

The Weekly Wage

Professionalism Expands in Pittsburgh: 1893

By PFRA Research

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The Pittsburgh Pirates almost won the National League baseball pennant in 1893. New team president William Chase Temple, a steel executive, put together a strong team that included future Hall of Famer Jake "Eagle-Eye" Beckley at first base and the original pirated player Louis Bierbauer at second. They might have taken it all if their spindly catcher, Connie Mack, hadn't been knocked out for most of the season by a bad spiking. The incident helped turn Mack toward a career as a baseball manager.

After all the charges and countercharges of professionalism died down, the Allegheny Athletic Association and the Pittsburgh Athletic Club readied themselves for the 1893 football season. They planned a pair of games to settle the local football title. And, although no one was admitting anything, both clubs planned to use paid players.

At the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, is a torn scrap of ruled paper. On it -- written in longhand in long-gray ink -- is the earliest-known pro football player's contract.

I hereby agree to participate in all regularly scheduled football games of the Pittsburg [sic] Athletic Club for the full season of 1893. As an active player I agree to accept a salary of \$50 per contest and also acknowledge that I will play for no other club during PAC games.

It was signed with manager Barbour as witness on October 4, three days before the P.A.C.'s first game. Unfortunately, the paper is torn across the signature, making it impossible to say with absolute certainty just who the P.A.C.'s pro was. The most likely candidate is Grant Dibert, the former Swarthmore halfback who had been with the Gyms since 1890. Still remaining on the paper are the remnants of two letters from the signature -- a high loop that could be the top of a b and, after a short space, the crossed top of a t. Dibert opened the season in the P.A.C. backfield, but lost his position after the fourth game. Although he was mentioned later in the season as an available sub, he did not play again. We may assume he was not paid unless he actually got into a game, but the last phrase of the contract, wherein the player promised to "play for no other club," is a reminder that athletes were not only paid to induce them to play for a team, but, sometimes equally important, to keep them out of a rival's lineup. It's possible that the whole point of the contract was to keep Dibert (or whoever) from playing for the A.A.A.

Several other P.A.C. men were very likely paid in 1893 although no other contracts have been discovered. A.C. Read played center all season. Clarence Lomax, the ex-Cornell end, joined the team after three games. Rags Brown showed up the next week to take

Dibert's place. All three had been suspected of professionalism before. The Gyms' best player, fullback G.W. "Beef" Ritchey, was a former Lehigh star who could have demanded a pretty penny for his services.

The P.A.C. chose to prepare for their first meeting with the A.A.A., scheduled for early November, by taking on the available local teams. Even though the quality of local football had improved quite a bit in four years, such a course virtually assured the Gyms of arriving undefeated at the Three A's game.

Sure enough, things went according to plan.

On Saturday, October 7, the Gyms took the Western University (Pitt) team into camp by a 10-0 score. Most of the betting around the P.A.C. ballpark turned on whether the college boys could score. To that end, the W.U.P. players resorted to slugging, and the Gyms responded in kind. "The results were not serious," insisted the Pittsburgh *Press*, although P.A.C. captain Charley Aull was forced out of the contest with a badly swollen lip.

A week later, the Gyms struggled through a wind and rainstorm to best Greensburg A.A. by another 10-0 score. Captain Aull was still nursing his mouth, but Doc Proctor took his place as signal caller and did well.

On October 21, the weather was better but the opposition wasn't as the Gyms romped over Geneva College 18-0. A nice crowd of nearly 2,000 turned up at P.A.C. Park -- drawn more by the sunshine than by any hope for a close contest.

How much the weather affected the size of the crowd was obvious on the last Saturday in October when a dreary, cold day held the attendance to a mere 250 for the P.A.C.'s second outing with W.U.P. That handful saw a whale of a game. W.U.P., under the leadership of coach and tackle Anson Harrold, had come a long way. This time they not only scored but gave the Gyms all they could handle before succumbing 16-10.

In their final warm-up before the Three A's game, the Gyms loped through a 20-0 laughter with Holy Ghost College (now Duquesne U.) on November 4. This brought them to five-and-oh, as expected. The only close call came in the second W.U.P.

Under the leadership of O.D. Thompson, the Allegheny Athletic Association decided to take the "high road" in 1893 by scheduling some of the better known athletic clubs from around the nation, such heavyweights as the Washington (D.C.) Columbians, Detroit A.C., and Cleveland A.C. The *piece de resistance* was a visit from

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the famed Chicago A.C., slated for only three days before the first P.A.C. game. It was an ambitious -- some might say foolhardy -- schedule.

