

Steamrollered

1928

By Bob Carroll

According to the report read by President Joe Carr at the annual league meeting, held at Cleveland's Statter Hotel on February 11 and 12, 1928, the previous season had been the greatest in attendance in league history, but you couldn't prove it in Cleveland, Buffalo or Pottsville.

Not even the magic name of hometown hero Benny Friedman had been able to make a Cleveland franchise profitable. Friedman was a big draw on the road, but the home fans stayed home. Herbert Brandt, the Cleveland owner, waited until the summer and then pulled the plug. He was allowed to sit out the 1928 season without penalty, but Cleveland wouldn't come back into the league for yet another try until 1931. By the time Brandt withdrew, Benny Friedman was deep in negotiations with a group of Detroit businessmen to reopen the Detroit franchise. When arrangements were made to play at the University of Detroit Stadium, the Detroit Wolverines replaced the Cleveland Bulldogs in the NFL.

Although details were never made public, it is possible Jim Conzelman, by now the Providence player-coach, realized a nice profit from selling a Detroit franchise that he'd probably never had to pay for back in 1925.

The Buffalo franchise, by now under the auspices of two gentlemen named Ray Weil and A.J. Lowe, had quit playing midway through the 1927 season, leaving a number of other league teams scrambling to fill an open date on their schedule. At the February meeting, Weil and Lowe asked that the \$2,500 they'd deposited in the guarantee fund be returned to them. The rest of the league had enough claims against Buffalo for its skip-out to eat up the \$2,500 and then some. With the wisdom of Solomon, the NFL Executive Committee tabled both the Buffalo request and the claims, deciding to wait-and-see just what Weil and Lowe were going to do.

At first they said they'd operate in 1928. Then they began dicking with Ole Haugsrud and Dewey Scanlon to operate the Eskimos out of Buffalo. And finally, they just sat tight in 1928, hoping 1929 would be more auspicious. Meanwhile, their money remained in the league treasury. Haugsrud and Scanlon also went on hiatus for the year. Ernie Nevers planned to help his old coach "Pop" Warner at Stanford and no NFL teams saw any reason to schedule the Nevers-less Eskimos. With Buffalo and the Eskimos out, the league was down to ten active teams in 1928. The Los Angeles Buccaneers, the road team that had played in 1926, made a try at arranging a schedule for '28 but found they were not enough in demand to put together a full schedule. In August, Jerry Corcoran, speaking for the owners, withdrew them from the league.

The old franchises from Akron, Columbus, Hammond, Hartford, Louisville, Milwaukee, and Rochester were officially cancelled. None had been able to find a buyer. There was no mention of a reprieve for the Minneapolis franchise either, but John Dunn's team returned in 1929 as the "Redjackets." Perhaps the league's vice president was accorded some special consideration.

Pottsville was another franchise in trouble. Coach Dick Rauch had to petition the league to get his salary -- \$1,625. With the retirement of Charley Berry, Russ Hathaway, and Russ Stein in 1927, the Maroons had slipped to a losing record, and the miners stopped filling tiny Minersville Park. In what turned out to be a next-to-last resort, Doctor Striegel let Wilbur Henry and the remaining players operate the franchise in '28.

Things didn't look so good for C.C. Pyle and his Yankees either. "Red" Grange, who'd completed his agreement with "Cash-and-Carry," would be out all season nursing his torn up knee. At the time, it wasn't clear that he'd ever play football again. Nevertheless, Pyle decided to have another go again in 1928. However, he had to get an extension to October before he could come up with the \$2,500 for the guarantee fund.

If half the NFL's active franchises were sick, at least half were in reasonably good health. That, in itself, was a phenomenon never known before.

Divine Providence

In 1928, the NFL's New England outpost was the Providence Steam Roller. Organized as a professional team in 1916, the Steam Roller played a schedule of games mostly against New England independent teams before joining the NFL in 1925. In three league seasons the team had a 19-17-3 NFL record, while continuing to play several non-league New England rivals each year. Team ownership and management was shared by sportswriter-lawyer Charles Coppen, former judge James E. Dooley, and realtor-promotor Peter Laudati.

