

BULL BEHMAN AND THE JACKETS

by Al Myers

"A monstrous man who could stand firm as Gibraltar or move like a cat," was the way pro football historian Roger Treat described Russell "Bull" Behman, one of the great linemen of the NFL's 1920s. "Behman was almost impossible to block. Coaches had to assign so many extra blockers to him that plays came apart."

The Bull, at 5'10", carried 210 to 230 pounds. In the twenties, that was mighty big. Given his agility, it's little wonder he was a nightmare to block.

While playing for Dickinson College (Carnegie, Pa.), this Steelton native anchored a line that enabled little Dickinson to hold its own with the best in the East in 1922 and 1923. He captained the '23 team, and his battles with "Snaps" Emanuel of Gettysburg on Harrisburg's Island Park Field are still remembered with awe by a handful of octogenarians.

In 1924, Behman joined the Frankford Yellow Jackets, just as the Jackets joined the National Football League. Frankford, a suburb of Philadelphia, was a big step for the NFL -- its first real shot on the East Coast. The Frankford Athletic Association had fielded strong independent teams for several years, often entertaining and sometimes beating touring NFL teams. The 1923 team, with a payroll of more than \$31,000, had come within a field goal of licking league champion Canton. There were those who said the NFL needed the Jackets more than the Jackets needed the NFL.

The Jackets won more games than any other league team in that first year -- finishing 11-2-1, but they still ended second to Cleveland on percentage.

Cleveland, with most of the same players who had won championships at Canton in '22 and '23, suffered only one loss and one tie in nine regular season games -- both to the Yellow Jackets. Early in October, Frankford tied them 3-3 at home and then beat them at Cleveland by a 12-7 count in mid-November.

Keep in mind that the Yellow Jackets (most of whom played the full sixty minutes) engaged in back-to-back Saturday-Sunday games because Sunday sporting events were illegal in Philadelphia at the time. For example, they played Kenosha at home on Saturday and then took a train to Dayton to play on Sunday. In addition to their 14 "official" games, they played seven more "exhibitions" in less than three months. What a tribute to the stamina and prowess of the likes of Behman, Jim Welsh, Tex Hamer, Russ and Herb Stein, and Pie Way -- the latter all of 145 pounds.

This first NFL edition of the Yellow Jackets set a pro record that still stands by scoring 39 touchdowns by rushing. Exactly how many of these were scored behind the ferocious up-front blocking of Russ Behman is not known, but you can bet there were plenty.

For 1925, Frankford went for the top, hiring Guy Chamberlin as coach. Success was Chamberlin's middle name. He'd coached three straight NFL champs at Canton and Cleveland, but the Yellow Jackets' backbreaking schedule proved too much for even his wonder-working. The team went 13-7. That's not the score of a single game -- that's their season won-lost record. Four of those seven defeats came on Sundays after a prior Saturday outing.

The Bull emerged as a place kicker in 1925, hitting on five field goals and twelve PAT's. Two of his field goals won ball games, one sinking the New York Giants in the waning minutes by a final count of 5-3. An anonymous writer for the Philadelphia *Inquirer* described it in this lyric fashion:

"In the clever and deadly toe of Captain Run (sic) Behman victory lurked for the Yellow-Jackets -- Everybody realized that the dropkick (note: Actually it was a forty-yard place kick) had snatched victory

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from the very jaws of defeat, that a certain New York victory had been transmuted by Behman's magic alchemy into a Hornet triumph."

If you think that's a bit rococo, read on:

"Haws (former Dartmouth scintillant who took the beautiful spiral from Springsteen, once a Lehigh gallant) dropped the ball to earth and Behman calmly, with nonchalance befitting a youngster kicking a pigskin against his back fence, swung his boot. The leather rose sure and true and fled to the goal posts. It wavered slightly just as the bar was reached, clearing the wood by a margin of a few inches."

They don't write like that any more. How long has it been since you've seen a scintillant and gallant, simultaneously, at that? Or watched leather fleeing to a goal post?

In 1926, Chamberlin led the Yellow Jackets to their only NFL championship with a 14-1-1 mark. Johnny Budd and Rudy Comstock, along with Chamberlin himself, were standouts in the line. Tex Hamer and Ben Jones paced a strong running attack.

Ironically, Behman was not on the team that year. In 1926, "Cash and Carry" Pyle, with Red Grange as his main drawing card, broke from the NFL and began a new league, the American Football League. Behman and many other NFL stalwarts jumped to the outlaw league. As captain of the Philadelphia Quaker squad, Russ drove his team to the title with successive triumphs over the New York Yankees of Grange, Mike Michalske and Eddie Tryon.

Behman was a consistent all-NFL selection throughout his career. In 1926, Wilfrid Smith, the only selector to add AFL men to his honor team, put Bull behind only Ed Healey and Duke Slater at tackle.

Alas, the AFL folded after just one year. The Bull was back with Frankford in 1927.

In a controversial move, Guy Chamberlin was let go as coach after winning his championship. The 1927 Yellow Jacket squad was a young one, and the Hornets slipped under .500 for the first time. But they almost took it all in '28. They dropped the Sunday game of another one of their weekend double-headers to Providence, and the Rhode Islanders ended with an 8-1-2 record. The Jackets, who always played the most league games, were 11-3-2.

The following year, Frankford entered the season with a new player-coach. Of course, Behman filled that dual role, and he filled it well. Dual role? He coached, captained, went both ways in the forward wall, and dropped back to do much of the punting.

Between September 28 and December 8, Behman's charges played 18 games, winning nine, losing four, and tying five. Until the final four games, which were played within an eleven-day span, Frankford made a strong run for the title. Exhausted, they were unable to score a single point in those last four games (although two of those games were scoreless ties).

It was the beginning of the end. Frankford collapsed, along with the nation's economy, in 1930. In mid-season, Russ Behman resigned as coach, though he continued to play, and the dying Jackets finished at 4-13-1.

Next year saw the break-up of the franchise, such as it was. Behman returned as an aging playing coach, the team won one, lost six, tied one, and folded with a month of the season yet to be played. It was an ignominious end for a gridiron warrior of giant proportions, and for a trailblazing NFL team.

Frankford averaged over seventeen games a season through 1930. Up to that year, their winning percentage was .744. They beat the best.

Yet, they are often forgotten today. Many people mistakenly believe the Jackets to have been the original Philadelphia Eagles. (They weren't; the Eagles were a new franchise in 1933.) Even George Halas, in his auto-biography, barely mentions the team that was playing more games than any other in the '20s. And he ignores Behman completely.

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In his halcyon days, Bull Behman was a tough man to ignore. A sixty-minute performer, a consistent all-pro selection, a hell- for-leather leader as both captain and coach, he personified the spirit and the will-to-win of the almost forgotten Frankford Yellow Jackets.

In the words of the poet, "He was a man."

THE JACKETS' NFL RECORD

Year	W	L	T	Pct.	Fin
1924	11	2	1	.846	2
1925	13	7	0	.650	6
1926	14	1	1	.933	1
1927	6	9	3	.400	7
1928	11	3	2	.786	2
1929	9	4	5	.692	3
1930	4	13	1	.235	9
1931	1	6	1	.143	9
	69	45	14	.605	