

A War Year

1918

By PFRA Research

Canton, Massillon and most other "big" teams closed up shop in 1918. So many players were in the service that the managers thought it unlikely they could maintain strong lineups. A few of the teams that tried to play found their schedules curtailed first by restrictions placed on train travel and then by the influenza pandemic that brought edicts of no large assemblies across the Midwest.

The Dayton Triangles lost players to the service, but they also had many kept home with regular jobs in industries deemed essential to the war effort. Somehow, the Triangles managed to keep a team on the field, avoid "flu cancellations," and beat what few representative teams were still playing football. They claimed a not-very-prestigious U.S. Championship. The Triangle coach and star runner was Canton's former "Foster" -- Earle "Greasy" Neale.

Neale was later to win deserved fame as a football coach on both the college and professional level. But it should not be forgotten that he was one of the most successful two-sport athletes of all time. On the gridiron, he was a fine back and even better end. If Thorpe was pro football's best player in the years before the National Football League was formed, Neale certainly ranked in the next echelon down. He starred for three consecutive national championship teams, something not even Thorpe could claim. On the baseball diamond, he was far more successful than the Thorpe. The highpoint of *that* career found him the regular centerfielder for the 1919 World Series champion Cincinnati Reds.

Dayton opened its season at Triangle Park on October 13 with a one-sided defeat of the Toledo Maroons. The Tris used old-fashioned, straight-ahead football in carving out their victory, seldom finding it necessary to resort to frills like the forward pass. Just as well; Dayton's great passer, Al Mahrt, was in the service. The Maroons aided the Triangles' cause immeasurably by fumbling the ball almost every time they had the chance.

Greasy Neale proved himself the leader of the Dayton contingent in two senses. As coach of the team, he had them ready for their opener so that they moved through their paces with seldom a miscue. As fullback, he showed the coach that he had an able ball carrier who could get the tough yards and also break away for long gains. And, just to prove his versatility, Coach-Fullback Neale contributed four out of five extra points to the team's total.

The first half saw the Triangles run up a 14-0 lead as Neale and Lou Partlow each scored a TD. In the third quarter, Neale pulled off the play of the game when he made a long run to score off a fake kick. The fourth quarter was where Dick Abrell asserted himself and ran for two touchdowns to ice the Triangles' cake.

A week later, a slippery Triangle Park field coupled with a stubborn opponent kept the issue in doubt for almost the whole of Dayton's contest with the Wabash Indians. The final score was 9-0 in favor of the Triangles, but a few breaks in the other direction could have meant victory for the visitors.

The Tris made a break for themselves in the first quarter when they caused a Wabash punt to be blocked. The Indians' center was shoved back into the punter, Jess Reno. His kick rebounded over the goal line and out of the end zone for a safety.

The narrow, 2-0, lead held up for the remainder of the first half and through the third quarter. In stopping the Wabash offense, the Triangles' secondary defense played outstandingly.

The Triangles finally garnered a touchdown in the final quarter. Lou Partlow did the honors with a great 29-yard burst right through the center of the line. Neale added the extra point.

The Tris wound up the October part of their schedule by hosting the Detroit Heralds. The Heralds who still retained some of their pre-war players, played a tough game for the first half, and only a fumble put the Tris in front at the intermission. However, in the second half Lou Reese, the Dayton quarterback, unlimbered his passing arm to put the game out of the Heralds' reach.

The opening quarter saw both teams threaten to score as the play was quite even. Things continued that way into the second quarter until Detroit fumbled a punt reception on its own eight-yard line and Dayton recovered. On the first play from scrimmage, Abrell burst through for a touchdown. Neale kicked the extra point to give the Tris a 7-0 lead at the half.

The Triangles struck like lightning in the third quarter to double their lead. Reese uncorked a beautiful pass to "Dutch" Thiele who scampered into the end zone. Neale again added the point to make the score 14-0.

Early in the last quarter the Heralds narrowed the margin when Pierce connected on a 35-yard field goal after Detroit recovered a Dayton fumble. But the Triangles came right back and widened the gap. Again it was Reese's throwing that did the trick. His zinger to Neale was good for 25 yards and a touchdown. Neale's extra point brought the final score to 21-3.

