

## **TWO AMERICAN HEROES: RED GRANGE AND FRITZ POLLARD**

**By John M. Carroll**

On a bitterly cold December day in Boston more than sixty years ago, fifteen thousand fans braved the elements to witness the first National Football League game in the Hub. The December 9, 1925 mid-week clash between the Chicago Bears and the Providence Steam Roller was no ordinary pro football game. Although official NFL records designate the game as a league contest, there would have been no game except for the presence of Harold "Red" Grange in the Chicago backfield.

Grange had recently completed his three years of varsity eligibility at the University of Illinois in spectacular fashion and immediately signed a professional contract with the Chicago Bears. Sportswriter Grantland Rice had dubbed him "The Galloping Ghost" while watching his extraordinary open-field running over the course of three seasons. In addition to the hundreds of thousands of mainly Midwestern fans who had seen Grange play, millions more had read about him in the sports pages or heard of his exploits over the radio. By the late fall of 1925 Grange had attained the stature of sports hero that far surpassed any ever accorded to a college football star.

Sportswriter Damon Runyon proclaimed that Grange was three or four men rolled into one for football purposes. "He is Jack Dempsey, Babe Ruth, Al Jolson, Paavo Nurmi and Man o' War. Put them all together, they spell Red Grange." Tens of thousands of fans agreed with Runyon's assessment and were willing to pay cash to see the Illinois football phenomenon in a Chicago Bears uniform.

The Providence Steam Roller was in its first campaign in the NFL, which included twenty teams for the 1925 season. Composed mainly of former New England college stars, the Steam Roller had compiled a record of five wins, four losses, and one tie going into the game with the Bears. In anticipation of the dramatic and potentially profitable clash with Chicago, which was undefeated in six games since Grange had joined them on Thanksgiving Day, Providence had signed a number of well-known players to bolster its team. Jim Crowley and Don Miller formerly of Notre Dame and Four Horsemen fame were added to the Steam Roller roster as was Frederick Douglass "Fritz" Pollard.

Pollard was signed by the Steam Roller after he had completed the season with the NFL Akron Pros where he was a halfback and shared head coaching duties with George Berry. In Providence, Pollard was better known as the fleet-footed back who was named to Walter Camp's All-American team after the 1916 season. He had led Brown University to two spectacular seasons which included a Rose Bowl appearance and victories over Yale and Harvard on consecutive weekends in 1916.

Like Grange, Pollard was an extraordinarily gifted runner and a football hero, but a hero of another dimension. For Fritz Pollard was a black man playing a white man's game. To black Americans who followed Pollard's career, he was a heroic figure who endured racial insults, threats, and physical abuse on the gridiron, yet survived and prospered during two collegiate campaigns and seven seasons in the pros. For many white fans and players, Pollard was a villain, a black man challenging white supremacy. Thousands of fans attended Pollard's college and pro games to verbally abuse the diminutive halfback and urge opposing teams to injure him, a call that seldom went unheeded.

Considering the racial barriers and economic disparity between whites and blacks at the time, Grange and Pollard had some remarkably similar experiences on their paths to athletic stardom.

Above all, both were exceptionally gifted athletes who excelled in a number of sports. Long-time Duke football coach Wallace Wade, who was Pollard's teammate on the 1915 Brown team, rated Pollard and Grange about equal in running ability and among the finest halfbacks he had ever seen. Both men grew up in the Chicago area in middle class families although the Pollard's were financially better off than the Grange family. As high school athletes they excelled in baseball and track as well as in football. At Wheaton High School just west of Chicago, Grange also garnered three letters in basketball while Pollard played in the band during the winter months at Lane Tech High School in Chicago. Interestingly, both youngsters began their football careers as ends in high school because it was the only position open in their freshmen years. There the similarities ended.

The fundamental difference between the two athletes' routes to football stardom was race and how it was perceived in the athletic world during the first quarter of this century. Red Grange, of course, was not much affected by the race issue. He was a white man playing mainly a white man's game. In his autobiography and in published interviews he never mentions the issue although he played against a few black players in both college and in the pros.

Grange's phenomenal rise to America's number one football hero by the mid-1920s was based on his raw athletic ability. At the University of Illinois under coach Bob Zuppke he ran behind a powerful T-formation attack and was greatly aided by the gifted blocking back Earl Britton. Reputedly, Grange carried the ball eighty percent of the time he was in a game which may help account for his thirty-one touchdowns in three years of varsity games. Nevertheless, Grange had the speed, ability, and strength to consistently break into the open. He was an all-around athlete who passed, caught passes, returned punts, played defense well, and could kick field goals if called upon.

Despite his exceptional talent and singular athletic achievements at Illinois, one is still puzzled by the near cult of hero worship which engulfed Grange by 1925. Benjamin Rader has suggested that Grange and other idols of sport in the 1920s such as Babe Ruth and Jack Dempsey were a product of the times. They were public heroes who served a compensatory cultural function.