The Steam Roller's home was the Cycledrome, located near the Providence-Pawtucket city line. The stadium sat approximately 10,000 spectators in an oval of bleachers surrounding a wooden banked cycle track. This wooden track, steeply banked around the turns and flatter on the straight-aways, enclosed just enough ground to fit a football field, with some slight problems. The track, equipped with seats and a bench for the players on each side, ran so close to the sidelines that players tacked near the boundary line frequently caromed into the front row of seats. One end zone extended a regulation ten yards, but the other end zone went only five yards before the banked track cut across it. The Cycledrome

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had an intimate ambiance, so that all the seats, priced at \$2, \$1.50, and \$1, were actually good seats from which to view a football game. The dressing quarters for the players were less agreeable. The dressing room used by the Steam Roller players had been built with a couple of bicycle racers in mind, so that a football team of 18 men found the room cramped, with only two showers at their disposal. But even that beat the accommodations for visiting teams, who had no dressing room at all. Players for the guest team had to dress at their hotel, come to the stadium, then return in uniform to the hotel to shower and change.

The place had a simple scoreboard, a no-frills press box, and a small area for parking, which was more than adequate for the number of cars on the road in 1928.

The Steam Roller players assembled at the Cycledrome for their first 1928 practice on Monday, September 17, under the direction of player-coach Jimmy Conzelman. For his per game salary of \$292, Conzelman not only coached the team but also played quarterback in the single-wing formation, calling the plays, blocking, and receiving passes, but infrequently passing or running with the ball.

The star and glamour player of the squad was tailback George "Wildcat" Wilson, who had earned a national reputation as an All-American in 1925 at the University of Washington and had joined the Steam Roller in 1927. He ran powerfully and passed well, but he earned his nickname with his spirited play on defense. His only fault was moodiness, but that was not enough to prevent the Steam Roller from paying \$375 per game, an exorbitant sum in an era when most players received \$100 to \$150 per game.

The leaders in the line were center Clyde Smith, an All-Leaguer from Cleveland despite his modest weight of 180, and stocky tackle "Gus" Sonnenberg, who'd come from Detroit with Conzelman. Sonnenberg was a famous professional wrestler in the days when grappling was a legitimate, albeit slow and often boring, sport.

The Steam Roller led off its season with a strong 20-7 win over the Yankees before a crowd of 5,000 at the Cycledrome, but the next week lost to the Frankford Yellow Jackets, 10-6. Three more wins followed against less than top competition: the Triangles, Yankees, and Pottsville Maroons. Unfortunately, Conzelman tore up his knee at Yankee Stadium and was sidelined for the rest of the season.

The Other Contenders

Meanwhile, the 1927 champion Giants struggled through October to a 3-2 record. They got as far as 4-1-2 in early November, then nosedived to five straight losses. The Giants' problems were many. "Hinkey" Haines retired and his replacement, former Yale star Bruce Campbell fell flat. Although Haines returned after a few games, he didn't play up to his 1927 level. Neither did Jack McBride, who was injured much of the time. The impregnable defense of the championship year, became suddenly porous. Chuck Corgan had died, Al Nesser was let go after four games, and others were injured or over-the-hill. There were reports of discension, but whether that was a cause or an effect of the decline is unclear.

The Bears also slipped in 1927, as age began to encroach on skills. The Packers, with a strong, young lineup, got off to a slow

start with two losses and a tie in their first three games and were never able to make up the ground.

With the pre-season favorites out of the picture, the championship race entered November as a three-way duel among Providence, the resurgent Frankford Yellow Jackets, and Benny Friedman's Detroit Wolverines.

