

THE TOWN THAT HATED PRO FOOTBALL

By Bob Carroll

Leo Lyons always insisted that Rochester, N.Y., could have been "another Green Bay." The manager of the Rochester Jeffersons during their sad six-year stay in the National Football League (1920-25) believed all his life that his hometown could have duplicated Green Bay's feat of playing successful David to the NFL's metropolitan Goliaths. When pressed, Lyons would temper his faith by adding that Rochester needed only "more time, money, and fans."

With all due respect to Leo Lyons, one of the authentic heroes of the league's early years, ANYWHERE could have been "another Green Bay" with enough time, money, and fans. The point is the Wisconsin city came up with the necessities and Rochester didn't. In fact, among the league's foremost lessons in its first half-dozen years was that Rochester was a pro football wasteland.

Of course, many small cities failed to make it in the NFL. Muncie, Columbus, Evansville and a dozen others lacked great players, fielded bad teams, and failed to draw. Rochester was something special. The Jeffersons were a terrible team, all right, but they failed to draw flies precisely BECAUSE they had some big stars.

To understand that paradox, we need to look at Rochester's football history.

In 1908, when Leo Lyons joined the Jeffersons as an enthusiastic 16-year-old end, Rochester virtually brimmed with football activity. Although the university eleven was usually of indifferent quality, fans supported a whole gaggle of sandlot teams like the Jeffs. By far, the biggest game each season was played by the town's two high schools. Huge crowds turned out, betting was rampant, and play was for blood.

It came as a shock then in April of 1910, when -- in simultaneous assemblies at the high schools -- the respective principals announced that henceforth the schools would cease playing football. Too many injuries, too much betting, and too much "unseemly conduct!"

Deprived of high school football, Rochester grid fans increased their interest in the sandlot teams. 1910 saw a bonanza for the semi-pros. In addition to bigger crowds, the sandlot teams gained player windfalls as many potentially fine high school players joined them. 1910 was also the year that Leo Lyons took over as manager of the Jeffersons. The team responded by winning the local sandlot championship with an 11-0 victory over the Scalpers, another neighborhood eleven.

From the start, Lyons poured his heart and soul into the Jeffersons. He was much more than just a player-manager. One job description had him as the team's "travel-agent, ad man, ticket hustler, doctor, road secretary, mentor, marriage counselor, recruiter, and financier." The role of financier was perhaps the most heart-breaking of all, for even though the Jeffs became the town's leading team during the years before World War I, Leo never saw a season when he didn't throw more money into the pot than he took out.

The annual games with the Scalpers drew well, of course. Occasionally, other local teams could bring out good crowds, but when outsiders visited the Jeffs, Rochester fans ho-hummed and stayed home. Their interest was primarily parochial. They cared not for good football; they just wanted to watch "their boys."

Although many of the locals were quality players -- Bob Argus, "Dutch" Irwin, and Henry McDonald, to name a few -- Lyons had a different vision. He saw the Jeffs becoming a national power, studded with former college stars, and contending with the best pro teams in the country.

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In 1917, he arranged a game at Canton, Ohio, against Jim Thorpe's Bulldogs, the most famous pro team in the country. It's significant how both sides looked at the game because it shows how far the Jeffs had to go.

For the Bulldogs, the game was no more than one of several routine warm-ups before the big games against arch-foe Massillon. The Jeffs were even mislabeled in the Canton press as the "Syracuse 47th Infantry," apparently because some of Lyons' players were in the service and "Syracuse" sounded better at the gate. Either way, it was just another work-out for Thorpe's 'Dogs.

For the Jeffersons, it was the most important game they had ever played. Alas! it also became the most one-sided defeat they'd had -- 41-0!

Lyons was totally impressed with the Bulldogs and their leader. He later recalled that he "didn't get a hand on Thorpe all day." That was hardly surprising because, according to lineups in the Canton newspapers, Leo didn't actually play in the game. But his point was not how good Leo Lyons was, it was how great Thorpe was. And how much better the Bulldogs were than the Jeffersons. If he wasn't already convinced, Lyons knew from that day on that his team could only be competitive with the big pro teams by importing quality stars instead of relying on local talent.

As he left the field at Canton, Lyons fell into conversation with Thorpe. "Jim," he said, "someday this game will draw like professional baseball." A thought struck him. "We should form a league."

For Thorpe and anyone else connected with Canton football, the idea was hardly novel. Some folks had been talking league since 1904. But to Lyons, the thought was a revelation, one that he would believe in and work toward all the rest of his life.

After the war year of 1918, Lyons began moving his team toward the big time, expanding his schedule and importing a few players. In 1919 he had his strongest Jefferson team to date, easy 20-0 winners in the annual game with the Scalpers.

During the summer of 1920, Leo heard they were going to plunge into a league down in Ohio. He couldn't be at the August 20 organizational meeting at Canton when the Bulldogs, Akron, Dayton, and Cleveland laid the foundation, but he sent word he was in all the way and was counted "present by letter."

On September 17, when western teams such as Decatur, Hammond, and Rock Island joined the Ohio Quartet at Canton for the get-together the NFL regards as its inaugural meeting, Leo was there, along with Thorpe, George Halas, and the other pioneers. His Jeffs were charter-members of the new American Professional Football Association (the NFL's name until 1922) -- pre-dating Green Bay by a full season.

For his 1920 team, Lyons recruited eight big college stars, including large Lou Usher of Syracuse and triple-threat Jim Laird of Colgate. But, when he couldn't guarantee that he'd get them all to Canton, Bulldog manager Ralph Hay cancelled a game Lyons had proudly scheduled back in September. The Jeffs won more often than they lost in 1920, but they dropped their only game with a league member -- 17-6 to Buffalo. It was the first of the Jeffs' six straight seasons of losing records against league teams.