It began with a blunder.

To open the season on October 7, Thompson put his team on a train for Chicago to play the famous A.C. While the A's were enroute, the Windy City boys discovered that almost no one in Illinois cared a fig about the visiting club with the strange-sounding name. What did Chicagoans know about an Allegheny? Faced with the prospect of empty stands, the Chi-A.C. cancelled the game and fired off a telegram to the A's to stay home. The message and the team passed each other somewhere in eastern Indiana, and the A.A.A. players didn't learn they had the day off until they detrained in Chicago.

The club returned untested to Pennsylvania for what figured to be the only real breather on its schedule -- the annual thrashing of the W.U.P. team. Shockingly, the college boys won 4-0!

There were extenuating factors. The weather was atrocious. Mud made the field slippery, wind interfered with kicking, and rain made life miserable for players and the hundred or so spectators who ventured to Three A's Park. Moreover, several of the W.U.P. players -- including tackles Joe Trees and Coach Anson Harrold -- were also regulars for the A's against other foes.

But, most of all, the A's team lacked precision.

The weather would improve. The W.U.P. players would switch sides. But unless something was done about the disorganization on the field, it was going to be a long season.

Ironically, the A's already had a trio of pros in the lineup. A page from the Allegheny Athletic Association's account book shows that three members of the team were under contract for the year. James M. Van Cleve, who later became football coach at Holy Ghost College, was a quick end from Lehigh. Ollie W. Rafferty provided the main running threat all season. And Peter Wright was a strong fullback. Each of these gentlemen received \$50 per game. Quite probably, others were paid for particular games.

The A's didn't lack quality players. What they were missing was a firm hand leading them.

To remedy that, Ben "Sport" Donnelly was summoned from Chicago and installed as coach. The account book page does not indicate any payment to Sport, but certainly he didn't come cheap. It seems likely that Donnelly was the first man ever paid to do nothing else but coach a pro football team. Of course, he played too, but that was apparently for free.

Donnelly was far too combative to let any of the Three A's loaf through a game or a practice. Any player who goofed off on Sport's time was likely to find himself challenged to fisticuffs. The new coach's tough drills brought an immediate change for the better. The Washington Columbians were downed easily at Three A's Park the very next Saturday by a 28-0 count. Donnelly scored the first touchdown himself. Other TDs went to W.U.P. men Harrold and Trees and to pros Rafferty and Wright.

The Pittsburgh *Press* decided that the opening loss to W.U.P. was the best thing that ever happened to the A.A.A.'s because it convinced them to bring Donnelly back. That the team's improvement was more than temporary was demonstrated the following Saturday when they soundly thumped the Cleveland A.C. by another 28-0 score. W.U.P. played the Gyms on the same day, making Trees and Harrold unavailable but the A's didn't miss a beat. Donnelly manned one tackle and at the other was old reliable O.D. Thompson, 38-years-old but still capable of giving a good account of himself.

With two impressive victories under their belts, the A's braced for their biggest test yet -- the Chicago A.C. The Windy City boys boasted some of the most famous players in the Midwest. Captain Herbert Alward at halfback and "Steve" Stevenson, a four-year starter at center for Purdue, were perhaps the best of a tough lineup. The most optimistic among the Allegheny fans hoped for a close game.

What they got was a game close enough to be called a moral victory. Donnelly, perhaps by prior agreement with Chicago, did not play, and Peter Wright had to shift to quarterback when Valentine, the regular signal-caller, also absented himself. Even so, the local team gave the visitors from Chicago all they could handle.

Only the weather did the locals in. A heavy rain that fell before and during the contest not only cut down the crowd but also turned a portion of Three A's field that had been scraped for tennis courts during the summer into a huge mud puddle. Midway through the first half, the A's centered badly. Harkness, subbing for Wright at fullback, was in deep punt formation. He started after the rolling, splashing football but slipped and fell in the deep mud. Chicago recovered near the goal line. From there, they bucked over to make the score 4-0.

After that, the A's played the famous visitors on even terms, neither side scoring. Slugging was frequent. At one point, both Van Cleve and a Chicago player were banished for fighting. But, when the visitors explained to the umpire they had no more subs, the offending Chicagoan was allowed to return. Naturally, Van Cleve was given the same return ticket. Freed of any threat of ouster, both teams increased their use of fists.

