

THE DAY THE FANS TOOK OVER AT POTTSVILLE

By Joe Zagorski

One of the most famous pro football games in Pennsylvania's Coal Region history was played on Thanksgiving Day, November 27th, 1924, when the Shenandoah Yellowjackets lined up against the Pottsville Maroons in a contest that personified the best and worst of gridiron struggles in Schuylkill County.

Situated just 10 miles apart from each other, these two natural rivals came into the matchup from different directions, and carrying different objectives. For the Maroons, it was to be an anti-climatic encounter. The previous Sunday had seen them clinch the Anthracite League Title with a 3-0 victory over Coaldale. Even so, with experienced players like Wilbur (Pete) Henry, Larry Conover, and Harry Robb (all three of whom signed on with Pottsville after playing on the Canton Bulldogs 1923 NFL Championship team), anything short of a win, regardless of the opponent, was considered intolerable.

The Yellowjackets, on the other hand, were not made up of as many high-priced stars as their counterparts. Nevertheless, under the firm guidance of manager and owner Joe Sepauley, this club had a penchant for pulling out victories, thriving in their customary role as underdogs. They hoped to avenge an earlier 7-0 loss to Pottsville on November 2nd.

A large crowd of feverishly enthusiastic spectators attended, with a light snow covering the field at Minersville Ball Park. The contest's outcome would prove just how much the fans were involved in the game.

Igniting the fires in the hearts of the fans were the opposing defenses. The Maroon defenders were dominant, as they successfully blunted the Yellowjacket running game. According to the *Pottsville Republican*:

The game was played throughout most of the Shenandoah end of the field, with the ball being usually between the Shenandoah 40 and 20 yard line. The visitors (Yellowjackets) did not have the ball in their possession in Pottsville territory at any stage of the game.

Led by stalwarts like Gus Sonnenberg, Vic Diehl, Tony Latone, and "Fats" Henry, the Maroon defense was so intimidating that Shenandoah's offense failed to gain a first down until midway through the fourth quarter.

A somewhat different approach was taken by the Yellowjacket defense, but the results were identical, as far as the score was concerned. Shenandoah relied on a bend-but-not-break effort, as each time the Pottsville offense came close to scoring, one unfortunate malady or another was bound to beset them. "Pottsville gained with ease," recorded the *Republican*, "until within scoring distance and then lost their punch. Their forward passes were not up to the standard and several of them were intercepted."

Frankie Racis and "Hinkey" Haines led the Yellowjacket assault on the Maroon offense. Between pass interceptions, losses in crucial ground attempts, and Henry's missed dropkick field goal tries, the Shenandoah defense did itself proud, considering the fact that Pottsville had averaged 24 points per game up to this matchup.

As the field got muddier with each passing quarter, the game remained a stalemate. Pottsville was in control of the ball's progression (or regression in Shenandoah's case), but with about nine minutes remaining in the contest, had been unable to overcome their own offensive mistakes in Yellowjacket territory.

Then came a turn in the tide of events. After the Maroons lost the ball on downs at their opponent's 15-yard line, the Shenandoah offense began to produce. Led by Haines, the Yellowjacket ground attack managed to pick up two first downs on six plays, which served to revive the now-boisterous Shenandoah fans.

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Then came Pottsville's biggest defensive play of the afternoon. Larry Conover intercepted a Mike Palm pass and ran it back to the Yellowjacket 30-yard line, leaving the visitors against the ropes. The newly-crowned Champions of the Anthracite were not about to let this opportunity slip away.

Pottsville's Vic Emanuel gained 7 yards on a pass reception, after which a fracas broke out between both teams' interior linemen. After a few punches, referee Jim Keating assessed a penalty for fighting on the Yellowjackets, placing the ball on the Shenandoah 11-yard line. The infraction and subsequent walk-off also helped to enrage the Yellowjacket fans, many of whom were threatening acts of physical violence themselves.

Four plays later, Pottsville's Barney Wentz ran through a gaping hole and into the endzone for the game's only touchdown. Wilbur Henry capped the short drive with a PAT conversion.

Then all hell broke loose. With but several minutes remaining in the contest, hundreds of Shenandoah fans stormed onto the field and refused to leave, thereby halting the game until it was too dark to continue play. In addition to the penalty given to the Yellowjacket team a minute or so before this incident, there was another reason as to why the spectators became participants and ended the proceedings so abruptly: gambling.

"It is truly unfortunate that the real sportsman must be troubled with the gambler in the region football games," claimed the Pottsville *Republican* a few days after the game. The *Republican* placed the blame for the riot at game's end on frustrated gamblers.

"The sooner this practice (gambling on the outcome of games) is abolished and the game played for the entertainment of the spectators the better it will be for all concerned," reported the *Republican*. "It is within the writer's memory when root racing and wrestling held a place in the sporting world, but these were contaminated by the advent of the bettor. Will professional football go the same route? Let us nip it in the bud and save it."

As was the case with most Coal Region rivalries, the newspapers held a hometown bias toward the games. The Shenandoah *Evening Herald* provided no exception to this rule, as their version of the story bore little resemblance to that of the *Republican*'s. In fact, the *Herald* writer(s) never mentioned anything about the propagation of gambling on the ranks of the spectators. Instead, they blamed the near riot on referee Keating.

"When the fans got out on the field," the *Herald* reported, "manager (John) Striegel of Pottsville immediately came to (Shenandoah manager Joe) Sepauley asking him to get the fans off the field. This the local manager tried his utmost to do, but failed. Sepauley then told the Maroon manager that it was up to the home team to keep the field clear. Referee Keating gave the Pottsville management a certain time to clear the playing field, but even after the time had expired Keating refused to make a decision. There were still 4 minutes and 17 seconds left to be played when this happened."

Whether Keating was responsible for the outcome of the game or not was not the real question. As far as the Pottsville side was concerned, the gambling element was the major problem. One old pro who was there believes to this day that there were several professional gamblers in the stands that day. "I believe that there was a lot of money bet on that game," recalled former Maroon substitute running back Joe Marhefka. The 5-foot-8, 155-pound Lafayette graduate didn't see any action that game, but he was a witness to the disorderly situation on the field as it occurred. "There were pointspreads being bet on even back then, and there was a lot of talk going on about gamblers who came down from Shenandoah to bet on the game. I can't remember their names, but those gamblers could've been the ones who urged the fans to go on the field so no more points could be scored by either team."

The scene on the field was chaos personified. The *Herald* reported that there were just as many Pottsville fans on the field as there were fans from Shenandoah. Some players tried to get the fans off the field by physical means. As it turned out, these attempts proved worthless, as they added just another faction to the free-for-all that was taking place. "The crowd rushed upon the playing field," the *Herald* claimed, "after 'Pete' Henry. The husky tackle of the Pottsville team made a dash at several spectators who had his 'goat.'"

Punches were thrown, and there was plenty of evidence of kicking and gouging. Edgar Lewis, the friendly patrolman who policed the sidelines at all the games at Minersville Ball Park, was overtaken by a number

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of fans and beaten up with his own nightstick. He suffered a few bruised ribs in the incident. In the end, the early evening sky had the final say on the day's events. Referee Keating gathered both team managers together and told them that the game was finished on account of darkness.

Although the game didn't make any national newswire headlines, certainly no one in attendance could ever forget the fiasco that occurred when the fans took over the field in one of the great games of Coal Region football.