During the next half-dozen years, Lyons brought in some excellent players to wear red Jefferson jerseys. Ex-Army All-American halfback Elmer Oliphant, former Syracuse center Joe Alexander, and one of the best backs who ever lived, Ben Lee Boynton of Williams were perhaps the most famous, but many other competent pros, famous in their day, were induced to perform for the Jeffs.

Yet, Rochester fans remained unimpressed. The more outside stars Lyons packed into his lineup, the fewer fans turned out for his games. At the same time, crowds for the local sandlot teams increased. Clearly, Rochester wanted to cheer for its own. In his heart-of-hearts, Lyons felt the same. As much as he loved stars with big college reputations, his favorite player was an area lineman who never got past fourth grade. Blond Hank Smith could play tackle, guard, or center as well as any star with All-American credentials.

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Lyons was caught in a bind. He knew he needed outside "name" stars to secure games with other NFL teams. Hank Smith just didn't make it in Chicago. But those same high-priced stars were turning off the local fans. More and more, the Jeffersons became a road team.

Curiously, despite some individual heroics, the imported stars tended to hurt the Jeffersons' performance, too. Most of them would not show up until the day of a game. Some of them never appeared at all. As a consequence, team play was impossible. The Jeffersons might have won more often with a well-practiced crew of local players.

There were other problems. Near the end of the 1920 season, while an unusual large crowd awaited the kickoff of a Jeffs- Scalpers game, Lyons was confronted with a strike among some of his locals, apparently over the heavy salaries the imports were receiving. Only when local boy Bob Argus stood up and shouted, "There's a big crowd waiting out there and I'm going out and play like hell!" could the team be induced to take the field. Not surprisingly, the final Jeffs-Scalpers game a week later was played -- by agreement -- with locals only.

As his team sank into a red deeper than its jerseys, Lyons worked all the harder to turn things around. He even added field maintenance to his other duties: "I used to put lime on the field, raid construction sites for two-by-fours to put up crossbars." Nothing helped.

"The thing that used to bother me most," he said later, "was seeing rich people sitting in the complimentary ticket section -- people who could have saved the team with just a little financial support. In the end, I couldn't even give tickets away.

"Baseball and boxing were real big, and even those phoney wrestlers outdrew us sometimes. One game between the Oxfords and the Russars drew 14,000 people. The players were all local kids, and that's what people wanted to see. Our largest home crowd was 8,000 for a game [but] the average was 1,200-1,500 at 85 cents a head."

Lyons figuratively lost his shirt and literally lost his house while trying to keep the Jeffersons afloat. He made a good living in the paint business, but his heart was in pro football. "I invented a paint for lining highways in the early 1920s, but was so busy hopping around lining up players and opponents that I never got around to getting a patent. Someone else did and made millions." Lyons loved pro football, but it didn't return the affection.

In 1925, he made a last-ditch effort to turn the team into a drawing card by offering America's foremost college football star, "Red" Grange, \$5,000 per game. Grange signed with the Chicago Bears instead. Perhaps it was just as well. From the way lesser stars turned off Rochester fans, Grange in a Jefferson jersey might have caused the whole town to move to Poughkeepsie. Ironically, the day Grange signed with the Bears, the Jeffersons played -- and lost -- the final game of their existence. Their all-time NFL record was 2-26-2.

Although Rochester was finished with pro football, Lyons wasn't. He still showed up regularly at NFL meetings, always ready to swap stories or talk over old times. Perhaps, at first, he hoped to re-establish the Jefferson franchise, but eventually those meetings became the chief link with the happiest time of his life.

Other teams dropped out of the NFL and new owners arrived. Lyons was one of the old guard who could explain what happened when the league was just beginning. As George Halas said, "His loyalty to the NFL never wavered." Eventually, the league recognized him as its "unofficial historian."

As an historian, Lyons was understandably limited by his own participation in events. It could make for a one-sided view. One consequence is the Rochester Jeffersons loom much larger in many pro football histories than their record warrants. After all, in six years they managed only two league victories, those against poor Tonawanda and the bedraggled Columbus Panhandles in 1921. Yet, one popular history devotes five pages to the Jeffs, but barely mentions the Providence Steam Roller, the 1928 champions!

And, although his memory was exceptional, it was not perfect. Somehow, he "remembered" the league starting at a meeting in Canton in 1919 -- a full year before the traditional date. He remembered it so

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completely that several respected historical works actually list 1919 as the NFL's first year. Dubious researchers have hunted in vain for any confirmation and have concluded that such a 1919 meeting did not happen. As a matter of fact, contemporary sources prove it **COULD NOT** have taken place. Lyons had simply -- and quite humanly -- confused some later meetings that he did actually attend.

But, on balance, Lyons served well as an historian, keeping alive memories of the league's formative years and aiding many researchers immeasurably. He was a tireless campaigner for the establishment of a Pro Football Hall of Fame and a regular visitor and contributor of memorabilia once the Hall opened.

Both before and after his death in 1976, he was nominated for enshrinement in the Hall. If love of pro football, willingness to work, and courage in adversity were the only criteria, he would have been a charter member. But, realistically, it is difficult to identify any real contribution to the game that would set him above a dozen or so other team owners. He was too busy in the hopeless task of trying to sell pro football to Rochester to become a major figure in NFL history.

Now, if he had only lived in Green Bay