As Rader explains, "they assisted the public in compensating for the passing of the traditional dream of success, the erosion of Victorian values and feelings of individual powerlessness. As the society became more complicated and systematized and as success had to be won increasingly in bureaucracies, the need for heroes who leaped to fame and fortune outside the rules of the system seemed to grow." Rader presents a cogent argument for his thesis of compensatory sports heroes in the 1920s and alludes to other factors which made that decade ripe for such a phenomenon.

World War I appears to have been a major force in promoting a national focus on sports and sports heroes in the 1920s. America's entry into the European conflict in 1917 curtailed athletic competition, restrained consumer impulses, and directed national energy to a crusade to make the world safe for democracy. By the early 1920s, many Americans sought escape from wartime rigors, the tattered idealism of 1917-18, and the horrible carnage which still weighed heavily on their minds. Spectator sports provided one avenue of diversion in the postwar years and sports heroes may have provided a reaffirmation of traditional values which were shaken in the aftermath of the Great War.

Certainly Red Grange benefited from the expanded media coverage of sports in the 1920s. Major newspapers increased their sports coverage in the postwar decade and employed talented writers such as Runyon, Rice, Pegler and many more. Although it is not clear whether the newspapers were responding to the readers interest or creating it, the impact was the same. The tens of thousands of words written about "The Galloping Ghost" or "The Wheaton Iceman" made Grange larger than life for millions of readers who had never traveled west of Philadelphia.

And importantly Grange performed magnificently in the games that attracted the most media attention. At the dedication of the University of Illinois' new Memorial Stadium on October 18, 1924 before 67,000 fans, Grange exploded for four long touchdown runs and a total of 303 yards in the first period against Michigan. The media focused on the game not only because of Grange and the dedication of the new stadium, but because long-time Wolverine coach Fielding Yost had boasted that his team would bottle up the Illinois redhead.

Grange responded to a similar challenge a year later when he led a weaker Illinois team into Philadelphia to play the University of Pennsylvania, the top team in the East. On a soggy field, Grange ran for 363 yards and three touchdowns in a 24-2 victory which made believers out of many eastern sportswriters who doubted the quality of Midwestern football or Grange's ability. The headlines which screamed CORNLAND TEAM AND BAND STUPEFY QUAKER CITY also suggests that part of Grange's fame was rooted in the urban-rural division which troubled postwar America.

The Illinois-Michigan contest was the first of many games which Grange played in that was broadcast to a regional radio audience, including the Bears-Steam Roller game of 1925. In addition, millions saw Grange's flickering image as he scampered for touchdowns in movie newsreels which were standard fare in the 1920s. As the postwar depression gave way to the consumer-oriented prosperity by 1923, advertising men and public relations specialists created a market for many products including spectator sports. Grange's professional agent, C.C. "Cash and Carry" Pyle, was one of many such men who

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exploited the paying public's appetite to see the spectacular, dramatic, and bizarre. As Grange later recalled, "When the breaks came I was ready for them."

Fritz Pollard traveled another road to football heroism. After compiling a spectacular athletic record at Lane Tech in Chicago, Pollard headed east to further his education and to play football. He finally enrolled at Brown University in 1915 where he was grudgingly issued an oversized uniform and allowed to try out for the football team. Pollard later recalled that "back in those days Brown was prejudiced as hell." But the players soon recognized his extraordinary ability and accepted him as a teammate. Pollard began to establish a national reputation in a 1915 game against Yale, then a formidable football power. "At New Haven," Pollard recalls, "I had to go through a separate gate so the fans wouldn't get on me." During an era when defensive football with its emphasis on field position was in vogue, Pollard broke for several long runs which evoked chants of "kill the nigger" from the Yale partisans. Although it was his flashy running that drew media attention, Pollard, like Grange, was an able passer, receiver, kicker, and an exceptional tackler. It was his defensive ability as much as his running which preserved Brown's 3-0 victory over Yale that day.

The victory over Yale led to a Rose Bowl invitation for the 5-3-1 Bruins and made Pollard the first black to play in the mid-winter classic. The following year Pollard established his All-American credentials by leading Brown to consecutive week victories over Yale and Harvard, then considered among the elite football powers. During the games Pollard scored three touchdowns, amassed over 500 total yards, and made two touchdown saving tackles.

At the conclusion of the 1916 campaign Walter Camp named Pollard to his All-American team and called him "one of the greatest runners ever to play the game."

After the 1916 season a combination of scholastic difficulties and the war ended Pollard's collegiate career. He served briefly in the Army as a YMCA athletic director and after the Armistice as head coach at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. During his second season at Lincoln, he turned to pro football to help supplement his income.

Over the next eight seasons Pollard became one of the premier gate attractions in the American Professional Football Association and later the NFL. In 1920 he led the Akron Pros to the league championship and was named to the unofficial all-pro game. Beginning in 1921 Pollard served as head coach at Akron and later performed the same duties for the Milwaukee team.

Pollard became an attraction in the pro league because of his exceptional running ability and solid all-around play, but also because of his race. Opposing teams and fans delighted in raining both physical and verbal abuse on Pollard. To protect himself, Pollard developed a habit of rolling over when tackled, cocking his legs, and flailing them bicycle style to discourage piling on. On occasion Pollard had to be driven to mid-field in a car moments before kickoff to avoid a shower of bricks and bottles often thrown by unruly fans.