The first A.A.A.-P.A.C. meeting of the year was scheduled for the following Tuesday. Off their fine showing against Chicago, the A's were installed as favorites, although no one had yet bested the Gyms.

In late October, managers Barbour and Thompson got together to make final arrangements. Although they both insisted they favored using only club members, the principal stumbling block was the lineups. Each knew the other would bring in ringers if he could, but neither could publicly complain about anyone being paid. They zeroed in on a quibble as to what players were with the teams for their opening games. Barbour protested the use of Sport Donnelly by the A's, and Thompson was adamant against Clarence Lomax lining up for the Gyms. The meeting was a standoff until each manager gave in and allowed the other to use his pro. Then, a few days later, Barbour began complaining that Harrold and Trees were W.U.P. students and not Three A's members. Thompson

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insisted his tackles were students AND members, but it took another round of negotiations to get them into the starting lineup against the Gyms.

More than 2,000 flocked to Three A's Park on Election Day, November 7. That was a little disappointing, but still a good crowd. One of the Allegheny's pros, Peter Wright, was unavailable, perhaps because it was a mid-week game. Other than that, both teams were at full strength.

They showed it during the first half, which was played on exceptionally even terms. Neither team could mount a serious scoring threat and the battle raged back and forth across midfield. The second half began as a duplicate of the first.

Then, the P.A.C. got the ball on the A.A.A.'s 45. Buck Martin went for ten yards through a hole made by Bill Gumpert. Rags Brown slipped through the same place for five more, and Beef Ritchey plunged for another five.

With the ball at the 25, the P.A.C. bunched tightly together and began to "revolve like a big colorful snowball." The A.A.A. players leaped upon the revolving mass. The P.A.C. was executing a play called the "turtle back," invented by Amos Alonzo Stagg only two years before. Probably none of the A's players had ever seen it before. An observer described Stagg's use of the play in detail: "ten men formed in a mass, with their bodies bent over, forming a 'turtle back' The ball was snapped back and disappeared into the middle of the mass. Soon, all but one of the bunch started toward the side of the field in what appeared to be a flying wedge ... with one man somewhat bent over and apparently carrying the ball, and with nearly the entire [opponent] team in pursuit. A minute later, an unnoticed man on the ground, who all the time had the ball concealed under him got up and ran down the other side of the field for a touchdown."

And, that's just the way it happened for the P.A.C. Suddenly, Buck Martin burst from the monster turtle and leaped toward the goal. There were no A.A.A. backs to intercept him, and he scampered between the goal posts as the crowd exploded. A.C. Read kicked the goal to make it 6-0, P.A.C.

Although the Gyms had used deception to score, they needed dogged determination to hold their lead. Three times before the end of play the A.A.A. had the ball on the Gyms' ten-yard line. Once they got to the six. Each time they were turned back.

The Three A's took their defeat with surprising good grace. Several members expressed surprise but not discouragement. Manager Thompson manfully admitted that his team had been outplayed.

On Thursday, two days after the loss, he began holding tryouts for the team. He announced there were several "promising candidates." And, although he had no plans to go outside the club for new players, he expected the team to be stronger for its second meeting with the Gyms.

In the meantime, the A's had another game to play, this with the tough Detroit A.C. On Saturday, November 11, a large crowd turned out at Three A's Park in expectation of seeing several new players in Allegheny blue. The deepest impression was made by

an "old" player in a new position. Ross Fiscus had performed fairly regularly on the A.A.A.'s line in '91 and '92, but all 1893 he'd been lobbying to get a shot at halfback. Given the chance against Detroit, he made the most of it, scoring three touchdowns. One of his dashes went for 55 yards and another for 20.

As usual, the contest was half football and half fistfight. In the second half, Valentine slugged Detroit's quarterback so openly they could have seen it in Greensburg. The officials ignored that, so the Detroiter used the next play to salute Valentine with his knuckles. Immediately, a general melee erupted, with even O.D. Thompson fiercely charged out from the sideline.

When peace was restored, the A's completed a surprisingly easy, 18-0 win. The P.A.C. had hoped to get another game in before meeting the A's again. However, the Philadelphia Y.M.C.A. cancelled its trip to Pittsburgh at the last minute, leaving P.A.C. Park empty for a Saturday. Captain Aull, A.C. Read, and a few others went over to watch the A's play Detroit. No doubt they were impressed with the work of Ross Fiscus.