On November 3, Dayton defeated a fine team from Hammond, Indiana, by the score of 13 to 7 at Triangle Park. In the Hammond backfield were three longtime pros of note: Halfback Emmett

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Specht, a sandlotter who later became a mounted policeman in Chicago; Fullback Dick King, a former Harvard star; and Frank Bacon, a speedy halfback who was to earn applause in the post-war years with Dayton. The Indianans gave the Ohioans all they could handle, and Dayton could consider itself fortunate in scoring a victory.

With Knabe at quarterback for the first time this season, the Triangles got themselves a touchdown in the opening quarter, but after that the offense had a lot less to offer.

Knabe set up the first period score with a long run. Then he went over himself from seven yards out. Neale kicked the extra point, and the one touchdown lead held through the remainder of the first half.

In the third quarter, things got tighter yet. Hammond astonished the Daytonians with a drive down the field that totaled 80 yards. It was the best job of ball control that Dayton had seen in a long time. Hammond's Meyers scored the touchdown on a pass from King, the one-time Harvard star. However, Bacon's try for the extra point failed, and the Triangles held their lead by the narrowest possible margin -- one point.

Entering the final period, the game was up for grabs, but the Triangles proved their mettle by pushing over another touchdown in the last few minutes. Neale scored on an eight-yard run. But, when he missed the extra point, it meant that Dayton was still in danger of being tied right up to the final whistle. Fortunately, for the home team, the Triangles' defense was up to the task of closing off Hammond's last desperate tries to score.

The Tris went on the road for a November 10 game at Detroit. The Heralds proved harder to beat in their own backyard than they had two weeks previously at Dayton, but the Triangles hung on to register a second victory over the Motor City eleven, this time by a 15-0 count. Lou Partlow was the big gun in the Triangle backfield, and it was largely due to his efforts that the Ohioans were able to hold onto the ball and keep it out of the hands of the potent Detroit attack. Doc Davis, the former Indiana man, also did a fine job at guard filling in for Charlie Winston who had entered the service after the Tris' last game.

Appropriately enough, Partlow scored the first Dayton touchdown in the opening quarter on a line buck, but the lead was a mere six points when Neale missed his chance for the extra point.

Through the second and third quarters, neither team was able to register a point. As the game entered the final period, the six-point Dayton lead loomed anything but safe.

However, Dayton had a tricky wrinkle ready; all they needed was the opportunity. When they found themselves on the Detroit ten-yard line, the opportunity had arrived. Deftly, they pulled off a trick pass play that saw the ball go from Partlow to Abrell and then downfield to end Chuck Helvie waiting in the end zone for a touchdown. Again, Neale missed his try for the extra point, but a few minutes later he made up for it when he dropkicked through the uprights for a 40-yard field goal that brought the final score to a safe margin.

Despite cancelling one October game because of the flu epidemic, the Heralds played eight games in 1918 and lost only the pair to the Triangles. Playing their home games at Navin Field, they defeated the Toledo Maroons, Rochester Jeffersons, and three service teams before taking the all-important city championship with a 14-0 win over the Armadas in December.

The Triangles returned from Detroit to take on another famous team -- the Columbus Panhandles. Despite their legendary reputation for rugged play, the 'Handles did not figure to give the Triangles many problems. The team had not played a game all season; they should have been out of shape, out of sync, and out of luck.

Yet for three quarters, the hastily thrown-together railroader crew held the well-seasoned Triangles scoreless. The 'Handles were aided by ankle-deep mud that turned the field into a slippery mess and hampered the speedy Triangle backs considerably.

Columbus put four of the big Nesser brothers in its lineup: Phil, John, Fred, and Frank. The impassable field was made to order for their brute force style of play.

The third quarter saw the two teams battle on completely equal terms and the Triangles fans were beginning to resign themselves to a scoreless tie with the mastadons of Nesserdom. Then, all at once, the Tris turned the whole game around.

Greasy Neale somehow found enough footing to run a Panhandle punt back 45 precious yards to the Columbus 26-yard line. From there, Lou Partlow took over and battered his way down to and over the goal line. Neale missed the extra point.

With the issue still in doubt, the Panhandles made a fatal error. They fumbled a punt at their own ten-yard line and Dayton recovered. It was Partlow Time again and big Lou was equal to the task. Again, he bulled over, and, again, Neale missed the extra point to make the final score 12-0.

On the Sunday before Thanksgiving, the Hammond club returned to Dayton with high hopes of turning the tables on the Triangles. Losers to the Tris three weeks before, Indianans knew that the game had been closer than the 13-0 score might indicate. In addition, this time around the Daytonians were forced to appear without the services of star halfback Lou Partlow, on the sidelines nursing his broken ribs.