After one Akron game against a Pennsylvania Coal League team in Gilberton, the windows of the train were shot out as the Pros left the eastern Pennsylvania town. What was worse many of the home fans were as bad as those Pollard encountered on the road. "Akron was a factory town and ... the fans booed me and called me all kinds of names," Pollard recalled, "because they had a lot of Southerners up there working. You couldn't eat in the restaurants or stay in the hotels."

In the early years of league play in professional football, Pollard was more a villain than a hero although his outstanding performance in the face of adversity was heroic. He is not considered in the same category of hero as is Grange because of his color and the time sequence of his career. World War I deprived Pollard of an opportunity at two more seasons of collegiate stardom.

After the war, he briefly tried out for the University of Pennsylvania team, but the Penn players made it clear that a man of his race was not welcome. Pollard entered the pro ranks at a time when the league received little newspaper coverage and was frowned upon by college officials, coaches, and most sportswriters. It was partly Grange and his public relations man Pyle who later forced the national press to focus on the NFL. Although it might be noted that a good part of the initial coverage of Grange and pro football was distinctly negative.

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Pollard received minimal public relations help from his natural constituency, the black fan and sportswriter. Black fans simply did not attend white college games in any numbers. Black newspapers in Pollard's day were almost all weeklies published on Saturday, which meant that football coverage was a week behind the dailies. The black papers gave some coverage, usually reprinted accounts, of Pollard's college games, but contain almost no record of his pro career.

The Chicago Defender, for example, was extremely critical of the pro game in the early 1920s despite the fact that a half dozen blacks were outstanding players in the NFL. Simply stated, the time was not ripe for the emergence of a publicly recognized black football hero in either black or white America.

The game in Boston was not a memorable football exhibition for either of the star running backs. The Providence *Journal* said that Grange was mobbed before the game by an admiring throng of 3,000 fans and forced to warm up in a space the size of a clothes closet.

But Grange was in no condition to play football that day. He had been roughed up in a game three days earlier at the Polo Grounds against the New York Giants and had a badly bruised and swollen left arm. According to his contract he was required to play thirty minutes which he did, but with limited results. He carried the ball five times for eighteen yards and had one of his three passes intercepted. Grange later recalled that "my arm was in such pain I couldn't do anything right."

The climax of the game came in the third period when Steam Roller punter Red Maloney booted the ball directly at Grange who stood dead in his tracks and allowed the ball to sail over his head and out of bounds. The Providence *Journal* reported that "the freezing fans, with the fickleness of the mob, rose as one man at the end of the third quarter when a substitute left halfback trotted on to the field and booed and hissed and jeered with cries of 'get the ice tongs.'"

Grange remembered in his autobiography that he learned that pro fans were much more demanding than the college crowds. He played the next day in Pittsburgh, but had to be taken out of the game because of his injury and was sidelined for the remainder of the Bears' northern games.

According to newspaper accounts Pollard did not enter the game until the final period and thus did not actually play against Grange. In an oral interview done some forty-five years later, Pollard remembers tackling Grange in the open field and telling The Illinois redhead that "you have a lot to learn kid." It is not clear if the newspaper account is inaccurate or Pollard's recollection was faulty.

The Steam Roller halfback carried the ball only three times for eight yards. About the only thing that was normal for Pollard in the game was that he was a victim of a roughing penalty. As the Providence *Journal* reported "the Bears were so intent on squelching the dusky Fritz that five of the orange-jerseyed athletes piled on the former Brown star."

No doubt Pollard held Bears coach and end George Halas responsible for the incident. He later maintained that Halas was extremely prejudiced and was mainly responsible for driving blacks out of the NFL in the early 1930s. When the final whistle blew the Steam Roller had upset the Bears 9-6, thus ending the Bears unbeaten string since Grange had joined the team on Thanksgiving Day. For their participation in Boston's first NFL game Grange received about \$4000 and Pollard between \$400 and \$500.

After his injury healed, Grange would continue on Pyle's whirlwind tour playing games in the South and West through the month of January. The following year he played for the New York Yankees in Pyle's American Football League and then played six more seasons for the Chicago Bears before retiring from active play in the mid- 1930s.

Pollard returned to the Akron Pros the following year as a playing coach, but was fired early in the season. He remained active in the game for more than a decade coaching black all-star teams in Chicago and New York. Grange and Pollard were two titans in the game of football during its first half century of development. Superb all-around athletes, they were two of the greatest halfbacks of their time and usually rose to the challenge in the big games. They were both football heroes, but of a distinctly different kind. Grange was the athletic idol of white America and accordingly in the 1920s received enormous publicity and widespread public adulation as well as lasting fame. "The Galloping Ghost" might rightly be considered the first football super-star.

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Pollard, on the other hand, was both a hero and a villain to the fans who watched him play, mainly depending on the color of their skin. He played in relative obscurity with the exception of his All-American season and was most often scorned and abused by fans and players alike. Pollard was a hero not only because of his brilliance on the gridiron, but for his courage and persistence in the face of great adversity. Grange and Pollard represented the extremes in terms of football heroes and reflected well the racial climate of the era in which they played.