The Wolverines' players were essentially those who'd led the league in scoring in 1927 as the Cleveland Bulldogs. Their 1928 incarnation was still the NFL's top scoring machine, but it suddenly misfired on a long weekend in early November. On Saturday, the 3rd, the Yellow Jackets held Friedman in check while blitzing the Wolverine defense for a 25-7 Frankford win. After the game, Detroit headed for Providence.

Interest in the upcoming visit of Friedman led Charlie Coppen to install 500 extra temporary seats in the Cycledrome to accommodate an expected overflow crowd that never materialized. A threat of rain held the audience to 8,500. The Wolverines arrived in town weary from their effort against Frankford the day before. The Steam Roller, on the other hand, was boosted by the presence of Conzelman, who came out of the hospital on Thursday to coach the team from the sideline on crutches.

A good Providence pass rush, led by stubby guard Jack Fleischman, kept Friedman off-balance, and the first half boiled down to a punting duel between "Wildcat" Wilson and Detroit's Ossie Wiberg. Providence drew first blood in the third quarter when Wilson hit rookie halfback "Pop" Williams on the run for a 45-yard touchdown pass. "Curly" Oden, a local favorite and brilliant kick returner, scored the extra-point on a drop-kick. The Steam Roller continued its pressure and choked off the only Detroit drive in the final quarter on the 13-yard line. The game ended with the score 7-0.

The win left Providence tied for the league lead with a 5-1 record. Frankford stood 5-1-1, and the Wolverines slipped behind at 3-2. Although Detroit went 4-0-1 the rest of the way, they had been knocked out of the race.

As usual, Frankford had scheduled more games than anyone else, taking advantage of the law against Sunday games in Philadelphia to play Saturdays at home and Sundays on the road. The Jackets had a strong line led by a trio of tackles: longtime favorite "Bull" Behman, veteran "Bub" Weller, and player-coach Ed Weir, one of the greatest linemen ever turned out by the University of Nebraska. Fullback Wally Diehl and tailback Charley Rogers handled the majority of the running, with the passing done mostly by quarterback Ken Mercer and sub-fullback "Hust" Stockton.

On the weekend of November 10 and 11, Frankford moved in front in the league race with back-to-back wins over Pottsville. The first game was a strange affair that saw the Maroons intercept eight Yellow Jackets passes, seven tossed by Stockton, yet lose 19-0. The Jackets picked off four Pottsville passes for a game total of 12. On the same weekend Providence also put up back-to-back wins, but their opponent was Pere Marquette, a Boston independent team, so the wins didn't count in the standings.

The Big Weekend

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The key to the season came the next weekend, when Frankford and Providence squared off home-and-home. Coach Conzelman and his squad took a Friday afternoon train to Philadelphia, stayed overnight at the Hotel Adelphia, and traveled by train Saturday morning to Frankford Stadium in a Philadelphia suburb. A good crowd estimated at better than 8,000 turned out to watch the confrontation between the seasoned Yellowjackets and the up-and-coming Steam Roller. Both clubs prided themselves on tough forward lines and stubborn defenses, and the first half of the game turned into a bitterly-fought scoreless duel.

The first break of the game came in the third period. With the ball on its own 20 yard line, Providence decided to punt. The Frankford line broke through and blocked Wilson's kick. Weir recovered it behind the goal line for a touchdown. Although the extra point failed, the 6-0 lead appeared impregnable against the Frankford defense.

But late in the fourth period, the Steam Roller benefited from a Frankford mistake. A poor punt gave Providence the ball on the Frankford 25-yard line. With the front line blocking effectively, the Steam Roller charged to the end zone on seven straight running plays, with Wildcat Wilson carrying for all but two of the yards. With time very short, "Curly" Oden attempted a drop-kick for the extra point, but drove the ball just under the crossbar. The clock ran out shortly thereafter, and the two teams had a 6-6 tie and many bruises to show for their troubles.