Instead, the Indianans' hopes were dashed as the Triangles proved to have more than enough firepower left in replacement Norb Sacksteder, quarterback Knabe, and coach and fullback Greasy Neale. The final score of 23-0 left little doubt as to which was the superior eleven.

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This was Sacksteder's only appearance in a Dayton uniform in 1918 (or in any other team's so far as we know). He may have been on leave from the service or perhaps simply retired for the season. At any rate, his one-game stand was most opportune with Partlow out. Although Sacksteder didn't break away for one of

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famous long runs, his mere presence in the lineup tended to draw opponents' concentration and open things up for the other backs.

After a scoreless opening period, the Triangles really put the game away in the second quarter with a 16-point outburst. Neale collected the first touchdown on a plunge, and, although he missed the extra point, his toe was more accurate a few minutes later when he booted a 20-yard field goal that brought the score to 9-0. Then, before the quarter had run its course, Neale hit Knabe with a touchdown pass. This time he cashed the point-after attempt.

With the game safely in hand, the Triangles were content to practice their defensive skills through a third quarter that saw neither side pick up any points. However, they added one more touchdown on Knabe's run in the final quarter. Neale kicked the extra point.

The Triangles rested through Thanksgiving and the following Sunday before taking on their final challenge to a perfect season on December 8. It turned out to be no challenge at all.

The Dayton Triangles and the Miamis staged a football game for one quarter at Triangle Park. After that, the Triangles held a track meet. The final score was 62-0, as the Tris scored three touchdowns in each of the final three periods.

Lou Partlow scored six touchdowns for the victors. For figure filberts, the NFL record for touchdowns in a single game is also six, but even the most partial Daytonian would admit that scoring against the Miamis was not the same thing as scoring against the Chicago Bears.

The Miamis played well in the opening period, surprisingly well considering their subsequent performance. However, toward the end of the quarter, Dayton launched a drive from its own 20-yard line that had reached the Miamis' 17 as the period ended.

On the first play of the second quarter, Abrell broke through the line to score. From there on it was a rout of the first order. A few minutes later, Abrell went fifteen yards for another touchdown. Then, Partlow garnered the first of his TDs before the intermission on a short plunge. Neale kicked all three extra points.

The second half was a complete slaughter. In the third quarter, Neale went over from 25 yards out and Partlow scored twice, once

on a plunge and once on a long punt return. Again, Neale kicked all three extra points.

The fourth quarter saw Dayton marching down the field like a great irresistible force. Partlow ended three drives with three plunges for three touchdowns. Neale booted the first two points, but finally missed the last one a few minutes before the final whistle.

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Considering the available opposition, Dayton's claim to the U.S. pro championship seems more than reasonable. Hammond and the Detroit Heralds, though hardly of the quality they'd shown in previous years, remained respectable teams and both were twice beaten by the Tris. Dayton's offensive stars Greasy Neale and Lou Partlow were among the best Ohio players of their time. Center "Hobby" Kinderdine and end Lee Fenner remained Dayton stars well into the next decade, as did Partlow. Several others -- end Chuck Helvie, guard Doc Davis, quarterback Lou Reese, and halfbacks Dick Abrell and Norb Sacksteder -- who appeared in games for the Tris were veteran pros of good repute.

Furthermore, no credible contender for the U.S. title from outside Ohio has ever been uncovered. Ohio had vaulted to the top in pro football in 1915 and remained there through the next two seasons. If the quality of Ohio pro football was reduced by military service call-ups in 1918, it is logical that the same can be said for teams in all other parts of the country.

On the other hand, Daytonian claims of an Ohio League championship must be taken with a large helping of salt. Without contenders in Canton, Massillon, Akron, Youngstown, or Cleveland, the always-mythical "league" could not exist on even a speculative level. In simple terms, since 1915 to win the Ohio League crown a team had to either beat Jim Thorpe or have him in its lineup.

And as Ohio pro fans' thoughts turned toward 1919, they had to ask themselves if their Ohio League could return to its pre-war quality. Could the once powerful teams in the northeast part of the state be rebuilt? Would heavy monetary losers like the Massillon Tigers even come back to try again? Would ambitious entrepreneurs in other areas of the nation lure top player talent from Ohio to play for their local teams?

The answer to one burning question would go a long way toward answering the others: what would Jim Thorpe do?