The second Gyms-A's meeting was scheduled for the following Saturday at P.A.C. Park. The Gyms -- with both the home field advantage and the earlier win in the till -- were favored, but there was plenty of Allegheny money available.

Peter Wright was back at fullback for the A's, and former Lehigh tackle W.W. Blunt, who'd captained the Alleghenys in 1892, replaced Trees. Significantly, Sport Donnelly lined himself up at guard, leaving the halfback slot he'd been playing to Ross Fiscus.

The P.A.C. fielded the same team that had won the first meeting. Most of the early scuffling occurred in P.A.C. territory, but the A's were turned back time after time. Finally, they moved in close and Ross Fiscus circled right end for a touchdown. The goal was missed, leaving the score at 4-0.

That seemed to spark the Gyms into action. As the first half wound down, they drove to the A.A.A.'s 25. In two rushes, Buck Martin moved the ball to the one-foot line. Beef Ritchey bulled over for the tying touchdown. Read missed goal and the game remained deadlocked at the intermission.

Things got nasty in the second half. Martin was forced to the sideline with a bad cut over his eye. Then Lomax and Charley Heppenstall, two of the Gyms' best linemen, were tossed out for slugging. Probably Donnelly was up to his old cute tricks because he was also accorded the rest of the day off by the referee.

The A's drove to the Gyms' two-yard-line, but -- though now shorthanded -- the home team responded to their fans' entreaties and stopped the Alleghenys' bucks. But, moments later, the A's were right back. This time Ollie Rafferty plunged over. The Alleghenys' partisans went wild. Again, Wright failed at goal.

Trailing 8-4, the P.A.C. fought desperately. As time ran out, they began a drive for the tying touchdown. Closer and closer they crept. At last the ball rested only two short feet from the goal line. And then they fumbled! The A.A.A. had won!

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Toward the end of the season, the Pittsburgh *Press* took it upon itself to explain football to its readers:

A football team advances the ball in two different ways. Either it is kicked or carried forward by a run. A kick explains itself. Runs are made either by individual players, who are assisted by the interference of the rest of their side advancing together. Individual runners are most frequently the backs, who are specially trained for that purpose, less frequently linemen, when tackles and ends, and least frequently linemen when guards. The center rusher can only run with the ball by obtaining it on a fluke after it has been put in play, as his own function is to snap it back.

Now runs with the ball are necessarily made either through openings in the line or around the ends, and all runners, backs or linemen, attack the opposing rush line and try to break through holes made by their fellows, or they skirt the ends, the opposing tacklers being blocked off by the interference.

When, on the other hand, it is sought to advance the ball by means of mass plays, the whole 11 group themselves together and either push forward as a mass or wedge, or standing back some distance, start on a charge, in a flying wedge, as it is called. These wedges are also often converted into runs, since if the player who holds the ball can slip out of the mass and elude the opposite tacklers he will generally have a clear field.

These plays are the foundation of all methods of running attack, and the lover of the game who studies and comprehends them will have no difficulty in appreciating all the fine points of play, in separating the struggling mass into its component parts and understanding at a

glance why the attack is prevailing over the defense or vice versa, and he will also find that he instinctively begins to understand novelties in the play and values the broader lines of strategy.

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With most of November left to choose from, managers Barbour and Thompson could not settle on a date for a rubber game. O.D. suggested Christmas Day, but no one -- including his own club members -- wanted to try that. The fans, somewhat disgruntled, were left to settle the local football championship by argument. Although each side had rooters who could "prove" that their team would easily win a third game, the best any neutral could say was that both elevens were very evenly matched.

Their big victory closed the A.A.A.'s season, but the P.A.C. continued with a meaningless pounding of poor Geneva College and a Thanksgiving Day meeting with Penn State University. State had one of the stronger college teams -- they had come within two touchdowns of tying Penn -- and a victory by the P.A.C. certainly would have inflated their reputation at the expense of the Three A's. However, the collegians won 12-0, showing that for all their local brilliance, both western Pennsylvania athletic clubs still had a long way to go before they could match the country's real football powers.

The historical significance of the local season was lost on all but a few insiders. For the first time (as far as we can prove), a football team -- the Three A's -- had gone a whole season with pros in its lineup. And, there is strong evidence that the P.A.C. did likewise. Moreover, the A's had gone outside their club to hire a ringer -- Sport Donnelly -- as their football coach.

Professionalism was on a roll, and, so far, no one had complained to the A.A.U.