After relaxing for a few hours, both teams boarded sleeping cars on a midnight train back to Providence. The Yellowjackets played weekend doubleheaders as a rule, but the Steam Roller players most likely felt the wear-and-tear of extended action. They'd played two games the weekend before, battled the first-place club to a tie on Saturday, and spent the night in a sleeping car on a speeding railroad. To make matters worse, fullback Al Hadden's knee, injured in Frankford, stiffened up overnight. With Conzelman and "Pop" Williams sidelined altogether and Jim Simmons and Hadden able to play only sparingly, the backfield of Wilson, Oden, and two brothers, Jack and Bill Cronin, had to play almost the entire game.

Rain threatened to drench the Cycledrome, but an overflow crowd of approximately 11,000 showed up at the new starting time of 2:15 (the days were growing shorter, and there were no lights) to root for the local favorites. Early in the game, the Steam Roller had the ball on the Frankford 46-yard line. Wilson took the hike, dropped back, and shot a short pass to Oden on the 40-yard line. The slippery quarterback dodged a few tacklers and sprinted to the end zone for a touchdown. His drop-kick for the extra point was low, so the Steam Roller had to settle for an early 6-0 lead. For the rest of the afternoon, the Frankford defense stifled the Steam Roller attack, but the Providence defense allowed the Yellowjackets only three first downs for the entire contest. When the final gun sounded, the scoreboard still read 6-0, and the Steam Roller had rolled into first place in the NFL.

The Stretch

The Steam Roller held its lead the next weekend with a 16-0 win over the fading Giants. They spent Thanksgiving in Pottsville, grinding out a 7-0 win over the Maroons.

Tragedy struck the next day when the Steam Roller lost one of its most loyal fans. Players who came from the New England area generally had living quarters, but those from the midwest had to find places to stay during the season. Conzelman, center Clyde Smith, guard Milt Rehnquist, and a few others rented rooms in the home of Pearce Johnson, one of the original founders of the team. Johnson's mother boarded the players under her roof, kept them well-fed until, and did their laundry all for \$15 a week. The day after Thanksgiving, while out shopping for groceries for "her boys," Mrs. Johnson was struck and killed by a streetcar.

The team had only one game left. On Sunday, December 2, they hosted the Green Bay Packers, a disappointment on the season but still dangerous. Regardless of the strengths of the Packers, the crowd of 10,500 at the Cycledrome had every reason to expect their local powerhouse to clinch the NFL title. All they had to do was keep from losing. Both teams blew scoring opportunities in the opening quarter. After "Curly" Oden shook loose on a punt return and brought the ball all the way down to the five-yard line, Wildcat Wilson tried a pass which was intercepted in the end zone. Later in the period, the Packers drove down to the Providence five-yard line but lost the ball on a fumble. The remainder of the first half boiled down to a punting match between Green Bay's Verne Lewellen and Wildcat Wilson. With the score still 0-0, the Packers broke the ice in the third quarter on a 30-yard touchdown pass from Lewellen to Larry Marks. The extra point made the score 7-0.

Facing possible defeat, the Steam Roller took the kickoff and drove 72 yards in 11 plays, with a 23-yard pass play from Wilson to Oden scoring the touchdown. "Gus" Sonnenberg added the extra point with a place kick, and Wilson's well-placed punts kept the Packers in poor field position for the rest of the afternoon.

The game ended at 7-7, making the Steam Roller the champion of the NFL. Later that day, the Yellowjackets lost 28-6 to the Chicago Bears.

Unlike today's Super Bowl winners, however, the Steam Roller players picked up no huge bonus checks for their championship. Team members simply received their normal pay for the final game. But there was one reward for the team, a "victory banquet" at the Hotel Biltmore on the following Tuesday evening at 6:30.

The entire team, a delegation of city and state officials, and approximately 200 paying fans celebrated the successful football season with food and talk. Each member of the team received a gold watch as a memento of the season, and a loving cup for the Most Valuable Player of the team was presented to Conzelman. The players themselves voted to decide the MVP, settling upon their popular, good-natured coach despite the knee injury which sidelined him for the bulk of the schedule. In a short speech, Conzelman praised the morale of the team, saying that "there had not been a cross word between any two of the players in three months, on or off the field."

