slight back in '92. His home was in the Windy City, but he was popular in Pittsburgh and had good memories of his days there. The Three A's asked him if he and any of his Chicago players might be available should the price be right. To the surprise and delight of the Alleghenys, word came back that more than half of the Chicago regulars would be willing to come to Pittsburgh as soon as their team finished its traditional eastern tour. After that, the reserves could play out the remainder of the schedule in Chicago. Many of the Chicagoans were tired of the hypocrisy of their semi-pro status.

With the Chicagoans as a beginning and Donnelly hot on the trail of other stars, the Three A's went ahead and scheduled games against the D.C. & A.C. and the P.A.C. The two local clubs must have known they'd be up to their nose guards in ringers, but they couldn't have anticipated how much talent they'd have to face.

Once Donnelly had his Chicago men lined up, his next move was to contact his old pal "Pudge" Heffelfinger. The great star had spent the years since 1892 coaching out west with only limited success. "Sport" asked him how he'd like to get paid to put a uniform on again, and Pudge allowed that it would be just "dandy." Big Ed Malley was one of the Chicago players planning on the Pittsburgh expedition. Heff hadn't seen him for years and was looking forward to the reunion. He was disappointed when Big Ed changed his mind and stayed home at the last minute.

Malley was a fine tackle, but he really wasn't needed. One side of Donnelly's line came from Chicago; the other side was straight All-American. Heffelfinger was at guard, ex-Princeton Langdon "Biffy" Lea was at tackle, and "Doggie" Trenchard was at end. Both Heff and Lea were three-time All-Americans. Large "Steve" Stevenson, whose abilities were well-known in Pittsburgh, came in to play center.

Behind a line like that, the All-Grandma backfield could have gained yardage, but Donnelly didn't scrimp with his backs either. Aldrich and Graver, veteran Chicagoans, were at quarterback and one halfback respectively. To take the other halfback position, Walter Howard, the former Lehigh star, came in from Latrobe

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where he'd been playing. At fullback, Donnelly lined up George Brooke, the famous Penn All-America and one of the best kickers in the world. That left Donnelly himself to fill in wherever he might be needed.

It was a lineup the like of which had never been seen, even on the greatest of the eastern college teams. But what they were being asked to do required superhuman abilities.

First, the Three A's had scheduled the games with the Duquesnes and the P.A.C. back-to-back on Tuesday, November 10 and Wednesday the 11th. With only Donnelly to substitute, that was stretching things pretty thin. But, even worse, because of other commitments, most of the players didn't even arrive in town until Sunday, the 8th. They had only one day to practice, and most of that was spent in getting acquainted and deciding who would play where. Donnelly's team was going to do it on sheer ability or not at all.

When Donnelly's bunch took the field on Tuesday, November 10, they represented both the strongest aggregation of football talent ever to appear on a western Pennsylvania gridiron and, apparently, the first completely professional football team ever to appear anywhere. Each member of the Three A's eleven was to be paid \$100 per game for his efforts.

Their Tuesday game was at Exposition Park against the Duquesnes, certainly the harder test. The Red and Black fought gamely, aided by the inevitable miscues that a group of strangers -- even supremely talented strangers -- were bound to make. Nonetheless, the issue was never in doubt. The A.A.A. stars huffed and puffed and stuttered and stammered on offense a bit, showing their lack of practice, but no one was ever going to score on them. It all came down to how many points the A's could score. The final modest total of twelve, on two touchdowns and two goals, lost a few bets for those fans who'd expected the A's to enjoy a complete massacre of the Red and Black. On the other hand, the Pittsburgh *Press* had predicted a Duquesne win!

The Duquesne game was, in effect, the A.A.A.'s first practice; the P.A.C. game was a lark. The East Enders hadn't been scoring on much lesser teams; they certainly weren't going to dent this one. The game's tone was set at the beginning when Donnelly lined up at guard and the giant Heffelfinger dropped back to become the world's biggest halfback. The final count of 18-0 could have been much worse had everyone on the A's been serious.

For one moment, things got ticklish. A P.A.C. man caught Donnelly lying on the ground and gave him a vicious kick. No doubt the boot came in reply to one of Donnelly's usual tricks, but a foot in the side still made for an unseemly escalation. Heffelfinger sidled over to

the kicker. "I came here to play football," he said, "but if you want something else, I'm ready for that too."

The P.A.C. man eyed the hulking Heffelfinger. "Let's play football!" he gulped hastily.

Star of stars for the two games was George Brooke, the clever little fullback. He lived up to all expectations, scoring three touchdowns and all five goals for 22 points.

Unfortunately, the crowds at the two games did not live up to the hopes of the clubs. That cut things tight for the Three A's. With the going rate of \$100 per body per game plus expenses, the world's first 100 percent professional team was costing them better than \$2,500.

That exhausted the Alleghenys' financial pool. To all intents and purposes, the club ceased to exist. They'd left an incredible legacy, however. They'd had the first known pro in 1892, the first regularly salaried players in 1893, the first completely professional team in 1896, and they'd gone out -- as they wanted -- in a blaze of glory. Their final team was undefeated, untied, unscored-upon, and unparalleled in pro football history.

Some stories had Donnelly's pros touring the boondocks after their Pittsburgh success. They were pictured merrily beating teams of farmers, then sitting around all night telling tales and raising brimming glasses. Supposedly, the fun went on well into the new year with the boys always deciding to play together just one more time. It's a nice, warm legend.

The truth was more prosaic. Brooke, Heffelfinger, and Lea headed east to watch their alma maters play the season's big games. Howard went back to Latrobe. Trenchard returned to coaching and playing for W.V.U. Donnelly went out to W. & J. to lend a hand in coaching there. The other six headed for Chicago where an ironic twist awaited them.

They expected to go back and finish out the season with the Chicago A.A. After all, jumping to another team for a game or two was nothing new; almost everyone did it. They figured the C.A.A. would welcome them back with open arms. But this time, the Chicago club took the defections personally. It fired the players, claiming that they had become professionals. Righteously, the Chicago team declared it would not contaminate its wholesome, semipro lineup with the soiled presence of rotten professionals like those who had gone off and left them for filthy Pittsburgh money.

Then, the Chicago A.A. sent a telegram east, making an offer for the services of that simon-pure amateur -- "Pudge" Heffelfinger.