Into the Mist

In Chicago, Chris O'Brien's Cardinals barely survived the season with an odd schedule. They opened in September with a 15-0 loss to the Bears before a crowd of only 4,000 at Normal Park, skipped a week, and then edged weak Dayton, 7-0, on October 7. A week later, they were pummeled at Green Bay, 20-0. They didn't play

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again for five weeks, apparently because O'Brien hadn't been able to arrange any games. With his team out of Comiskey and back in Normal Park, the only likely visitors had already been there: the Bears in "pity" warm-up and the Triangles, who'd go anywhere for the guarantee.

The Cardinals weren't much of an attraction on the road either, but O'Brien could cut expenses to the bone by playing two of his meager six games back-to-back. The weekend before Thanksgiving, O'Brien's team launched its "second season" when they showed up in Philadelphia to lose to the Yellow Jackets, 19-0. They overnighted to New York, where the Yankees also beat them 19-0. Four days later, they ended their endeavors for 1928 with a 34-0 Thanksgiving Day loss to the Bears at Wrigley Field. The only thing memorable about the game was that it saw Jim Thorpe's last NFL appearance. The 41-year-old Indian, overweight and out of shape, went in briefly at end for the Cardinals in a cameo that brought only sadness to those who had seen him in his prime.

In Providence, the winter of 1928-9 was a time of relishing the achievements of the past football season. Charlie Coppen, Pete Laudati, and Judge Dooley had sizable profits to reflect upon, products of the unprecedented enthusiasm which Providence fans showed as the team picked up momentum with important victories in November.

Sonnenberg reached the top of the professional wrestling ladder when, on January 4, 1929, before 20,000 fans in the new Boston Garden, he beat Ed "Strangler" Lewis in two straight falls to capture the world heavyweight championship.

Despite that good beginning, 1929 proved to be a bad year for the Steam Roller. Sonnenberg stayed out of football to make better money defending his title, Oden quit to take a job with an insurance company in Boston, and Clyde Smith decided to stay back in his native Missouri as a coach. Conzelman didn't fully recover from his knee injury, Milt Rehnquist missed the first portion of the schedule because of illness, and "Wildcat" Wilson played with a

complacency that turned him into a tabby. The 1929 Steam Roller turned in a limp 4-6-2 record, and the fans who kept the turnstiles spinning during the championship season stayed away in droves.

When the Depression gripped the nation, not even a title contender could have cured the sick gate. At the conclusion of the 1931 season, the three partners in the team gave up and turned the franchise back to the NFL.

Providence no longer had a place on the NFL circuit, but it continued to have post-collegiate football. Pearce Johnson organized a semi-pro version of the Steam Roller to play small-scale local teams in 1932. Off and on through 1964, the Providence Steam Roller played independent and minor-league pro football. Its most recent incarnation was as an arena football team.

The Cycledrome continued to host cycling and football until the city closed it down on November 8, 1934, citing the decrepit and dangerous condition of the bleachers. Owner Pete Laudati turned this his advantage by leveling the Cycledrome and building on the site an E.M. Lowe drive-in movie theater. When it opened in 1937, it was only the second drive-in theater in the nation, the first being in Jersey City, N.J.

FINAL STANDINGS: NFL 1928

Team	W	L	T	PF-PA
Providence Steam Roller	8	1	2	128- 42
Frankford Yellow Jackets	11	3	2	175- 84
Detroit Wolverines	7	2	1	189- 76
Green Bay Packers	6	4	3	120- 92
Chicago Bears	7	5	1	182- 85
New York Giants	4	7	2	79-136
New York Yankees	4	8	1	103-179
Pottsville Maroons	2	8	0	74-134
Chicago Cardinals	1	5	0	7-107
Dayton Triangles	0	7	0	9-131